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Inaction speaks louder than words: The problems of passivity

Sally J.F. Baron

United States Air Force Academy, 2354 Fairchild Drive, United States Air Force Academy, CO 80840-6208, U.S.A.

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Abstract Much has been written about bystander apathy, which occurs when an outsider (i.e., the *bystander*) is hesitant to act during a situation that clearly calls for action. However, what about when the individual called to act is an insider? This article asserts that insiders (i.e., *players*, or organizational actors) exhibit similar passive behaviors but not because they are apathetic. Players who are internal to the organization and are often responsible for the outcome are expected to act. Rather, when confounded by ambiguous situations, obfuscated communications, time pressure, and confusion, players often stand by befuddled. This article surveys two such cases. First is the recent case of Joe Paterno, the famed and beloved Penn State football coach of 62 years whose otherwise remarkable career was tainted by his failure to adequately act following a child abuse allegation of a staff member. Second is the case of the Vancouver Olympic Committee and the death of a young athlete on their newly built luge run. Those responsible failed to act when the danger of the track's extreme speeds were well known. The article compares the two cases and concludes by proposing remedies to mitigate inaction.

1. What are we thinking?

What are we thinking? Sometimes, we're not; we're reacting instead. Sometimes, we are victims of our own evolutionary success and fixed-action patterns that have kept us safe (Cialdini, 2009). In modern society, these behaviors still prevail. Many of us fear snakes—a behavior that saved the lives of our ancestors. Similarly, we are inclined to stay away from trouble. These heuristics help us get safely through our days without requiring complicated analysis and deep thought for each situation, but sometimes, we need to involve ourselves in troublesome situations for the sake of humanity, overriding our natural instincts. The applications for more effective behavior in crisis situations are widespread. In war zones, natural disasters, accidents, and even sports, effective crisis management happens one person at a time. The actions of a single person or many

E-mail address: sally.baron@usafa.edu

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individuals working together can have enormous effects on outcomes. This article examines such responses to extreme situations.

Stunned, shocked, scared, and confused, human beings often act like the proverbial deer frozen in the headlights when presented with a troublesome and unprecedented situation. Organizational actors, who are often a very important part of systems potentially going foul, often stand by in confusion or with the assumption that with so many people around, someone must be doing something. These can include situations with outcomes having devastating effects, such as loss of life. For the organizational actor, speaking up or acting in any way out of the norm could be risky behavior, placing the actor as well as his/her reputation, job, and livelihood in jeopardy. In the midst of confusion, people are hesitant to stand out for fear of potentially making an embarrassing mistake or looking foolish in front of others. According to the theory of *social proof*, people take cues from others and follow suit (Cialdini, 2009). There is no strong evidence suggesting people are apathetic; it just appears that way. Some studies have suggested a diffusion of accountability causes people to react with ambivalence, especially if the situation is ill defined (Darley & Latané, 1968).

1.1. Bystanders, players, and stages of inaction

The distinction between bystander apathy and player inaction requires clarification. A *bystander* is a person uninvolved with or outside an organization or situation. A *player* is a person involved with or inside an organization or situation. *Apathy* is not caring, while *inaction* is simply not acting. Let's look at a specific and well-known case and then examine the problems of passivity.

2. Joe Paterno

By most measures, the late Joe Paterno was an extraordinary person as his career and personal successes remain unparalleled. With a total of 62 years' coaching at Penn State, and 45 years as head coach, Paterno had a remarkable football career. Not the typical path for someone with an English literature degree from an Ivy League college, the famous football coach was also a supporter of intellectual endeavors and higher education. When Paterno arrived at Penn State in 1950 as an assistant coach, the Nittany Lions football team was hardly a top contender. Since taking the head coaching position in 1966, Paterno led them to 37 bowl games and was named the winningest Division I coach in the history of the sport with 409 victories under his belt (Carey, 2012).

His players, friends, fans, and family adored him. He was married to Suzanne [née] Pohland, and they spent 50 years together. They raised five children, all Penn State graduates, and enjoyed the love of 17 grandchildren. During his tenure at Penn State, Paterno turned down several substantially more lucrative offers to coach professional football. He liked to reminisce about his father's words: that money is needed to live, but too much is simply unnecessary. His coaching style blended academics, athletics, and ethics. His philosophy bled into campus life, and he was considered a positive force throughout the enormous campus. His family donated millions of dollars to Penn State, and the Paterno Library has stood as a symbol of his commitment and generosity. He was affectionately nicknamed JoePa and was an endeared and beloved figure on the Penn State campus.

People who knew Joe well remarked that he was adored and outspoken but not perfect or saintly. As with many successful coaches, Paterno was intense and was known to shout at his players and others. His outspoken nature and passion to improve his team and moreover Penn State often offended others. Friction with the university over the punishment of players who broke school rules was not uncommon. As a coach, he got much satisfaction out of rehabilitating players who needed guidance. He was a man of many interests who believed strongly in a well-rounded education and liked the challenge of helping an athlete who was having trouble academically or otherwise. He was always anxious to support such athletes even if he had to clash with university officials.

In October 2011, one of Paterno's former assistant coaches, Jerry Sandusky, came under fire for some 50 counts of sexual assault against eight boys over a 15-year period. Sandusky left Penn State in 1999 after Paterno told him that his chances for advancement were nil. After investigations, it was discovered that in 2002, Paterno was made aware of one of these alleged attacks by a member of his staff, Mike McQueary, then an assistant coach (Everson, 2012). McQueary reported that he witnessed Mr. Sandusky's suspicious behavior in the football facilities. In 2002, Sandusky was three years gone from Paterno's staff, but Paterno reported what he knew of the incident to his superiors, including the athletic director and, later, the university vice president of finance and business, who oversaw the university police. Paterno said that he was not accustomed to handling such situations and was satisfied that he had adequately acted to report the allegations made about his former employee.