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The Fulcrum of Leadership

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By Arthur Athens

Banks are among the nation’s most important and influential institutions. Our economic well-being and national security are dependent on the strength of the banking industry. And individual banks, both large and small, will rise or fall on the quality of the leaders found at all levels in these financial institutions. This assertion prompts me to encourage our banking leaders to pause and reflect on “the fulcrum of leadership.”



If you remember back to high school or college physics, a fulcrum is the point upon which a lever pivots—for example the center support of a playground seesaw. After leading various organizations for the past 45 years, I am convinced leaders make a decision each and every day about which direction they will pivot. Tipping in one direction results in selfish leadership that typically creates dysfunctional teams and results in compromises of integrity. Tipping in the other direction results in selfless leadership that enables teams to flourish and achieve extraordinary results. These two sides of the fulcrum can be illustrated with two sports stories.

Selfish versus selfless

In 1994, the Chicago Bulls were matched against the New York Knicks in the National Basketball Association's Eastern Conference championship. This was a five game series and the Knicks held the lead, two games to nothing. The series returned to Chicago and the Bulls needed a win to keep their playoff hopes alive.

The star of the Bulls was a young man by the name of Scottie Pippen. He emerged as a potential leader for the Bulls after the recent, unexpected retirement of Michael Jordan, one of the game's greatest players. Pippen seemed to like the attention he received during the regular season and tried to make the fans and press forget Michael Jordan. His desire for the spotlight seemed to dilute his interest in being a team player. In the third game of the championship, the score stood at 102 to 102 with 1.8 seconds remaining in the game.

The Bulls gained possession of the ball and Phil Jackson, the coach of the Bulls at the time, called a time out to design one final play. As Pippen headed to the sideline for the play, he beamed at the crowd, as if to say, "Don't worry, I've got this one!" When Phil Jackson diagrammed the play, Pippen's look of confidence turned to a look of disgust. Jackson planned on having Pippen inbound the ball to a Bulls rookie by the name of Toni Kukoc. Jackson, of course, thought the Knicks would be expecting Pippen to take the last shot and wanted to come at them with something unexpected. Pippen looked one more time at the plan, shook his head and sat down on the bench—refusing to go out for the last play. Jackson made a substitution and the rookie took and made the last shot. In the celebratory moments that followed the shot, Pippen was nowhere to be found.

Pippen's actions were severely criticized by both the press and the Chicago fans. Pippen was a good basketball player and a promising leader, but he decided to tip in the direction of selfishness and, in the long run, he had challenges on and off the court and never reached his potential.

In contrast, a Major League Baseball pitcher called Doc Halladay played for the Philadelphia Phillies and pitched a perfect game on May 29, 2010, against the Florida Marlins. With that perfect game, where no opposing player got on base for nine innings, he became the 20th MLB pitcher in history ever to pitch a perfect game. I happened to watch his press conference after the game and I was struck by his humility and focus on his teammates and not himself.

Halladay's name would surface again when he pitched a no-hitter on Oct. 6, 2010, versus the Cincinnati Reds. In this instance, he became the second MLB pitcher ever to pitch a no-hitter in the playoffs. Don Larsen of the New York Yankees, in 1956, was the last pitcher to throw a no-hitter in the playoffs. What an accomplishment for Halladay! The press conference following the play-off no-hitter replicated the post perfect game press conference where Halladay once again highlighted his teammates, not himself.

These two press conferences piqued my interest and I began researching Halladay. In doing so, I learned Halladay had bought an expensive Swiss watch for every member of the Phillies organization after the perfect game in May. He presented this gift to every player, every manager, the batboys and, of special note, everyone in the front office. Halladay placed each watch in a box with the person's name on the box and the date of the perfect game. Additionally, the box had this inscription, "We did it together. Thanks, Doc Halladay." Wow—there is someone who understands the power of selfless leadership! Halladay is now retired from baseball, but he was a leader on the field, in the clubhouse and in the community.

Teamwork and gratitude

As I have considered these two sides of the fulcrum, selfish and selfless, I am reminded of an analogy shared with me by an extraordinary leader and highly decorated Marine general. Gen. John Sattler tells leaders about the “*Sports Illustrated* jinx,” the phenomenon of athletes getting their individual picture on the cover of a major magazine and soon finding themselves with degraded performance or a highly visible defeat. Sattler then goes on to say that leaders, every single day, must decide whether their aim is to have the big, individual, vertical picture of just them on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, or whether they are more interested in being part of a horizontal picture on the cover that displays a championship team. Their individual picture is small and inconspicuous, but they will forever be associated with that championship team.

I believe the key for leaders to tip in the right direction is found with the inscription created by Doc Halladay, “We did it together. Thanks!” There are two parts to that expression: first, understanding that the team must come before the leader, and second, realizing the leader’s responsibility to acknowledge the contributions of others.

The first element requires humility where leaders consider others more important than themselves and look after the interests of others not just their own interests. C.S. Lewis described humility as “not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” When a friend of mine coached basketball at the collegiate level, he would tell his players: “When you get ready to go into the weight room, remind yourself, it’s not about me; it’s about the team. When you get ready to go on to the practice court, remind yourself, it’s not about me; it’s about the team. And when you are going into the arena with all those screaming fans, you remind yourself one more time, it’s not about me; it’s about the team.” This would be a good way for all leaders to start every day, to remind ourselves: “It’s not about me today; it’s about the mission, my people, our customers and serving others.”

The second element requires leaders to scan the workplace constantly to determine who can be thanked, appreciated and honored for their work. When leaders are saying thank you, it becomes much easier to tip in the direction of selflessness. Unfortunately, I am familiar with many organizations where team members are desperate for acknowledgment and that acknowledgment will rarely come from a selfish leader. Leading with humility and saying thank you help build trust, which leads to a more motivated and united team, which leads to exceptional performance.

Selfless leadership in action

For one final story illustrating selfless leadership, I turn to an incident that occurred in Iraq on April 14, 2004. A young Marine Corps corporal by the name of Jason Dunham was a squad leader, responsible for 12 other Marines. Dunham and his Marines were conducting a reconnaissance mission in the town of Karabilah when they learned their battalion commander’s convoy had been ambushed in a nearby location. Dunham led his squad to the ambush site and decided to outflank the enemy by moving with some of his Marines to the rear of the ambush.

In the rear of the action, Dunham discovered seven vehicles attempting to escape with some of the insurgents. As they approached the vehicles, an insurgent with a grenade attacked Dunham and in the ensuing struggle, the insurgent was able to roll the grenade towards Dunham’s Marines. Without hesitation, Dunham broke the grip of his opponent, told his Marines to “hit the deck,” and proceeded to sprint towards the grenade, covering the grenade with his helmet and body. The grenade exploded, killing Dunham but saving the lives of his fellow Marines.

In January 2007, the president of the United States presented the military's highest decoration for bravery, the Medal of Honor, to the Dunham family in memory of their son's courageous and selfless actions. Dunham's squad members attended that ceremony and they all remarked about the selfless leadership their squad leader always demonstrated, whether back in the United States or on the front lines, and how his ultimate sacrifice was in keeping with his pattern of putting others before himself.

You as a banker will not have to place yourself on a literal grenade, but you make decisions every day about "grenades" that emerge in your workplace. Is it going to be about us or about our team? Are we going to be a Scottie Pippen or a Doc Halladay? Do we want the vertical *Sports Illustrated* picture or the horizontal one? Will we be a selfish leader or a selfless leader? We must choose wisely because our destiny and the destiny of our organizations hang in the balance of which way we tip the seesaw.

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