Firing the Coach Instead of the Players (and Other Counternarratives Against Leaders)

Season 4, Episode 6 – originally released 31 March 2020

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

> *There's an old saying that the higher you climb the flag-pole or the corporate ladder, the more your butt shows. It's a none too polite way of saying that being a senior leader or a top executive means that you are a magnet for criticism. You might find yourself loathed or vilified for what you do because of your position or others will make up stories and blame you for whatever goes wrong with the organization, whether it's actual or perceived or alleged. It can be very, very frustrating for leaders. But one wonders, are there patterns or predictable behaviors and ideas associated with these criticisms? In other words, are there counter narratives that underlie these criticisms? And if so, if the counter narratives can be identified, perhaps leaders could be better prepared to deal with them.*

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

I want to begin with a simple sports metaphor to describe what essentially amounts to behaviors that one sees in a competitive environment. Typically the competition is fair; and when it's a fair competition the better team always wins. When this season begins, of course, there's a lot of expectations out there. Fans are certainly always expecting that their team is going to perform well or desiring that their team perform well. But of course, not every team performs well. Not everyone meets the expectations that are set. And it can be especially problematic if you are expected to be a championship team and you find yourself with a losing record during the season.

So when teams begin to fail or show signs of a systemic problem of some kind, that suggests that they're going to not only they're not only failing expectations now, but it doesn't seem like they're going to meet or recover fans, media pundits, you know, commentators are going to start calling or questioning the coach or manager, you know depending on the sports, the person who is on the sideline and responsible for preparing the team to play the game. And in some sports, like especially in American sports, the coach has a very, very active role in setting the tactics of the game. Whereas in other sports, like soccer, once the players are on the field, coach really doesn't play so direct a role. So who's the one who bears the blame or who's the one who gets onto the hot seat or, you know, however you want to put it, who's under the spotlight?

It becomes the coach. And then the conversation turns to when, you know, what will it take for the general manager or the president or the senior executive -- the coach's boss on other words -- to pull the trigger and say the coach needs to go. You can think of any number of reasons why teams can underperform apart from the fact that maybe the coach didn't do a good job of preparing the

team. It could be injuries. It could be some, you know, unfortunate, bad, bad calls, bad breaks. You know, all sorts of things can happen. They just conspire -- sort of in a several standard deviations from the mean ... sense -- to cause a team to basically have an unfair losing streak. And even in those cases, there's just this sort of sense that, you know, if a team is underperforming and it can't really be pinned on any particular thing, then sometimes, you know, it just becomes nobody else being available to bear the brunt of the criticism [except] the coach.

And it's kind of odd, too, because in some instances, you know, when a team is underperforming, the coach is going to get fired. And when the coach gets fired -- sometimes, obviously not all the time, but -- sometimes the change in the coach comes with the team suddenly turns its fortunes around. And then all of a sudden, it's like it "*must have been the coach's fault*," because otherwise, why wasn't the team doing this well before? Sometimes we tend to forget the fact that quite a number of instances, I don't know the numbers, but when you fire the coach, the team gets worse or the team just, you know, just really fails to show any sign of improvement. If anything, it just it just ends up running. The course of the season ends. Hope for better luck next year. The point of this whole metaphor is to understand somewhat of the communication environment surrounding a leader of an organization when it's not necessarily the case that the leader is entirely to blame.

The reason why I was thinking about this was because in communication environments -- and I've talked before in previous episodes about narratives and counternarratives; counternarratives being the alternate stories of an organization -- sometimes counter narratives oppose an organization's narrative simply because the competitor ... is competing with the organization's narrative and just simply wants to try to take the narrative down. Well, doesn't the same thing kind of happen with leaders, too? We certainly see instances in which a leader of an organization is challenged or criticized by the mere fact of being associated with the organization, that the personality of the leader or perhaps the demography of the leader is such that the leader is open to challenge. What this drives me towards is to think about counternarratives between the organizations and individuals.

Now, when I built the constructs of narratives and counter narratives, I used identity and I used image. I used identity from Albert and Whetten, in which an organization's identity is established by its claims of central character, its distinctiveness, and its history. And counter narratives were any alternative view of that sense. In a book by a whole bunch of established identity theorists back in the 1990s; this book basically chronicles those discussions ... Essentially build a bridge in identity theory between the organizational level and the individual level. Essentially saying that there the construct is multi-level. So then with we take that same construct and we apply it to the leader as an individual, both as as a member of the organization and as the leader as a person, then what we have is that you can have counternarratives against the leader that sort of look the same or serve the same purpose as counter narratives of the organization. And what's especially important in leadership and of in awe of a large organization is the extent to which the leader's identity is expected to mirror that of the organization's identity. What we expect to see is that, you know, the leader is fully representing the organization in addition to being themselves as as individual persons.

If we take that to its logical conclusion, then and we consider the different types of counternarratives that I've discussed in a previous episode, we can place these counternarratives on a continuum that runs from the rational to the emotional in organizations. [Rational is when] it's the organization [that] did something wrong and therefore the organization can be expected to repeat the mistakes and therefore cannot be trusted to handle affairs that are related to the mistake. It turns out, you know, when we think about some of the criticisms of levied against leaders, they sound somewhat of the same vein when the leader makes a mistake. When the leader speaks, says something wrong, misspeaks, does something, invests money wrongly, or does something with the organization's resources that proved to not work out as as hoped for or as planned? That becomes a matter of the counter narrative is a response to the leader's action. That message is that the leader cannot be trusted to handle such situations in future.

