

When Your Employees Go Viral – Here's How Leaders Should Really Respond

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Key Takeaways

- Learn why a single viral moment can create dramatically different outcomes for employees and your brand.
- Discover the leadership approach that turns unpredictable online attention into clarity and control.

One video. Two employees. Millions of views.

Both worked at the same gym. Both appeared in the same viral clip. Both suddenly had more attention on them than they'd ever experienced before. From the outside, it looked like one story. Inside the business, it quickly became two.

In the world of multi-unit retail, a single viral moment at Unit A can set the precedent – or the fire – for the entire brand. As a franchise executive, that experience at a publicly traded national fitness brand forced me to answer a question more leaders are facing today: What do you do when your employees become the story – and the internet wants an instant verdict?

You can't predict virality. But in a high-performing franchise, your team should know exactly how you will respond.

Watch before you act to protect your brand

The clip wasn't malicious. Just light, behind-the-scenes content showing the gym environment and two employees' personalities. It was posted on a personal account, but our logo and environment were visible.

My phone lit up. Screenshots. Links. Alerts. Some leaders would instinctively "shut it down" to protect the brand. I did something different: before reacting, gather context.

We watched the full video, not just the "outrage" clips. We checked facts – were employees on the clock? Were member privacy rights violated? We talked to the employees. Intent matters as much as impact.

The facts were the same for both employees. The outcomes were not.

Turn visibility into opportunity

One employee treated the virality as a responsibility. They realized they represented more than themselves – they represented the brand and their coworkers.

We implemented a simple "social media operating system":

- No filming while responsible for member safety or service.
- Zero tolerance for filming members without explicit consent.
- Total transparency – when in doubt, ask.

They honored the rules, built a positive presence and eventually left to pursue social media full-time on great terms. They became the blueprint for growing with a brand rather than at its expense.

Stop risk in its tracks before it spreads

The second employee chose visibility over responsibility. As the views climbed, they began filming during their shifts, prioritizing “content” over their core duties. This wasn’t a “PR issue”; it was a performance and safety issue. In retail, if an employee is focused on their camera angle, they aren’t focused on:

- Member experience: Serving the person standing in front of them.
- Operational standards: Maintaining cleanliness and Safety checks.
- Team culture: Not leaving their coworkers to pick up the slack.

We followed a clear coaching sequence: review, sit-down, expectations and documentation. But when the behavior didn’t change, termination was the only way to protect the integrity of the franchise unit.

Lead through virality with clear rules

These experiences revealed four essential truths for managing employees in the age of virality:

1. **Start with context, not control** – Audit first, act second. Leadership can’t be outsourced to the internet.
2. **Protect authenticity while enforcing standards** – Distinguish between cringe-worthy content and true violations of values.
3. **Give guardrails, not gag rules** – Simple boundaries empower employees instead of suppressing creativity.
4. **Create predictability for trust** – Consistency builds

confidence for employees, franchisees, and investors alike.

Build a franchise culture that survives the spotlight

Virality is unpredictable. Leadership shouldn't be. How you respond to these moments shapes culture, trust and long-term brand health. In multi-unit retail, a single mistake can cascade – but a consistent process protects people, values and reputation.

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