

Shocked and Surprised at the Penn State Story? We Shouldn't Be.

By Jeffrey O'Brien

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Can we stop acting shocked and surprised about the unfolding news out of Happy Valley? Are we really shocked that a man of unquestioned power was not challenged? Are we really surprised that other men did not intervene when they knew of this abuse, even against a child? That they allegedly went about business as usual for years after learning of the abuse?

We shouldn't be.

To be sure, any time children are involved it understandably gets our attention and righteous anger. If the reports are true, the leadership failure in this case is immense. But men of unquestioned power have done this for centuries, fully anticipating the silence of other men. To not understand this point is to miss the point.

This is not really about Joe Paterno or Penn State or even Jerry Sandusky. Just like the emerging Syracuse story is not about Jim Boeheim or Bernie Fine. Their involvement makes it news. But this is about power. Leadership failure. Unhealthy notions of manhood. It's about passive bystanders.

Why do I believe this to be the case? I have worked with the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program in college and professional athletics for nearly 20 years. MVP trains student-athletes, coaches and staff members about how to be proactive bystanders empowered to confront abuse, violence and inappropriate behaviors involving teammates, peers and co-workers. Since 1993, my colleagues and I have taught bystander intervention skills to athletic departments on over 150 campuses, including dozens of nationally ranked Division 1 schools. In the domestic violence and sexual assault prevention field, MVP stands alone as the innovators in this realm.

We teach bystander intervention skills utilizing our key curricular innovation, the MVP Playbook. The Playbook consists of a series of work or social scenarios depicting a range of physically and sexually abusive and harassing behaviors, with participants positioned as bystanders. We have found over the years that one of the most difficult situations for people is when someone with more power or status than them is acting inappropriately – or even criminally.

Starting to sound familiar? Whether the status differential is a first-year student-athlete observing an upperclass teammate, an assistant athletic director observing a senior administrator, or a young coach observing a head coach of a power team (football, men's basketball) at a BCS institution, going "up the chain of command" is hard. For many years, MVP has conducted bystander intervention leadership training with personnel in all branches of the U.S. military, and with high school faculties and students in several states. Going "up the chain" is hard for everyone.

Part of what makes MVP unique is that we teach bystander intervention skills from a social justice perspective. We talk about power and privilege -- or the absence of it -- and how this shapes our interactions. It is important in an educational context to be honest and realistic. People often do not act because they fear the loss of their job, or even career, if they challenge a powerful man. You can teach bystander intervention skills all you want, but if you don't address the underlying power dynamics, you will not inspire people to step up in the moment of truth.

While the Penn State tragedy comes from athletics, we have seen similar dynamics in the Catholic Church (e.g. the priest child sex abuse scandal), the military (e.g. Air Force Academy sexual assault scandal, Navy Tailhook scandal, etc.) and in the political arena (e.g. Bill Clinton, Herman Cain scandals). There are common denominators in each. Unquestioned Power. Leadership failure. Unhealthy notions of manhood. Passive bystanders.

Due to our work in organized athletics, my colleagues and I have found ourselves in the company of many powerful men. We have worked with some who get instinctively the importance of men's leadership in gender violence prevention, and others who grow into that understanding. Unfortunately, too often some of the most powerful men's head coaches and athletic directors decline to participate in our trainings. This is while the majority of the other coaches and staff do take part. The message is clear: the rules are not the same for everyone.

How do unhealthy notions of manhood contribute to these dynamics? Our culture pressures boys and men to squeeze into narrowly defined gender roles. Dominant masculinity includes a range of behavior expectations and some explicit do's and don'ts that serve as "man law." In MVP trainings we have always used the "man box," an exercise originally developed in the late 1970s by the Oakland Men's Project. Inside the "man box" we cram -- as a society -- all of the potentially harmful stereotypical understandings of what it means to be a man. The box is sealed by the demeaning language we use to "police" men into very rigid and restrictive gender norms. This gender policing is a critical part of the socialization process, and it informs men's response to any number of incidents -- including situations involving abuse and other criminal activity.

This is about more than Penn State or even Syracuse. We are socializing our children to grow into passive adult bystanders when faced with abusive, illegal or just plain inappropriate behaviors. Think of examples we see all around us. We regularly tell children not to be a "tattle tale." In MVP we regularly hear that relationship abuse is a "private matter," that it's "none of my business." High school and college students tell us that "in my neighborhood, snitches get stitches." We've needed to enact "whistleblower" laws to protect employees who step up and report illegal activity from being targeted with retaliation. We seem to live in contradiction. On one hand, we want people to step up and do the right thing. On the other we want them to shut up and mind their own business. We can't have it both ways.

These children we are socializing into "mind your own business" adults have learned a core value that is fatally flawed. We need a cultural course correction. Let's use this tragedy at Penn State as a true teachable moment and begin to realign our values and actions. We can teach each other, from the highest levels of power to the children at our feet, that we all have a responsibility to be proactive bystanders and speak truth to power. It is our responsibility to challenge power, to rein in and transform unhealthy masculinity, to lead with values and fairness and to be proactive bystanders.

If we are not willing to do this, let's stop pretending to be shocked and surprised when the next predictable scandal breaks involving these same dynamics.

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