

DISTINGUISHED PSYCHOLOGIST IN MANAGEMENT AWARD

Personal Leadership Identity and Leadership Frames: Understanding What Happened at Penn State

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The actions and decisions of university leaders at the Pennsylvania State University are considered using the Leadership Frames model of Bolman and Deal (2008) and the context of events leading up to and surrounding the conviction on sexual abuse charges of a former assistant football coach. The nationwide scandal that led to the resignation of a respected university president and the termination of a long-honored head football coach placed the spotlight on the responsibilities of leadership when competing values are at stake. Questions are raised about the appropriateness of frames that were used in making decisions and the environment that created an over-reliance on a “political frame” for viewing the challenges of both leadership and the university. The long history of events and the pressures on leadership to protect the university are described in seeking to understand factors that resulted in lack of responsible action. The structure of the University board within the political context of the state and other political motives are described, and a Special Investigative Counsel’s Report, as well as Grand Jury presentments, are referenced. It is suggested that key leaders failed to adhere to their authentic “personal leadership identities,” as reflected in espoused values, their training, their substantial accomplishments, and their prior professional reputations. Those failures, of course, led not only to the destruction of individual careers and reputations, but also to disastrous consequences for the University, including reputational and major financial damage.

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I am deeply honored to have been selected by SPIM as the 2013 Distinguished Psychologist in Management, and I again thank the organization for inviting me to share some thoughts about leadership with you—first at the SPIM annual meeting, and now in this version of that presentation for *The SPIM Psychologist Manager Journal*. The perspectives I shall share with you were stimulated by my consideration of a recent leadership case in higher education that has been unusually public—the child sexual abuse scandal at the Pennsylvania State University.

As the facts unfolded over the past two years, resulting in charges of child sexual abuse and the conviction of Jerry Sandusky, a former Penn State assistant football coach, popular opinion has been quick to blame a “failure of leadership.” At first, that finger-pointing was focused on the late Head Football Coach Joe Paterno, who had been for more than 40 years the peculiarly charismatic leader of a college football dynasty that seemed to be about all the best things in college sports. Inevitably, those accusations also were turned onto the now former president of Penn State, Graham Spanier, who was forced to resign in November of 2011, just days after the abuse charges were brought.

Sandusky, who also was the founder of a charitable organization created to help at-risk boys, was convicted in June of 2012, on 45 counts of sexual abuse against 10 young boys; he now is serving 30 to 60 years in prison. On November 1, 2012, Spanier and two senior administrators were charged with obstructing justice, lying under oath, and endangering children. I will not challenge the assertion that University leadership bears responsibility and deserves blame for the way in which the matter was handled—and perhaps for permitting the abuse itself. Nonetheless, I would like to explore with you just how and why that might have happened. In the process, I hope to suggest some lessons that will help to keep our own leadership lives on track, or the leadership lives of others whom we coach or to whom we consult.

Because I have been the president of a major university, I like to think that I have some special insight into the actions, the successes, and also the mistakes of others who serve in higher education leadership roles. Furthermore, as a former University president who also chaired the NCAA’s Presidents Commission, I believe that I know the world of college sports and understand, a bit more intimately than most perhaps, the triumphs, the defeats, and the fumbles that occur in that world. As president of the University of Colorado in the 1990s, I was responsible for a highly successful Division I football program that was headed by a high profile, winning coach who was arguably the best known personality in the State. At that same time, I knew and interacted occasionally with Graham Spanier, the Penn State president. I believe that I had a reasonably well-developed perspective on who he was and what he believed; I hasten to add that those perceptions were all positive. My particular challenge in talking about this case, of course, is

to use the insight of my experience to deepen understanding, while also stepping back to find the leadership lessons that may be available.

