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Prejudice is Taught: A Leadership Test in Textbook Publishing

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Abstract. Carrie Nielsen, a senior product executive at a school-materials company, after she discovers biased and racist content in elementary classroom materials. Carrie has recently relocated and carries significant family responsibilities, making the decision personally and financially tense. After organizing an internal review and presenting evidence of harm, cost exposure, and reputational danger, Carrie must decide whether to keep pushing from inside the company, escalate the issue, resign, or build an alternative path aligned with her values. The executives face their own dilemma: withdraw profitable materials and accept financial loss, or continue selling them while waiting to respond only if complaints become public. The case asks students to examine how people in authority act when revenue, career risk, harm to children, and personal conscience collide.

Keywords: ethical leadership; moral courage; stakeholder theory; responsible leadership; business ethics; educational publishing.

Disclaimer: Divya Modi and Professor Ryan Schill prepared this case solely as a basis for classroom discussion. This case is not intended to serve as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. The authors would like to thank Carrie Nielsen for her time and valuable insights in writing this case.

Source Disclaimer: This case is based on extensive interviews with the protagonist and supporting information provided directly by the individuals involved. To protect confidentiality, all names of people, organizations, school districts, and locations have been replaced with pseudonyms. Some details have been lightly modified for clarity and to preserve anonymity, while maintaining the factual integrity and decision dilemma presented in the case. All interpretations, analyses, and exhibits were prepared by the authors unless otherwise indicated.

In February 2019, Carrie Nielsen faced a critical situation in her professional life at Steadfast Learning Publications. As the Chief Product Officer, she oversaw ensuring that elementary school social studies publications were accurate and unbiased.

Unexpectedly, a school district in Indiana discovered racially insensitive language and stereotypes in one of the company's social studies publications. The

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district flagged the content as offensive, but the company and CEO were reluctant to issue an apology. However, Carrie sent a private email apologizing, but she did not disclose how the company intended to address the issue. The school district severed its relationship with the companyand ceased purchasing materials.

Carrie proposed an approach to prevent a similar situation from recurring: she created a diversity board to review 130 publications. Her team identified multiple biased and racist statements across various publications and proposed alternatives to address them. With data and a cost-benefit analysis to support her, she met with the CEO to present her findings.

Initially, Carrie's supervisor supported her recommendations to address the biased textbooks. But when she returned from a conference in Chicago a couple of weeks later, she reviewed the notes from the executive meetings held in her absence. The sales team had argued against halting distribution, suggesting the company should simply apologize if a district complained. Senior executives echoed this view, indicating that they preferred to keep selling the existing materials despite the identified issues. Carrie was so disappointed with this approach. She began to question whether she should remain at a company that was willing to overlook content like the racially insensitive language behind the Indiana complaint, especially when her name was tied to the publications. Her professional integrity and the impact these materials would have on students mattered to her.

Carrie now faced a difficult choice: should she remain and continue pushing for change from within, or step away to avoid being complicit in decisions she fundamentally opposed?

1. Carrie Nielsen: A Natural-born Teacher

Carrie Nielsen was born in Idaho in 1975. After her parents divorced, Carrie and her younger sister moved with their mother to Southern California in 1980 and never received child support from their father.

Her mother had a college degree and worked as an elementary school teacher with a modest salary. For many years, they lived on welfare and food stamps, in government housing. From an early age, Carrie absorbed her mother's core lesson: self-reliance and the importance of taking responsibility for one's path. As a teenager, Carrie aspired to become a dentist and therefore completed all prerequisite courses for dental school in Florida. At her mother's insistence, she took a job in a dentist's office to see the profession up close. The experience was eye-opening; she quickly realized she had no interest in clinical work and acknowledged that the field did not align with who she was or how she wanted to contribute. That moment taught her the value of realism and the importance of listening to her own instincts. As a schoolteacher, her mother gently encouraged her to explore teaching a subject in which Carrie was naturally suited. After initial