

What Not To Do In A Crisis: The Case of Donald Sterling

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Abstract

This paper reviews the events that led to owner Donald Sterling losing his National Basketball Association franchise, the Los Angeles Clippers. Employing William Benoit's Image Restoration Discourse Theory, we argue that Sterling had at least a chance to keep his team had he handled his public relations properly. Instead, he ended up a disgraced, if somewhat financially better-off, public figure.

Introduction

For nearly 33 years, real estate magnate Donald Sterling and his family owned the National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise, the Los Angeles Clippers. In fact, Sterling and his wife, Shelly, were the longest-tenured owners in the NBA – that is, until April 2014. In July 2014, Judge Michael Levanas of Los Angeles County Superior Court ruled that the franchise could be sold by Shelly Sterling to former Microsoft Chief Executive Officer Steve Ballmer for \$2 billion.

Given that Donald Sterling purchased the franchise in 1981 for \$12.5 million, one would think he would be overjoyed at selling his team for a record price for an NBA franchise. The sale, however, was not his choice. In April 2014, Sterling was caught on audiotape making racist remarks to his young girlfriend. The tabloid news channel TMZ obtained the tape and aired it on April 25. By April 29, new NBA commissioner Adam Silver had forever banned Sterling from the NBA, fined him \$2 million, and announced steps to strip him of the franchise.

This paper reviews the events that led to Donald Sterling losing his franchise. Employing William Benoit's Image Restoration Discourse Theory, we argue that Sterling had at least a chance to keep his team had he handled his public relations properly. Instead, the Sterling saga became a case study of what not to do in a crisis. Fires need to be put out by water, not gasoline.

“You Don’t Have To Have Yourself With, Walking With Black People”

On the night of April 25, 2014, the website TMZ.com aired a 9-minute 27-second audio recording, where a person identified by TMZ as “Mr. Sterling” can be heard chiding a woman, identified by the website as “V. Stiviano,” saying he was angry that she had posted a picture on her Instagram account of herself and “Mr. Johnson” (who, it later turned out was Los Angeles Laker basketball legend Earvin “Magic” Johnson). In the recording, “Mr. Sterling” is heard to say to “Ms. Stiviano” that “It bothers me a lot that you want to broadcast that you’re associating with black people.” Later in the recording, Sterling says of her Instagram postings:

You don’t have to have yourself with, walking with black people. Don’t put him on an Instagram for the world to have to see so they have to call me. And don’t bring him to my games. Yeah, it bothers me a lot that you want to promo, broadcast that you’re associating with black people. Do you have to?

That night, Clippers players held a meeting to discuss the news, less than 24 hours before the team would play Golden State in Game 4 of a first-round playoff series. On Sunday, the website Deadspin posted an additional 5:41 of the conversation in which at one point the man identified as Sterling, presumably referring to Clippers players, says: “I support them and give them food, and clothes, and cars, and houses. Who gives it to them? Does someone else give it to them.” Later, prior to playing Game 4 against the Warriors, the Clippers’ players staged a protest by tossing their warm-up jackets at midcourt. The Clippers lost that night.

At this point, during that weekend, media organizations tried to verify that the voice on the tape was Sterling’s. Many believed that the voice on the tape was, indeed, Sterling’s given his past history of racial discrimination. As recently as 2009, Sterling was forced to pay a \$2.725 million settlement in a lawsuit brought by the Justice Department which accused Sterling accusing him of driving African-Americans, Latinos and families with children out of the apartment buildings he owned. Sterling was also sued by the former Clippers general manager Elgin Baylor, who accused him of envisioning “a Southern plantation-type structure” for the Clippers (Witz, 2014, April 28).