In thinking about leadership roles in this case, I shall refer to the four frames for leadership, about which Lee Bolman and Terry Deal (Bolman & Deal, 2008) have written extensively. Building on the Bolman and Deal work, Bolman and Gallos (Bolman & Gallos, 2011) described leadership in higher education as being practiced through either a structural, a human resources, a political, or a symbolic frame—and sometimes a combination of two or more of those frames. I have found the Bolman and Deal model to be especially useful for thinking about the decision making that leaders do, and for that reason, I attempted to look at what occurred at Penn State in terms of leadership frames. From that perspective, I would suggest to you that a primarily political frame had been chosen (either explicitly or implicitly) at Penn State, and that was a choice that ultimately may have led to the avoidance of decision making by the presidency at a critical time, as well as to a disastrous lack of clarity about the decisions that needed to be made. I would also submit that the system in place encouraged a political approach, or frame, that forced leadership into a protective stance.

The issue of leadership frames notwithstanding, it is increasingly my sense that the failure of leadership at Penn State was not just a failure of leadership style, or focus, or an inappropriate choice of frame—but rather, at its root, a failure of what I shall call, “personal leadership identity.” We come to leadership roles as adults with prior identities. Those identities may be closely linked to previous work roles, or to family or social roles, but in any case, they reflect our sense of self, and are informed by the experiences that have shaped us, the competencies we have developed, and the values that have guided us over a period of time. I shall return to this concept later as I review the roles of both the president and the head football coach. But first, a little background is in order.

I am assuming that most readers have at least a general awareness of the case, so am listing here only the major relevant events.

- Sexual abuse of young boys by Sandusky was observed, or reported to have occurred, in campus athletics facilities on multiple occasions from 1994, or earlier, until at least 2001.

- Incidents in 1998, reported by a parent and child psychologist, were investigated by University Police and the State Department of Public Welfare, but no charges were brought.

- Sandusky retired in 1999 with special privileges, including access to athletics facilities.

- Showering and sexual activity were observed in 2000 by janitors; a 2001 incident was reported by a graduate assistant coach (McQueary) to Coach Paterno, who reported it to the athletics director, who reported it to the

senior vice-president, who reported it, in turn, to *outside* legal counsel, and the president.

- First and second grand jury presentments included detailed reports from 10 victims.

There were indications that something was wrong at least 15 years ago. The report of the Special Investigative Counsel, appointed by the Penn State Board in 2011, goes into considerable detail about the 1998 incidents that occurred on campus. Particularly worth noting is the fact that a psychologist who was seeing a child victim reported suspected abuse, as did that child's parent. The case was dropped after investigation by the police, and virtually no action was taken by University officials who were informed.

Then, in 2009, the State Attorney General, who now is the Governor of Pennsylvania, decided to reopen an investigation. More incidents had come to light, including Sandusky's being barred from a high school after a parent's report of his sexual abuse of her son. It was clear that the earlier investigation had resulted in no meaningful changes, or even a careful look at the University's vulnerabilities, much less those of potential victims. Jerry Sandusky was arrested and arraigned on November 5, 2011; Penn State President Graham Spanier was fired just days after that on November 9; and Head Coach Joe Paterno, who already had announced his intention to retire at the end of the season, only hours later. Former FBI Director Louis J. Freeh was appointed as Special Investigative Counsel by the Board of Trustees on November 21, to look into the actions of the University related to the Sandusky charges. Sandusky was convicted in June of 2012, and Graham Spanier was indicted on October 31, of that year.

How could this have happened? Who was to blame? Who decided that child sexual abuse would be ignored—or covered up—at Penn State? Where did leadership fail? To begin to answer those questions, we need to look at the leading players.

GRAHAM SPANIER

Spanier was indicted and will be tried—along with former Senior Vice-President for Finance and Business Gary Schultz and Director of Athletics Tim Curley—on eight charges related to those on which Sandusky was convicted; these include two felony charges of endangering the welfare of children and one of perjury, as well as five misdemeanor charges. On the face of it, there could not be an unlikelier suspect than Graham Spanier.

