

**SOURCE:** Rochester (MI) Eccentric  
**AUDIENCE:** 97,000 [provided by Nielsen//NetRatings]  
**DATE:** 08-31-2012  
**HEADLINE:** job'

Source Website

August 30, 2012

Penn State scandal shows leadership demands more than just 'I did my job'

Takin' Care Of Business

By Lee Meadows

Guest Columnist

I am sure there are more than enough us who have heard of or been touched by the Penn State scandal and, undoubtedly, opinions abound. One thing that is for certain is that this story is not just another sports discussion in which eyes are rolled at the mere mention of a statistic or a questionable call. We know that we have been pulled into an unfortunate and unconscionable event that staggers the imagination and intertwines so many angles that it is hard to know where to begin.

The legal angle, the ethics angle, the moral angle, the humanity angle, the trust angle, the institutional angle and more, make this the kind of news event that has more legs than a chorus line! Yet, through it all, there is one prevailing notion that is an arc in which all of the aforementioned angles are bullet points. The leadership angle has been mentioned and directed toward specific individuals who hold key institutional leadership roles. As a society, we hold leadership to be the one constant in an ever-expanding kettle of social stew.

Since the economic debacle of 2007, most corporations have been subject to a microscopic eye and chamber of voices that define higher expectations that are a part of corporate social responsibility. The underlying assumption is that when faced with a dilemma, the option is, always, to 'do the right thing'. In the case of the Penn State scandal, that expectation meant going beyond passing along information and take decisive action under the umbrella of 'serving the greater good' — even if it meant chasing down the information and finding out that it was an unsubstantiated rumor.

In the case of these innocent victims, the greater good would have been served knowing that the 'alleged' actions were false and then having to apologize versus finding out the 'alleged' actions were true and hoping it goes away. There is nothing that explains away inaction when the perpetrator is an adult, who is supposed to know better, and children who cannot fend for themselves.

Leadership demands action, even if information is minimal. Leaders are paid to make decisions. When those decisions involve the slightest hint of malfeasance among staff members, leaders are judged by the swiftness of their decisions where innocent lives are at stake. While it can be argued that swift decisions are not always good decisions, inaction decisions, more often than not, result in more harm than decisions that are made too quickly.

There are those who would make the argument that leadership expectations in a public institution, like Penn State, are different than what is expected of a business. However, as our friends in Ann Arbor have demonstrated, when over 100,000 people show up for a home football game and spend money on all the surrounding businesses, that's a business! The expectations are no different. We expect our state institutions to adhere to high standards of ethical and moral conduct without making a differentiation.

In the 1958 film "The Buccaneer", the character of Jean Lafitte, played by Yul Brynner, is confronted about a ship that was attacked resulting in the loss of lives. The attack occurred despite contrary orders from Lafitte. When asked if he attacked the ship, he responded, "I was responsible." The irresponsible behavior of staff members is just as much the responsibility of the leader. The leader is held responsible no matter if they were directly involved in the act or heard of it by way of a third party rumor. Leaders do not have the option of saying, "I did my job!" More is expected, and in the case of the Penn State scandal, more was demanded.

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*Highlights: Walsh College*