



What Have We Learned from Penn State?

When viewing the horrors of the Penn State stories in the aftermath of the indictment of Jerry Sandusky, former assistant coach for the Nittany Lions under head coach Joe Paterno, through the leader's lens, a picture comes into focus that is nothing less than frightening.

Let's put the alleged heinous acts of Sandusky aside for a moment, and ask this question:

How could this have happened and not been properly dealt with for over a decade? Moreover, some (I'm among them) would suggest that a cover-up of massive proportions went unsuccessfully challenged for years before any actions were ever taken.

I want to believe that those who knew of these things also knew they were without any rational defense. They knew they were wrong, but they felt powerless to do anything about them. Or, while they knew they were wrong, in their minds, a greater wrong would have been to reveal them, to speak out, and risk their own personal well-being, futures, jobs, careers. Or, while they knew they were wrong, for them the protection of the university and its reputation superseded their own personal sense of morality. I suspect all three explanations are in effect in this case.

But, leaders have to dig even deeper to understand this occurrence so they will know how it can be prevented in their own organizations. I have some thoughts on the matter:

1. **Every leader, no matter the position occupied, must be accountable to someone.** Truly accountable. By most accounts, Joe Paterno was "king" of Penn State, having been asked to retire some several years ago by the university's board of trustees and flat-out refusing to end his coaching career.
2. **Don't wait for the "big one" to occur before you act.** Penn State's former standards and conduct officer, Dr. Vicky Triponey, asserts that she, over several years' time, attempted to impose disciplinary measures on university

football players for infractions ranging from academic rules and integrity violations to fights and assaults off campus, only to be thwarted at every turn by the head coach, who asserted he would be the sole disciplinarian for his football players. While not directly related to the Sandusky events, occurrences like these and the subsequent outcomes can give us insight into a culture where the only source of truth was the football coach. Nothing else mattered.

3. **Moral courage isn't just a term loosely tossed around in casual conversation.** Apparently, it was in short supply at numerous levels in this case. As one of my old battalion commanders used to say when we made a mess of something, "I can spread this sh#t all around." Moral courage is spoken of often, but only tested in the most severe of circumstances. But, when it's viewed under a microscope, the essence of leadership is about courage and it's a true measure of a leader. Think about that before you're tempted to elevate someone to deity-like status because of the number of games (or other victories) he's won.

There will be other lessons for leaders to reflect on, of this I'm certain. I'll keep you posted when they occur.