The record shows, and his colleagues have attested, that Graham Spanier was an academically respected sociologist and licensed family therapist, and that he practiced as a family therapist for several years. It also is the case that in childhood, he was a frequent victim of his father's physical abuse. In adulthood, he has been known as a kind and loving husband and father. Clearly, he was a successful academic administrator, having served as the president of Penn State for 16 years after holding successively responsible positions at other major universities, including Chancellor at the University of Nebraska and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Oregon State University. His record at Penn State, where he was responsible for creating an Honors College and expanding the University's activities in a number of ways, was admirable. He was, at the time of his resignation, the third highest paid public university president in the country, and he served the higher education community in important roles at the national level. He served on the Board of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and chaired the National Security Higher Education Board. In my experience, moreover, he was a genuinely nice person who cared about others and who was absolutely committed to higher education and its ability to shape the minds and values of young people. Graham Spanier was proud of the standard set by Penn State in academics and also in athletics.

So how could it have happened that Graham Spanier—a family therapist by training and practice—was charged with endangering children and, according to the Special Investigative Counsel's Report released just subsequent to Spanier's arraignment, that he covered up, rather than acted on, the abuse that was reported to him?

JERRY SANDUSKY

And what about Jerry Sandusky? Who was he, and why should he have been protected, as it appears that he was? Sandusky was an assistant coach at Penn State for 30 years, held tenure as an assistant professor of physical education, and retired in 1999, after Joe Paterno told him that he would not be the next head football coach. He was given an "emeritus" title by presidential exception, because his academic title did not qualify for emeritus status. It should be noted that the University Provost Rodney Erickson (now President of Penn State) apparently questioned the wisdom of that action, but did not oppose it. In addition, Sandusky's retirement package included an unusual and substantial lump sum payment (\$168,000) and a number of special privileges, such as access to facilities and tickets to athletics events, and a commitment that the University would "work collaboratively" with him

and provide office support for activities related to community programs, including his “Second Mile” charity. The facilities to which he would have lifetime access included the coaches’ locker room and showers, where incidents of abuse are now known to have been observed. It also deserves mention that Sandusky’s 1999 retirement agreement was executed a year *after* police investigations into a report of suspected child sexual abuse by Sandusky. As already noted, those investigations were prompted by a parent complaint and also reported by the psychologist who was seeing the child. The University and Borough police, consulting with a State Department of Public Welfare case worker and a counselor from the County Department of Children and Youth Services decided that the incidents represented a “gray area,” however, and the County DA decided not to press charges. So why the special treatment for this retired assistant coach?

Sandusky was a larger-than-life persona in State College, Pennsylvania—a sort of big, lovable, self-deprecating teddy bear of a guy, who was the life of every party. Everyone knew who he was, and he knew them. He had written an autobiography and two books about coaching. Sandusky and his wife have six adopted children and also foster parented a number of others. Their mission in life seemed to be helping children, and in 1977, the Sanduskys founded “The Second Mile,” a charity serving at-risk boys. The organization was highly successful, reaching thousands of boys each year; it achieved national recognition, had a million plus budget, and was generating revenues of about \$3 million annually. The Second Mile now is defunct, of course, as a direct result of the Sandusky scandal. Jerry Sandusky used his Penn State affiliation to organize sports camps for Second Mile boys, and he took selected boys with him to football games—even sitting on the sidelines with the team. A number of former Second Mile boys came forward to testify that Sandusky had molested them, and just as the trial began, the Sanduskys’ youngest adopted son, Matt, joined that group.

Whereas Paterno was somewhat socially withdrawn and an all business symbol of Penn State athletics—and for some, of Penn State itself, Sandusky was its friendly and welcoming voice, its most visible symbol among the people. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell described Sandusky in this way: “Here was a man who built a sophisticated, multimillion-dollar, fully integrated grooming operation, outsourcing to child-care professionals the task of locating vulnerable children—all the while playing the role of lovable goofball” (Gladwell, 2012). It seems incredible that so much of this could have taken place on the Penn State campus, under the noses of those responsible for guarding the pristine reputation of one of the country’s great college football programs. Yet, quoting Gladwell again, “the culture of football could be the greatest hiding place of all, a place where excessive

physicality is the norm, where horseplay is what often passes for wit, where young men shower together after every game and practice” (Gladwell, 2012).

