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The Leadership of the Commissioner

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Project Development

The original idea for this project was brought to my attention as I visited my home during a break from my Jepson internship with the Pittsburgh Pirates, a major league baseball team. As I was home in Ohio, I read an article in the local newspaper which described the multitude of problems facing Major League Baseball. The writer proposed that these problems could be solved if baseball found a permanent commissioner. The article concluded with a sarcastic entry similar to those in the classified ads; "Wanted: Experienced person with demonstrated skills in marketing, legal issues, conflict resolution, labor negotiation, public relations, and exercising authority over a group of twenty-nine rich men and Marge Schott" (Gallipolis Daily Tribune 7/31/96). Upon reading this article, I began to consider the many demands which are placed upon the commissioners of professional sports in America. The issues raised in the article; the ability to resolve conflict, manage crisis, and reflect a positive image to the fans of the sport through the media, have been raised in multiple leadership courses I have taken. The execution of these skills is directly related to the evaluation of the commissioner's effectiveness and the public perception of the sport.

The contribution this research project makes to the advancement of the study of leadership is applying the theoretical outlooks of conflict
resolution and crisis management to the actions of the commissioners in professional sports during highly publicized situations of strife. The unique aspect of this project is that it will use the frame of reference developed by the print media to analyze the process and outcomes of the actions taken by the three main leaders I will analyze: current National Basketball Association (NBA) Commissioner David Stern, current National Football League (NFL) Commissioner Paul Tagliabue, and acting Major League Baseball (MLB) Commissioner Bud Selig. The reliance upon print media sources will allow my work to be affected by the biases of the writers, but it will also serve to demonstrate one of the requirements of a person in the role of commissioner, creating a positive media image in order to promote their sport.

A final topic which will be considered in this paper is the question of whether or not the lack of a permanent commissioner in Major League Baseball has contributed to the lack of popularity of the sport and if current leadership-related problems could be solved by an autonomous commissioner. The positive and negative leadership aspects of these current commissioners in professional football, basketball, and baseball will then be balanced in order to suggest the ideal make-up for the next Commissioner and Commissioner’s Office for Major League Baseball.
Literature Review

My research has yielded two distinctive types of literature which I will be combining in my research to develop logical conclusions that will provide support for the basic hypothesis: The ability of a commissioner to effectively exercise leadership skills in crisis and negotiation has a correlated effect upon the popularity and marketability of the sport. The two categories of literature are leadership textbooks and newspaper articles primarily written by sports journalists. An addition to this knowledge pool will come from books containing historical baseball narratives from a time span ranging from the 1920's to the present. The most important category of literature for this project will be the information selected from my past texts. The texts I have chosen to use and the highlighted information will create the framework through which I will examine the multitude of articles I have discovered.

Leadership Theory

Laurence Barton’s text *Crisis in Organizations: Managing and Communicating in the Heat of Chaos* will provide the information necessary to develop a definition of a public crisis, determine guidelines for proper leader action in the face of crisis, and present examples and measures of the outcomes associated with proper and improper leader behavior in handling crisis. Barton’s text is written to educate an
organizational manager or leader, but many of the lessons he raises apply directly to the office of a professional sports commissioner:

1) Impact of a crisis can be reduced if individuals take the time to understand the relationship of crisis to their organization (p.3).

2) Management’s reaction to crisis - positive or negative - may either save money and preserve the organization’s reputation or greatly damage the organization (p.3).

3) It is the responsibility of company to understand the pulse of employees, stockholders, and the masses (p.17).

4) The press serves an important role in opening up crises for examination and resolution. They must be dealt with honestly and swiftly in order to minimize negative publicity (p.22-23).

These four lessons will be very important in the evaluation of leadership action in resolving the crises in which the actions of multiple commissioners will be analyzed. In the general case of a professional sports crisis, the league’s commissioner must understand the impact of the crisis and the ability to effect the crisis with their own action or those of their support staff. When the term management is used in lesson #2, it will typically be referring to the combination of the commissioner, and leaders from the group of owners and the players union. It is up to the commissioner to understand the views of all these groups, along with the consumer or fan when managing important situations. Finally, it is
imperative for these critical groups to deal fairly with the press in order to minimize the negative publicity that will be presented to the public for review. The popular media section of this review will show the effect that poor crisis management techniques can have on a professional sport.

The text *Negotiation*, written by Roy J. Lewicki, Joseph A. Litterer, John W. Minton, and David M. Saunders gives a framework in which to evaluate the efforts of commissioners as third-party negotiators and allows for more thorough examination of the break-downs in negotiation which led to Major League Baseball’s 1994 player’s strike. Five typical problems which inhibit negotiation as conflict escalates are as follows:

1) Atmosphere is charged with anger, frustration, and resentment.
   Mistrust and hostility are directed at the opposing negotiator.

2) Channels of communication become closed or constrained; also are used to criticize and blame the opponent.

3) Original issues become blurred or ill-defined, new issues are added.

4) Parties see themselves as further apart than they actually are, may not recognize areas in which they are in agreement.

5) Parties become locked in their positions as tension increases, rather than searching for concessions and moving towards agreement.