Sterling also had a poor reputation as a team owner. Originally a lawyer by profession, Sterling started buying up properties in the 1960s, when immigration exploded in California and land prices subsequently escalated. His entry to the NBA came about, in part, due to his real estate dealings. During the 1960s and 1970s, a former University of Southern California chemistry professor named Jerry Buss was also making a fortune in real estate. In 1979, Buss had an opportunity to purchase of the Los Angeles Lakers, the Los Angeles Kings, the Forum (the arena the teams played in) and a 10-acre ranch. He was short of cash, however, for the \$67.5 million price tag. Buss was able to raise the rest of the money by selling some of his apartment buildings to Sterling for \$3 million. In 1981, Buss encouraged Sterling to buy the San Diego Clippers for a price tag of \$12.7 million (Witz, 2014, April 28).

The Clippers came into the league when film executive, Irv Levin, owner of the Boston Celtics, wanted to have an NBA franchise in southern California. He knew that the NBA would not let an historic franchise such as the Celtics be relocated, so Levin had to wait for other opportunities. One arose when John Y. Brown, the owner of the Buffalo Braves (and Kentucky Fried Chicken) agreed to swap franchises with Levin. Buffalo had been having attendance problems, and there

were rumors the team would move. Levin and Brown proposed the deal to the NBA Board of Governors, who approved the deal and the relocation of Levin's new team to San Diego, by a 21-1 vote.

The deal called for the teams to swap rosters, but not before Brown and Levin completed a trade that involved several players. Celtic players Kevin Kunnert, Kermit Washington, Sidney Wicks and Freeman Williams moved to the Braves while Boston received Marvin Barnes, Billy Knight and future NBA Hall of Famer, Nate Archibald. Though the deal looked fairly even on paper, the players Levin received were highly paid veterans on the downside of their careers, a fact that would hinder any success on the court for the new San Diego Clippers.

Though the city of San Diego had longed for a franchise since the time the former San Diego Rockets franchise had moved to Houston, the failure of the team to make the playoffs saw attendance drop to 4500 fans per game by the end of the 1980-81 season. At that point, Irv Levin sought to sell the team, and made the deal with Sterling.

The team's fortunes did not improve under Sterling's ownership, and attendance continued to flag. Sterling asked the NBA to move to Los Angeles, but the league did not approve (the Los Angeles Lakers did not want another team in the same market). Then, in 1984, the National Football League (NFL) Oakland Raiders moved to Los Angeles without NFL approval. Sterling decided to move to Los Angeles over the objections of the league. NBA Commissioner David Stern fined Sterling \$25 million – the same David Stern, who, as Assistant General Counsel of the NBA had negotiated the deal between Irv Levin and John Brown. Defiant, Sterling sued the NBA for \$100 million. Eventually, Stern backed down, reducing the fine to \$6 million, to be taken out of future NBA expansion fees.

The Clippers played their first 15 years in the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena, but their fortunes on the court did not improve. Injuries and bad trades and draft picks plagued the team. Sterling did not help matters by paying lower salaries for players than other teams, meaning good players left as soon as they could become free agents – and free agents from other teams did not want to play for the Clippers. During the first 15 seasons, the team made the playoffs only three times – losing in the first round each time – and often lost 60% or more of their games.

Despite the team's struggles, and his increasingly criticized reputation as an owner, Sterling turned down offers to from others to buy the team. Because it cost so little for the Clippers to play at the Sports Arena, Sterling could continue to stay where he was even with a losing team. A proposed move to Anaheim that would have paid Sterling nearly \$100 million fell apart at the last minute. When the new Staples Center opened in 1999, Sterling did move out of the Sports Arena. The Staples Center was a significant upgrade over the Sports Arena, but Sterling was the Center's third tenant, behind the Lakers and the National Hockey League (NHL) Los Angeles Kings.

The first year in the Staples Center, the Clippers won just 15 games, while the Lakers won 60. This season was symbolic, for it established the image that the Lakers would clearly overshadow the Clippers. The Clippers would not return to the playoffs until 2012, after drafting players such as Blake Griffin, and trading for superstar guard, Chris Paul. Ironically, NBA commissioner David Stern assisted Sterling in getting Paul when Stern refused to approve an earlier trade of Paul to the Los Angeles Lakers. Thus, when the revelation of the tapes occurred, the Clippers were a

playoff team with a bright future, while the Los Angeles Lakers, beset by injuries and age, were out of the playoffs.