Today, Sandusky remains in prison with no possibility of parole for 30 years, when he will be 99. Although an appeal is in process, there is no reason to believe it will succeed, and indeed, the first court of appeal denied it in January of 2013. Sandusky’s statements about the case continue to blame others, referencing a grand conspiracy in which multiple institutions and individuals essentially have “framed” him; his wife has taken that same position. Meanwhile, additional victims continue to go public.

JOE PATERNO

Among the cast of characters, the late Penn State Head Football Coach Joe Paterno (or JoePa, as he was affectionately known at Penn State) probably least needs introduction. He was a national figure, and even those who are not college sports fans usually have heard his name. Surely (so many of us said), Joe Paterno didn’t try to cover up what was going on? Surely, he would not have tolerated Sandusky’s behavior? Surely, he would not have risked the Penn State reputation?

Joe Paterno had been head coach at Penn State for 45 years and was tied for the all-time winning record in college football (Div I). He was a hero in Pennsylvania and was idolized by Penn State alums. There was a huge statue of Paterno in front of the football stadium. His stature within college sports was incomparable; when Paterno spoke, everyone in sports listened—and most of the rest of us as well. What was most remarkable about this coach, however, was his reputation for doing things the “right way,” and his program usually was the model held up for others that had gone astray. Paterno’s name was considered synonymous with integrity and academic standards in athletics. He was well paid, of course, and he had made gifts totaling more than \$4 million for *academic* purposes at Penn State. When a potential Penn State donor needed persuasion, it is said, a meeting with Joe Paterno often could be the deal closer. It also can be noted that, in matters of concern to him, JoePa’s judgment was not questioned. He was a force with whom to be reckoned—and I am confident that the President of the University, the Board of Trustees, the Governor of the State, and most certainly the Director of Athletics, were among those who engaged in that reckoning.

Paterno announced his retirement on November 9, 2011, just days after the Sandusky charges were brought, although in the preceding months he quietly had negotiated the \$5.5 million retirement package that would have taken effect at the end of that season. Late on the evening of his announcement, however, he was fired, immediately and unceremoniously, by the

Board of Trustees. As the Special Investigative Counsel's report later detailed, Joe Paterno was informed of Sandusky's abuse of a child by a graduate assistant coach in 2001, yet he failed to do anything other than to convey that information to the Director of Athletics. He did not pursue action, even of a preventive nature, within his program and his building—although the football facilities clearly were his castle. Nor did he follow up on how the matter was being handled. For 10 years, he did none of those things. Paterno was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2011, and he died on January 22, 2012, less than three months after he was fired.

Jerry Sandusky has been convicted, and there seems to be little question of his guilt. His crimes were horrendous and repugnant, and surely must have seemed so to both Paterno and Spanier. So, given what they had at stake, why would either of them have risked their reputations or their substantial incomes, not to mention the reputations of the organizations they led, or the values they had publicly espoused over the years, to protect Sandusky? Both Paterno and Spanier have protested that they did not know that there was sexual abuse involved in the events reported to them. But neither asked the questions that could have revealed the nature of those events. How was that possible? Perhaps Paterno believed, as he reported to the Special Investigative Counsel, that he didn't have expertise in such matters and was "afraid to do something that might jeopardize what the University procedure was." Perhaps as Spanier reported, and although there is documentation of his participation in discussions about how to manage Sandusky after reports of at least inappropriate behavior with children, he did not take further action because he "never heard a report from anyone that Sandusky was engaged in any sexual abuse of children." But I have trouble accepting these explanations, and I suggest to you instead that massive failure to do the right thing, to even *ask the right questions*, in the case of those in top leadership roles at Penn State was first and foremost a problem of impaired, or lost, "leadership identity." In explaining what I mean by that, I shall focus primarily on the role and behaviors of the president, Graham Spanier. The two personalities and their roles are quite different, and I'll come back to Paterno later, but let's begin by looking at the CEO.

