

The Elephant in the Room: What to do about Williams

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This critical incident represents a real situation in which Mike Riley, head coach of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln Cornhuskers football team, faces a dilemma. His popular and successful assistant coach, Keith Williams, was arrested for driving while intoxicated, following a minor traffic accident two weeks prior to the start of the 2016 football season. Before joining the Nebraska team in 2015, Williams was convicted of driving while intoxicated in 2004 and 2009. Coach Riley must decide what action to take following Williams' arrest.

INTRODUCTION

"Well...let's address the elephant in the room. Uh, it is, uh...we had a bad situation," stated Mike Riley, head coach of the Nebraska Cornhuskers football team as he faced a room of reporters after practice on Monday (Planos, 2016). Earlier that weekend, Keith Williams, one of the team's highest-profile assistants, known for his exuberant personality and recruiting prowess, had been involved in a car accident and was arrested on suspicion of driving while intoxicated.

The incident had been prominently featured on local and national news channels, as well as social media. The University of Nebraska had released an official statement on Sunday afternoon that read, "The Nebraska Athletics Department is aware of the incident involving Assistant Coach Keith Williams. We will continue to gather additional information and will withhold further comments at this time," (Christopherson, 2016).

As Williams remained in custody, awaiting his Monday afternoon court appearance, head coach Riley addressed the incident, with his comments urging the need to seek additional information while also emphasizing the severity of the situation.

"Bottom line, most important, this is dangerous, dangerous stuff...like we do everything, we will have an assessment and evaluation of it, and then, you know...you talk about things like intervention and education, and then there will be consequences, which I'm not ready to talk about right now. Because we're going to find out...we really don't know all of the facts of what happened, and we, uh, have not talked to Keith yet personally. We'll talk to Keith, hopefully, later in the day."

Riley demonstrated concern for his assistant coach and family by stating *“this is really, really hard on his son, wife, daughter, all that...we put our arms around them”* and also emphasized the desire to seek a collaborative solution: *“we will come up with an administrative plan to handle this, consequence wise....it will be teamwork that’s done in this, and we’ll take any input from the University that they have.”*

Riley’s closing comments further expressed confidence that the issue would be handled appropriately, *“This is the beautiful thing about Nebraska...this thing will be done in the right way, with all the bases covered, knowing the seriousness of the situation,”* (Planos, 2016).

BACKGROUND

College football has a proud tradition in Nebraska. The NCAA record holder for consecutive sellouts (since November 1962) the team has won five national championships, counts three Heisman trophy winners among alumni, and is regularly listed among the top programs in the nation for academic all-Americans. The University of Nebraska Board of Regents unanimously approved plans for the flagship campus in Lincoln to join the Big Ten Conference in 2011, noting that the move to the Big 10 would create new opportunities for faculty collaboration and research, strengthen student recruiting efforts, and enhance the school’s profile and visibility in academics, athletics and private/public sector partnerships (Kellog, 2011). When he accepted the Cornhusker head football position in December 2014, Mike Riley became the highest paid public employee in Nebraska (Sauter et al., 2015) and arguably the highest profile leader in the state.

Riley and “Nebraska Nice”

Each entrance to Memorial Stadium at Lincoln features the phrase “through these gates pass the greatest fans in college football” and Cornhusker fans have earned the reputation for being loyal, respectful, and gracious in both victory and defeat. The same year Riley was hired as head coach, the Nebraska Tourism Commission launched its new “Nebraska nice” brand campaign. While the slogan was met with chagrin by some who considered it patronizing and less than inspiring, others argued it reflects the fundamental Nebraska values of courtesy and honor (Hendee, 2014).

With a calm, humble, and compassionate demeanor, Riley’s leadership approach is markedly different from the pugnacious and often profane style demonstrated by his predecessor, Bo Pelini. Four days after Pelini was fired, the university’s announcement of Riley’s hiring acknowledged his 40 years of coaching success and also prominently featured comments about Riley’s integrity, values, and character (KETV Omaha, 2014).

Riley is no stranger to dealing with off-field issues. As Oregon State head football coach, he dealt with players who were arrested for alcohol related offenses. Riley went on record (Panda, 2012) emphasizing that type of behavior was “totally unacceptable and appropriate discipline started immediately with each event, and future incidences could result in exclusion from our football program.” In his first year as Nebraska head coach, Riley announced that three players were dismissed from the team, including one who had previously been suspended twice from the team as a result of drug-related arrests (Nyatawa, 2015)

Williams Brings Energy, Expertise, and Troubled Past?

