

We Are All Actors
Act 2, Scene 3
"Who Speaks for ZCorp?"

by
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INT. A BOARDROOM

WILLARD stands at the head of the table. PATRICK and ALICIA sit opposite each other.

WILLARD

I'm getting less and less excited about social media.

ALICIA

Is something wrong?

WILLARD

Yes. People are getting mixed messages about our positions on issues.

PATRICK

Are you talking about Jerry's postings Monday?

WILLARD

Yes, but not just that.

ALICIA

What did Jerry do?

WILLARD

Jerry didn't do anything wrong. He just posted his own personal opinion on an online forum. He marked it as his personal opinion, and it's not an issue he works on for us. But he posted a position that's 180 degrees away from ours, and people know he works on other issues for us.

ALICIA

And we got emails?

WILLARD

A lot.

PATRICK

Well, we can't tell the staff not to post about issues we work on, and we can't require them to agree with our positions whenever they're online.

WILLARD

Of course we can't. We need to have a way to identify our positions as coming from us as an organization rather than from our employees as people.

ALICIA

Why don't we create a "ZCorp" account wherever we want to participate in discussions, and formulate some policies and processes for deciding who'll post under that account name?

WILLARD

I asked legal about that. We can do that some places, but there are a lot of online forums and social networking sites whose terms of service don't seem to allow it, at least right now. They want you to be a person, and to have things like a birthday and an email address.

ALICIA

Oh. That's a problem.

WILLARD

Yes, and even if we could be "ZCorp" that's not really good enough. Sometimes we want to identify both our employee and the company. For example, "Ronnie Thompson, ZCorp usability expert". Because we want people to know that we're taking a position, but we also want them to know that it's an expert position - and they won't know that unless they know who the expert is.

PATRICK

That would be a really useful kind of account to have. I've had a similar problem a lot lately; ever since I got elected to the City Council, I've had this problem of making sure people know whether I'm writing as "Patrick the ZCorp HR VP", "Patrick the City Councilman", or "Just Plain Patrick".

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PATRICK (cont'd)

And there are laws and regulations that could cause me a lot of trouble if I get it wrong.

ALICIA

Did legal have any other issues, Willard?

WILLARD

Ah, yes; thanks for asking. The terms of service for various forums and social networks are one issue - we can't be "ZCorp" because ZCorp isn't a person with a birthday and so on. That's one. Certain kinds of communications can't come from "ZCorp"; things like offers have to be made by an individual acting for ZCorp, because there are corporate bylaws and state and national laws regulating who can take those kinds of actions for a corporation. That's two. There are some things that shouldn't be said by a "ZCorp" identity no matter who's posting under the account, because they could create commitments or liabilities. That's three. And there were a couple of other issues I took notes on but I can't remember right now.

PATRICK

But why are we worrying about all those things if we can't create "ZCorp" or "Patrick on behalf of ZCorp" identities anyway?

WILLARD

Because we have to find a way to communicate clearly here. I'm thinking about visiting the hosts of our most important online communication forums and talking to them about setting up the structures we need. We need to have a proposal for them, or at least clear requirements.

ALICIA

It sounds like we need clear requirements internally too - so we don't misuse the facilities we get.

WILLARD

Yes, we do.

ALICIA

So it sounds like what you want is a way to make a Corporation into an active identity online.

WILLARD

Yes, and also a way to express a relationship between a Corporation and a person.

ALICIA

Sort of like an agent or a power-of-attorney.

WILLARD

Like an agent, yes.

PATRICK

And you think our forum hosts will do this?

WILLARD

I think they'll have to. We can't be the only ones having this problem. What about volunteer organizations? They must have people who work for them one day and then work for somebody else the next day. If the same person is representing two organizations in the same forum, how do people tell who he's representing at any particular time.

PATRICK

True...

WILLARD

I think making ZCorp into an active identity - should we just say "actor"?

ALICIA

I like that, yes.

WILLARD

I think making ZCorp into an actor is pretty easy. Just change the terms of service so it's OK for a company to sign up.

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WILLARD (cont'd)

Maybe have a special registration process to ensure that corporate identities aren't spoofed, but basically it's just another account, except you give it to something that's not a person.

ALICIA

But agency is harder, because there's no notion of agents in most of the systems we use.

WILLARD

Right. People just talk for themselves. So building agency accounts is going to be harder. There's got to be some way for the corporate actor to designate an individual actor as his agent, and then to take that agency status away again.

PATRICK

And we have to have some internal personnel rules to make sure that people who are using agency accounts know how they're supposed to behave.

ALICIA

Exactly. And there's also got to be a process for assigning an agency account to an employee, and for taking the agency account away again, and for training and educating the employee and auditing his actions.

WILLARD

Right. And we'll have to manage different agents. We'll need someone who speaks on financial issues, and another one who speaks for marketing, and so on.

PATRICK

Who gets to use the "ZCorp" account.

WILLARD

That's a really interesting question. I think we'll have to have a board meeting to determine the rules for that.

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WILLARD (cont'd)

I imagine it wouldn't be used too often - maybe to comment on legislation, for example. Or to present our opinion at an industry association. We'd need a process for drafting and approving communications to be posted under the ZCorp account.

ALICIA

That process probably has to include legal review.

PATRICK

And maybe PR also.

WILLARD

So it's complicated. Very interesting though. How long will it take to draft a proposal for what we want?

ALICIA

I'm not sure. I think maybe we'll want to talk to our forum hosts first, to see if they're already working on something we can build on.

WILLARD

OK, let's do that. But I need a proposal soon.