How to be a Heroic Leader Like Missouri Coach Gary Pinkel

If there's a surprising hero in the whole Missouri student protest about racial issues, it might be Missouri football coach Gary Pinkel. Pinkel helped publicize the issue by tweeting after the players asserted that they would not play until Tim Wolfe, the president resigned. His twitter account read that "The Mizzou Family stands as one. We are united. We are behind our players." The tweet included a photo of his team, black and white, arms locked. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/sports/ncaafootball/gary-pinkel-missouri-coach-evolution-followed-by-revolution.html?_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/sports/ncaafootball/gary-pinkel-missouri-coach-evolution-followed-by-revolution.html?_r=0)

While Pinkel later moved away from any assertion that he meant to force Wolfe’s resignation, he in fact, has a long history of trying to understand and support players who might feel different on his team. A couple of years ago, he skillfully dealt with the issue of a player, Michael Sam, who disclosed that he was gay and became the first publicly gay NFL player.

Sadly, Pinkel announced Friday that he has non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer of the blood, and would resign after the season.

While launching over twenty current NFL players, he also has a reputation as a canny negotiator, receiving an annual salary of more than $4 million and helping orchestrate the university’s entry into the Southeastern Conference. He also brought Norris Stevenson, who was the first black scholarship football player at Missouri in 1957, to talk to the players about his experience. The coach has built a successful team by listening carefully to his players and doing his best to help integrate them -- black and white -- into the campus experience.

Many commentators have failed to understand what happened with the protests last week at Missouri, Yale and Ithaca, implying that black students were hyper-sensitive and needed to develop tougher skins. Yet such comments fail to take into account how it feels to be other, to have a lifetime of experiences where you’re the only woman, African-American, Latino or openly gay person in the room. Where your car is stopped because you’ve been driving while black or brown, or where you have to put up with subtle sexual harassment in an environment where men do not have those experiences.

In diversity work, we call that phenomena, cumulative impact, the idea that these kinds of events build up and then what might seem -- to the dominant culture -- like smaller issues, trigger a surprising response.

When we conduct diversity training, we have participants tell their own cultural stories, a time when they had a feeling of being different from the predominant group in the room. Perhaps they were the only Methodist in a Baptist church, or the only non-Spanish speaker in Spain, or the only straight person who accidentally stumbled into a gay pride parade.
We always tell our students that they don’t have to reveal anything that makes them feel too vulnerable, yet people take risks that amaze us when they share their own journeys. Such an exercise can start to move people toward understanding the reactions of their coworkers in situations where a response seems over-blown to the uninitiated.

What can you do as a leader to help your own employees better understand diversity issues? Follow coach Pinkel’s lead and do these four things:

1. **Be pro-active.** Start your efforts now, BEFORE there’s a crisis.

2. **Listen hard to your employees who are different.** Find out what they need to succeed in your environment.

3. **Don’t minimize their concerns.** Remember *cumulative impact*.

4. **Call the experts.** In addition to bringing in Stevenson, Pinkel turned to campus LGBTQ activists when Michael Sam came out. Pinkel respected their expertise. He knew his super-power was as a football coach, not a diversity expert.

*Did you know that we have a diverse team of diversity consultants and workshop leaders to help you navigate these concerns?*

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