(p.144)

These factors will come out clearly in the development of the 1994 MLB players’ strike. The question that will be raised is whether or not a third
party, or an autonomous commissioner, could have intervened at any point and resolved the situation before the negative consequences associated with the conflict grew to extreme levels. "Often third parties need not do more than implement some of the dispute resolution techniques ... such as aiding in the reduction of tension, controlling the number of issues, enhancing communication, establishing a common ground, and highlighting certain decisions" (p. 349). This description is designed for the organizational manager; in the situation of a sports commissioner, it becomes more difficult due to the number of involved parties and the lack of authority the commission holds in the negotiation process. However, examples will be reviewed where the commissioner was able to provide some of the listed forms of relief. Other factors involved in typical third party intervention may not be as important in the professional sports example, such as the timing of the intervention. It is the responsibility of the commissioner to act in the best interest of the sport, and a requirement of that action is to stay informed and provide input to the collective bargaining process between owners and unions of players and officials.

_Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience_ by Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnet, and Gordon Curphy will be used to develop a basis for my understanding of conflict resolution. This text provides a useful definition for conflict and valuable discussion of the results of effective leadership in conflict. A challenge in merging conflict resolution
and crisis literature comes from the common tendency to group the two concepts together in a definitional sense. Conflict can be defined as occurring, “when two opposing parties have interests or goals which appear to be incompatible” (Robbins in Hughes p.363). The definition of conflict applies to the actions of a professional sports commissioner typically in handling labor situations involving a union of players or umpires petitioning management for a more favorable collective bargaining agreement. Barton defines crisis as, “A major, unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and its aftermath may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation” (Barton p.2). This definition allows the example of a player embarrassing the game in some manner as a crisis in which the commissioner will have to become involved. Recent crises from different sports have included a star baseball player spitting on an umpire following a dispute or a basketball player with multi-colored hair kicking a courtside camera person in the groin during a game. These unpredictable situations call for immediate action from the commissioner, coordinated with all affected parties and the media. The gray area in this discussion comes when a conflict, such as a labor negotiation, escalates to the level of a crisis. This transition can be recognized in the 1994 MLB Player’s Strike. The inability to effectively negotiate a conflict between the owners and the players’ union led to crisis which MLB had to manage.
An additional text which will be used to help understand the unusual situation surrounding the authority vested within commissioner's office will be Ronald A. Heifetz Leadership Without Easy Answers. An interesting balance that is held by many sports commissioners is the fact that they have a duality of power. The MLB commissioner has the power to act on any situation or issue that defies the best interest of the game by delivering a punitive response. In dealing with on-field and off-field activities concerning MLB players, umpires, owners, and employees, the commissioner has seven capabilities to use authority. The formal authority vested in the commissioner allows for control and direction of attention, access to information, control of information flow, power to frame issues, maintenance of order or disorder, select decision making processes, and to penalize those in violation (Heifetz 104-105). However, his authority is taken by the MLB owners and MLB Players Union when dealing with labor and policy issues. Leadership without authority means engaging people to make progress on the adaptive problems they face. This progress requires learning, so the task of the leader without authority is to coordinate the educational process in the organization or community (Heifetz 187). This concept outlines the role which should be played by the commissioner in the process of resolving labor conflict, identifying the impact of the parties actions upon the health of the game, and communicating these beliefs to involved parties.
The difficulty in analyzing the leadership of the commissioner's offices in light of both crisis management and conflict resolution situations occurs when the inability to resolve conflict escalates to a crisis for Major League Baseball. However, this may fail to fit the definition laid out by Barton because this crisis commonly occurs when collective bargaining breaks down and when there is a threat or occurrence of a player or umpire strike or the owners feel that they must lock the players out (not allow them to play). This changes the working definition of crisis for this project to a "predictable or unpredictable event". Because the commissioners do not typically hold the authority to avert this type of predictable crisis, they must be prepared to manage the windfall of negative publicity which surrounds the existence of a labor dispute within professional sports. The definition of a crisis may also be contingent on the viewpoint through which one is analyzing the situation. For this project, the view is set primarily through the eyes of print media, making it a biased, but relatively accurate view of the interests of the fans. This viewpoint may see a certain situation as a crisis, but for different reasons than would other reference groups; owners, players, umpires, and the commissioner.
Methodology

The research design for this project is based primarily upon the use of electronic sources including Lexis Nexis, the World Wide Web, and First Search in order to discover a multitude of current information relating to situations of crisis and conflict faced by the NBA, NFL, and MLB. This information will be categorized based on the relevant commissioner who handled the situation and analyzed in order to determine how relevant leadership issues influenced the actions of or were neglect in the actions of the commissioner. The sources of the information will be critiqued to the best of my ability to eliminate personal or regional biases in the description of a commissioner’s action. (ex. Cleveland writer chastising Bud Selig for not suspending Baltimore’s Roberto Alomar for the playoffs; Alomar hit a home run which eliminated the Cleveland Indians.)

In order to develop and integrate concepts and theory which will enhance leadership education, I will use texts, notes, and narratives from some of the courses I have taken. These courses include Leadership in Crisis, Foundations of Leadership, and History & Theories of Leadership. I will also need to examine the materials associated with the Conflict Resolution course so that I can gain a greater understanding of the leadership skills involved in that essential art of the commissioner.

The main hypothesis that will be tested in this research project is that when a commissioner competently exercises crisis management,
conflict resolution, and communication skills in the eyes of the print media (and inherently from there to the eyes of the sport’s fans), the commissioner advances the popularity and marketability of the game. The alternative hypothesis to this is that competent execution of leadership activity will have no effect on the popularity of the game. Both hypotheses have examples which will provide support, but it will be my end to determine an actual conclusion to this inconsistency.
Discussion of Commissioner's Individual Leadership Actions

The extensive use of newspaper articles, magazine articles, journal submissions, and historical narratives is designed to highlight important aspects of leadership associated with the commissioner's position in professional sports. The format of this section of my project will be to provide a historical view of the development of the baseball's commissioner's office and a look at baseball's most renowned commissioner, Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis. Time will then be forwarded to a view of the current situation surrounding the leaders of professional sports. In order to understand the actions of the leaders which will be analyzed, one must first gain a knowledge of the situation in which they operate. Finally, multiple media bytes will be used to examine, analyze, and apply the leadership action of David Stern, Paul Tagliabue, and Bud Selig to the concepts of crisis management and conflict resolution.