Williams came to Nebraska as wide-receivers coach with experience as a collegiate and professional player and experience coaching at San Jose State, Fresno State, and Tulane. Known for his quick wit and infectious humor, Williams is a favorite among the players and often touted in the media as a “difference-maker” (Sipple, 2016) for the Cornhusker program, with recognized skill in both recruiting and mentoring players. Skilled in the use of social media with the Twitter handle @wideouts, Williams describes the wideout position as a “lifestyle you lead” and markets his own line of Wideouts 4 Life t-shirts and hats, that he describes as helping to illustrate his passion and philosophy (Christopherson, 2015).

When Riley took over as Husker head coach, Riley hired Williams away from Tulane. Prior to the 2016 season, Williams' salary was increased to \$400,000 as a result of his success in coaching an injury-riddled 2015 team and for strengthening the Huskers' ability to lure top talent to Nebraska. Williams was credited for landing two 4-star receivers who had committed to the 2017 team and, during the weekend of his arrest, was hosting two additional 5-star high school prospects (McKewon, 2016).

Williams' arrest early that weekend morning was his third DUI offense. He had previously been convicted of DUIs in 2004 and 2009 while living in California. Neither Williams nor the three occupants of the car rear-ended by Williams in downtown Lincoln at 1:50 a.m. on Sunday sustained injuries, and damage to the vehicles was minor. The driver Williams hit initially just wanted to exchange information without involving the authorities, but she called the police after Williams told her his car insurance was provided by Blue Cross Blue Shield. The Lincoln Police Sergeant stated Williams was cooperative with police when they arrived on the scene, readily offered unsolicited responsibility for the incident, and had a blood-alcohol content of .150, which is nearly twice the legal limit (Christopher, 2016).

Third-offense DUI with a blood alcohol-level of .150 or more is considered a Class III-A felony, punishable by up to three years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. Williams also faces revocation of his driver's license for up to 15 years (Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles, 2016).

Williams had passed a background check when he was hired at UNL in 2015. During the Monday press conference, Riley stated Williams been cleared by Human Resources, who "*knew of stuff and they cleared him...and so in the hiring process, we (including Riley) didn't know*" (Planos, 2016). Media coverage immediately following Williams' arrest posed the question of what Riley and his superiors knew of Williams' past legal issues when he was hired, and whether the university provided any type of in-house program to support Williams and others in coping with the high-stress nature of their jobs (Sipple, 2016). The University of Nebraska Standards of Conduct for Employees and Students Regarding Alcohol and Drugs (<http://police.unl.edu/drug-free-campus-policy>) prohibits the use of alcohol off University premises that adversely affects an employee's work, safety, or the safety of others.

Coach Riley's Dilemma

The first game of the 2016 was in just two weeks, and expectations were high for Riley's second season as head coach of the Nebraska Cornhuskers. Known for reminding his players to "do the right thing" on and off the field, Coach Riley now faces the challenge of determining the "right thing" to do about Williams.

How should Coach Riley respond? What factors are likely to influence his decision on how to handle this situation? What are likely repercussions of the decision(s) Coach Riley makes?

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TEACHING NOTE

Overview

This critical incident represents a real situation in which Mike Riley, head coach of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln Cornhusker football team, faces a dilemma. His popular and successful assistant coach, Keith Williams, was arrested for driving while intoxicated, following a minor traffic accident two weeks prior to the start of the 2016 football season. Before joining the Nebraska team in 2015, Williams was convicted of DUI in 2004 and 2009.

The critical incident provides students the opportunity to consider the crisis management process Riley should employ regarding the Williams dilemma, factors that may influence the process used by Riley, and potential impact of any decisions made by Riley.

Application

This critical incident is appropriate for use in both introductory and advanced courses in managerial communications, strategy, organizational behavior, leadership, sports management, ethics, and brand management. Student discussion can encourage critical thinking about crisis management, stakeholder analysis, antecedents that shape a leader's approach to crisis management, and how a leader's response to a crisis can impact brand image.

Research Methods

This critical incident was based solely on secondary research. No names or data were disguised and all material was taken from cited sources.

Learning Objectives

- 1) Students will identify conditions that necessitate crisis management and consider strategies used in responding to a crisis.
- 2) Students will analyze the various stakeholder groups impacted by this situation and resulting decisions.
- 3) Students will understand how decision-making of leaders can be influenced by their personal values, past experience, and their legal and ethical perspectives.
- 4) Students will consider how strategies used in responding to a crisis can impact the brand image of the organization.