And The Hits Just Keep On Coming

By Monday, April 28, the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP announced that it would revoke Sterling's lifetime achievement award that he would have received in May and that money donated by the owner would be returned. The chapter had been scheduled to give Sterling the group's Lifetime Achievement Award at its May 15 banquet at the Biltmore Hotel. Ironically, on May 1, Leon Jenkins, the president of the chapter resigned when the NBC-TV affiliate aired a report that revealed a \$50-million promise to help the homeless in the city of Los Angeles had yet to be fulfilled by Sterling.

By Tuesday, April 29, it appeared certain that the question was not whether the NBA would punish Sterling, it was simply how harsh the terms would be. So it was that just four days after the news first came to light, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver made the defining decision of his brief (barely two months), tenure leading the league. At a press conference, Silver said the NBA's investigation confirmed the voice in the audio recording to be that of Sterling. In addition, Sterling himself confirmed to Silver that it was his voice on the recording. As a result, Silver announced Sterling was banned for life from associating with the Clippers and the league. Sterling would also be fined \$2.5 million (the maximum amount allowable by the league), and the money will go to anti-discrimination organizations. The biggest punishment that Silver announced was that the NBA would "force a sale" of the team for violations of rules in the NBA's constitutional by-laws, and the process would begin immediately. Later that day, citing the recordings, UCLA officials rejected a \$3 million donation pledge Sterling had made. Perhaps the biggest sting came that night during the Clippers playoff game. In the fourth quarter, fans at the Staples Center starting chanting "We Are One," which, perhaps, gave the team a boost to earn a close victory over the Warriors.

By Thursday, April 30, rumors flew surrounding who the possible new owners for the Clippers might be, with names like TV talk show host Oprah Winfrey, former NBA great Magic Johnson and boxing champion Floyd Mayweather being suggested. Though no NBA franchise had ever been previously sold for more than \$550 million, estimates for the worth of the Clippers reached as high as \$1 billion.

On Saturday, May 2, 2014, reports emerged that Sterling had been dealing with prostate cancer, but no other details were provided. It is not clear if this information had been leaked to elicit sympathy for Sterling. Additionally, the NBA and the Clippers announce that they will jointly hire a new CEO to handle the team's operations. A week later, Clippers' president Andy Roeser resigned and Richard Parsons, the former chairman of Time Warner Cable and Citigroup, is named the Clippers' new chief executive officer (CEO). By this time, Sterling was engaged in a crisis communication plan to restore his image.

Image Restoration Discourse Strategies

As noted elsewhere (Carveth, Ferraris, and Backus, 2007), reputation hinges upon the judgments that key publics make based upon an organization's -- or an individual's -- behavior. Sound reputations protect the organization or individual against existing and potential problems such as those that arise when controversial incidents occur (Baker, 2001). A previously solid reputation will not only help an organization or individual to ride out the storm, but also to successfully recover in the wake of its damage.

Image restoration becomes an issue when organizations or individuals have passed the point of anticipation and have lost the opportunity to act proactively in protecting themselves. All efforts thereafter must be made with the goal of regaining the confidence of all relevant publics, minimizing negative publicity, and returning the organization to either its previous state or one better.

Analysis of crisis communication often focuses on the content of external communications such as apologies and speeches of self-defense (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2001). Benoit's theory of image restoration comprises the typologies of self-defense to create a detailed typology of image restoration strategies for organizations (Benoit, 1995).

Benoit (1997) has identified two simple components of an attack:

1. The accused is held responsible for an action.
2. That act is considered offensive.

In addition, public figures and organizations need to address a variety of stakeholder groups, each with their own set of goals and concerns. Benoit (1997) urges that in crisis situations, it is important to prioritize these groups and tailor messages to their specific concerns.

