

Management must think ahead before saying, 'You're fired'



KEVIN SULLIVAN

Our pro teams fire so many head coaches and managers — nearly 40 in the past year alone — they really should be better at it.

Take the Oklahoma City Thunder: Last November, the NBA team fired coach P.J. Carlesimo following an embarrassing 25-point home loss to the New Orleans Hornets that dropped the club to 1-12. Management made the announcement after midnight and after the team had left town for a rematch in New Orleans the next night.

I understand general manager Sam Presti's frustration. It was another in a run of listless performances, this time in front of a Friday night sellout crowd and a national ESPN audience. And getting run out of the Ford Center with such a woeful effort had to hurt more at the hands of the Hornets, the sweethearts of Oklahoma City following Hurricane Katrina. It was like looking really bad in front of your wife's old boyfriend.

In the name of decisive action that would send a message to players, the team issued an after-hours press release announcing Carlesimo's dismissal. The first story appeared on Oklahoman beat writer Darnell Mayberry's blog at 2 a.m. on the day of the Oklahoma-Texas Tech game between two of college football's top teams.

Oklahoman columnist Berry Tramel accused Presti of trying to bury the bad news on the biggest local sports day in eight years. I don't buy that, but the team's itchy trigger finger cost it a good opportunity to effectively tell the story of how things were going to be different.

At least Presti had the decency to tell Carlesimo before he got on the plane.

Exhibit A for poorly handled firings will probably always be the Mets' disgraceful treatment of Willie Randolph last June. After leaving him to twist in the wind for weeks, general manager Omar Minaya allowed Randolph to fly to Los Angeles, where he presided over the Mets' 9-6 interleague win over the Angels. Randolph conducted his postgame press conference and then headed for the team hotel, where Minaya was waiting to fire him. The club e-mailed around a press release at 3:14 a.m. ET.

The Mets front office was assailed for days. New York Times columnist William Rhoden blasted the Mets as "weak-kneed" and compared the "early morning escapade" to the Colts sneaking out of Baltimore in the middle of the night. The New York Post called it an "abomination" and an "embarrassment." ESPN's Jayson Stark hit the mark when he said, "Who thinks this stuff up?"

A reporter recently asked me if it is possible for a firing to go well. Absolutely, but for every classy, orderly dismissal of the Denver Broncos/Mike Shanahan variety, it seems there are two Al Davis/Lane Kiffin-style car crashes.

Inexplicably, teams cannot seem to set emotion and ego aside long enough to develop and implement a plan for an orderly transition. Firings gone badly send a clear message that it's not only the team that is in disarray, but the organization is, too.

In January, when the Grizzlies let Marc Iavaroni go as head coach, the early morning AP story reported that team spokesman Dustin Krugel "wouldn't say who would coach the team in that night's

game at the Knicks."

As the Dallas Mavericks' longtime PR guy, I felt for Krugel as I read the story in my morning newspaper. How could he not be equipped to tell reporters who was going to coach in that night's game? How could management fire a coach without a succession plan in place and not expect ridicule from the media?

During my run as White House communications director, I was grateful that the communications staff always had a seat at the table from the outset of any policy process or the management of an issue. We were expected to function as "subject-matter experts" on the timing and implementation of announcements. Our opinions were valued and objections given careful consideration.

In sports, team executives who would never make a fiscal decision without consulting the CFO and who would never overrule the team doctor on a medical issue too often disregard or exclude the public relations director on a communications matter. These bungled firings can damage the brand of the team long after the coached has moved on to his next job.

So what could the Thunder have done differently last November? First, they are fortunate to have a general manager like Presti who won't accept substandard effort and acts decisively. But after he decided to change coaches during that painful loss to the Hornets, he should have taken a deep breath and worked up a strategic plan with his communications director.

They could have gotten through the weekend and made the announcement on Monday morning. The sequence of events could have been choreographed to allow time for properly addressing the

team, providing a dignified exit for the respected Carlesimo, and backgrounding a few key reporters, columnists and other opinion shapers. They could have followed the announcement with a mid-morning news conference to tell the story of the Thunder: a promising young team that for now can accept losing, but not substandard effort.

Fans of young teams will generally be patient if they see signs of progress and evidence of a plan. Presti could have laid out his vision and then introduced impressive assistant coach Scott Brooks as the interim coach for the remainder of the season. Brooks would have had the chance to look into the cameras and say: "I have clear plans to make the team play with more energy and passion," precisely what he said on that Saturday night in New Orleans when everybody in Oklahoma City was watching OU dismantle Texas Tech. ■

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