

Worst Play Calling in the History of Sports? Or Law?

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on February 4, 2015

As I write this less than 24 hours after the stunning end of Super Bowl XLIX, the consensus has completely firmed: Seattle's decision to throw the ball on the one yard line, with three downs and enough time for Marshawn Lynch to make that final yard was the worst play calling in the history of the Super Bowl and probably of all time in any sport. It erased the miracle of Jermaine Kearse's reception only moments earlier to set up the Seattle win – which never happened. The Seahawks had a well-fought game won... they just had to finish it. This one will be remembered for a long while.

So, what does this have to do with the business of law? A lot, actually, on multiple levels:

- First, the obvious. A lot of good work can be undone by one or a few colossal mistakes. We've seen examples over the past few years of law firms coming undone, and once the details get out you can't help but ask, "What were they thinking?" Building a major firm with little or no capital? Providing high-profile laterals with huge guarantees? Fudging the numbers? But there is nothing new about law firm leaders blowing the call – those who have been around long enough will remember the ill-fated, culturally disastrous merger of Chicago's Isham Lincoln & Beale with Ruben & Proctor in 1986. The deal still ranks as one of the worst legal merger decisions ever made, and the combined firm lasted less than two years. The leaders didn't think through the cultural implications of combining two very different firms. (Younger readers can look to Dewey and others for similar outcomes.) No matter how good the leaders are, critical decisions need to be vetted and reviewed.
- Second, though, is the critical lesson forgotten or never learned by so many firms: Stick with your strengths, especially when it's crunch time. Rather than building on their strongest core practices, many firms continuously chase the next hot thing. Better to ask, "What is the core of our firm, and how can we make it stronger?" Play to your strengths, and you have the greatest probability of success. *Of course* Seattle should have given Lynch the ball.
- Third, success requires continuous focus. A moment's (or a few months') distraction can do significant damage. Law firms can go from successful trajectories to tailspins in a short amount of time. There is no time off for leadership, and no room for anything but focus on the game. We've seen firms falter when leaders get distracted, or think too much about their own interests. What's the best decision for the firm now, tomorrow, and the next day? As Yogi Berra once said, "It ain't over till its over."
- Finally, pay attention to what could go wrong, not just the potential glory of success. With the game on the line, second and goal at the one, who would ever run a pass play? The QB could get sacked. Or worse. (Like an interception?) What's the law firm equivalent? Taking on the potentially huge contingency that poses great risk or potential for conflict? Or bringing in the 1200 lb. gorilla with the \$10 million practice – who has changed firms every two years for a decade? Or "locking in" excess expansion space to assure the firm's growth plans will be executable? The list of things that have brought firms to the brink of disaster is long. Leadership needs to do its job – not just fall on the sword afterwards. And sometimes that means not putting your team in a position that multiplies the potential for a game-ending blunder.

Like many people reading this, I was pretty agnostic this year on which team I wanted to win the Super Bowl, but none of us are agnostic in our own organizations. We want to win, build the best firms we can, and have as much success as possible, and we don't want that success undone by disastrous, avoidable mistakes. This makes leadership selection

critical.

In any firm, you could put most partners in a decision-making role with good information and they will get most decisions right. Good leaders will get the vast majority right – but every leader will also get some decisions wrong. The best leaders, however, will get it right when crunch time comes, and will understand when a decision has that critical level of importance. All our firms deserve that type of leadership.