Image restoration theory focuses on the variety of message options at a crisis communicator's disposal. The theory is comprised of five broad categories of image repair strategies and three of these are divided into more specific subcategories of tactics. Denial is the first category of repair strategies. There are four variants within this category: simple denial, shifting the blame, separation, and denying that the act was harmful (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). Simple denial is a rejection of the charges. The accused party may deny that the act occurred or that they even performed the act. For example, at first, Enron denied that it had engaged in any financial wrongdoing (George & Evuleocha, 2003). Shifting of blame entails an argument that another party is actually responsible for the undesirable act. Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal (2002) demonstrated that both Ford and Bridgestone tried to focus the blame on the other company in the wake of the incidents involving rollovers of Ford sports utility vehicles that used Firestone tires. In an analysis of Texaco's racism scandal, in which executives were taped using racial slurs against African-Americans, Brinson and Benoit (1999) also identified a previously unrecognized form of shifting of blame that they termed separation. Separation seeks to place the blame on a small portion of an organization that can be separated from the remaining and presumably good part. Finally, denying that the act was harmful is an admission by the accused that they committed the perceived wrong, however, they refute the fact that anyone was damaged by it (1999).

Evasion of responsibility is the second category. Here the offender attempts to dodge or reduce responsibility of wrongdoing. Simply put, evasion of responsibility involves the crafting of excuses (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). This general strategy has four different versions: provocation,

defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Provocation occurs when the accused party claims that the offensive act was merely a response to another's offensive act, and that the behavior should be viewed as a reasonable reaction to that provocation. Another form of evading responsibility is defeasibility. Here, the accused party alleges a lack of information about or control over key elements of the situation. Arthur Andersen tried to blame the Enron scandal not on their accounting practices, but on the downturn in the economy (George & Evuleocha, 2003). Similarly, President George W. Bush attempted to use defeasibility in defending his first term as president during an appearance on "Meet the Press" (Benoit, 2006). A third option is to claim that the offensive action was accidental. If the audience can be convinced that the negative action was a mishap, then the reasoning is that the accused will be held less accountable and the damage to image will be mitigated. Part of the image repair strategy used by the U.S. Navy in 2001 when the USS Greenville collided with a Japanese trawler, killing nine people, was that the incident was an accident (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004). A final strategy within this category entails an attempt to convince the audience that the offensive act was performed with good intentions, that although an undesirable situation occurred, the accused meant well (Benoit, 1997).

The third major category involves reducing the offensiveness of events. This category is made up of six sub-categories: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation. Bolstering attempts to boost audience good will toward the accused in order to offset the negative feelings connected with the offense. Stressing the good traits of the offender or describing the offender's positive acts in the past achieves it. In the wake of the Enron crisis, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) engaged in bolstering by stressing the positive activities and attributes of the profession (Rogers, Dillard & Yuthas, 2005). Minimization seeks to reduce the negative feelings associated with the wrongful act so that it appears less harmful than it may have initially seemed to be (Benoit, 1997). A third option is the employment of differentiation, distinguishing the present negative act from other similar, but more offensive actions in the hopes that this will reduce negative sentiment toward the act and concurrently toward the accused (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). U.S. Congressman Gary Condit attempted to employ differentiation in explaining his role in the disappearance of Chandra Levy, an intern in his office with whom he was having an affair (Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004). Transcendence attempts to place the act within a broader, more favorable context and appeals to values and group loyalties in order to improve the offender's image. In attempting to shore up his sagging approval ratings, in an April 2004 press conference, President George W. Bush employed transcendence as a strategy by claiming he was a "war president" and thus should not be judged according to the usual criteria for evaluating presidential performance (Benoit, 2006b). When attacking the accuser, the offender tries to cast doubt upon the attacker's credibility to reduce the intensity of the attack. During the August 1, 2006 broadcast of his TV show, *The O'Reilly Factor*, host Bill O'Reilly responded to charges he personally attacks guests by charging his attacker, Oregonian TV critic Peter Ames Carlin, with not doing his own reporting, thus attempting to undercut his Carlin's credibility (O'Reilly, 2006, August 1, "Most ..). The sixth and final strategy within reducing offensiveness is compensation. In this strategy, the accused offers to reimburse the victim of the offense, which, if it is acceptable to the victim, should help reduce the negative feelings arising from a failure of some sort (Brinson & Benoit, 1999).