QUESTIONS

Learning Objective #1: Students will identify conditions that necessitate crisis management and consider strategies used in responding to a crisis.

1) How is a crisis defined and recognized by an organization?

An organizational crisis has been defined as a dramatic interruption in the day-to-day routing that severely tests the management and leadership capacity of the decision maker (Dayton, 2009).

A situation is considered a crisis if three conditions are met: (1) it presents a threat to core values; (2) it requires immediate response; and (3) it contains a high degree of uncertainty.

The situation with Williams meets all three conditions, as (1) it threatens the core values of the University, (2) requires the University to inform stakeholders, as soon as possible, as to how they will handle the situation, and (3) there exists uncertainty regarding the legal ramifications for potentially both Williams and the University.

2) What are the components of crisis management?

According to Bundy, Pfarrer, Short and Coombs (2016) there are two components to crisis management: (1) addressing a crisis by managing the internal dynamics of the crisis, and (2) communicating to external stakeholders. In terms of internal dynamics, the decision of Coach Riley will convey to the rest of the organization what he, and by extension his organization, stand for and the values and behaviors to which he and the organization will adhere. In his first press conference, Riley indicated "doing the right thing" by Williams' family and the University, in that order.

With respect to communications with external stakeholders, namely the fans and boosters of the University football program, Riley's task is to convey not only the values and behaviors tolerated, but also the importance of not jeopardizing organizational outcomes (i.e., winning games). To that effect, Coach Riley was more elusive, by saying "this thing will be done the right way, with all the bases covered..."

3) Who is likely to be (and/or should be) involved in managing this crisis situation?

As depicted in the short case, Coach Riley has taken on the role of key spokesperson in acknowledging Williams' arrest and providing assurances that the situation would be handled appropriately. Riley's comments during that initial news conference, such as "...it will be teamwork that's done in this, and we'll take any input from the University that they have..." suggests Riley will be employing a more participative, rather than autocratic, approach to managing the situation. It's apparent from Riley's comments at the news conference that additional information is needed and students may suggest the benefit of involving other University personnel in that assessment and evaluation of the situation. Students may also suggest Coach Riley turn to his trusted advisors to serve as a sounding board. Crisis management literature (Dahlén et al, 2013) suggests that while employing others to obtain information and generate potential actions, Coach Riley would be wise to continue as the primary spokesperson and take primary responsibility for any decisions made as well as communication of those decisions.

Learning Objective #2: Students will analyze the various stakeholder groups impacted by this situation and resulting decisions.

4) *Who are the various stakeholders impacted by Williams' arrest?*

Both internal and external stakeholders are impacted by this situation. Students may define internal stakeholders very narrowly (Williams and his family, University football program staff and players) or more broadly to also include University administration, employees, and students, as well as the loyal Cornhusker football fan base. Additional key external stakeholder groups to be considered could include the media, University alumni and donors, potential future NU students and their families, companies who supply equipment to the University football program, sponsors of the University's football program, the NCAA, and the community of Lincoln and state of Nebraska.

As they consider the various stakeholder groups impacted by this situation, students may recall the continued negative impact resulting from the Penn State scandal (Dignan, 2017). The type, scope and severity of violations involved in the Penn State situation are arguably different and more extensive than University of Nebraska's situation with Williams. However, the fallout resulting from the Penn State scandal -- resignation of Penn State head football coach Paterno, resignation of University President Spanier, and decline in enrollments and alumni contributions -- could serve as a cautionary tale for Coach Riley.

5) *When determining what action to take following the news that Williams has been arrested, should Coach Riley consider some of the stakeholder groups to be higher priority than others?*

Managers of high-performing companies consider the interests of all major stakeholder groups as they make decisions (Harrison & Freeman, 1999). Stakeholder analysis has practical application for sports management (Friedman, Parent & Mason, 2008) and can be used to identify the likely claims and motivations of the various stakeholders impacted by this situation with Williams.

Students could utilize frameworks such as a power/interest matrix (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997) to analyze and prioritize stakeholders by their relative influence, as determined by each stakeholder's (1) power (the ability a stakeholder has to influence the outcome of Coach Riley's decision); (2) legitimacy (the authority a stakeholder has over Coach Riley); and (3) urgency (the degree to which a stakeholder demands an immediate response to their concerns regarding this situation with Williams).

Learning Objective #3: Students will understand how decision-making of leaders can be influenced by personal values, past experience, and legal and ethical perspectives.

