



## 'One for All' or 'One for One'? The Trade-off between Talent and Disruptive Behavior

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The talk of the National Football League in recent weeks has been Terrell Owens, the talented wide receiver who was let go by the Philadelphia Eagles because of repeated disruptive behavior that alienated teammates, coaches and fans alike.



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Although the saga of T.O. -- as he is familiarly known -- dominated the sports pages for days on end, coverage of his relationship with the Eagles' organization could just as easily have found a home between the covers of an academic management journal. Faculty members at Wharton and other experts say Owens is a classic case of a star employee who, because of his immense talent, was given wide latitude even though he engaged in eccentric (at best) and abusive (at worst) behavior. But even Owens' ability to catch passes and score touchdowns could not save his job because his behavior reached the point that it was deemed detrimental to the successful functioning of the organization.

"In any organization, power is related to dependence," says Wharton management professor [Lawrence Hrebiniak](#). "If the organization depends on someone for skills and if that person's expertise is rare, the power of that individual goes up. T.O. has greater skill than the normal player and more valuable expertise. When any individual has that type of influence, he becomes central to the organization and can break the rules more than a regular employee can. Because of his rare skill, you're willing to take a chance on him. A team wouldn't do that for the guy of average ability who's on the practice squad."

But Hrebiniak says Owens showed that even a highly talented employee "can go too far. T.O., even with his centrality and power, attacked the enterprise and broke the rules. The organization said, 'If we let you go too far, other employees who might not be as central to our success as you are may pull the same stuff.'"

"How employers think about the trade-off between talent and disruptive behavior depends on how important they believe teamwork and morale are in the organization's culture," says Wharton management professor [Peter Cappelli](#). "If you have a star sales person who's difficult but works away from the office, you might be willing to tolerate a high level of difficulty with that guy because it doesn't have much effect on the performance of the organization. But where teamwork matters, you want to tolerate less of that."

Employees like Owens are found in almost any organization, but they can be more difficult to manage in cultures that demand top-flight results and, at the same time, place a premium on cooperation and harmony. Cappelli says the Eagles' decision to cut Owens sends a signal through the organization about culture. "By letting T.O. go, the Eagles are saying, 'We're willing to pay a pretty high price to maintain teamwork. We will not tolerate people who are not contributing to the overall good of the organization. This is an exercise in refocusing the organization and getting people's priorities clear.'"

For those who have not followed Owens' story, it is important to note that the athlete's questionable actions were not limited to one or two isolated incidents and that they followed a pattern headed for

self-destruction. Before the start of the 2005 season, Owens -- who had a reputation for being a disruptive player with his previous team, the San Francisco 49ers -- began making comments and engaging in actions that caused serious tension with his teammates and coaches.

During training camp over the summer, Owens criticized the team for not being willing to re-negotiate his contract to pay him more money, even though he had signed a multi-million-dollar, multi-year contract in 2004. He also openly criticized quarterback Donovan McNabb, the Eagles' franchise player and a fan favorite. Owens was sent home from training camp in August 2005, but later given a second chance and permitted to return. During the training-camp period, Owens refused to talk to the press, and at one point engaged in bizarre behavior: doing calisthenics on the lawn of his New Jersey home and wearing headphones, while cameras whirred and reporters shouted questions that Owens ignored.

For the first few games of the current season, things seemed quiet. But Owens soon began to criticize the team and McNabb again. He complained that the Eagles did not "honor" him when he scored his 100th career touchdown, and once again treated McNabb disrespectfully by agreeing with the comments of an interviewer who had suggested to Owens that the Eagles would be undefeated if Green Bay Packers' quarterback Brett Favre was the Eagles' QB instead of McNabb. Eagles coach Andy Reid at that point told Owens to apologize to McNabb and the rest of the Eagles, but Owens gave only a halfhearted apology to his teammates and refused to apologize specifically to McNabb. Reid then suspended Owens for four games, and stated that Owens would not play for the Eagles the rest of the season. In effect, Owens was fired. Later, Owens and his agent held a press conference during which Owens apologized to all concerned but it was too little, too late. The Eagles have no plans to reinstate Owens.

Much speculation about the Eagles' future without Owens was in evidence prior to their November 14 game against the Dallas Cowboys. The Eagles ended up losing that contest in its waning moments, by a score of 21-20, when McNabb threw an interception that was returned for a touchdown. The loss prompted Phil Sheridan, a sports columnist for The Philadelphia Inquirer, to write: "Somewhere, you imagine, Terrell Owens had a No. 5 [McNabb's number] voodoo doll. He waited until the perfect, most painful time to jam the pin in."

## **Corrupting the Organization**

The Eagles cannot be faulted for taking a calculated risk in signing Owens to a multi-million dollar contract prior to the 2004 season, according to the Wharton faculty members. Club officials figured he could help the Eagles reach the Super Bowl (which they did before losing to the New England Patriots) but these officials also knew that Owens and his antics could come back to bite them.

[Thomas W. Dunfee](#), professor of legal studies and business ethics at Wharton and an ethics expert who follows professional football closely, says the Eagles cannot be faulted for recruiting Owens because there was a chance that he would mend his ways and try hard to fit in with a winning team noted for its no-nonsense approach to discipline.

