Case 1.1: Open Mouth . . .

# Case Synopsis and Analysis

As newly hired offensive coordinator, Coach Berger was interviewed by the student-led school paper at Grand Valley State. His response to leadership questions posed in the interview citing the accomplishments of Adolf Hitler’s “leadership” among others. When the article was published, it created issues and the GVSU athletic department asked for the online story comments to be taken down. The school paper initially obliged the request, but then re-posted the comments. This forced the story to become viral and was picked up by national media outlets and even late night television hosts. The coach eventually resigned a week later citing bad judgement and remorse for the comments. This led to active changes at GVSU to focus on more social justice-based curriculum.

The case study provides interesting opportunities to discuss leadership and morality. Students can debate leadership acts and efforts and how the moral compass driving those acts and efforts must be pointed in the “right” direction to be considered effective leadership. As the teacher, be mindful of their biases regarding these leadership acts and efforts. Students may want to argue “leadership is leadership, regardless of outcome.” Leadership for the greater good of humankind is the key, otherwise it may be better qualified as pseudo-leadership.

**Learning Objectives:**

* Students will understand the morality found in effective leadership.
* Students will recognize the differences between leadership and pseudo-leadership.
* Students will further understand how their bias impacts their world view.

**Answers to Questions in the Text:**

1. Who are the leaders in this situation? How would you describe their actions as leaders based on the definition of leadership in this chapter?

The definition of leadership found in Chapter 1 is, in short, “when one can motivate many to a common goal.” That is very denotative as there are 1,000’s of other connotative definitions of the word “leadership.” Based on this text definition, the leaders are the coach in question, the athletic department, the head coach, the university administration, the school paper, the Hillel group leaders, and the national media outlets. The actions of all of these individuals reflect effective leadership prowess and efficacy, after the situation was “viral.” The coach who was interviewed, while his choice of words was “poor” at best, did choose to remove himself from the situation to allow the focus to be on the student athletes and their development. The coach clearly aligned leadership to any leader rather than focusing on leaders who do so with a moral lens, for the greater good of all. Try to keep discussion on the greater good. An effective leader might easily lead his group, but if the leader leads them off a cliff to their death – that is not effective leadership.

1. Do you think it was wrong for Coach Berger to cite Hitler as a “great leader”?

Yes. However, students may agree with the choice; after all, Hitler led a country into a world war over his beliefs. Students should consistently be re-focused into the morality aspects found in effective leadership. Pseudo-leaders David Koresh and Jim Jones were also viewed as effective leaders by their followers, however history shows us their desire was not about the greater good.

1. What is your reaction to Coach Berger resigning one week after signing a contract to coach at GVSU?

To be at a high-level NCAA Division II football program like GVSU and then resign over comments made to the student paper outlines the severity of this case. Neither the GVSU athletic department nor the GVSU community wanted this to be part of their culture. The expedited resignation simply shows the severity of Coach Berger’s comments.

1. Based on our discussion of morality and leadership in this chapter, would you say Coach Berger’s comments are based on leadership as a neutral process or on leadership as a process that has a moral dimension? Why?

Students, again, may want to argue that leadership is leadership and that efficacy should be caroused regardless of outcome. Just a quick look back at other historical “leaders” can quickly destroy that mindset. One cannot escape the morality found in working to make the world a better place for all. Moral leaders seek to create and grow, while pseudo-leaders care not about others – only themselves.

1. What does the university’s response suggest regarding how the university views leadership?

The university, based on this case, spun this off as a “teachable moment” by working to infuse social justice into the curriculum and potentially staff training (although not mentioned). However, to allow the athletic department to dictate policy to the student-led paper is alarming. Those sorts of “back room” discussions tend to perpetuate issues rather than fix them. Also, the university should not react to issues like this “after the fact” in the future, but should be working 24/7 to create a socially just and moral leadership climate for all.

1. If you were the president of the university and you were asked to define leadership, how would you define it?

Leadership is always doing the right thing. While there may be debate on what is “right,” if your compass is pointing to the greater good of humankind . . . you are on your way to becoming an efficacious leader. Social change is only social change if it is leading to something positive.

1. Bobby Knight was a coach who was known to use questionable leadership tactics. Do you think Coach Berger would have been safe to ask Coach Knight to dinner? Why?

Bobby Knight may no longer be someone that Generation Z’s may remember, so it is important to remind them of who he was. He coached the Indiana University Hoosier basketball team for nearly 30 years along with Texas Tech, and Army. He was an intense coach who often yelled, screamed, and physically put hands on players. His explosive temper did yield results for his teams as those teams won many “banners.” Even after he left (or was removed) from Indiana and went to Texas Tech, the IU bookstore sold Texas Tech shirts with Bobby Knight’s name on them. His public meltdowns and chair throwing incidents are part of NCAA and Indiana folklore. He was a military man, enlisting in the Army. Often the military employs the “tear them down to build them up” philosophy and Knight’s coaching style was no exception. Comparing Adolf Hitler and Bobby Knight is a stretch, at best. No one was ever executed under Bobby Knight, no wars were started, etc. If Coach Berger would have suggested a dinner with Bobby Knight, the interview would not have been as controversial. History will remember Bobby Knight as a winning coach with questionable tactics. Still, Bobby Knight needed to rely more on his public persona of “doing the right thing.” He operated at IU with immunity as IU turned a blind eye when needed. Leadership is doing the right thing, at all times for the greater good. Whether or not Bobby Knight did the right thing with his players will always be overshadowed by his out of control antics.

**Potential Teaching Approaches:**

This case study is conducive to group discussions and exercises.

Below is a way to structure a class, based on Case Study 1.1:

* Lecture on Chapter 1 and the inherent continuums found in this chapter (leadership is like this and also like that) inclusive of the morality aspects found in leaders.
* Have students read Case 1.1.
* Professor discusses the questions from the case study. Large-group discussion should center on theme of morality and its role within effective leadership.
* Finally, the professor may choose to conduct in-class exercises listed below.

**Exercises for This Case Study:**

1. In small groups, create lists of historical leaders who led for the betterment of society. Also create a list of pseudo-leaders who did things to only benefit themselves. Have the groups debate their lists with other groups. Ask them to define what makes a leader a pseudo-leader.
2. Ask students to define these five words in small groups: ethics, morality, character, integrity, and values. Tell them they cannot use any of these words while defining the other words. Have the dictionary definitions ready to share as the groups report out their answers. Discuss similarities and differences found between the group’s definitions and the dictionary definitions.
3. As students to role-play the interview setting found in Case 1.1. Either the faculty member or a student should serve as a narrator (Coach Berger’s conscience) to start/stop the action within the interview. Stop the interview when needed and insert a moral voice into the head of the coach. Even allow him to say “Hitler” but then back track to ask for an on-the-spot revision complete with a request of the journalist to “strike that from the record.” Students watching the role play can then ask questions of the coach and journalist, while they remain in character.
4. Students can read the case and write a 150-200-word reaction to the coach’s choices of dinner guests, writing from one of the following perspectives: Athletic Director, President of Hillel, President of GVSU, a GVSU football player, or editor of school paper.