THE PENN STATE PRESIDENCY AND THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

The job that Graham Spanier held was enormous in scope. The university he led is huge. On all its campuses, Penn State enrolls about 94,000 students—44,000 in State College—and it has the largest alumni organization in the world. The research enterprise, too, is large (>\$750 million), as are the

service and auxiliary programs of the university. The annual budget is over \$4 billion, with less than \$400 million of that coming from sources other than state appropriation. The president is the chief fundraiser at any university, and with an endowment approaching \$2 billion and \$200 million in annual gifts, that is an enormous undertaking at Penn State. These figures just hint at the breadth and magnitude of executive responsibilities that fell to Graham Spanier. When a university has such size, economic impact, and public loyalty, it easily becomes a target of political pressure and posturing. The internal politics of a university can be impressive, but when we add to that a politicized board, you begin to see how complex the job of president can be.

The Penn State Board of Trustees is large, at 32 members, and although it is not unusual that a state's governor appoints members of the Board, it is unusual for the governor actually to sit on the Board—but that was the case at Penn State. The governor also appoints an additional six trustees, and three State Secretaries serve on the Board. In addition, six trustees are elected by organized agricultural societies, nine by the alumni, and six elected by the trustees to represent business and industry. In cases such as these, a university's board of trustees usually functions more as a political body than an educational and policy oversight board. Given the political character of the Board, it is not completely surprising that the Board had expressed only marginal interest in the events related to the investigation of Sandusky—*until* it appeared that blame might be assigned to the University more generally. At that point, the Board began looking for a scapegoat, or at the very least a way to deflect blame from itself. It is no wonder the Special Investigative Counsel's Report found that the Board "failed to inquire reasonably and to demand detailed information from Spanier." They were described as complacent and overconfident, and as "failing to require accountability."

THE GOVERNOR AND OTHER PLAYERS

In this context, it is interesting to note a few facts about the governor's role in the Sandusky matter as well. Governor Tom Corbett was the State Attorney General who convened a Grand Jury in 2009, to review older complaints against Sandusky that had not been prosecuted. Later that same year, he announced his run for the governorship. It has been suggested that his visibility in this matter was a major factor in his election as governor, and he has been criticized for the time lag between convening that Grand Jury and the delivery of indictments. These facts, of course, beg the question of whether the Governor's actions in the Sandusky case were politically motivated.

Among the other complex relationships in this matter was that of University legal counsel, Cynthia Baldwin, who formerly chaired the Board

of Trustees. As the Investigative Counsel's report showed, she was conspicuously absent from early internal discussions related to the Sandusky matter—the president and other officers apparently having preferred to use the advice of outside legal counsel. Although the press has not made a great deal of the Baldwin situation, my experience tells me that her exclusion from discussions of Sandusky's actions was a sign that the inner circle was too closed, and that the stance of protection taken by Spanier, his senior vice-president, and the director of athletics, involved high stakes, indeed.

LEADERSHIP IN THE POLITICAL FRAME

The intrigue—political and otherwise—that these facts collectively suggest is not created overnight, and we can speculate that the highly politicized position of the University already was a fact when Graham Spanier—academician and family therapist, and an experienced chief academic officer—was selected as president of Penn State in 1995. It must have been overwhelming at times, and it is clear to me that the job involved a complex organization context that often demanded responses tailored primarily to the political frame. And now, of course, I am referring to the Bolman and Deal concept of leadership frames.

Bolman and Deal present the four frames as perspectives that can serve as filters in organizing the leadership focus, and as navigators for decision making and problem solving. In their words:

The structural approach focuses on the architecture of organization—the design of units and subunits, rules and roles, goals and policies. The human resource lens emphasizes understanding people, their strengths and foibles, reason and emotion, desires and fears. The political view sees organizations as competitive arenas of scarce resources, competing interests, and struggles for power and advantage. Finally, the symbolic frame focuses on issues of meaning and faith. It puts ritual, ceremony, story, play, and culture at the heart of organizational life. (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 21)

The frames are useful because they allow us to use multiple perspectives in viewing the complex work of organizations with multiple goals and multiple constituencies. They allow us to filter the irrelevant and to define what is most important in a given situation, while reminding us that none of these frames alone can tell us all that we need to know.