The Creation of Baseball's Commissioner's Office

Professional baseball began in the 1870's and existed without an outside commissioner for over forty years. In the late 1910's and early twenties, problems arose which required baseball owners to create a position of an autonomous authority designed to bring discipline to the game. As baseball increased in popularity throughout America, it had also gained the interest of gamblers. While rumors of fixed games had been persistent in baseball around these times, it was not until the 1919 World
Series between the Cincinnati Reds and the Chicago White Sox that the fixing of games was proven and exposed to the nation. During the 1920 baseball season, evidence came out which showed Chicago players had taken money from gamblers in return for losing the World Series. This incident is remembered in history as the “Black Sox Scandal” and has been immortalized in popular culture in the motion pictures *Eight Men Out* & *Field of Dreams*. It was as a result of this incident that baseball’s owners hired the game’s first commissioner.

“Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis was hired as baseball’s first commissioner in January 1921. The position was created to provide a strong leader for the game in the wake of the Black Sox Scandal, which led to eight members of the Chicago White Sox being banned from baseball for life for their part in throwing the 1919 World Series to Cincinnati” (Rocky Mountain News 4/18/95)

Landis is often referred to as having ruled the game with an “iron fist”. His background contained two important factors which will arise later in the discussion of qualities which are necessary in a commissioner. Landis was a Federal Judge, giving him a natural background in law, decision-making, and ensuring justice. He was noted as being stubborn, enjoying the spotlight, and notably, “he was a fan before he became commissioner” (Nemeck 130). This array of characteristics, along with the authority he was invested with by the newly drafted Major League Baseball Agreement allowed him to take strong actions to improve the
image of the game of baseball and eliminate individuals who tarnished this image. The most important weapon in Landis's arsenal was the Major League Agreement which provides the authority and foundation for the action of the Major League Baseball Commissioner. The Major League Agreement states:

"The function of the Commissioner shall be to investigate . . . any act, transaction, or practice . . . not in the best interests of baseball" and to "determine what preventative, remedial or punitive action is appropriate . . . and to take such action against clubs or individual" (Major League Agreement, Art. 1, sec. 2 (a)-(c) in New York Law Journal 7/12/96).

The Major League Agreement grants the commissioner broad powers to be the investigator, judge, and appeals court on any infractions. This doctrine allowed Landis to take action in voiding player transactions, banishing players for reasons such as gambling, and even suspending Babe Ruth for a month because he played in a barnstorming league prior to the 1922 season (Nemeck 186). The authority held by the commissioner's office in Landis's time was much greater than that which is awaiting the next commissioner of baseball. Judge Landis's confrontational style of resolving disputes and the severity of his penalties may outrage owners and lead to his removal. However, he remains a standard by which to measure the power, strength, and decisiveness held by any commissioner since his reign. "His career typifies the heights to which dramatic talent may carry
a man in America if only he has the foresight not to go on stage” (Brown in Nemeck 104). Landis is considered to be one of the greatest sports commissioners of all time and the standard he set in resolving disputes and protecting the image of Major League Baseball has made him a benchmark for all commissioners who have followed.

Current Situation Facing Major League Baseball’s Commissioner

Professional baseball is on the wane. Salaries must come down or the interest of the public must be increased in some way. If one or the other does not happen, bankruptcy stares every team in the face”

- Albert Spalding, a former baseball player and league executive in 1881. (Toronto Sun 6/19/94)

In commenting during the MLB strike of 1994, acting commissioner Bud Selig said, “What you are seeing today is an industry adjusting to change. We are trying to preserve the great tradition of baseball while trying to be sensitive to changes that need to be made” (Wisconsin State Journal 6/14/94). The changes that have taken place in Major League Baseball during the 1990’s are perhaps the most spectacular of any time period in baseball history. The decade began with the realignment of divisions, expansion in the National League, addition of an extra round of playoffs, and a wild card team from each league. From this point, MLB suffered through the most difficult labor conflict in its history. “Finally, there is
labor peace, ensuring five interrupted seasons. Finally, there is a form of revenue sharing. Interleague play is here to spice he scene, if also to annoy purists” (Chicago Sun-Times 2/28/97). Major League Baseball is on the brink of a resurgence and hopes are high for the industry as the 1997 season begins to pick up steam. The most recognizable change in the near future of Major League Baseball will be the nomination of its 9th full-time commissioner. At this point, MLB will be prepared to address its many problems which linger even though labor peace is a reality. The importance of leadership from a strong commissioner within this resurgence will be a recurring theme in this project. Examples will show how MLB’s current situation is similar to that facing the NBA in the early 1980’s, before David Stern took over and righted the course of the NBA. The situation is ripe for MLB to follow this example, even in the times of high salaries and ungrateful stars. Fans are beginning to come back to the game, and the length of time they stay will be largely determined by the leadership qualities possessed by the next commissioner.

David Stern, Commissioner of the NBA

“We were in deep yogurt, But David challenged the direction of the league” (Owner Richard Bloch on Stern’s leadership in Sports Illustrated 6/3/91).