"There have been any number of instances of pro players who have been with a team where they had problems but went to another team and got straightened out," Dunfee explains. "In those cases, it was probably a matter of the players just being a bad fit with a team but getting [undeserved] reputations for being trouble-makers. I think the Eagles had something of a reputation of being able to handle difficult players. They probably thought, with reason, 'Here's a great talent and we can manage him.'"

The Owens case raises ethical issues because disruptive behavior by high performers, if left unchecked, can run counter to the values of organizations whose codes of conduct require employees to treat one another with respect. "For corporations, it's understood that if you have a double standard and look the other way for your star performers who are behaving poorly, you are corrupting the organization," Dunfee says. "The stars think ethical rules don't apply to them."

"Managing stars is difficult duty for even the most skilled managers," says Katherine A. Nelson, a suburban Philadelphia-based ethics consultant who teaches in executive education programs at Wharton. "It's challenging enough when you are managing a high performer who has good interpersonal skills. However, if you are managing a high performer with poor interpersonal skills, your job goes from challenging to nightmarish. Almost nothing can disrupt a workplace faster than a star performer who is arrogant or abusive or who demands special treatment. Not addressing the star's bad behavior is tantamount to lobbing a grenade into a conference room because resentment will ferment among other members of your team and it will eventually -- sometimes very quickly -- undermine the performance of the entire team. The Eagles are a perfect example of this."

The most serious damage caused by the temperamental star is to the credibility of an organization, according to Nelson. "How can an organization claim that it stands for respect or that it cares about its people when abusive behavior is allowed to go unchecked? The result of publicly promoting noble values and at the same time neglecting to check an abusive personality is that soon your organization will have zero credibility. You say one thing and tolerate another. That is the beginning of a cancer that will devour an organization from the inside out."

But the experts also stress that not all difficult star performers are troublesome nails that need to be hammered down so that they behave like all other employees.

"True star performers in sales or even in organizations such as law firms -- the big rainmakers -- who misbehave or march to their own drum can be a huge challenge," says Linda Richardson, founder, president and CEO of a sales and consulting firm in Philadelphia that bears her name. "As long as the star performer is producing and as long as the behaviors are not contrary to the true value system of the organization, an organization that is able to absorb diversity is usually stronger."

But, Richardson adds, when management "feels the behaviors are egregious" and are not "consistent with the values and principles of the organization, or if the behavior is completely unacceptable from a role-model perspective, then the person can be coached and given a clear warning with specific consequences or the plug can be pulled. I have always been a believer in second chances, if at all possible. Often the egregious act is a build up from a series of negative behaviors preceding it. I think many organizations that have problems with stars could benefit from bringing in an executive coach or counselor to help the management and the star work things out before the behaviors reach a breaking point."

The bottom line, according to Richardson, who notes that she was not familiar with all the details of the Owens story, is that there is no one answer on when to oust a star employee. "The reality is it is very, very hard to give up a star. Also, no one is irreplaceable, or at least almost no one. The more an organization can live with diversity and keep its 'must haves' to a few and catch and handle problems early with coaching and counseling ... the better off it is and the more likely it will keep its stars and create win-wins. The decision is a matter of weighing the factors -- the value the star brings and the cost that comes with it. The cost is more than hard dollars. It is morale, public opinion, the role model that is set, the impact on standards and the value system."

High-producing prima donnas are one challenge faced by management. But also worrisome are the non-performers. Nelson, the ethics consultant, says managers cannot afford to tolerate "nice" employees who do not rock the boat but also do not perform up to snuff either.

"Some people are great to work with but produce little or no results," she notes. "Both ends of the performance/values spectrum need to be managed carefully. Smart organizations try to reward employees for a range of behavior that includes producing results and exhibiting the organizational values by which the organization achieves those results. If, after careful goal-setting and coaching, the star can't learn to play well with others and the easy-going person can't learn to produce results, both should be shown the

door."

## Stars as Junk Bonds

In a broader sense, sports teams, because of their very nature, face a conundrum when it comes to dealing with unpredictable stars like Owens, according to Wharton's Cappelli. Players, and their agents, know that players are rewarded for individual achievement. Glowing statistics -- yardage gained, passes caught, touchdowns scored, interceptions made -- are what command lucrative salaries. How much money, by contrast, does a running back or a linebacker earn for being a team player? The same holds true for corporate employees -- perhaps not so much staff people, whose efforts cannot be clearly translated to the bottom line, but certainly salespeople and CEOs, whose compensation is tied directly to performance.

"The real dilemma for sports teams is they can't figure out what the real contribution is of individuals as individuals as opposed to individuals as members of the team," Cappelli notes. "They can't pin down what is optimal. Is it better to have an individual player who's a superstar in terms of stats? Or is it better to have somebody who is giving up opportunities themselves in order to pursue team harmony and team success? You hear all the platitudes about teamwork but teams also talk out of both sides of their mouths. They talk about teamwork but give money to individual stars."

Now that Owens is no longer an Eagle, will other teams try to sign him for the 2006 season? Absolutely, says Wharton's Hrebiniak. But should they? "It all depends on your propensity for risk. T.O. is like a junk bond: the potential return is high, but so is the risk. Will you buy that junk bond? What is your risk tolerance? How much money do you potentially have to waste? If I'm the coach of a team with a losing record, I'm going to try to sign T.O. But if I'm the New England Patriots or the Indianapolis Colts, strong teams with a culture of cooperation, I'm not going to bring in T.O."

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