

Lessons in Integrity and Loyalty from the Campaign Trail

By Andrew Sobel

Before the industrial age, most advisors were political counselors of one sort or another. Think of Aristotle, who tutored Alexander the Great; Cardinal Richelieu, who was King Louis XIII's advisor and then "first minister"; or Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII. In modern times, presidential advisors—such as Henry Kissinger—have sometimes received almost as much press as their clients.

Recent incidents on the presidential campaign trail hold some interesting lessons for modern service professionals who advise business clients. The first involved democratic presidential candidate Barak Obama. Videotaped excerpts of sermons given by his long-time pastor and spiritual advisor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, become public. These tapes captured Wright making what many considered to be inflammatory, racist and anti-American remarks from the pulpit. Obama's political rivals pounced on these tapes and used them to attack his judgment and character. They demanded that he unequivocally renounce Wright and sever all ties to him and his church, which Obama has been a member of for many years. In a groundbreaking speech, Obama denounced Wright's words, but pointedly refused to denounce the man. He used an analogy (always a powerful communications tool), pointing out that his white grandmother had sometimes made dicey comments to him about African-Americans, and while he rejected her words he wasn't going to reject his grandmother. In other words, Obama refused—despite massive public pressure—to throw his fiery pastor under the bus. Some weeks later, however, Wright returned from a trip abroad and gave his own speech—a rebuttal, really—criticizing Obama and bitterly defending himself and his views.

Hillary Clinton's chief campaign advisor, Mark Penn, who is also the CEO of the public relations firm Burson-Marsteller, recently got caught up in his own mini-scandal. Senator Clinton was publicly opposed to the so-called Columbian Free Trade Agreement, while at the same time, Burson-Marsteller was retained by the government of Colombia to lobby the US government for its passage. Penn actually met with the Colombian ambassador to brief him on his firm's efforts on Colombia's behalf. A few days later, when the meeting became public, he was assailed for sustaining an untenable conflict of interest, and he resigned as the Clinton campaign's chief advisor.

Let's take the Rev. Wright incident first. At first, Obama took a chance by refusing to denounce his pastor, and it was a stand that served him well. He demonstrated that he was not going to mindlessly cave in to popular pressure with a knee-jerk reaction to the crisis. He refused, in essence, to cave in to others and dump his spiritual advisor. In doing so, he demonstrated that his loyalty does not evaporate overnight. Setting aside one's political persuasions, he arguably demonstrated integrity and consistency. But then things changed when Wright went on the counter-offensive. If you are someone's trusted advisor, you make it all about your client, not about you. You stay in the background. Wright didn't do this. Worse, he criticized Obama. This second time around, Obama had to finally and unequivocally denounce Wright.

Remember, the more public credit you give your client, the more private credit he or she will give you!

I teach a case which has a similar theme. In it, your senior client—let's say the CEO—tells you that he wants to replace an executive you have been working closely with for over a year. One of the lessons of the case is that the CEO knows very well that you have a close working relationship with this individual, and if you immediately "throw him under the bus"—for example by quickly agreeing with the CEO that he should go—you lose all your credibility. The CEO is going to think, "So what is this person going to say to one of my board members behind my back?"

In the case study, you may ultimately need to be supportive of the CEO in his efforts to move this executive

aside. But you should only do so after a great deal of discussion and probing.

Loyalties are complex and fraught with potential conflicts, and there may indeed be a time and place to give them up. Don't throw people under the bus too quickly. But don't let blind loyalty keep you from ever throwing them under the bus if that is the right thing to do.

The Mark Penn affair is perhaps more straightforward. You can't represent two clients with diametrically opposed interests for long—that's why law firms and investment banks screen each new client to ascertain if a conflict of interest exists or could develop. You can justify it in your own mind, perhaps, but the appearance of conflict can be just as bad as an actual one. Trusted advisors are careful about this and bend over backwards to avoid situations where their clients feel they have less than full loyalty—or worse, that they have been betrayed.

During October of 1973, special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox finally obtained audio tapes which would implicate President Nixon in the break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate building. On a Saturday night, President Nixon, sensing that Cox was closing in on him, ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire Cox. Richardson, believing it was an illegal and unethical request, refused, and resigned on the spot. Nixon then ordered the Deputy Attorney General, William French Smith, to fire Cox, and he also refused and resigned. Finally, Robert Bork—who was the Solicitor General—agreed to fire Cox. Interestingly, this incident was later cited when he was denied confirmation for the Supreme Court in 1987. This series of events later became known as “the Saturday night massacre.” In his autobiography, Richardson wrote that “The more I thought about it, the clearer it seemed to me that public confidence in the investigation would depend on its being independent not only in fact, but in appearance” (my emphasis). In other words, it's as important to avoid the appearance of impropriety as impropriety itself.

Deep personal and professional trust, which boils down to a client's belief in your integrity and your competence, is a hallmark of the long-term relationships that great professionals are able to develop. Clients may forgive occasional errors of judgment, but lapses of integrity are a red flag. As the fifth-century religious leader St. Augustine wrote in his essay *On Lying*, “When regard for the truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.” Set high standards of conduct for yourself. Tirelessly develop your reputation for integrity and honesty, and it will become one of your biggest assets as a professional.

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