6) *Beyond stakeholder interests, what factors are likely to influence Coach Riley's decision?*

Personal values and past experience: Personal values serve as a perceptual filter that help shape how leaders make decisions (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996). Similarly, leader decisions can be influenced by past experience (Juliusson, Karlsson & Garline, 2005) that has helped to confirm or challenge those values.

Using the limited information available in the short case, students must infer how Coach Riley's personal values and past experiences may influence his decision on how to handle the situation with Williams. For example, Coach Riley's opening statement, "let's address the elephant in the room" could reflect his preference for being open and forthright, while his comments regarding how difficult this situation is for Williams' family and his statement that "we put our arms around them" could be interpreted as indication of his strong beliefs in family loyalty. Information contained in the Background section of the short case highlights Riley's reputation for being "loyal, respectful and gracious" and how his "integrity, values and character" were consistent with the fundamental Nebraska values of courtesy and honor. Students can also discern from information in the short case that Riley has been faced with alcohol related incidents in the past with his football players at both Oregon State and during his first year at Nebraska. As stated in the case, Riley took a hard-line stance with those instances involving players. But Williams is a hired employee - with a proven record of success, but also two prior arrests for driving

under the influence - so discussion could prompt students to consider whether Riley is likely to take a similar hard-line approach in this situation with Williams.

Legal and ethical perspectives: Williams' arrest presumes he has broken the law of Nebraska and must face the consequences. Williams' actions also suggest violation of the University code of conduct by "adversely affecting an employee's work, safety, or the safety of others." The moral implications of Williams' actions and Coach Riley's decision, however, may be more nuanced. The ethical decision-making framework outlined by Hartman, DesJardins and MacDonald (2014) could be used to examine how decision alternatives might impact various stakeholder groups based on any of the following frameworks: 1) utilitarianism - where the "right" decision is one that leads to the "greatest good for the greatest number of people" with a primary focus on the consequences of any decision; 2) virtue theory - where Coach Riley's decision reflects the type of person he desires to be (and students might infer from the case Riley's desire to be viewed as fair, collaborative and take action that is "done in the right way, with all the bases covered" as stated in the short case); and/or 3) deontology - where the focus is on what duty or obligations Coach Riley has to others. These duties could include Riley's obligation as a University employee to represent and act in the best interest of the University, his duty to serve as a mentor and disciplinarian to his coaching staff, and/or his obligation to be a role model who protects the welfare and supports the educational experience of the players entrusted to his care.

7) *Williams is a talented and valued employee who made a serious mistake. How far can (or should) a leader tolerate a character flaw in one of the key employees in an organization?*

This question could help students further explore the moral ramifications of Williams' behavior as well as examine how the way in which Coach Riley responds to this situation will demonstrate the enacted values of the team. As described by Sher (2014), leaders may "tolerate team damaging behaviors when individual performance is strong." Williams' off field issues coupled with his proven record of success with the team may be viewed as an example of what Janssen (2014) would describe as a "peak performer/culture killer" as Williams can get the job done for the team but acts in ways that are inconsistent with the organization's culture. The extensive work by Schein (1983) also argues the most powerful ways that culture becomes embedded in an organization include how a leader reacts to critical incidents and by who is hired and fired from an organization.

Instructors could also prompt students to consider how decision makers may consider not only what is best for the recalcitrant employee, but also what is good for the employer. For example, if Coach Riley decides to fire Williams as a result of his arrest, that decision will not only impact Williams but also Coach Riley and the overall team. Students could discuss the pragmatic reality (and moral implication) of how strong performers are sometimes given more "leeway" and afforded more "second chances" than marginal performers. Students may argue that if Williams were a marginal employee who had made little contribution to the team prior to his arrest and could be readily replaced, Coach Riley may be less likely to keep him on the team. (Research by Reynolds (2006) suggests students' own moral awareness and values may play a role in how they answer this question.)

Learning Objective #4: Students will consider how strategies used in responding to a crisis can impact the brand image of the organization.

8) *How should Coach Riley manage this crisis?*

Students may offer several 'off the top' suggestions such as being fully transparent about the progress in the situation with all stakeholders, firing Williams by adopting a zero-tolerance policy, involving the team in making the decision etc.

