

## LEADERSHIP: IS IT GARY PINKEL OR MICHAEL SAM?

By Judy Hissong, CLM  
President, Nesso Strategies

Gary Pinkel is the head football coach at the University of Missouri. In the summer of 2013 he was in a pickle (play on words intended). He hadn't performed for the University as they had hoped and he was facing termination if he didn't turn his program around in the fall season. He had been building this program over the past few years, but hadn't seen the performance results he'd hoped for and that the University intended. Little did he know that later in the fall Michael Sam would gather a group of players and coaches and share that he is gay. Now Mr. Pinkel had a decision to make — how would he lead his team?

The truth is that Gary Pinkel had already created a path of leadership that allowed his program more than 5 months between Mr. Sam's revelation with his teammates and the publicity that ensued prior to the NFL draft. How we all crave the spacing between a personal announcement and the telephone game that spreads our sharing across our lives! So how did this happen?

Pinkel's strategy to turn this program around was simple: he set out to create avenues for players to know each other beyond the field. He set forth team meetings, like the one in which Sam formally announced being gay, as part of this strategy. These smaller group meetings featured players sharing deeper details about themselves, which created the trusting environment where vulnerability was welcomed. Pinkel didn't participate in the groups — he set forth the structure and let the informality of the group develop the trust to lead the team. He set out to build a comfortable and relaxed program — intending to keep his job by creating an environment of trust - in him and among his players. And, with the additional pressure of Sam's announcement, the culture Pinkel created responded with a magical season and an NFL-bound gay athlete. His teammates felt no need to share Mr. Sam's announcement with the press, or anyone else. They were comfortable in the trust created under Pinkel's tutelage, and sent their messages via the fantastic season on the field.

TRUST:  
FIRM BELIEF  
IN THE  
RELIABILITY,  
TRUTH,  
ABILITY,  
OR STRENGTH  
OF SOMEONE  
OR SOMETHING

This story reminds me of how law firm leaders gather to report on the finances of their firm. They gather to make decisions about the direction of the firm. They gather at year-end to make financial decisions around the tough concepts of trust and vulnerability. When is the last time you heard a partner confess they had a bad year, should have a reduction in compensation (even when the firm overall has had a stellar year) and is willing to commit to creating a better year before they are rewarded for it?

I suggest that the lack of trust is partially a result of the lack of connection. After all, how often do those same partners gather to simply share and connect? To dig deeper into the complexities of their practice and how they each impact each other? And, equally important, how often does the management team have lunch together with the only agenda item to deepen relationships and understanding of the cross-functional aspects of their overall goal of managing the firm?

This deeper relationship is trust. It opens the door to vulnerability and shared experiences. Then, when your firm is faced with adversity, you can make better decisions in addressing it. Most reactions are to tighten

control. If Pinkel had tightened control of his team, would there have been 5 months of silence before the press was informed? Ha! I doubt it!

How can trust develop when you tighten your grip? Consider building trust through strategic structures and development of solid relationships that build levels of leadership in your organization. What if you adopted a Pinkel approach? Then, when a Sam shows up, you'll be prepared for any controversy.

For more information and further reading on Leadership, visit our [online library](#).



### **JUDY HISSONG, CLM**

President, Nesso Strategies | Founder, Legal Leadership Institute

Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

Bachelor's Degrees in Accounting and Physical Education | Master's Degree in Sports Management | Former Professional Athlete | Licensed Provider of Emotional Intelligence Tools | Certified Living Your Vision Facilitator | ALA Certified Legal Manager | ACE Certified Personal Trainer | ICF Professional Certified Coach

#### **CONNECT WITH JUDY**

619.546.7885 | [judy@nessostrategies.com](mailto:judy@nessostrategies.com) | [nessostrategies.com](http://nessostrategies.com) | [legalleadershipinstitute.com](http://legalleadershipinstitute.com)



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