Lance Armstrong's Best Shot at Redemption

Lance Armstrong isn't Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Martha Stewart. He certainly isn't Charlie Sheen, Michael Vick, Michael Milken or any of the other many public figures who have fallen into disgrace and to whom he has been relentlessly compared in the past few days.

Armstrong's situation is so different because his sins are about both what he does professionally and who he is personally. As a cyclist, Armstrong is now the poster child for athletic fraud on a global scale. As a human being, he has been revealed as a bullying cheat.

Many of the people to whom Armstrong has been compared at least limited their failing to one dimension. Tiger Woods' affairs weren't connected to cheating on the golf course. Whatever you make of Arnold Schwarzenegger's acting ability, having an illegitimate child didn't directly relate to how he makes movies. The same can't be said for Armstrong who not only doped but allegedly pressured others to do so and then defiantly sued anyone who accused him whether his masseuse or the Sunday Times of London.

So what's his best shot at reformation? Whatever Armstrong's hopes may be for one day cycling again or reeling in big money sponsors for triathlons, he needs to put all of that aside. If there is one learning from others' attempts at rehabilitation, it's that nobody will forgive, let alone forget, until Armstrong has paid his dues and has a track record of selflessness. He needs to inspire others to believe again that he is a fundamentally good person worthy of public redemption.

The most complex part of the Armstrong narrative, and what prevents many from simply writing him off, is his founding of Livestrong as a result of his personal battle with cancer. Detractors have said that whatever good may have been done sprung from a false idol who donated or accepted millions from others based on untruth. They suggest that Livestrong was an extension of Armstrong's enormous ego more than an altruistic gesture. In its own fight to survive, the organization has had to distance itself from Armstrong since he resigned last October.

The cancer community isn't so quick to judge. Scott Stuart, the ESPN commentator who is in the midst of his own cancer fight, echoed the sentiments of many survivors when he recently said that he remains "very grateful" and that Armstrong's ultimate legacy will be his "efforts that affected millions of people with cancer." Although it's not difficult to find messages posted from survivors whose faith in Armstrong as a hero has been crushed — including the guy who vowed to take his signed Tour de France jersey off his wall -- there's still admiration among many for how profoundly his work has helped others and propelled their recovery. There's recognition that even with performance enhancing drugs, his physical comeback after surgery and chemotherapy was nothing short of remarkable.

When we advise CEOs and organizational leaders we remind them that trust is based on the credibility that comes through results. Armstrong's credibility in the athletic world is shot and he has destroyed most people's trust. In an era when authenticity and good judgment are critical, Armstrong has made poor choices at nearly every turn and showed himself to be the ultimate phony. But he still has trust and credibility with some in the cancer community and that's a foundation upon which to start over.

Armstrong can't be the brand and rainmaker for efforts to cure cancer -- he's lost that privilege -- but he can quietly get back to work meeting people who are battling the disease and sharing his own example of the determination required to survive. Whatever remains of his reported $125 million personal wealth, a healthy portion of it could be purposed in efforts to advance treatments. He could apply his knowledge and personal networks to connect organizations, donors and research institutions seeking to cure cancer but which too often operate in isolation.

The road to redemption won't be easy for Armstrong. All of this would need to be done away from the spotlight that Armstrong still seems to badly crave. It won't be well-received by everyone; there are articles and blog sites with survivors who tell Armstrong to "stay away." And even his good deeds will be viewed by some cynics as mere publicity stunts. However, if Armstrong truly wants to reinvent himself -- with any hope of rebuilding public trust in the process -- this time he needs to apply his tenacity and unrelenting drive to a worthy cause while demonstrating he's motivated by something beyond self-interest.

Noel M. Tichy and Chris DeRose are co-authors of "Judgment on the Front Line: How Smart Companies Win By Trusting Their People." DeRose, a survivor of colon cancer, has consulted and taught around the world with companies such as Royal Dutch/Shell, Ford Motor Company, Intel, 3M and HP. Tichy has also authored many other business bestsellers. He is a professor at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan and advises CEOs around the world.