The fourth category of image restoration theory is corrective action. Strategies of corrective action involve the offender promising to correct the problem. The offender may promise to restore the situation to the state of affairs before the event by repairing existing damages,

and/or promising to take preventive action (such as revising policies) to avoid a recurrence (Benoit, 1997).

The last category of defensive rhetoric is mortification. Apologists who use mortification confess to the wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness or express regret (Benoit, 1995, pp. 74-79). The rationale here is that the admission of guilt and a display of regret can often lead the audience to pardon the negative action (Brinson & Benoit, 1999).

Benoit (1995) argues that the more successful apologies will be those that use a combination of strategies. He also counsels the apologist to admit fault (if at fault) immediately and to report plans to correct problems and prevent recurrences. He argues that denial, shifting blame, and minimization do not typically work to preserve an apologist's image.

Sterling's Use of Image Restoration Strategies

The first strategy that Sterling employed was simple denial – he denied, or a Clippers employee denied, that it was his voice on the tape. On Saturday, April 26, Clipper president Andy Roeser issued a statement declaring:

We have heard the tape on TMZ. We do not know if it is legitimate or [if] it has been altered. We do know that the woman on the tape -- who we believe released it to TMZ - - is the defendant in a lawsuit brought by the Sterling family alleging that she embezzled more than \$1.8 million, who told Mr. Sterling that she would "get even." Mr. Sterling is emphatic that what is reflected on that recording is not consistent with, nor does it reflect his views, beliefs or feelings. It is the antithesis of who he is, what he believes and how he has lived his life. He feels terrible that such sentiments are being attributed to him and apologizes to anyone who might have been hurt by them. He is also upset and apologizes for sentiments attributed to him about Earvin [Magic] Johnson. He has long considered Magic a friend and has only the utmost respect and admiration for him - - both in terms of who he is and what he has achieved. We are investigating this matter. (Knoblauch, 2014, April 26; Shoichet, 2014, April 28).

Roeser later told the NBA during its investigation of Sterling that he and Sterling had spent hours crafting the public denial.

Despite his denial, the public response to Sterling was unrelentingly negative. The most powerful voices came from the past and present NBA players and executives. "Magic" Johnson, LeBron James, and current Clippers like Chris Paul and DeAndre Jordan all expressed dismay at the situation. James even threatened that the NBA players might take action in the playoffs, like refusing to play until Sterling stepped down as owner of the Clippers. Clippers head coach Doc Rivers told reporters he was not sure he would stay with the Clippers for the 2015-16 season if Sterling still owned the franchise. Meanwhile, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver called the recording "truly offensive and disturbing," but says Sterling will be afforded due process. Silver was backed publicly by a number of owners offering their vocal support of the commissioner's office to respond appropriately. Even President Obama commented on the situation, calling it disturbing.

Though Sterling – or, rather the Clippers – had issued a denial, sponsors were not waiting to act. By Monday, April 28, a number of major sponsors begin to drop the Clippers, including State Farm, Kia, CarMax and Virgin America. Clearly, the public, the sponsors and the league were not buying the attempt at denial.

Another strategy that Sterling engaged in was *bolstering*. For years, Sterling’s PR team tried to craft an image for the owner that showed he was a benevolent philanthropist. In 2009, the Los Angeles NAACP chapter honored Sterling after he gave away thousands of free Clippers tickets to underprivileged children, filling rows of empty Staples Center seats. Later, in December 2010, the Donald T. Sterling Charitable Foundation Summit held a big gala in which Sterling was featured distributing \$1 million to 10 high schools in South and East Los Angeles and 20 charities across Los Angeles County. In both cases, so that the public knew about Sterling’s giving nature, Sterling took out full-page ads in The Los Angeles Times citing his achievements.

