

Peyton Manning and Ethical Leadership: Omaha and Payback

INTRODUCTION

One Sunday afternoon, as fans watched the Denver Broncos play the San Diego Chargers for the ticket to the AFC Championship game, a media buzz emerged around the call of “Omaha.” Quarterbacks have been known to use code words to inform the offensive linemen of the next play. A few years ago, only those on the field could make out what was being said on the field. However, due to changes in the placement of television camera microphones and the fact that offensive linemen are required to wear microphones, these plays can be heard by everyone watching. The name of Nebraska’s largest city was repeated 44 times, generating a national discussion around his use of the word. During the game, the term was trending on Twitter, and several mass media outlets picked up the story. The next day national morning shows, newspapers, and magazines including ABC, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Time* featured stories on Peyton Manning’s call. The city of Omaha as well as businesses that have “Omaha” in their name wrote tweets expressing gratitude and enthusiasm for all the attention. The media attention had a marketing impact of \$10 million for the city over a ten-day period, which was broken down to the equivalent of \$150,000 in advertising for every time Manning mentioned Omaha.

Eight major businesses that call Omaha home took note of the promotional possibilities. As a result, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce organized with ConAgra Foods, First National Bank of Omaha, Mutual of Omaha, Omaha Steaks, Cox Communications, CenturyLink, Union Pacific railroad, and DJ’s Dugout Sports Bar & Grill to donate a combined total of \$800 to Manning’s charity, Payback Foundation, for each time he called out “Omaha” in the next week’s AFC Championship game. The Payback Foundation, which supports schools and youth programs in Peyton’s native New Orleans, Louisiana, and Tennessee, received \$24,800 from Manning’s 31 shout-outs to Omaha. This is the first time a philanthropic activity of this nature has occurred in the NFL.

PEYTON MANNING AS AN ETHICAL LEADER

Peyton Manning, who comes from a family of quarterbacks, grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana, while his father, Archie Manning, was the star quarterback for the city’s football team, the Saints. He and his three brothers grew up with a strong set of family values and were constantly participating in competitive sports. This laid the foundation for Manning’s strong work ethic, professionalism, and ethical leadership as he grew older. He achieved remarkable milestones as a high school quarterback with 7,207 passing yards and 92 touchdowns, and led the team with a record of 34-5. Top football universities were eager to have him on their team, and he chose to enroll at the University of Tennessee. Manning’s apparent work ethic and level-headedness led him to succeed both academically and athletically, earning enough credits to graduate and garnering a collegiate athletic record of 11,201 passing yards, 863 complete passes, and 89 touchdowns by his junior

year. He was widely sought as the top draft pick for the NFL, but declined offers in order to complete his senior year. The decision served him well, as he recorded 3,819 yards and 36 touchdowns in addition to receiving the esteemed Sullivan Award—an award given to top college athletes for athletic ability, character, and leadership. In addition, staying in college when he had a lucrative NFL career ahead signaled the importance of education to others. After graduation, Manning signed with the Indianapolis Colts, as the NFL's number one draft pick in 1998.

In his time with the Colts, Manning led the team and set several regular season records. The team never fared well in the post season, but Manning won several awards for his leadership. He was recognized by the annual Associated Press poll of 50 sports writers and broadcasters and was deemed Most Valuable Player in the NFL for 2003, 2004, 2008, 2009, and 2013, becoming the first NFL player to receive the honor more than three times. In 2013, he was recognized by *Sports Illustrated* as "Sportsman of the Year." Manning also broke several NFL records. For instance, he is the only quarterback in NFL history to have thrown over 12,000 yards in his first three seasons, the first to score 100 touchdowns by his 56th career game, and the first to reach 400 touchdowns faster than any other player. As a Colt, he set the top seven totals for most passing yards in a single season and started in 128 consecutive games. In 2007, the Colts made it to the Super Bowl and won the title against the Chicago Bears. Manning was named MVP for the game. He led the Colts to the 2010 Super Bowl, but lost to the New Orleans Saints.

The next year Manning suffered a neck injury that required surgery and was released from his contract with the Colts. Many other football teams courted Manning, and within a few weeks, he signed with the Denver Broncos for \$96 million. In his second season with the Broncos, they had a record of 13-3 with more than 47 touchdown passes for Manning. They also earned the AFC Championship Title, cementing a place in the Super Bowl for the first time in 15 years. In addition, Manning is currently the nation's best-known football player, and sponsors line up to endorse him because of his wholesome personal life and strong positive influence both on and off the field. At 37 years old, he has the most lucrative contract and best-selling jersey. He is an asset to any team that he plays for because of his reputation. His good example has been a welcome distraction from the bad media the NFL as a whole has received. Incidents ranging from former New England Patriots' tight end, Aaron Hernandez's murder charge, the bullying allegations on the Miami Dolphins team, and the NFL's settlement regarding head trauma have been blights to the NFL.