I imagine that it would have been extremely difficult to practice the presidency at Penn State without a major focus on the Political Frame. I would also suggest that at Penn State there probably was not room for another Symbolic Leader; there simply could be no larger symbol than JoePa. And the Structural and Human Resource frames fit better those who were closer to operations and to people. The issues that the president at Penn State dealt

with usually involved positioning the institution, accessing power, and gaining resources. It was a political job. Of course, this is the case at most large universities. The structure of the Board, and the interplay of community, symbols, and politics persuade me that this was absolutely the case at Penn State. One had to play in the political world; one had to be a political leader. As for symbolic leadership, the political frame requires giving great deference to those who bear it, and obviously that was the attitude of Spanier toward Paterno. Given his high profile in the community, we must wonder whether Sandusky, as a symbol, also commanded a wide berth.

BEYOND THE FRAMES OF LEADERSHIP

Whether the political frame as described by Bolman and Deal represented Graham Spanier's strength as he took on the presidency at Penn State is debatable; he previously had served in roles focused more on academic issues. What is not debatable, when one reads the emails and the accounts of Board conversations and considers the responses that have followed his indictment, however, is that he had chosen to take on the mantle of political leader. Perhaps that was not the best fit for a family therapist—or perhaps the family therapist had to go.

I am making a point of this because I believe that one of the most important things that we do as leaders is to understand the settings in which we work, what they will demand of us, and what kind of leaders we will be, given those demands. In my early academic career, I was first and foremost a scientist—and even as a teacher, I thought of myself as a scientist first. Others—particularly in the academic world—may think of themselves as teachers first, as engineers, as physicians, or whatever their first and lasting career identification suggests. This means that as leaders, we may think of ourselves as scientist/leaders, physician/leaders, teacher/leaders, or perhaps coach/leaders or even consultant/leaders. This doesn't mean that in every task I face that I will use only a scientific or analytical style, but it does mean that those are things that I will not naturally, or quickly, give up. This will be true whether I am working within a structural frame, a human resources frame, a political frame, or a symbolic frame. And the voices of those values and early identities within us are voices that should not be silenced as we go about the work we do that requires viewing our tasks—both large and small—through frames that may, or may not, fit very well. As a leader, I cannot always be a scientist, a teacher, or a coach, but I can always heed the voices of those identities, and the values they represent. These identities are important because they suggest something deeply meaningful about our approaches and the values that we take into our leadership roles.

I came to understand this centrality of personal identity in a new way when I was training as a professional coach with our colleague Bob Lee and his iCoach group in New York. One of the central themes and tasks of that program was the development of a Personal Model for coaching (Frisch et al., 2012), and the first step in that development process was to answer the question, “What do you bring to coaching as a person and as a professional?” In exhaustively answering that ostensibly simple question, I gained a sense of my value as a coach that has been far more important than the competencies that I have strived to develop and the tasks. Just as staying closely in touch with who I am enhances my work as a coach and my ability to help and support my clients, so that sense of personal identity enriches my life as a leader and strengthens my responses to the challenges of leadership. It has occurred to me that perhaps every course in leadership—and today there are many—should begin with the request that participants ponder, and answer the question, “What do you bring to leadership as a person and as a professional?”

Graham Spanier, the president of Penn State, had learned to function as a political leader, and what we read in the Freeh Report suggests that he may have begun to view the world exclusively through that frame. Spanier has referenced his identity as a family therapist in refuting the charges against him. But I am having difficulty believing that he was listening to the voice of that family therapist when he decided not to question what Jerry Sandusky actually was up to. In fact, I think it was only when the charges were brought that he remembered who he was. “Unfathomable,” he reportedly uttered, on learning of the charges and then reminded us of his professional identity as a family therapist and his personal history as a victim of family violence. Unfortunately, those protests did not have the ring of authenticity. I believe that this case is not unlike so many others in which a set of false beliefs about personal competence and power begins to take the place of authentic values and identity. This becomes possible when leaders operate in secrecy and insulate themselves from the truth. In this case perhaps, the goals of leadership were unchallenged for so long that the political frame became reality—rather than merely one perspective through which we may learn more about an organization, a problem, or a decision to be made.

