The Essendon Syndrome, Social Proof and Obedience to Authority – Behavioural Characteristics That Affect Many Sport Boards

The doping scandal and subsequent fallout for the players, club, coaches and board of the Essendon AFL club are the outward manifestation of a syndrome that affects the boards of many international and national sporting organisations. The genesis of this syndrome takes place in the selection and election of directors of sporting organisations.

Outwardly, the candidates for directorships or sitting directors, give the appearance of a perfect fit; successful in business, sport, politics. They are usually, well connected with networks in society, business and government. However, many of these seemingly model directors and or candidates, hide an alter ego. These alto egos have three main forms; the committed fan, the hero worshipper or the trophy hunter.

The trophy hunter is the most dangerous, typically, successful in nearly every endeavour they undertake. However, recognition and success in a sporting environment has eluded them. Resulting in a deep-seated desire, need, to be associated with successful, powerful, prestigious sporting bodies. Whereas, the hero worshipper dreams of standing alongside, socialising, being part of their hero’s environment, being able to name drop at the appropriate time. While the committed fan has the focus of a laser, so focused, that their ability to think laterally, use their skills and knowledge is lost. All three alter egos are little more than a seat warmer’s at the board table.

While certainly having the necessary skills, when they enter the board room of the organisation (e.g. Essendon, FIFA, IAAF). The very skills, knowledge and experience that were obvious at the selection or election stage, evaporate. Lost forever, almost as if they have undergone surgery to have a frontal lobotomy.

Two of the alter egos, the 'hero worshipper' and the 'committed fan' were identified in comments of Mr. Zwier, a high-profile Melbourne lawyer, as reported by Patrick Durkin in the Australian Financial Review (Jan 16th). Mr. Zwier was reported as saying that he blamed the board for being fans (hero worshipper) of Mr. Hird (Essendon head coach) and the club (committed fan).

Generally speaking, sport organisations view the election of high profile personalities to the board of directors as bringing great benefit. After all, they are successful in their business, sporting or other careers. They enjoy a high profile in the media. As such they are easily recognised by the sport community, and importantly, have connections in all the right places. When organisations talk with sponsors, etc., these high-profile names open doors. Therefore, it stands to reason that they will make great directors.

Therein lies the problem, the symptoms of the Essendon syndrome are not always identifiable, at the time of selection and election. Take these highly successful people out of the context in which they were successful, business, etc. Place them in the company of their hero’s, governing the club through which their 'committed fan' alter ego lives, or their thirst
for status is quenched, and what happens. They forget what they are there for, all the skills and experience they possess are lost. To use an appropriate sporting analogy, they choke.

With that analogy in mind, reflect on the issues facing Essendon today. If this was the director’s business and not their sport, I doubt the board would have let this issue explode into the mammoth that it has become, with all the damage and fallout that is occurring.

While there are both parallels and disparities between the corporate and sporting (NFP) governance environments. The parallels between these two environments to the Essendon issues are encapsulated within the field of ‘behavioural governance’. That is, how the effects of psychological, social, cognitive, and emotional factors combined with the individual and collective behaviour of those involved, influences the organisation's performance. Without delving deeply into ‘behavioural governance’, the key components that influenced the Essendon case, are the social and cultural factors of the board, executive and players.

To explain further, a colleague of mine, Catherine Ordway wrote in a recent article: “Although all the players were over 18, senior players and people with ‘god-like’ charisma, such as that ascribed to Essendon head coach James Hird, can have an enormous influence in a team setting.” Combined with the observation, that from a players’ perspective, the Essendon doctor (Bruce Reid) would have been viewed as an 'authority figure', one whose decisions and recommendations were not or should not, be questioned.

Two behavioural principles; ‘social proof’ and ‘obedience to authority’, greatly influenced how the Essendon's doping scenario played out. Social Proof, allows the actions of others to influence the actions we take. This often manifests itself in a sort of ‘mob mentality’, e.g. everyone else was doing it, so it must be right. In the Essendon case, it was identifiable in the action or inaction of players’ regarding injections received, or the lack of questioning from directors regarding the efficacy, etc., of the enhancement's programme. This behavioural principle is especially powerful if we view those in the group to be similar to ourselves. This principle becomes more powerful still, when combined with other unspoken social and cultural norms of board or sport team, e.g. you don’t question the Coach, team doctor, Chair or President.

Obedience to authority is something that is programmed into us from birth. Obedience to authority has been the root cause of many disasters, e.g. there is a well-researched and proven connection between ‘obedience to authority’ and a number of air crashes and medical misadventures. In the case of Essendon, obedience to authority played a part in the actions, or rather inaction of many players and directors. Those recognised as having perceived or real ‘authority’ would have been in the case of the team, the doctor and those having a ‘god-like’ (hero) status, e.g. the hero player, captain or coach, and for the board, the Chair/President and those directors with highly successful careers and or a high profile.

In these situations, ‘obedience to authority’ plays a significant role. It is difficult if not impossible for anyone to question the authority of these authority figures, without incurring some form of social exclusion or worse. Often in these situations, once a directive/decision has been made by an authority figure (real or perceived). Those who see themselves as having a lesser status, stop thinking, and simply react. In Essendon’s case, this would have manifested itself in players complying with the injection programme without question. And in the case of the board, the manifestation would have seen directors either stopping or not asking questions.
The issues outlined above are not isolated to Essendon. Many sporting organisations suffer from what I have termed the 'Essendon Syndrome', two topical examples are FIFA and the IAAF. Both are excellent examples of organisations whose board/executive suffer from the *Essendon Syndrome*, combined with the effects of *Social Proof* and *Obedience to Authority*.

What steps can an organisation take to mitigate the possibility of this happening to your organisation? Here are three easily implemented steps.

- Conduct a behavioural governance analysis to identify the personality types that are currently on your board/executive.
- Have a robust, transparent and detailed, director selection process, using the above analysis as one part of data used to screen out those with the identified alter egos.
- Conduct a full ‘behavioural governance’ review of the board bi-annually
- Ensure your constitution allows the organisation to remove poor performing directors.