

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



When Leaders Fall from Grace, Should that Negate Their Positive Contributions?

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

If I were to say the name of a famous singer, Michael Jackson, what image comes to mind? Opinions are sharply divided between those who celebrate his music and showmanship and those who accuse him of committing various crimes and exhibiting bizarre behavior in his case. The music has endured and many people separate the music from the person such as happily dancing to Thriller. Each Halloween. But everyone is not forgiven in this way. And sometimes when we take down the person, we turn our backs and their earlier accomplishments. To what extent is this appropriate? Are there times when we should separate the person from the accomplishment?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

he impetus behind this episode is a situation that I think just about all of us have experienced in our professional careers and some of us have experienced more than once. It's a simple case. It's basically where a successful person, usually a leader -- but doesn't necessarily have to be a leader -- somebody who's been extraordinarily successful eventually becomes a victim of their own success. The particular instances that I'm going to specifically refer to are when the victim of success is one who succumbs to personal temptation, either to commit personal misconduct, to break rules that should not be broken, but otherwise basically do things that cause them to be removed from the position, ultimately leave in some form of disgrace with with a sullied reputation. Ordinary bad performance or poor performance in a particular position doesn't quite generate that same level of interest. I mean, you know, people who do not succeed can be moved along rather quietly. In this case, we're talking about individuals whose actions wind up putting them on in the news, if you will.

In my career, beginning from when I was a very, very young officer just a couple of years in the service, I experienced being around leaders who ultimately succumb to this sort of issue. [These were] cases of not being able to handle success. As I progressed, you know, these sorts of incidents, they didn't happen very, very often, but they certainly had an impact.

In my school, we have made very liberal usage of a ethics article that is kind of explains over the challenges of success and what it can do to an individual. And it was by Dean Ludwig and Clinton Longenecker. And it's called "The Bathsheba Syndrome, The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders." This article is really an excellent one. If you've not heard of it, I definitely suggest getting getting your hands on it and reading it because it tells how success can lead to a person's downfall if they are mentally or emotionally unprepared to deal with the success.

One side of this is in terms of, "All right, well, if you're the leader, obviously you have to be aware of the possibility of these sorts of temptations." What I'm really focusing on this episode is what happens to the things that were done well? What happens to the accomplishments? What happens to everything that the particular leader touched? This, I think, is a little bit more unique, doesn't always happen in the instances which I've been personally experienced. But there is reason to question the accomplishments of the individual, say the personal misconduct, or the thing that caused the downfall was an indicator that perhaps what the individual was doing in the first place is worth questioning. Perhaps there were risks involved. Perhaps there were ethics violated in the course of developing the success that the leader had. So then in that particular case, then the accomplishments go with the person and and that makes sense.

But instances that I am really interested in here are ones where the accomplishments really did stand on their own and they should not have then swept away. In a particular instance that I am all too familiar with, we had a leader who took an organization in a time of crisis. This was the type of existential crisis that said that the organization was, no kidding, at risk of failure. The organization was providing a capability that many felt was not needed. The threats to shut down or remove the organization were present. There were squabbles over what purpose the organization served. The leader in this case did several things that really turned the situation around over a relatively short period of time. And as a result, the organization not only has endured, but ultimately thrived. I mean, a new purpose, basically, that the organization's purpose was transformed [and] its structure was transformed. A lot of good things were done and it provided some lessons, learned some insights about how to deal with similar circumstances in the future. In other words, I felt based on my witness of how this organization responded to the leader's actions and also how the senior leadership team as a whole helped to usher through the crisis, that this was something that had enduring value and could be applied in other organizations.

However, that proved far more difficult because unfortunately, as kind of an outcome of the success, the individual then committed some acts of personal misconduct -- not to get in any detail -- and it sort of sullied everything. It ruined both the individual's and the organization's reputation. Ultimately, the organization did [recover and] thrive. It moved on because with the succession of or the installation of a new leader, the organization essentially distanced itself from that [leader].

However, in my own case, as I tried to mention the accomplishments and say, you know, "we really ought to be looking at this," that this is the sort of thing that we would want other people to do if they were found themselves in a similar crisis situation.

Unfortunately, because of the reputation of the leader, I was not able to really get very far. As a matter of fact, the mere mention of the organization provoked a response that essentially said that, "Oh, ... This leader was, you know, in charge of [that unit]. And didn't this leader do all of these bad things? Well, we don't want to talk about that." And my response was, "Well, no. I mean, I felt that the acts of the senior leadership team in this case were just as valuable and that the knowledge gained from the situation, which was completely independent and separate from the leader's subsequent acts, post-success if you will, that we ought to separate the two and still kind of tell the story."

I mean, it kind of like with in the upfront piece about Michael Jackson, it took years, I mean, years, many years for the memory of the the leader's association with the organization to kind of fade before

I was finally able to confidently put forth the lessons learned, put forth the insights, tell the story fully and ultimately affect, you know, introduce some new ideas and concepts for a similar crisis situations that I've actually used in subsequent consulting work.

It just kind of felt odd. It felt strange. It felt wrong that it had to take so many years for me to be able to do that. And so I just kind of wanted to think about some of us, if not many of us are going to experience these situations where we are around a leader who falls from grace. Then, you know, what do we do to preserve what is valuable to the organization and put the organization's needs first and separate, you know, just at least salvage or leverage what we can and should maintain, which is that which belongs with the organization?

And so I came up with a few ideas. And I think that there is in a way, it's good to have somewhat of a discourse and be armed with some arguments, because indeed, in my mind, sometimes I wasn't sure, wasn't always sure whether the rebuke against the leader that I was referring to was really a rebuke against the leader or just resistance to the idea that I was trying to promote. Sometimes I could tell the difference, but not always. I think it's kind of helpful to have some ideas in mind of how to deal with these sorts of situations.

First and foremost, we have to look at the accomplishments as knowledge, as something that the organization owns and should take care of. And the organization's needs take ultimate precedence. If there is indeed knowledge that has been produced that can be shown to be divorced from any of the individual issues, then somehow we have to go through and separate the accomplishments from the individual and let the organization learn so that we can take advantage of it. I think we are too quick to tie the accomplishment to the individual when it's when it's not necessary and when it's counterproductive.

The corollary, of course, is that if the accomplishment cannot be separated from the individual and essentially cannot be replicated, like if there isn't a way to repeat the success, in my mind, that's when there are reasons to doubt the legitimacy of the accomplishment. Perhaps there was something in the individual's conduct meant that the accomplishment was achieved illegitimately and OK, then the organization has to be protected. You know, if there is nothing to be learned from the situation, if there's nothing to be learned from what was done, then yeah, just then it's a story that should die.

And then sometimes, indeed, you know, those of us who are trying to push for retaining and leveraging the knowledge, sometimes we do have to be patient.

Sometimes the story is just a little bit too hot. The damage done by misconduct has to run its course. And we have to either await the proper timing or set conditions by which it at a future time, the knowledge can be leveraged. And this this kind of allows everybody to. Let the emotions die down and think about things rationally. It's a challenge in today's information environment because is that today? It's really, really too easy to resurrect bad stories. It's it's kind of a shame, but it's the way things are. So it's all that much more important that we find ways to to take the knowledge, to isolate it and not let the emotions take away the good that can come from what was accomplished.

... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

ALL THE BEST!

TOM GALVIN