As I have referenced, in November of 2011, the Board of Trustees appointed a Special Investigative Counsel, the former FBI Director, Louis J. Freeh, to conduct a thorough investigation into the report of Jerry Sandusky’s actions and who knew what about them at the University. That report is long, detailed, and a fascinating read. It summarizes the results of more than 430 interviews and 3.5 million pieces of electronic data and documents, as well as extensive information from police, public agencies, and sources contacting a toll-free hotline. The investigation was extensive, wide-ranging, and completely independent.

The findings of the Freeh Report were devastating for all of the key players, but perhaps most so for Spanier, who was characterized in that report as a president who “discouraged discussion and dissent.” Rejecting the explanations for their actions by Spanier, Schultz, Curley, and Paterno, and their attorneys, the report concluded that “in order to avoid the consequences of bad publicity, the most powerful leaders at the University . . . repeatedly concealed critical facts related to Sandusky’s child abuse from the authorities, the University’s Board of Trustees, the Penn State community, and the public at large.” In part, the report blamed, “a culture of reverence for the football program that is ingrained at all levels of the campus community” (Freeh, Sporkin, & Sullivan, LLP, 2012).

Most troubling of the evidence presented in the report are the e-mails and notes of conversations between Spanier, Athletics Director Tim Curley, and Senior Vice President for Business and Finance Gary Schwartz, the vice president to whom Curley reported. The tone throughout the reports of those communications suggests a delicate dance in which the players are testing just how much should or shouldn’t be said. They use code in some messages—referring to the “other matter,” for example or “the subject.” These signs of secrecy tell me that everyone recognized this was a “hot potato”—that it was important to keep the circle tight and the topic under wraps. The messages from Spanier, moreover, reflect a distancing that appears to signal the deferral of decision-making to others. It is as though Spanier were saying, “I will not ask too much, so long as you are telling me that the matters to which we are *not* directly referring are being taken care of, that they will not cause problems for the University, the football coach, or for me.” In other words, the decision was being made to protect the presidency with respect to knowledge of these events. If one doesn’t officially know too much, then one can “plausibly deny” even more, and certainly any specific knowledge of events. I am not suggesting that this kind of conversation does not occur with some frequency in the leadership of large organizations, and that it might not, on occasion, serve a legitimate purpose. But an important art of leadership is to be able to detect the signs that *this one is serious*, that there can be no backing off. What is difficult to understand in this case, of course, is how a family therapist/leader could not have read those signs in this case.

We might say the same of Joe Paterno, of course, if we want to look at his leadership role in the context of the decisions made in this case. Paterno had a huge legacy to protect. As I already said, he held hero status not only in State College, Pennsylvania, but in American college sports. He was the model for ethical behavior. It is reported that Paterno had always focused his attention almost exclusively on football. There was room in his life for very little else, and he was acutely conscious of his reputation and the power that he held over others. Reportedly, he was not close to Sandusky—in spite of the fact that Sandusky had served for 30 years as an Assistant Coach and for

more than 20 years as defensive coordinator for Joe Paterno's Nittany Lions. He told Sandusky that he would never be head coach at Penn State. Yet Joe Paterno—who was known to demand what he wanted and usually to get it, who was known to clearly and emphatically reject what he did *not* want—that same Joe Paterno did not confront Sandusky about the allegations of child sexual abuse that reportedly occurred in *his* locker rooms, nor did he insist that anyone else report to him what had been done about the information that he simply passed on to Athletics Director Curley. Where was the ethical football coach leader? How could he possibly have missed what this was all about? How could he not even have asked?