In 2006, Sterling pledged \$50 million for construction of a homeless center. In addition, Sterling promised to fund a new summer program at a Malibu camp (complete with activities such as horseback riding, golf, and facilities like a new pool and tennis court, even a heli-pad) for poor children in the greater Los Angeles area. It was for those pledges and other activities that the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP was going to present him with the lifetime achievement award on May 15. When the media then reported that Sterling had not fulfilled his pledge to build the center, and that no steps had been taken to establish the program at the Malibu camp, the goodwill that Sterling had been building dissipated, undercutting his attempt at bolstering (Pringle, Mozingo and Jennings, 2014, May 3) .

A Failed Attempt At Mortification

Clearly, Sterling most disastrous move when he began to engage in a strategy of *mortification*. On Tuesday, May 12, Sterling did an interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper. He repeatedly apologized for his remarks (“I’m so sorry,” “I’m so apologetic,” “I’m asking for forgiveness,” being statements he repeatedly made). For the first part of the interview, Sterling appeared sincerely contrite for his actions, As the interview continued, however, things got progressively worse for Sterling.

First, in denying accusations that he's racist, Sterling claimed he'd been “baited” by Stiviano into making what he called “terrible” remarks. Then Sterling claimed, “The players don't hate me. The sponsors don’t hate me. The fans don’t hate me. The media hates me. It’s all the media.”

But, it was at the mention of Magic Johnson that Sterling managed to completely eliminate any chance of winning back enough NBA owners to forestall his losing his team. Sterling observed of Johnson, "What kind of a guy goes to every city, has sex with every girl, then he catches HIV? Is that someone we want to respect and tell our kids about?" Sterling then continued, "I think he should be ashamed of himself. I think he should go into the background. But what does he do for the black people? He doesn't do anything."

Sterling also claimed that he waited so long to apologize about the recording because Johnson, called him and told him to remain silent. Sterling said Johnson advised him, “I know the girl, don't do anything. I'll help you." Sterling then proposed, “I think he [Johnson] wanted me to just do nothing so he could buy the team” (Shoichet and Almsy, 2014, May 12).

Further, Sterling asked, "What has he done? Can you tell me? Big Magic Johnson, what has he done?" Sterling went on, "That's one problem I have. Jews, when they get successful, they will help their people, and some of the African-Americans -- maybe I'll get in trouble again -- they don't want to help anybody." (For the record, Johnson as CEO of Magic Johnson Enterprises, has invested millions of dollars in small businesses in the Los Angeles area, and founded the Magic Johnson Foundation, which has raised millions of dollars for HIV awareness, testing and treatment.)

Reaction to the Sterling interview was swift. Magic Johnson posted on Twitter "After this week, no more Sterling talk. Just the NBA Playoffs." Clippers Coach Doc Rivers said of Sterling's comments, "That doesn't sound like much of an apology to me." The strongest condemnations came from two sources. NBA Commissioner Adam Silver announced after he had read a transcript of the interview, "While Magic Johnson doesn't need me to, I feel compelled on behalf of the NBA family to apologize to him that he continues to be dragged into this situation and be degraded by such a malicious and personal attack. The NBA Board of Governors is continuing with its process to remove Mr. Sterling as expeditiously as possible." Then the next morning, Shelly Sterling appeared on NBC's "The Today Show" to state that she believes Donald Sterling has dementia. "He's not the man I know, or I knew," she said to Savannah Guthrie. "There's something wrong. I really think, personally, he has dementia" (Shoichet and Almasy, 2014, May 12).

Having blown his attempt at apologizing, Sterling decided to *attack the accuser*. On May 15 Sterling hired Maxwell Blecher, a prominent anti-trust lawyer, who informs NBA executive vice president and general counsel Rick Buchanan that his client will refuse current sanctions as his actions do not warrant "any punishment at all." The NBA responds four days later by announcing its formal charge seeking to remove Sterling from ownership for violations of the league's constitutional by-laws. A vote is set for June 3, at which time 22 of the 29 owners would need to vote in the affirmative for the measure to pass. Sterling is given until May 27 to officially respond.