And the emotional side, of course this is where the organization's existence is in question. And so the organization is treated as nefarious in some way. Well, we see the same thing with counternarratives against leaders of an emotional nature. The person is the leader of the organization and therefore is some sort of a scumbag, a bad person to begin with. And now, by virtue of taking over this organization, they are poisoning the organization. So that's the other extreme.

This sort of a coaching change metaphor of where the leader is not really culpable in any direct sense for the organization's failure, but certainly is culpable by virtue of being the leader of the organization. So where does that fit on this continuum? And are there variations of a theme here? And I would argue yes, because there are many different circumstances in which the leader finds himself or herself leading an organization that is underperforming or that is deserving of criticism. So let's put this coaching change metaphor in the center and let's kind of lean to the rational side initially. Here is a case where you have a team that's on a losing streak because they're making tactical mistakes or they're just seen to be unprepared to play the game. You can attribute it to the coach, even though the players may very well be faulted for the poor execution. Ultimately, the coach by a logical framework is blamed for the failure.

The change in coaching is supposed to suggest that that the coach's identity, which probably manifests itself in the way in which the coaching is done, such as training a certain way, choosing or preferring certain tactics or something like that, something that's in the character of the coach is what's in question. And the removal of the coach and the placement of it would resolve that particular tension. And it's sort of an 'if-then' proposition. So we kind of see that. And that's sort of in the ... on the rational side of the spectrum.

And then we have the other cases which perhaps lean a little bit over to the emotional side. Let's just say that this is an individual whose character or whose personality simply does not fit with the organization or does not appear to fit with the players or the members of the organization. And so there is a *loss of trust*, a *loss of loyalty*, [and] a *failure to control the locker room* [are] counternarrative[s] of that nature, especially if you have a very high level professional organization who may be dealing with a lot of elite players with very, very strong egos. And if there is a failure of the organization to gel together and to work together, then that becomes an identity crisis for the team, which in turn becomes an identity crisis for the coach there.

You've you kind of see how, you know, that's a different type of a counternarrative. And so then the counter narrative attacks the coach's ability to control the locker room, to control the situation, to be able to bring these egos together and coalesce the team in order to perform. But it still may not necessarily denigrate the leader's character.

So what does this all mean? And why is this kind of useful and important to me?

Just as with understanding counternarratives against organizations, if you understand that the messages, you know, and if you're under the spotlight, you're gonna be receiving thousands upon thousands of these types of messages thrown at you, questioning who you are, questioning what you're doing, questioning all this sort of thing. And you don't have time to -- you know, at the organizational level -- to be dealing with all of these thousands of messages straining your energy. You can imagine when they're concentrated on a single individual, you know, there's a certain level in which the coach is going to sort of tune out the criticism and think that the best thing to do is, is try to drive on.

But there's a point where you have to respond. You either have to respond through changing or improving something with the with the performance of the team, or you have to defend yourself openly against the criticisms, especially if the criticisms are unfair or basically inaccurate -- an inaccurate representation of what's going on. If you can think about what's the root story that's being proposed as far as where the where these criticisms are coming from, where these messages are coming from, what are what are the opponents thinking about you as the leader of the organization?

Then you can prepare a personal defensive strategy similar to the defensive narratives that I discussed in the previous season, where you can either confront the criticisms directly, refute the charges, and say that they're wrong. "*And here's why. And here is what I can demonstrate.*" Or to accommodate and say, "*There were mistakes made and or there were things that went wrong. And here's how what we're doing to change the way that our organization is doing. This is how we're going to shake things up.*" Or you could take the strong, silent approach and essentially tell the critics to go talk to the hand and try to minimize the energy that you place in defending yourself and concentrate on trying to get the situation turned.

But then you have to think about, "*All right. So then what is the next step?*" How do you, as a leader of an organization, decide when you recognize that the counternarratives are getting more and more intense and require a change in strategy so that you can go ahead and try to defend and basically put the organization's needs first. Protect the organization from the criticism and allow yourself the freedom in the room to maneuver. In order to get what you need to get done up until the point where, unfortunately, so sorry, you wind up having to leave the organization because there just is no other way.

If indeed it is inevitable that things are going to come to an end, how do you use this same defensive strategy to put yourself out in the best possible terms, set yourself up for potentially being hired by another team? The beauty of identity and image in this communication framework, because of the ability to apply identity at multiple levels from the individual to the organization and all levels in between. What it allows us is a very, very powerful tool to think about the character of

conversations that are coming at multiple levels within the organization. Because one of the things you want to understand, taking away the sports metaphor and just thinking about organizations in general. If I am a competitor or an opponent of an organization, I'm looking for as many targets as I possibly can to deliver opposing messages. And as I said before, if the organization doesn't do anything that warrants criticism, I can attack what the organization is or is not. And then once that ceases to work, I can go back to something that the organization did either recently or in the distant past.

Well, now ... identifying the leader as a single individual of great importance in the organization allows me that many more targets. So, when attacking the organization ceases to work, I can shift and send my messages directly at the leader. And when I can't get that leader anymore, I can shift back to the organization. So then taking it from the organization's perspective, now you've got that many more avenues to try to close off when you're formulating your defensive communication strategy. *How do I protect the organization? How do I protect the leadership? How do I protect the and the relationship between them both*? There is there's so much power in understanding what the root counternarrative is against the leader, because from that you can establish a strategy that basically blunts the opponents attack against the leadership and hopefully provides the necessary space to act and try to promote one's [own] narrative. It is very complex stuff, but if we can think about it rationally, take a step back from all of these messages that are coming at us that seem to come from many different directions, hitting many different targets within the organization. Then we can see the terrain much more clearly, And be able to [respond much better].

… 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