

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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Bosses... Are You Listening?

Hey, boss! Take a lesson from David Stern.

As commissioner of the National Basketball Association, Stern is in charge of all of the operations of one of the most recognizable sports brands on the planet. He's widely recognized as the one who has brought the NBA from financial hardship 23 years ago to world sports prominence.

This year, however, Stern made a mistake with his employees – the 600-or-so professional athletes he represents.

In October, the NBA began using a new basketball as its “official” ball for games. It was manufactured by Spalding, with a new composite material that Spalding researchers claimed to be a better-performing ball under NBA conditions, including being easier to grip than leather when exposed to moisture.

When the new balls were passed out to the players, however, no one was impressed.

The players complained that the new synthetic balls didn't bounce as true as the old leather balls. They were unpredictable, and felt “new” each time they used one, which is not the way they prefer to play. Charles Barkley, a former NBA star and current TV commentator, chimed in that he would always look for the balls that were scuffed up, because they were easier to play with.

Even more disturbing, the new ball seemingly got slipperier when wet, which was the opposite of what Spalding had predicted.

Players were vocal to the media about the new balls, including Miami Heat superstar Shaquille O'Neal. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban went so far as to commission a study of the new balls by physicists at the University of Texas at Arlington, whose preliminary findings were that the microfiber composite ball didn't behave the same at all.

Stern was smart enough to recognize when he'd made a mistake. On December 12th, Stern announced that the league would be switching back to the old leather ball as of January 1st. It was an unprecedented in-season change for a professional league.

"Our players' response to this particular composite ball has been consistently negative and we are acting accordingly," Stern said in a released statement. "Although testing performed by Spalding and the NBA demonstrated that the new composite basketball was more consistent than leather and statistically there has been an improvement in shooting, scoring and ball-related turnovers, the most important statistic is the view of our players.

"In the meantime, we will work with our players and our partners at Spalding to determine the best possible ball for the NBA."

In an interview the following month, Stern was asked what he had learned about the ball incident.

"The management lesson of that is listen to your employees," he said. "The public has spoken. We misstepped. We didn't listen to our employees and we have owned up to our own failures."

What a humbling and authentic response!

David Stern admitted he was wrong, and he wasn't ashamed to say it out loud. He understood that in the end, he didn't need to right on this issue, because his employees were the ones that mattered most. He wasn't afraid to eat a little crow in order to benefit them.

Would you have done the same thing?

Should you do the same thing?

Have you made a decision lately that caused a negative reaction? One that affected the lives of several others?

How did you go about making that decision? Did you get input from those the decision would affect before proceeding? Or did you simply decide it needed to be done, and made the change without input?

It's OK to make a mistake and admit it. To ignore a wrong decision is simply re-creating the same mistake each and every day it affects the lives of others.

Upon further review, David Stern had the guts to reverse his call.

How about you?

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