When David Stern took office as the Commissioner of the National Basketball Association on February 1, 1984, he inherited a league in which
problems were plentiful. The NBA was in a position of popularity behind professional football and baseball. NBA games were rarely seen on national television and the pervasive image of the league was a negative one. (Chicago Sun Times 6/29/96).

"When Stern took over as NBA commissioner, the common perception of the league was 'it was too black, too over-salaried, too involved with drugs' (Stern). He immediately tackled these problems. He got the players union to adhere to an antidrug agreement and salary cap. Then . . . he put the spotlight on the NBA's premier players, regardless of color" (Sport 3/94).

Stern's initial actions were a combination of his business acumen and his ability to exercise his authority to address issues which would allow the NBA to improve its image with fans, sponsors, and network television. "What Stern did was explore marketing possibilities, promote individuals rather than teams . . . and avoided public relations pot holes. When drug abuse ran overtly rampant in the mid-1980's, he toughened the league's policy. When (the style of play) alienated viewers, he introduces tighter defensive rules" (The Palm Beach Post 11/1/96). By understanding the power of his position in solving the crises which faced the NBA and by communicating his feelings to players, owners, and officials, Stern was able to capitalize on the opportunities for expansion available for the NBA. "If (David Stern) was universally adored, he wouldn't be in charge. Basketball would be baseball. That it is a tribute to the power of the commissioner,
power never exercised in the NBA until Stern took control in 1984” (The Palm Beach Post 11/1/96).

The four main issues in which David Stern has differentiated himself from other commissioners are his action in dealing with labor disputes, his commitment to the promotion of minorities in all positions of his sport, his ability to act decisively in crisis, and his marketing skills.

Stern and Labor

“A measure of Stern’s unparalleled ability to negotiate the twists and turns of professional sports management is the fact that the NBA is playing games without a collective-bargaining agreement, while MLB and the NHL burn” (The Sporting News 1/2/95). In the position of mediator, Stern has kept the NBA relatively free of labor strife; when NBA players attempted to decertify their union and strike in 1995, Stern was able to negotiate a bargaining agreement and keep power in the original union. Stern’s use of commanding tactics and persuasion have allowed him to enhance the power of his office. “He has been known to get up on the conference table and walk up and down it just to make a point. David Stern is a memorable figure . . . It’s more his cutting you up and putting you in your place.” (Sports Illustrated 6/3/91). He also has the ability to promote the interests of the game in the face of opponents. “There was significant opposition among the owners to the salary cap, I had to sell it to them. I had a leadership role based on my own view of what’s best for the NBA.
That view isn’t always the same as the owners I represent” (Stern in Los Angeles Times 3/8/87). His ability to maintain focus upon the best action to promote the NBA and communicate that to conflicting parties allows him to influence others during negotiation.

Stern and Minorities

“I believe that David Stern and (deputy NBA commissioner) Russ Granik are committed to seeing that minorities are more included in NBA ownership. (Hiring of minorities) is not a mandate, it is a set of principles that David and Russ have taken upon themselves to support with their great vision and outstanding leadership” (Isiah Thomas in Chicago Sun-Times 3/2/97).

An initial complaint expressed when David Stern became NBA Commissioner was the number of African-Americans players in the NBA was limiting the popularity of the league. Since Stern took office, the NBA has been an industry leader in the hiring of black coaches and executives. The NBA also had the first black ownership group in major professional sports. Situations such as these are not accidents; they come from the responsible attitude of leadership and equality expressed by Stern and his staff. It also comes from Stern’s own willingness to understand the role the NBA can play in setting an example which may improve the outside world. “Many of society’s biggest issues - violence, drugs, racism - are played out in sports for the world to see. There’s no reason for sports not to play a leadership role in addressing those issues” (Stern in The
The success of the NBA in addressing the issue of racial equity across all levels of the league should be noted and simulated by other professional sports organizations.

**Stern and Crisis**

"With stronger leadership and labor peace, the NBA has a history of dealing swiftly with players who accost an official... The NBA has acted swiftly by meeting immediately with the player and his representatives. That's when an appeal can be made and/or negotiated" (The Arizona Republic 10/6/96). The incidents referred to in this excerpt involved Los Angeles Lakers stars Nick Van Exel and Earvin "Magic" Johnson making physical contact with officials during crucial games near the end of the 1995-96 season as the Lakers were fighting for playoff positioning. The separate incidents were acted upon immediately by the commissioner's office with each playing receiving a three-game suspension. In contrast, events of this type have recently taken weeks to resolve in baseball, with a lengthy appeal process and sometimes a lessening of charges. By understanding the effects of timely action, Stern helps to sweep the negative publicity generated by the incident off the sports headlines so that fans can focus on the games which are still going on. An understanding of crisis and the media which surround it have given the NBA numerous examples of success which could have been included in this section.
Stern and Marketing

"MLB has sports personalities; the NBA has cultural icons" (Sport 3/94). This simple statement identifies one of the methods Stern has used to move the NBA to the forefront of professional sports. The benefits from the promotion of individual players can be seen each day on television, in the movies, and in retail stores. Stern has also guided the NBA’s successful expansion to global markets, concentrating on developed nations. An influx of international players in the NBA has also contributed to this success. "David had a more progressive look... he was a brilliant young lawyer who was blessed with business instincts, marketing sense, and a disarming sense of humor" (Sports Illustrated 6/3/91). The marketing instincts Stern possesses have allowed him to understand the importance of a positive relationship with the media in handling crisis. Stern’s business skills have now become a prerequisite for future professional sports organizations to emulate. They have also served to increase his authority with owners and players because the success of the NBA’s marketing strategies has increased the value of the NBA franchises and the potential for players to earn in salaries and endorsements.

