

Datestamp: 06/27/2008

Olson's leave was a complex issue to handle

One of the difficult times for Robert N. Shelton during his second year as University of Arizona president began when Lute Olson announced last Nov. 4 that he'd be taking a temporary leave of absence.

"For many people in this community, in this state and in this nation, Lute is the most recognizable face at the University of Arizona," Shelton said recently. "And when he's having troubles, the university is having troubles."

Shelton discussed the Olson issue with the Citizen on June 13.

Q. You had a meeting with Lute after the press conference (that Olson held April 1 after his return to coaching). Did you call that or did Lute request it?

A. Lute asked to come by. He wanted to come by and give me a sense of how he was feeling about things, his view of where he was. He wanted to let me know he felt good, ready to be full time, strong, back leading the program. We probably met for 45 minutes.

Q. Had you heard about the press conference and, if so, were you surprised at his behavior?

A. Yes, I heard about it. I mentioned to Lute - he talked about the press conference - and I said, "As you well know, you are a national figure and you have to make sure you work with the press. I'm not going to tell you how to do it . . . but just to remind you that's important in your job and in my job." He said he understood that.

Q. Were you embarrassed by Lute's behavior at the press conference?

A: I wouldn't say embarrassed, I would say surprised. You know, I'm not familiar with Lute's style with the press, but I was surprised at the level of confrontation.

Q. In answering e-mails after the press conference, you told concerned donors that you were "seeking clarity on the situation with Olson." How did you seek that clarity and did you get it?

A. I sought it through (athletic director Jim) Livengood. The question I had was, "Is Lute serious about serving as head coach and all that that implies?" And every piece of information I got said, "Yes, he's committed."

Q. You also said in those e-mails that "the basketball coaching situation has been a huge and complicated challenge and I've been very frustrated by the manner in which much of it has unfolded. . . I'm certain we could have handled it better." Could you explain?

A. It was complicated because there was a personnel health issue involved. It was complicated because there was a personal divorce situation. The university, even if it weren't bound by law, has to treat confidential personal issues confidentially.

My frustration was that we couldn't get clarity early on. I understand Lute wanted some privacy. . . How could

we have handled it better? By having more, earlier conversations with Lute to allow for greater clarity earlier in the process. It is difficult when you have individual, medical, personal issues involved. You've got to respect the individual on that, and yet the press, especially with somebody as visible as Lute, especially with an institution as important as UA, wants to find out what's going on. And then, when you can't say things, speculation goes wild and that doesn't help anybody.

Q. Have you prepared for next year if something else happens?

A. Jim's and Lute's combined decisions on the assistant coaches - they're all new, right? - in the sense that Lute and Jim have a strong team of coaches, then that will put us in the situation, should any issues occur in the fall, where we have the people there to handle it. But I'm not anticipating that.

Caption:

Publication: Tucson Citizen

Section: Local

Source: Citizen Staff Writer

Edition:

Page: 4A

Book: A

Byline: RENÉE SCHAFER HORTON

From: