

“When is just enough, too much?” - The dark side of leader behaviour©

By Leanne Faraday-Brash

I find it curious that so many journalists provoking discussion and debate about some profound error of judgment on the part of a high-flying corporate executive or footy player speculate that the decision maker in question was intellectually challenged (aka “stupid”). Yes, Alan Didak, the father of modern understatement admitted a few of his recent decisions “weren’t the best”. Given that plenty of footy players and business tycoons on six-figure salaries follow the share market, is it possible that these people are not simply stupid or flamboyant but rather supremely arrogant or out of touch with community reality? The saving grace in Didak’s case is that he experienced the biggest impact. Not so, with HIH shareholders.

I find it equally curious and almost amusing that others will talk about these people and muse authoritatively about footballers’ apparent lack of discipline. I see.... Yes, the same people who monitor their food intake for nutritional quality seven days a week for 10 months of the year, run umpteen times a week, crash through pain and mental anguish trying out the Kokoda trail for something to do, spend hours almost daily in a gym, turn up to training on time, attend media appearances, visit hospitals, choose words carefully in post match media interviews and walk into Port Phillip Bay at 0830 hours on a freezing winter morning in a skimpy pair of bathers for a post match recovery session just because someone else at the Club thought it was a good idea. Sounds pretty disciplined to me!

Now you could say, and you might, that it’s precisely because they have to be so disciplined on the *other stuff* that they’re tempted at times to freak out and push the boundaries. But is it possible there are other factors at play, and at work?

When the Wayne Carey/Anthony Stevens crisis hit North Melbourne, Ricky Nixon, Carey’s manager and Carey’s hapless wife, Sally, both commented publicly on their feeling that community reverence, dizzying success and power and Carey’s lack of experience at being told “No” were key to what they believed to be his ruination. Sally Carey blamed herself and others in Carey’s inner circle for cultivating a rarefied sense of entitlement that gave rise to poor decisions, failure to consider consequences and difficulty taking responsibility by her husband for his actions. Simone Warne did not, to my knowledge, come out publicly and say *exactly* the same thing. She just forgave Shane for it.

What she did appear to be saying was that her husband had/has what we call in psychology, poor impulse control or low frustration tolerance. So she was prepared to be open minded on lots of things but supposedly demanded he never hire a female nanny unless she looked like Mrs Doubtfire (my extra, not Simone's). Now who's being histrionic? Sorry!

What are some of the qualities we demand in elite performers – whether athletes or corporate executives? Surely to be successful they have to be supremely self-confident, somewhat self-absorbed, disciplined, single minded, goal oriented, bold, perfectionistic and faced with a ferocious tackle by the competition - unyielding. As a high profile commodity, when they are not on the field or in the board room, they may enjoy cult status or Golf Club membership celebrity, are dressed impeccably (even sponsored) by suit manufacturers, may dwell on their appearance, and surround themselves with beautiful things and beautiful people.

Hogan and Kaiser in their fascinating 2006 report entitled 'The Dark Side of Discretion' describe a taxonomy of the 'dark side of leader personality'. Situational strengths like energy, enthusiasm even passion, can be channelled when under stress into emotional explosiveness. Could that help explain the brawls outside pubs? One person's discipline and undistracted focus could be another's obsessoid personality. One manager's unswerving self-belief at the pointy end of the scale is another's narcissistic sense of callous entitlement. A characteristic such as being tough and resolute under pressure may translate into uncommunicative behaviour in relationships, and insensitivity to moral issues. The darker side of courage, confidence and charisma may be reflected in an inability to admit mistakes or learn from experience. It is well documented that Ben Cousins' return to Australia does not seem to have curbed his appetite for night clubs and partying; nor does he seem to have felt a pressure to manage peoples' perceptions of him while he seeks permission for a return from exile.

None of these 'dark side' attributes connote mental illness; rather flawed interpersonal strategies that in the extreme can become pervasive long-term weaknesses.

What Sally Carey may have failed to take into account when she blamed herself, Wayne's manager and the Football Club was the individual make-up of the person calling the shots. Yes it may be that the North Melbourne Football Club and its supporters regarded Carey from a very young age as Arden Street Royalty, and West Coast footballers are regarded as demigods in Western Australia and feel omnipotent. But we know not every footballer is being poured into a taxi after an evening at nightclubs and strip joints or allegedly consorting with criminals. James Hird can be found in a beanie and sunglasses on a Sunday morning - not because he fancies himself as a rock star - but so the adoring throngs leave him alone so he can watch one of his kids play football for the local club.

No one blamed the One Tel or HIH shareholders for seemingly unconscionable acts of the company's senior executives. Sally, should we blame the footy supporters for Brendon Fevola's antics?

Enron, HIH, One-Tel and the trading floor at NAB are potent examples of a rarefied penthouse culture that got out of control, where ethics, accountability and conscience were hard to find; at least within the cohort making some big decisions. I would even take an educated guess and say they probably had to surround themselves with dependent personalities; people who prided themselves on being considerate team players who kept the boss informed while we might have seen them as sycophantic back slappers desperately trying to please their superiors.

It may be that some of these footballers and corporate sociopaths aren't narcissistic in the obvious way of a Saddam Hussein. I mean they don't have streets named after them, statues built in their honour or declare national days of celebration on their birthdays. Then again, with the disarray, cover-ups, outrage and scandals allegedly occurring in some local councils and government departments at the moment, perhaps the applications for street name changes just haven't been considered and approved yet!

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