No one disputes that Stern is now the best commissioner in sports, the best in the history of basketball and every bit the equal of the best sports commissioner of all time, such as the NFL’s Pete Rozelle and baseball’s Kennesaw Mountain Landis" (Sports Illustrated 6/3/91).
Paul Tagliabue, Commissioner of the NFL

“For the time being . . . he is running the only major professional sports league in the country in a state of labor peace, which is no small accomplishment in today’s environment” (The Sporting News 1/2/95)

In the fall of 1989, the National Football League was undergoing a conflict that stung the core of the league’s success over the previous three decades. Commissioner Pete Rozelle, who took office in January of 1960, had announced his retirement early in 1989. (The Palm Beach Post 12/8/96). In the wake of his announcement, NFL owners became divided on the basis of the number of years spent as an owner. “Old-guard” owners, who had been in the league nearly 30 years were set on a candidate name Jim Finks, the 62 year-old General Manager for the New Orleans Saints and longtime football man. The “new guard” wanted Paul Tagliabue, a 48 year-old lawyer who had represented the NFL many times. The equal distribution between new and old owners created a divide that even Commissioner Rozelle could not traverse. “The logjam (in naming a new commissioner) was quickly developing an image problem for the league, especially when compared to the way the baseball owners quickly named Faye Vincent as commissioner after A. Bartlett Giamatti died of a heart attack on September 1” (The Sporting News 10/23/89). However, four days after this article was published, on October 27, 1989, Paul Tagliabue was elected to be the next NFL Commissioner. Tagliabue had big shoes to
fill following Rozelle, one of the most renowned figures in all of professional sports, and his early review in the media was not promising:

"Tagliabue, who was elected at the owners’ meeting yesterday in Cleveland, doesn’t have the public relations skills of predecessor Pete Rozelle or the football background of defeated rival Jim Finks, but the 48 year-old attorney is know for bringing people together" (The Washington Times 10/27/89).

The defining factors of Tagliabue’s tenure have been the lack of major labor problems in the league, a unique relationship with television networks, use of the power of the NFL to take on social ills, and the ability to deal fairly with other types of crisis, although not always in an expedient manner. Tagliabue has also been downgraded because he lacks the personality and visibility of his predecessor, Rozelle and his peer, Stern.

Tagliabue and Personality

"Tagliabue’s intellectual approach doesn’t appeal to the average fan . . . Though Tagliabue may not have a dynamic personality, . . . his leadership and vision have translated into extraordinary positive results for the league" (The Sporting News 5/8/95). This statement, along with the fact that he has been involved with the NFL for only a decade, create difficulty for Tagliabue in keeping tabs and understanding the pulse of the players and fans. This can create a problem for Tagliabue in handling crisis situations. However, Tagliabue’s approach seems to work very well in
negotiation with owners, television networks, and sponsors. "Paul's a moderating influence, a problem solver. He looks for a solution that expands the size of the pie rather than just splitting the pie up into more pieces" (law partner Bob Sayler in The Washington Times 10/27/89). He has been successful in fostering labor peace and has been in the forefront on the development of American football worldwide.

Tagliabue and Social Responsibility

"In light of the situation in the Mideast we've made it clear that our objective is to focus on the game itself on Sunday afternoon and on the rich tradition and history of the Super Bowl" (Tagliabue on ABC's World News Tonight 1/25/91). In January of 1991, the eyes and ears of America were tuned to CNN as we watched the escalation of Operation Desert Shield to the invasion referred to as Operation Desert Storm. At this sensitive time, the NFL was in limbo concerning the handling of the premier sporting event in America, the Super Bowl. After deciding to play the game, Tagliabue was able to cancel most other events surrounding the event and place an emphasis on providing security for those in attendance and providing transmission of the game to Saudi Arabia. This situation was similar to the decision made by baseball's Landis in 1942 when baseball continued at the wish of President Roosevelt although many players had enlisted and were in Europe. A second important situation in which Tagliabue showed the power of the NFL in promoting social responsibility
was during the assignment of the 1993 Super Bowl, which was originally slated to be held in Phoenix, Arizona.

"NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue was expected to meet in Washington, D.C., today with Arizona Sen. Dennis Deconcini and Gov. Rose Mofford over the 1993 Super Bowl. The commissioner has recommended Arizona be stripped of the game because voters rejected a holiday honoring Martin Luther King" (The San Diego Union-Tribune 12/7/90).

This situation was a result of a continuing league effort, which is still the target of much criticism, to bring more awareness to issues of racial equality. With a majority of players in the league being of African-American heritage, Tagliabue felt it was the sensible thing to do. It is also important to note that the Super Bowl is traditionally held the week following Dr. Martin Luther King Day. This example highlights how a commissioner who understands the power of their position and the positive impacts they can have in the face of crisis can create positive publicity for the league and also bring about important social change.

