

When the Ground Dropped Out at Coca-Cola

A Leadership Lesson from inside the gray zone.

Cruising at Seventeen Years In

In 2018, during my 17th year with Coca-Cola and seven of those spent at the company's corporate headquarters, I was in a solid place. I knew the business. I was trusted. I was contributing to meaningful projects. And on my own time, I was building something I felt called to: a leadership message, a book called *Disciplined Leader*, and what would become my coaching and speaking platform, Preston Poore & Associates, LLC.

I wasn't making money from it. I wasn't hiding it. I saw it as growth. Something with purpose beyond the walls of my job.

Then Came the Calendar Invite

One day, I received a vague calendar invite from Jessica, a colleague I worked closely with. No agenda, just a time slot.

She came into my office and said, "We'll need to wait for Greg."

"Who's Greg?" I asked.

"He's with Ethics and Compliance."

And then she hit me with:

"People have been fired for less."

What followed was a surprise meeting where I was questioned about potential violations of the company's Code of Business Conduct.

At the center of it?

A short LinkedIn video, more like a GIF, showing me standing in front of a Coke-branded backdrop. No caption. No context.

Just a looping motion that made it *look* like I was dancing.

To me, it was a fun, human moment from an internal meeting.
To them, it looked like self-promotion using Coca-Cola branding.

The Hole I Didn't See Coming

They raised questions about other posts. Leadership stories. Hashtags like #cocacola. They brought up a pro bono training I led for Great Lakes Coca-Cola through the John Maxwell platform. Something fully approved, disclosed, and reviewed.

Still, the tone was serious. And I later learned this wasn't random. A senior VP had *specifically asked* that I be "checked out." Ironically, that same leader had been investigated six times himself for conflict of interest and had his own consulting business on the side.

What hurt most wasn't the questions.

It was the how.

No conversation. No trust. Just a blindsiding.

Jessica and I were peers. She could've pulled me aside. Instead, she walked me into a room, sat me down, and let it play out like an ambush.

Finding Clarity in the Dark

I left that meeting shaken. Embarrassed. Disoriented.

I wasn't perfect. I had crossed into gray areas and underestimated how sensitive some lines were. But I hadn't acted in bad faith. I wasn't trying to profit off the brand. I was trying to grow something real, on my own time, with integrity.

In the days that followed, I fasted. Prayed. Talked to my wife, Carla, who reminded me we'd get through this. No matter what.

I reviewed the Code again. Cleaned up my online presence. Tightened my boundaries. I sent materials back to Jessica and Greg for review.

Eventually, Greg confirmed I was in the clear. No violations.

But the experience had already done its work. I was no longer the same.

Climbing Out and Moving On

In 2022, I retired from Coca-Cola and stepped fully into the work I once feared might cost me my job: speaking, coaching, writing, and guiding others in leadership.

The experience changed me.

It sharpened my judgment.

It deepened my conviction.

It reminded me that the *how* of leadership matters just as much as the *what*.

And as it turns out, this wasn't my last run-in with HR.

A later event would come even closer to derailing my career but that's a story for another time.

I didn't fall out of the hole.

I climbed out.

And I'm stronger for it.

Final Thoughts

I may not have been perfect. I made mistakes. But I'm not a victim either.

I own my story. The wins, the warnings, and the wisdom that came from walking through the fire.

If you're building something on the side, know the rules. Respect the lines. Be transparent. But don't let fear stop you from chasing the vision planted inside you.

And if you lead others, remember:
Accountability is necessary.
But respect is not optional.

What you do matters.
But **how** you do it – that's what people remember.

After I left Coca-Cola, someone who knew what I'd walked through said to me,
"I'm glad to see you're thriving after Coke. The Lord takes care of babies and fools."

At first, I laughed. But then it sank in.

That old saying carries truth: sometimes we stumble, we miss the signals, we get ahead of ourselves and God still shows up. Not because we earned it, but because He's merciful.

In many ways, I've been both the baby and the fool.

And still, here I am. Thriving.

By grace.