Though all of the above can be argued as legitimate responses, it might be prudent to ask students to first think of the goal the Coach should achieve in responding to the crisis. In our opinion the primary goal should be to protect the 'product' (football) and the 'brand' (Huskers). Thinking on these terms, we believe the right solution might lie in thinking of the crisis as a 'product-harm' crisis. In product-harm crisis situations the multitude of sources with conflicting information will negatively impact on the

stakeholders reactions (Dahlén et al 2013). Therefore, Coach Riley should immediately take action to manage the flow of information by becoming the sole person to inform stakeholders on the progress of the crisis situation. Such information dissemination should be on a “need to know” basis and be consistent throughout the messaging process. Given that the "Huskers" brand has strong identity among all stakeholders there will be a smaller loss of brand equity because of their positive expectations (Dawar and Pillutla 2000) which Coach Riley needs to protect. So while Coach Riley can seek input from a variety of stakeholders and advisors, managing the brand identity will be best accomplished by having Coach Riley take on sole responsibility for messaging and becoming the sole spokesperson on the issue.

9) *How would Coach Riley's actions in response to this situation impact the brand image of the University of Nebraska?*

Miles and Mangold (2005) argue that employee branding can be a source of competitive advantage, and define "employee brand image" as the "image employees project to those around them." Among the many outcomes of employee brand image is its influence on the organization's brand positioning, which can be positive (e.g., Southwest Airlines) or negative (Penn State). Coach Riley's decision would not only have a bearing on his own brand image, but that image will get transferred to the organization he leads.

EPILOGUE

Williams was held at Lancaster County Jail in Lincoln until his court appearance Monday afternoon on August 15, 2016. He was originally charged with Felony IIIA Driving Under the Influence, as his blood alcohol content at the time of arrest was 0.15, nearly two times the .08 legal limit. Those charges were reduced to DUI-.08 (2 prior convictions) which is a misdemeanor charge, as well as careless driving. Williams pled not guilty to both charges. Williams was released after posting a \$5,000 personal recognizance bond, and was scheduled to appear at the Lancaster County Court again on October 24, 2016. The case was continued to February, 2017.

On August 19, 2016 the Nebraska athletic department announced that Williams was suspended without pay until August 31, 2016 and would not be allowed to coach or attend the first four games. Williams shared the following prepared statement with the media on August 19, 2016:

Hello, I am disappointed in myself, and I am angry in my own poor decision. I am embarrassed and I am ashamed. But most of all, I am sorry. Sorry that my actions have brought harm to my family, to this University with whom I have fallen in love with, to the young men on our football team that I may have let down. To Coach Riley, who has always believed in me. To Shawn Eichorst, Chancellor Greene, and President Bounds, who will not allow poor decision to go without consequence. And to the Husker family of fans, around the state and around the world, for this is your University and you must be proud of our actions. In the coming days, weeks, and months, I will try to work back the trust that I have understandably lost from many in our community, I will work hard to strengthen my life, and I will do all I can to educate the young and old on the dangers of making poor decisions. I make no excuses, I accept the consequences. I want to thank those that have supported me in a very difficult week, and I will repay you by representing Nebraska with the utmost of integrity. Although it will be hard to not be around the team and my colleagues who I do love, I know they will be working hard every day to get better, just as I must do the same. Appreciate it. (Nyatawa, 2016).

The Court's Decision

On February 22, 2017 Williams pled no contest to third-defense DUI and was sentenced to three years' probation, a \$1,000 fine and 30 days in jail. A second charge of reckless driving was dropped by prosecutors. Lancaster County Judge Thomas Zimmerman allowed Williams to apply for house arrest, which would allow him to serve his sentence as home and work with the team on campus. Lancaster County Attorney Joe Kelley said the sentence was “not unusual” for the jurisdiction. Williams' sentence also included license revocation for five years, but after 45 days, Williams can apply for an interlock ignition device on his vehicle. (McKewon, 2017)

Public Perception

The *Omaha World-Herald* newspaper (Omaha.com/sports-polls) conducted a poll during the months of February and March, 2017 asking readers the question their views regarding the court's decision for Williams. The question asked in the poll was as follows:

“A Lancaster County judge sentenced NU wide receivers coach Keith Williams to three years' probation, a \$1,000 fine and 30 days in jail after Williams agreed to a plea deal. Judge Thomas Zimmerman also allowed Williams to apply for house arrest, which means Williams could serve his sentence at home and be allowed daily to work at Nebraska. Do you think the punishment is fair, too harsh, or too lenient?”

The poll was taken by 249 readers, with the following results:

The punishment is fair:	63.4%
The punishment is too harsh:	7.9%
The punishment is too lenient:	<u>28.7%</u>
	100.0%

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS

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