Tagliabue and the Bill Parcells Incident

Every year, the two-week layoff between the AFC & NFC Championship games and the Super Bowl is utilized to allow the teams a chance to prepare for one another and to give the media a chance to provide unprecedented amounts of publicity to the event. The top story going into the 1997 Super Bowl was that New England Patriots Coach Bill
Parcells was going to the the Patriots following the game and take over coaching duties for the New York Jets. The only flaw in this intention was that Bill Parcells still had one year left on his contract with the Patriots and New England owner Bob Kraft wanted Parcells to remain in New England. Before the Super Bowl, both men denied the story. However, in the week following the game, it became evident that Parcells was going to leave New England in order to work for the Jets. Kraft responded by refusing to release Parcells from his contract and called on Paul Tagliabue to take action. Unfortunately, Tagliabue's response to the incident was not made in a timely fashion. After the story had been back in the media for a few days, the publicity began to take a negative spin for Tagliabue individually, and the NFL as a whole.

"It was a mistake to believe he'd want a settlement instead of another couple of weeks of messy accusations and name-calling up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Instead, Tagliabue has shown none of the leadership skills of NBA commissioner David Stern or late NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle" (The Record 2/6/97).

"With the Jets and Kraft at an impasse which has embarrassed the league, Tagliabue should have strongly offered to broker a deal. Give the Patriots something big but something less than the first pick in the draft" (Newsday 2/5/97).

Tagliabue did act in an appropriate manner, ordering a settlement similar to that described in the second excerpt, but the damage from negative publicity had been done. Fortunately, his resolution of the ordeal was
deemed as fair by the media and parties involved, so the story died. This exemplifies one of the important aspects of crisis management; acting in a timely manner and communicating these actions to the media. Tagliabue also needed to show more concern to the situation to understand how it was effecting both the media and the fans.

**Bud Selig, Acting Commissioner of Baseball**

On Labor Day of 1992, MLB Commissioner Faye Vincent was ousted from office in an owners’ coup which sent the sport reeling (Chicago Sun Times 2/28/97). Owners had become upset with Vincent’s performance - he hadn’t advanced labor negotiations, didn’t compare well to other commissioners, and his elevation to the office was not the product of a full search for owner. Upon the death of Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti, Vincent was promoted from Deputy Commissioner to the position of MLB Commissioner. This natural selection was detrimental to Vincent because his only experience in MLB had come under Giamatti’s brief tenure. Major League Baseball faced a crisis upon the death of Giamatti, and answered this uncertainty by promoting Vincent. In the late summer of 1992, baseball owners envisioned the multiple problems Vincent would create in the upcoming negotiation process and voted to make a change. “By naming Milwaukee president Bud Selig as temporary commissioner, (baseball’s owners) sent a message that the next labor negotiations with the players would not be a soft-sell” (Chicago Sun Times 9/10/92).
The term of Selig, who was named interim commissioner because of his position as Chairman of the Owner's Executive Council, was initially destined to last only a brief period of time. "Selig will serve until the restructuring committee redefines the new commissioner's job and then give way to a permanent commissioner. That should take about two months" (Chicago Sun Times 9/10/92). The initial time limitation then was altered as Selig was still in charge as labor negotiations were beginning between baseball's owners and the Major League Baseball's Players' Association (MLBPA). According to the Providence Journal-Bulletin, owners postponed hiring a new commissioner while "prevailing upon Bud Selig . . . to stay on as the game's de facto commissioner until a new collective bargaining agreement is negotiated with the players" (1/20/94). Already in 1992, Selig was receiving negative publicity concerning his performance in the commissioner's role. "Selig is not decisive, to a fault, because he believes in the democratic process. He has agonized about every move, turning to the Executive Council for final guidance on the (tough decisions). If there were a commissioner, decisions would be made more quickly" (USA Today 12/9/92). This consensus building is a good quality in some situations, but in many of the crises faced by professional sports commissioners, the time taken to build consensus is long enough for damaging publicity to appear in the media. This leadership style hurt Selig many times during his tenure as interim commissioner.
Contributing Factors to Major League Baseball’s Decline

At this point, MLB was beginning a downward spiral in popularity that was blamed on the lack of action in the game, lack of personality in the players, the impending labor situation, and the inequity between teams in small and large markets. “Small market teams . . . cannot compete with big-city teams in attracting marquee players because they cannot afford the multi-million dollar salaries the best players demand” (Wisconsin State Journal 7/14/94). Other professional sports league handled this crisis in an effective manner, but MLB still hasn’t come up with a plan to share revenues. “When the NBA wanted to help out its small-market teams, David Stern snaps his fingers, and out of nowhere, the league quietly announces it has millions of dollars set aside for its small market teams to use” (Star Tribune 11/7/96).

In no place was this lack of popularity more evident than in MLB’s television contracts, which were up for bids after the 1993 season. Cable television giant ESPN reduced its payments from $100 million a year for six games a week, to $42.5 million a year for only three games per week. After losing $443 million on a four-year, $1.06 billion deal signed in 1989, network carrier CBS would offer only $200 million for the next two years. “In only four years, baseball has gone from being a blue-chip free agent to a stumbling, over-priced free agent whose ratings numbers were in serious decline” (Dallas Morning News 10/18/93). Major League Baseball was in a
difficult position entering the 1994 season, and the dark cloud of an extensive labor dispute on the horizon only intensified the negative publicity and loss of popularity for baseball.

Selig and the Labor Strike of 1994

What follows is a time line of the ultimate example of the inability of owners, players, and the Commissioner’s Office to effectively negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. The negotiations which began in January, 1993, demonstrated how an unresolved conflict can develop into a damaging crisis. From the perspective of the media and most fans, this was an example of ineffective leaders at work; the crisis management principles outlined earlier were not considered and the negotiation techniques employed to resolve the labor dispute were not adequate.

