April 2012

**Personal Accountability: Putting the Brakes on Moral Breakdown**

On April 10th, Bobby Petrino, still red-faced from road rash and embarrassment, was fired as head football coach at the University of Arkansas. Ten days earlier Petrino had wrecked both his motorcycle and his career while on a drive with his mistress and co-worker, Jessica Dorrell. Petrino, a married father of four, had failed to disclose his affair with Dorrell when she applied for, and later accepted, a job working on his staff. In addition, Petrino had circumvented university policies to fast-track hiring her. He had requested and received a waiver to bypass a stipulation that open jobs remain vacant for 30 days prior to interviews being conducted. Moreover, unbeknownst to the university, Petrino personally had given a $20,000 gift to Dorrell during her first week on the job so that she could buy a car.

Sadly, Petrino’s crash-and-burn is only the latest in a series of moral breakdowns occurring in college football. Several other prominent programs have suffered leadership failings over the past three years.

- **Penn State**: Longtime head coach Joe Paterno and school president Graham Spanier were fired in November 2011 for their part in covering up the misconduct of former coach and alleged child molester, Jerry Sandusky. The school’s athletic director and one of its vice presidents also resigned as a result of the scandal.

- **Ohio State**: Head coach Jim Tressel was forced to resign in May 2010 after falsely denying his knowledge of improper benefits received by players. Ohio State’s football team has been banned from making a postseason appearance in 2012 as a result of the incident. Additionally, the program is serving a three-year probation.

- **North Carolina**: In March 2012, North Carolina was penalized with a loss of scholarships, placed on three years of probation, and banned for postseason play after violating numerous NCAA rules. The program engaged in academic fraud and one of its coaches allegedly accepted bribes from professional agents. In the scandal’s aftermath, the university fired head coach Butch Davis.

- **USC**: Head coach Pete Carroll resigned in January of 2010 with Southern California’s football program under investigation for having lacked oversight of its student-athletes. In June 2010, the NCAA imposed sanctions which included the loss of thirty scholarships and a two-year postseason ban.

In each of the above situations, coaches and/or administrators abused power for personal and professional benefit. Initially, we might be tempted to stereotype these leaders as unethical egomaniacs obsessed with winning at all costs. However, closer examination would show us a far more complicated picture. Joe Paterno was revered not only for winning football games, but also for the stellar academic record of his players. Butch Davis cleaned up the University of Miami’s tarnished image while coaching there from 1995-2000. Jim Tressel was highly esteemed on account of his personal philanthropy. The point is that some of these men were great leaders, even models of integrity, prior to losing credibility. However, each ultimately lacked something every leader, even the most well-respected, cannot do without: personal accountability.

**DEVELOPING PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

People want to be known as honest, hard-working, trustworthy, and competent; I doubt anyone starts a career intending to lie or cheat their way to the top. However, as leaders we are determined to succeed, and if we’re not careful, our ambition can overshadow our vision of the moral person we aspire to be. We can lose track of who we are as we strive toward what we desire to accomplish. Personal accountability means being answerable to our “better selves” or to the sort of honorable human being we would like to be. Developing personal accountability involves three steps:
1) Distrust Yourself

In my experience, leaders who fail ethically share a common trait: a false sense of security. They believe themselves to be incapable of ruining their lives on account of flawed character. Wise leaders do not trust themselves to do the right thing all of the time. They know that power corrupts, and they’re fully well aware of their fallibility.

Don’t presume that you’re too good of a person to have a moral breakdown. Instead, realize that you’re just as vulnerable to ethical missteps as anyone else. Operate under the assumption that you will abuse your influence as a leader unless you intentionally take precautions to guard against the darker side of your ambition.

2) Set Behavioral Boundaries

Leaders are not only accountable for their actions, but also before their actions. Certainly, leaders should be willing to explain their actions after the fact. However, they also must be prudent enough to prevent morally inappropriate courses of action from ever presenting themselves in the first place.

3) Invite Inspection

When leaders do not inspect themselves, people do not respect them. However, moral authority demands more than self-inspection. Accountable leaders give others permission to inspect their behavior; they’re proactively transparent.

The more leaders grow in influence, the less likely their teammates are to disagree with their decisions or to question their behavior. People automatically assume a legendary leader will do the right thing. For this reason, highly successful leaders have to be especially diligent in surrounding themselves with trusted advisers willing to speak the truth.

CONCLUSION

As a Japanese proverb instructs, “The reputation of a thousand years may be determined by the conduct of a single hour.” If you’ve not taken steps to safeguard your reputation, start today by asking yourself the following questions:

1) What behavioral boundaries prevent me from abusing my influence as a leader?
2) To whom have I given permission to scrutinize my actions and to question my decisions?