Since joining the Broncos, the team is ranked as the top scoring team with an average of 41.2 points per game. It is the sixth most popular football team in the league. This is due to the work ethic, influence, and coaching leadership style Manning has provided for the team. Insiders and outsiders alike can see his dedication to every aspect of the game, and it trickles down to almost every player. Manning exhibits seriousness and enthusiasm in practices that is rare of such a seasoned player. His peers have commented on his level of preparedness for practices. As soon as Manning joined the Broncos, he began studying the playbook and knew the plays better than others. As a result, he was able to fine-tune every detail with his fellow players in practices. Manning's behavior is based on strong principles including trust, accountability, fairness, and respect. His teammates look up to him because of his accomplishments and admire him for his willingness to coach them in details that continue to improve them as individual players.

His ability and willingness to admit his mistakes and continually improve himself through learning makes him an accountable leader. As the quarterback, he bears the burden of the team and encourages his teammates to pay attention to the way they are running and where they are looking so he can get the ball to them. He takes over the big picture so that his teammates can focus on the details that lead them to success. There was an instance when Manning threw three intercepted passes in the first quarter of a game. His peers were impressed that he did not shy away from media interviews and admitted his mistake rather than placing the blame on other team members. He also leads by example through good sportsmanship. This resonated with his peers during the 2012-2013 season when the Broncos lost to the Ravens in double overtime, which eliminated them from the playoffs. Manning stayed behind after all the players and teams had left the field in order to shake hands with Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis.

PEYTON MANNING'S ETHICAL REPUTATION

Despite his large presence, Manning is very approachable. He has been known to set up informal practices with fellow players to work out and talk about the plays. Teammates are motivated to be precise in practices, so they can be part of the offensive plays. They know they have to prove their dedication to the team and the game if they are to get Manning's attention on the field. Off the field, Manning gives reporters and fans the same detailed attention, resulting in quality interviews and admiration among fans. He has also been known to write to fans and keep in touch with those that have influenced him. Manning's contribution to the Bronco's team and the city of Denver is palpable, inspiring pride among fans in their home team.

Manning's attention to detail is a testament to his image. He is aware that his fame puts him in the eyes of many people, and he strives to protect his reputation so as not to damage his influence. This serves as an asset for endorsements. Chief Marketing Officer of DirecTV, a company that Manning is the face of, commented that customers are drawn to Manning for his family-orientated values and high-quality character. Even in endorsements, Manning is setting records, becoming the fourth highest-ranked athlete endorser after Michael Jordan, Hank Aaron, and Arnold Palmer, as well as the highest ranked athlete currently.

Some fans have commented that his involvement in the community was the impetus for becoming his supporter. His involvement in the Payback Foundation is only one way Manning gives back. He is also heavily involved in Play it Smart, an educational program for high school football players from underprivileged backgrounds, and the Manning Passing Academy, a football camp owned and managed by the Manning family. In addition, Peyton Manning is good at poking fun at his benevolence, as witnessed by his 2007 United Way spoof on *Saturday Night Live*: <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/united-way/n12129/>.

Overall, Manning's influence is a result of the high expectations he holds for himself, his concern for his community, and the acknowledgement of the responsibility he bears to the team. He strives to make himself better every day, which, in turn, encourages those around him to do the same. ESPN's NFL Nation Confidential survey of 320 players reported Peyton Manning as the most respected player, receiving 27 percent of the vote, as well as the player they would most want to start a team with, receiving 19 percent of the vote. When told of the poll, Manning humbly responded to the

accolade with appreciation and gratitude that his teammates thought so highly of him. It has even been said that Manning's influence reaches employees in the entire Broncos franchise, influencing the entire organizational culture in a positive manner.

SUPER BOWL XLVIII

Super Bowl XLVIII began on a rocky note for Peyton Manning and the Broncos, and the trend continued throughout the game. The Seattle Seahawks beat the Broncos 43-8 through aggressive defense. The game was marked by several intercepted passes from Manning as well as several incompletions on the part of the Broncos receivers. Encountering a loss this bad was hard for the team to take after such a triumphant regular and post season. It is in emotionally devastating times such as these that ethical leadership is truly tested. While it was obvious that Manning was mourning the loss, he continued to acknowledge his fans with autographs and responded to reporters' questions with dignity. One fan commented on his interaction with Peyton Manning after the game, stating that he has respect for his fans and has maintained his good reputation even in hard times.

When it was certain that the Broncos were going to the Super Bowl, seven additional Omaha businesses (for a total of 15) combined resources and pledged to donate \$1,500 for each time Manning called out "Omaha" during the big game. Due to the dynamics of the game, however, Manning was only able to make the call twice for a total of a \$3,000 donation to the Payback Foundation.

QUESTIONS

1. How has Peyton Manning's personal work ethic and integrity impacted the Denver Broncos' culture?
2. What impact does a high integrity athlete have on a team's value and admiration in an era when many athletes do not exercise ethical leadership or personal character?
3. What can be learned about the creativity and impact of linking behavior (such as a quarterback's signals) to supporting a charitable cause?

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