Timeline of Baseball 1994 Labor Strike

Jan. 11, 1993  Collective bargaining begins. Owners’ representative announces there will be no lockout in spring training.
Feb. 17, 1993  Owners vote to tie revenue sharing to salary cap
March 7, 1994  Talks between representatives of owners and players resume for the first time in 14 months.
June 14, 1994  Owners make a salary cap proposal; issues include limiting payroll, eliminating arbitration, lowering free agent eligibility.
July 18, 1994  Players reject owners proposal; make counter demands
July 27, 1994  Owners reject players’ proposals.
Aug. 1, 1994  Owners fail to make $7.8 million payment to union pension and benefit fund.
Aug. 11, 1994  Final baseball games are played
Aug. 12, 1994  Players' strike begins. Sides agree to federal mediation.
Aug. 23, 1994  Mediators meet separately with each side in preparation for upcoming talks.
Aug. 24, 1994  Sides meet for first time since strike began.
Aug. 25, 1994  Talks break off with no future meetings planned.
Sept. 2, 1994  Acting Commissioner Selig announces the season should be canceled unless owners and players come to an agreement by Sept. 9.
Sept. 6, 1994  Owners receive a copy of an unfair labor practices complaint filed by the players union from the National Labor Relations Board.
Sept. 8, 1994  Players make a second proposal in attempt to settle before the deadline.
March 30, 1995  Players announce they will end 7 1/2 month strike if a federal judge issues an injunction restoring salary arbitration and free agent bidding. (Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel 4/30/95).

"Baseball games are won and lost because of errors -- and this will go down as the biggest 'E' of all," said former commissioner Peter Ueberroth, who negotiated an end to the 1985 strike after two days.

"The losers are the fans, and there is no winner. 1994 -- the season that struck itself out" (San Francisco Chronicle 9/15/94)

"Selig, a good man who tries hard to build consensus among maverick owners, blew it when he did not show leadership the past two weeks. He should have backed the labor agreement, (reached by owners' and players' negotiating parties), done something creative when he sought modifications, and gone down in honorable flames if owners rejected his leadership"” (The Seattle Times 11/17/96)
In analyzing the events which took place in the negotiation process from January, 1993, until the MLBPA received a court injunction in April of 1995, one can see the apparent lack of focus upon managing this crisis and reaching a resolution. In making this judgment, I am obviously writing and interpreting articles written primarily from the fan’s viewpoint. But the facts remain, baseball stopped play during one of its most exciting seasons in history: multiple players were in position to challenge records which had been in place since Ted Williams had a .406 batting average in 1941, and Roger Maris smashed 61 home runs in 1961. The labor dispute ripped away Tony Gywnn’s pursuit of William’s .400 batting average and Ken Griffey, Jr., Frank Thomas, and Matt Williams were all in position to challenge Maris’s all-time home run standard. It was also discouraging to observers of the dispute that nothing was settled; the collective bargaining agreement in place when play resumed was the same as a result of the injunction granted to the MLBPA. “The baseball season finally opened last week after a nearly nine-month strike that sees the sport’s labor problem no further along than it was when players walked off the job last August” (The Sporting News 5/8/95).

“From a public perception, however, both sides acted like spoiled brats, sticking out their tongues at each other and refusing to negotiate a settlement. And for that, the blame falls on Selig and Fehr... They failed to provide leadership that could’ve brought about a settlement” (Rocky Mountain News 4/18/1995).
In response to media inquiries concerning whether or not the strike not would have progressed this far if there were a commissioner in office, Selig responded that it would have because “the commissioner had suasion over one side only. Those who say there wouldn’t be a strike if there was a commissioner - - it’s simply not true” (Selig in Chicago Sun-Times 8/31/94). This statement highlights one of the most evident inadequacies of Bud Selig serving as commissioner - he is not autonomous. Because he is also the owner of a MLB franchise, his decision-making and actions taken as commissioner are all determined through the lens of an owner, with less regard on the understanding needed from players, fans, umpires, and the media. The resolution of this labor crisis in a timely manner would have saved the owners and players $810 million in direct losses as a result of canceled games (San Francisco Chronicle 9/15/94). The damage to the reputation of the game, caused by canceling the World Series and the denial the chance for some players to make history, can only be equated in comparing pre- and post-strike attendance figures. In most cases, attendance following the strike was down significantly as fans displayed their own protest to the sport which had abandoned them the year before. It is now two full seasons after the strike, and some organizations are only now becoming optimistic about bringing fans back to baseball.
The 1997 Commissioner Search

"Right from the beginning, nobody has failed to understand this industry needs a strong commissioner. That seems to be in dispute only . . . in the media" (Selig in USA Today 12/9/92).

Now that MLB Owners and the MLBPA has agreed to a collective bargaining agreement that will carry the game into the next century, a promise of 5 years has been fulfilled. "Just as he promised to do once labor peace was secured, Bud Selig has instructed baseball's executive council . . . to find a commissioner to end his internship" (The Houston Chronicle 1/26/97). However, "The field is not crowded with candidates eager for this job. The three names being tossed around at the moment are Leonard Coleman, Bob Gutkowski, and Ron Shapiro" (The Houston Chronicle 1/26/97). Coleman is currently president of the National League, "Sometimes, as in the case of the late Bart Giamatti, a league presidency is a steppingstone to the commissioner's office that is currently vacated" (The Houston Chronicle 1/22/94). Coleman also has been "praised for his harsh punishments to players engaging in on-field violence last season" (The Houston Chronicle 10/22/94). Gutkowski has been characterized in the Truex article as a possible David Stern for baseball. He shares much of the same background as Stern; he is an attorney with business acumen. Hendrix is the most unlikely candidate mentioned in the article, as he currently is a player-agent- long considered a nemesis of owners who are
required to approve the new commissioner with a two/thirds vote (The Houston Chronicles 10/22/94). These candidates are largely speculation by the media. Information concerning the search process is kept very secretive among baseball owners and will be released when the process is closer to completion.

