



STUDENT-ATHLETE EDITION

The Death of Loyalty

Nothing Sabotages Loyalty Like the Blame Game

CASE IN POINT

In 1994, the Bulls, without Michael Jordan, were playing the Knicks for the Eastern Conference semifinals. In the last seconds of a close game three, Phil Jackson called the game-deciding play, with Toni Kukoc rather than Scottie Pippen as the shooter. An angered Pippen took himself out of the game, Kukoc hit the shot and the Bulls won, but Pippen's highly visible act of insubordination posed an immediate challenge for Jackson. Phil declined to come down hard on Pippen in his postgame interview. In the locker room, however, he closed the door, announced that he thought the team had something to say to Pippen, and then left the room. Bill Cartwright, a quintessential team player, was so upset that he was close to tears as he asked Pippen how he could let the team down after all they had sacrificed for as a group throughout the year. Other players chimed in. Pippen, man enough to see his error, apologized on the spot, and in the next game he was back contributing to the Bulls' performance.

-Bill Bradley, Values of the Game

Loyalty is central to the heart and soul of any meaningful relationship. A sports team provides the perfect platform for loyalty. Giving of one's self to others is the foundation of loyalty. Many of our greatest experiences in life can be found in our relationships. At its core, loyalty is about reliability. And in the team setting reliability is a necessary ingredient for success.

Loyalty is found in the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social support we provide others. It is the bond of loyalty players have to teammates that forges a coherent team. It is players willingly committing to each other and going out of their way to ensure someone else's needs are met.

However, getting along with others doesn't mean obligation to endure wrongful actions.

The Blame Game

Nothing destroys a relationship faster than blame. When you shift fault to another you cast yourself as a victim. In the court of victimhood what you want is the other person to be wrong and you to be right. No doubt, you feel you have real justification in your specific situation. When you wrongfully blame others, you lose the right to loyalty. You've sacrificed a relationship to "save face," to "look good," or to simply hide a weakness. This is not loyalty. It is betrayal.

Let me state it plainly: Playing the blame game is wrong. Blame fuels conflict. It feeds the fire of dissent. It divides people. It can—and will—destroy your team. The blame game makes a mockery of loyalty. Blame is an act of selfishness.

Funny thing, most people that blame others look for at least one other person to align with them, to be an accomplice in the blame game? When a team member complains about what someone else "did to me" (such as a coach not giving you enough playing time), do others look to eagerly rush in and agree with the victim? Should one "cover" another's back in the name of false victimhood? After all, "she's my friend and that's what friends do for one another."

These are not real friends. A real friend would say, "Cut the blame game and quit complaining about what "they" did to you. What did you do? What can you do to fix it?" Now that's a loyal friend. This kind of honesty is what a loyal friend would do.

You need to be honest and direct, willing to confront teammates that violate team norms. Say what you need to say in a manner that shows your intent to solve the problem. Your objective is not to fight, but rather to make a positive impact toward a positive resolution. Your goal shouldn't be to prove someone wrong, or to make you look good. Rather, your solution should be to cooperate and work toward a common purpose.

If you find yourself playing the blame game, understand that you are limiting your growth psychologically and relationally. Every time you choose to blame someone for a setback or for something negative that's happened to you, you miss the opportunity to learn how to overcome adversity.

Confidence in one's teammates is what makes for a tight-knit team. A team of loyal teammates offers a clear way to win. So when blame rears its ugly head, look instead for the courage to build up the moral muscles necessary for growing your commitment to others. Pledge to remain loyal and do the right thing.