Before the May 27 deadline, media reports appear that Donald Sterling has given his ex-wife control of the team, and permission to sell the franchise. Yet, on May 27, Sterling sent a 32-page statement to the NBA responding to its "illegal" punishment, saying that a forced sale of the team would require his family to pay an "egregious" capital gains tax. Sterling vows he will fight any potential sale.

Despite Sterling's vow, on May 29 the news appeared that Shelly Sterling had reached an agreement with former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer that he would buy the Clippers for \$2 billion, a price exceeding virtually everyone's prior estimates. Shelly Sterling and Ballmer reached the agreement after medical experts allegedly deemed the 80-year-old Donald Sterling to be "mentally incapacitated," thus giving her the ability to complete the sale without his permission. The NBA's Board of Governors still had to approve the sale.

Undaunted, Sterling's legal team revoked the trust that the team was held in, thereby giving Donald Sterling sole authority over the ownership of the team. Shelly Sterling then went to probate court, where, on June 11, Judge Levenas scheduled a four-day trial to July 7 to determine whether Shelly Sterling was within her rights when she negotiated the deal Ballmer.

After multiple days of acrimonious testimony by both sides, Donald Sterling failed in his last attempt to restore his image. His attack on his accuser failed (Witz, 2014, July 28).

Conclusion

In September 2014, Atlanta Hawks controlling owner Bruce Levenson reported to the NBA that he sent a racist e-mail to his general manager, Danny Ferry, in August 2012. Among other things, Levenson's wrote in the email that the Hawks' fan base was too heavily African-American. Because of the email, Levenson announced that he would be selling his interest in the Atlanta Hawks.

In the press release announcing his intention to sell the team, Levenson is quoted as saying:

I wrote an e-mail two years ago that was inappropriate and offensive. I trivialized our fans by making clichéd assumptions about their interests (i.e., hip hop vs. country, white vs. black cheerleaders, etc.) and by stereotyping their perceptions of one another (i.e., that white fans might be afraid of our black fans). By focusing on race, I also sent the unintentional and hurtful message that our white fans are more valuable than our black fans (Joseph, A., 2014, September 7).

Levenson did not receive the type of public scorn that Sterling got. While some people decried Levenson's comments as being racist, other, such as former NBA star, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, suggested Levenson's comments were simply those of a rational business owner. Jabbar noted:

Levenson is a businessman asking reasonable questions about how to put customers in seats. If his arena was filled mostly with whites and he wanted to attract blacks, wouldn't he be asking how they could de-emphasize white culture and bias toward white contestants and cheerleaders? Don't you think every corporation in America that is trying to attract a more diverse customer base is discussing how to feature more blacks or Asians or Latinos in their TV ads? (Jabbar, 2014, September 8).

The reasons Levenson did not generate the same condemnation that Sterling did were: 1) Levenson was proactive, in that he self-reported the incident rather than the media reporting it first; 2) he was genuinely contrite in his apology to the public; and 3) he took corrective action by planning to sell the team. Levenson took all the steps that Sterling should have taken but didn't. In the end, Levenson (ironically, one of the strongest critics among the NBA owners f Sterling) will no longer be owner of an NBA franchise, but, given the price paid for the Los Angeles Clippers, Levenson will emerge with a healthy return on his investment and his personal reputation largely intact.

As for the Clippers, the 2014-2015 NBA season starts, Steve Ballmer is the team and a disgraced Donald Sterling is counting his \$2 billion. In Donald Sterling's world within his mind, he has lost. In the real world, however, this sorry story that started with a report from TMZ led to a happy ending for all concerned. With Ballmer in place, the future seems brighter for the Clippers than it has in a while. ***And, the field of crisis communication has a primer on what not to do in a crisis.***

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