To conclude this project, I must answer the question: What criteria should the Executive Council’s Search Committee use to evaluate potential candidates at this crucial time for Major League Baseball.

"Armed with delicate momentum, baseball more than ever requires a dynamic leader who will stand up to owners, as the fly-swatting Kennesaw Mountain Landis did ... Labor calm aside, the game is beset by problems that must be resolved to achieve full recovery” (Chicago Sun-Times 2/28/97)

On the makeup of the next commissioner, “he doesn’t need to be a baseball person ... he needs to be a consensus builder. He needs to have long range vision of the sport. He needs to execute it ... There is no training ground or school for commissioners ... You have to look at what he can do, what he can learn, his abilities and what he can offer to the game of baseball” (Rocky Mountain News 8/17/95)

The next commissioner of baseball must do two things immediately: he/she must reestablish the autonomous power of the office so it doesn’t have suasion over only the owner’s side of any conflict; he/she must develop a public relations/marketing plan to promote individual players similar to the NBA and to ensure that communication lines are accessible in
order to provide timely and positive response during crisis. The next commissioner must focus on the first two listed principles of crisis management. They must understand the relationship of their position to the crisis and predict how their action will effect all the critical reference groups (fans, players, owners, and umpires) involved in a MLB crisis. In this project, I have develop the benefit of proper execution of these principles by the commissioners of the NBA and NFL. The ability to carry out the basic principles of crisis management, create a marketing plan similar to those of rival sports, and to act in an autonomous fashion will determine the success of the next Major League Baseball Commissioner.

"Commissioners Bowie Kuhn, Peter Ueberroth, the late A. Bartlett Giamatti, Faye Vincent and (commissioner-elect) Bud Selig did nothing individually to damage baseball, the lack of stable leadership since 1984 has certainly impeded the game's progress" (Sport 3/94)
**Results & Conclusions**

In has become evident through the analysis of the presented examples concerning the leadership action of the three major professional sports commissioners that the main hypothesis is acceptable. The actions of commissioners in situations of conflict or crisis do have a positively correlated effect upon the popularity and marketability of their sport in the eyes of the media and fans. One only needs to study David Stern to see how decisive leadership action in response to situation of conflict and crisis like the NBA’s drug problems or labor negotiations has saved the public image of the league. His leadership response in these situation has allowed the NBA to become the most popular professional sports league in the world. The keys in his response are similar to those outlined in the review of Barton’s *Crisis Management*. Stern is always away of his role in relationship to the situation and the power that his action can have to solve the situation. Stern typically seems to act in a manner that is in the best interest or is the desire of all parties. And finally, Stern is a public relations master, always being perceived as though he is dealing in an up-front and honest way with the media. His action during the NBA’s labor crisis highlights the need for a commissioner to be a good mediator. Stern was able to step into as escalating situation and focus the parties on the core issues in conflict, away from those that had risen in the escalation process. He was also able to push for a solution that was mutually
beneficial to both players and owners, therefore serving the best interest of the NBA. It is leadership action such as this from Stern cause him to be widely renowned as the best commissioner in professional sports. His ability to manage conflict whether he is in a situation where he has authority or not is a skill that the next commissioner of baseball must emulate.

The only difficulty is comparing the actions of these commissioners is that they do operate in different environments with different followers. In Stern's case, his sport is expanding. Consequently, it is not as difficult to create consensus in labor negotiations because both players and owners know that they are going to get an ever increasing amount of revenue. In the case of Major League Baseball, the financial growth of the league is stagnant overall; some individual teams are profiting, but the league itself is not. There is also very little revenue sharing (which exists in the NBA) so owners are less motivated to work together on issues. The focus on self-interest of the owners is a challenge the next baseball commissioner will have to overcome in the labor negotiation process. The next baseball commissioner will also have to try to gain back some power in punishing players for on-field and off-field acts from the MLB Players Association. The power of the Players Association has taken some of the autonomy from the position of commissioner; no longer would it be possible to rule with an iron hand like Judge Landis without some form of legal reproach.
The final aspect of the situation which must be repaired is the relationship of the sport to the media. The NBA has promoted its star players to the point where it seems a majority of television spokespeople are currently NBA players. MLB has taken the approach of promoting the franchises and the game of baseball through their media outlets. This approach will have to change when a new commissioner takes office. Also the action of players will require close monitoring in order to prevent or control individual players from ruining the progress of the game through any type of isolated, stupid act (See Albert Belle chasing small children from his front yard in his car on Halloween). This media focus must also be maintained during the next commissioners handling of crisis and conflict. It is in the press that judgments are made concerning the progress of the game and the popularity of individuals involved. The publicity generated by the press is not completely controllable, but it is monitorable. With efficient use of support personnel, the commissioner can observe and response quickly to any incident or report which is potentially damaging.

In summary, this paper has shown that leader action can and does effect the popularity and marketability of professional sports leagues. The main leader actions which are observed in the press and are therefore relevant are the resolution of conflict and the management of crisis. It is essential that the next person selected to be MLB Commissioner have an aptitude with these skills and be able to communicate well with the media.
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