On February 10, 2013, the Paterno family released a report, privately commissioned by them and completed by former U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh, that rebuts the Freeh Special Investigative Counsel Report. I have read the Thornburgh Report and note that it makes some valid points related to shortcomings of the Freeh Report—particularly those related to individuals who were not interviewed. He also points out that there were discrepancies in the details reported by some individuals—for example, whether or not McQueary reported having actually seen sexual acts, or only inappropriate contact between Sandusky and the victim in question. Thornburgh takes great pains to point out the lack of evidence that Paterno was actively involved in a cover-up. With respect to Paterno's leadership responsibilities, however, these issues are beside the point. Although we cannot learn exactly what Paterno actually did or didn't know, his failure to act in a situation where it was clear that something very wrong had occurred, and that it had occurred in an area of his responsibility, remains unchallenged. Paterno did not exercise the leadership responsibility to ask questions, to pursue issues, and to follow up with all who depended on him to do what was right. He did not provide the model of integrity for which he was known, and on which he prided himself. Thornburgh cites Paterno's often stated values and his reputation—in other words, Paterno's personal leadership identity. Unfortunately, he does not convince us that the man behaved in this instance in a manner that was consistent with that identity.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

One way in which the questions of Paterno's behavior—and that of others—can be addressed is to look at what there was to be protected at Penn State. The problem with crisis of any sort is that it shakes up life as we know it. In the case of huge personalities, huge organizations, and huge cultures, crises can literally destroy the "civilization" that has been built. Somewhere in our collective consciousness, we seem to know that, and our deepest

instinct is to resist that destruction. Unfortunately, instinct rarely has a long-term view. Instead, we act on the immediate threat. We circle the wagons—as Spanier and other top University officials did, or we look the other way—as Paterno did. At times such as this, personal leadership identity is vulnerable.

In retrospect, it is easy to see that these actions are wrong, that they take us to the edge of the proverbial “slippery slope.” Inevitably, the tempting decision to look past one specific issue, to patch it up, fix it up, or dress it up, and then to assume that it will not recur, only means that it will be impossible to address it in a straightforward and morally correct manner, when it does recur. And when we know that something is not as it should be, it usually will recur. “The heart of leadership lies in the hearts of leaders,” [Bolman and Deal \(2001\)](#) told us, even before they had fully developed their work on the four leadership frames. We cannot, and never should, go beyond what we know in our hearts. And when we doubt in our hearts, we must stop and question. This is the fundamental issue that Dick Kilburg has explored in such eloquent detail in his work on leadership—most recently in his volume on “Virtuous Leaders” ([Kilburg, 2012](#)). He explored the dependence of ethical leadership practice on a foundation of “virtuous behavior,” and he suggested that, “virtue can only be attained through practice during a life dedicated to achieving higher levels of expertise and experience with them.”

The notion of “personal leadership identity,” may represent an extension of that statement. If we can manage to hang on to the values and beliefs that helped us to grow as professionals, or simply as human beings, then we have the foundation for our personal model of strong and ethical leadership. Our understanding of who we are as leaders should rest on those simple foundations—not on our ability to change our perspective, or to become more and more skillful at working within a specific frame. If, on the other hand, we do not know who we are as leaders, and if we do not listen to the voices of our respective identities, then regardless of the frame in which we are functioning, and no matter how appropriate it may be to the setting, we can become totally lost. We can follow the rules of the frame and still lose our bearings completely. That, I believe is what happened to both Graham Spanier and Joe Paterno in this case—and perhaps to Tim Curley, Gary Schwartz, and others as well. When confronted with an ugly truth—or perhaps just the hint of that truth, they went into defensive mode. They tried to defend their identities by turning away from the awful truth, by saying that it had nothing to do with them—that they were simply looking after the best interests of the University. How different things might have been had they used the power of those identities and the values that lay beneath them, to speak out and to take action.

I shall conclude by saying that I have chosen to comment on the specific leadership issues of this case only with some personal misgiving. As has been

the case for many of us, in the course of my leadership roles, I have had the experience of my actions being misinterpreted and my intentions distorted. That experience is always painful, and now it gives me pause—lest I have gone too far beyond what it is possible to know. As I said earlier, I knew and had high regard for Graham Spanier, and so I admit the possibility that I may have misread his actions, his intentions, or the mistakes that I believe he made. Those possibilities notwithstanding, I have felt compelled to seek an understanding of how mistakes as serious as those we saw at Penn State could have been made and to reach for the lessons that all of us may find in them. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share that journey with you.

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