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# LEADING TRENDS

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## Here We Go Again



Imagine an elite-level sports team, say in American baseball or European football. Both sports call the head coach a “manager,” and team owners delegate the authority to make on-the-field decisions to the coach. It is left up to the manager to decide who to play, when they play, what plays to use, and how best to approach opponents. The owner’s involvement, other than writing checks, is at a remove of some distance, and some sports impose severe sanctions on owners that cross the invisible boundary between “owning” and “managing.”

Imagine for a moment that an owner pushes at this boundary, perhaps saying within earshot of a newspaper reporter that he doesn’t like the way the manager is using players, that one or another should have more or less playing time. Public statements like that have a way of turning into headline stories that confidence has been lost in the manager—a lack of confidence that quickly becomes contagious to fans.

Upping the ante a bit, let’s imagine that the owner mutters something directly to a player about not liking how the manager uses players. Maybe the owner doesn’t even make a sound, but just nods while a player ventilates some issue he has with the manager. The nods have a way of being interpreted as agreement, intended or not, and this begins unraveling confidence the

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players have in the manager. Once the rumor becomes about how soon the owner will replace the manager, a betting pool emerges about which assistant coach will be the interim.

You might be tempted to say that vignette's like the above would be stupid in real life, and that billionaire sports owners should know better and would face steep fines or worse. But they do happen in real life, always with negative consequences for the team in the short and long term through undermined confidence in the manager or making it difficult to hire a new manager as no one wants to work for an owner who is a known boundary-crosser. The problem is that almost the exact same thing happens every day at dozens of private, independent schools—the count is likely in the high hundreds if one considers international schools, too. The mess that meddling makes creates exactly the same problems for schools as it does football or baseball teams.

Owning a big-time sports team has downsides; for one, the owner has all the risk and very little direct control, so it must be tempting to intervene when one sees what seems to be a problem. Governing a private school, particularly as a parent, has similar downsides and the stakes may even seem higher, given that it involves one's child(ren). But, in both cases, owners of teams and governors of schools have to learn to live with the anxiety and manage their presence in public. If this is not possible, then we suggest they are likely not cut out for the job. Not everyone is.'

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Assume for a moment that an owner pushes at this boundary, perhaps saying within earshot of a newspaper reporter that he doesn't like the way the manager is using players, that one or another should have more or less playing time. Public statements like that have a way of turning into headline stories that confidence has been lost in the manager—a lack of confidence that quickly becomes contagious to fans.

Upping the ante a bit, let's imagine that the owner mutters something directly to a player about not liking how the manager uses players. Maybe the owner doesn't even make a sound but merely nods while a player ventilates some issue he has with the manager. The nods have a way of being interpreted as agreement, intended or not, and this begins unraveling confidence the players have in the manager. Once the rumor becomes about how soon the owner will replace the manager, a betting pool emerges about which assistant coach will be the interim.

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Triangle Associates solves governance problems, keeps boards on track, guides strategy formulation, and develops senior leaders for private, independent schools around the world. See our [web site](#) for more information and a partial list of clients.

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Strategy  
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