

Letter of Resignation

By Sabina Menschel

The Old Boys' Network is Failing

Former Covid vaccine czar Moncef Slaoui's departure from various corporate positions following sexual harassment allegations and the continued calls for New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's resignation following allegations of bullying, inappropriate comments, and unwanted touching, are only two of the most recent in a litany of such incidents involving men in leadership positions in 2021. The last two months alone have seen an array of forced resignations of senior leaders from the NFL to the training ground for France's elite. These resignations, which include Eli Lilly's CFO, the Jacksonville Jaguars strength coach, and the head of Sciences Po—whose graduates include four out of five of the last French presidents—are part of an unrelenting, depressing, and inexplicable wave of such occurrences over the last several years.

As a woman, an investigator, and the head of a firm that has conducted scores of investigations into sexual misconduct and abusive behavior, in some sense I should not be surprised. We have looked at similar conduct by all manner of executives, cultural figures, and the like, and on a professional level I've become somewhat inured to shock.

Putting my professional experience aside, I can't help but make a decidedly non-forensic observation: what is wrong with these organizations and the men that lead them?

Again and again, organizations fall short in appropriately vetting candidates and in addressing problematic conduct by senior executives. This is especially true since our investigations have shown, overwhelmingly, the recidivist nature of those implicated. Looking into someone's past will often provide a good indication of not only how that person will lead and manage but also, and perhaps more importantly, how they will behave.

The Jacksonville Jaguars is a case in point. Chris Doyle, who on February 11, 2021 was named the Director of Sports Performance of the Jaguars, left the University of Iowa college football program in June 2020 after several current and former players accused him of fostering a culture of bullying and racism. This was not a secret; in fact, the university hired a law firm to look into the allegations, and Doyle's eventual departure from Iowa was covered by national news organizations.

In response to questions about how and why someone with this track record came to be employed by the Jaguars, head coach Urban Meyer replied with a straight face, "I've known Chris for close to twenty

years.” Meyer also claimed to have done a “very good job” vetting him. It is clear that Meyer had relied on his relationship with Doyle in making the decision to hire him, evidence to the contrary be damned. By Friday, February 12, one day after the announcement of Doyle’s appointment—and the ensuing public outcry—the Jaguars announced he had resigned.

While personal relationships and networks are unquestionably meaningful, they can also lead to blind spots. Indeed, on the hiring front, personal relationships often interfere with the willingness to really “look under the hood” and thoroughly examine a candidate’s background and behaviors. (It can also severely limit the diversity of candidate pools, but that’s the subject of another article.) As with Meyer, the default position that “I’ve known this person for a long time,” suggests that there is nothing more to be found. As an experienced investigator, I can confidently tell you that is, more often than not, wrong.

The Sciences Po scandal also shows the danger of tight insular networks in investigating allegations of wrong-doing. Frederic Mion, the organization’s head, was forced to resign after a French government report accused him of “mishandling allegations” against Olivier Duhamel, a former professor and chair of the school’s governing board who was accused of sexual abuse and incest. Mion allegedly knew about the allegations back in 2018, yet did nothing about it. He, along with a number of others in what the *New York Times* describes as a “small world of intellectuals, artists, and politicians” is now accused of protecting Duhamel. *Le microcosme*, made up principally of Gallic old boys, failed miserably.

Organizations and their leaders must start by recognizing the tendency to mistakenly rely on the sanctity of personal relationships and networks to predict behavior. When faced with hiring decisions or allegations of misconduct, it is incumbent on decision makers to demand as comprehensive—and objective—a picture of the individual implicated as possible. Unless and until this happens, the relentless drumbeat of scandal, followed by resignation and recrimination will see many more old boys fall.

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