

Philadelphia Inquirer

Op Ed – March 22nd, 2012

Two iconic Pennsylvania figures, Joe Paterno and Anthony Bevilacqua, passed away this year. Both the longtime Penn State football coach and the former archbishop of Philadelphia had remarkable careers of public service and achievement that ended in scandal — scandals that will forever shadow their legacies. Both men saw themselves as close to God, but both were also treated as gods by those around them. And that may have had more to do with the scandals than has so far been appreciated.

It may be that both men's lives and reputations were horribly wounded by what I call the seduction of the leader.

As I recently told a group of Philadelphia executives, leaders of every stripe can learn important lessons about the dangers of this seduction from "Joe Pa" and the cardinal. Court proceedings may show otherwise, but my guess is that neither Paterno nor Bevilacqua intended to deceive. If history is any guide, cultural culpability is far more likely than criminal culpability.

The cultures of their respective organizations — cultures they tolerated, if not outright fostered or even demanded — probably tended to discourage the people around them from plainly stating the most unpleasant truths at hand. The most likely scenario is that these men never heard the completely unvarnished truth, because they created or tolerated cultures that did not encourage people to tell them difficult truths.

This does not make them evil. Sadly, it makes them normal. The fact is, the more influence and power we have, the less likely those around us are to tell us the truth. This dynamic is at the core of the concept of the seduction of the leader.

Truly great organizational leaders recognize this dynamic and work to counter it, actively seeking and creating an environment in which their subordinates feel free to speak plainly.

This doesn't happen with platitudes or one-and-done mission statements. It takes a thorough, disciplined, and continuing commitment.

Unfortunately, most leaders do not make that commitment. As a result, their subordinates hold back.

Consider former Penn State assistant coach Mike McQueary's testimony at a preliminary hearing last year, in which he described a conversation with his boss, Paterno.

“I never used the word *sodomy* or *anal sex* out of respect for Joe Paterno,” McQueary testified. He added, “You don’t go to Coach Paterno and describe in detail those kinds of sexual acts. I wouldn’t do that.”

McQueary had allegedly just witnessed what he believed to be the violent sexual assault of a little boy by a grown man. But it took him a day of agonized deliberation just to muster the resolve to go to the leader of his organization with that essential information. And when he finally did, he couldn’t bring himself to describe what he saw plainly.

Instead, he sanded off the edges, and a cascade of further sandings followed. The result may have discouraged any action to address a credible allegation that one of the most heinous crimes imaginable had been committed. Worst of all is the possibility that more young people were victimized as a result.

But I don’t blame McQueary. I blame the culture Joe Paterno helped create.

In Cardinal Bevilacqua’s case, it was a culture he inherited — one of secrecy and protection in Philadelphia’s Catholic hierarchy.

In both cases, speaking plainly to the larger-than-life boss — whether it was the coach or the cardinal — was a daunting prospect. And when leaders set such a tone, when they fail to demand truth-telling systematically, the harsh truth is that they get what they deserve: something less than the truth. And the resulting perils are theirs.

Obviously, not all such cultures have consequences as great as those that faced Joe Pa and the cardinal. The truth is that the seduction of the leader occurs thousands of times a day, when good and not-so-good men and women have opportunities to speak the truth but don’t. These small omissions and half-truths can eventually give way to deceptions that are larger and more treacherous. A business or organization without a commitment to candor will eventually pay the price — perhaps in scandal, but more frequently in injured morale and reduced effectiveness.

And this problem is growing. The economy has made many organizations riskier places to work. And as security grows ever more tenuous, the aversion to truth-telling rises. Leaders are confronted and challenged less, bad news is hidden, and feelings are not shared.

As a management consultant, I have seen far too many businesses in which people are unable to be honest with one another, and the results are often catastrophic. Organizations must directly confront the problem of the seduction of the leader. Leaders must work overtly to create cultures in which the truth is systematically demanded, invited, and protected. It’s not just the right thing to do; it’s the smart thing to do. Ask Penn State and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

The question is: Can you stand the truth?

Rod Napier is the chairman of the Napier Group, a former Temple professor, and a member of the organizational dynamics faculty at the University of Pennsylvania.