

Als part ways with bristly Lalonde

Eroding bottom line cost president his job

It was a relationship that seemed doomed from the beginning, a car wreck just waiting to occur.

But 423 days – as someone far more prolific than us in mathematics figured out? Not even we believed the association between president Ray Lalonde and the Alouettes would end this abruptly.

You knew, almost from the beginning, it wasn't going to last. The optics simply



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on management shakeup

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never were ideal. This was the classic example of going from a good cop to a bad cop, passing the torch from the personable, quotable and visible Larry Smith to Lalonde, who earned a reputation as being arrogant and obtru-

sive during his years as vice-president (marketing) with the Canadiens.

This is not to suggest all the blame lays squarely at the feet of Lalonde, whom the Als announced on Friday afternoon was resigning for "personal reasons."

When he was hired in March 2011 by owner Robert Wetenhall, Lalonde was told to fix the office mess he had inherited from Smith, who during his second tenure as president seemed as much concerned with promoting himself as the team. Lalonde's other mandate was to increase and improve the

team's visibility. In this he succeeded, but at what price?

"No relationship is perfect," said Paul Harris, the chairman of the Als' board of directors. "There are things we were pleased about. Other things, we would hope would have been better. When there's change, some people resist that change and feel their culture has been offended. Internally, there was some resistance. Some didn't appreciate new ways of doing things and some people got their noses out of joint. It wasn't the process, it was the decisions.

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PHIL CARPENTER GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Corporate sponsorship slipped from more than \$6 million to about \$2.5 million with Ray Lalonde as president of the Alouettes. Season tickets sales also tumbled.

ALs Lalonde told his staff to remove family pictures from desks

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"I think Ray was tough, but fair."

Not only did Lalonde feud with members of the administration office, he was at loggerheads with key members of the football operations department—never a good omen. Jim Popp's the only general manager this team has known since it returned to the Canadian Football League in 1996, and the Als have been highly successful under his tenure. A president simply must let him operate in his own manner, since it's far easier to find someone who can cultivate and locate the talent pool.

Lalonde was hired and, almost immediately, told the office staff they must remove family photos from their work stations, believing that gave the appearance of an unprofessional organization. Birthdays no longer were to be celebrated with coffee and

cake. Senior sales representatives were told they no longer would be allowed to take potential clients to lunch. This led to obvious hostility.

Lalonde believed it was imperative to redecorate the downtown office. He spent more than \$130,000 on a new telephone system and once was spotted in the team's ticket office after hours, caught after he inadvertently tripped the security system.

But Lalonde's ultimate sin was the team's eroding bottom line, something that never will be palatable to Wetenhall.

Corporate sponsorship, which totalled more than \$6 million as recently as the 2007 season, now hovers at about \$2.5 million. Major sponsors, including Subway, Nissan and Discount, have deserted the team. Companies were paying \$150,000 each to have their logos painted on the field at Molson Stadium, but Lalonde decided those

markings cluttered the field unnecessarily.

Season-ticket sales once were in the 18,000 range, higher when including corporate tickets. Today, they're slightly over 14,000.

Before Lalonde, ticket renewals were mailed to subscribers in October. They

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BOARD CHAIRMAN PAUL HARRIS

were given a discount if they renewed early. But Lalonde told his staff to wait until December, with many subscribers facing price increases.

"He did some good things," Harris maintained. "He has excellent marketing skills. If he had stayed longer, you would have seen that."

To go from the Canadiens to the Als is like comparing apples and oranges. The Habs inherently are a part of the

city and province's cultural fabric. They're a religion, a staple in the corporate world, selling out the 21,273-seat Bell Centre for every game. But the demographics are different for the Als; the CFL, in many ways, is a mom-and-pop circuit—an \$18-million annual business venture for

each club.

The two simply aren't the same, and it takes a president to be cognizant of this factor. It takes a president with people skills.

If Lalonde failed, so too has Harris. While the Als utilized a search firm to identify potential candidates—and Lalonde undoubtedly came highly recommended—it was Harris who ultimately recommended him to Wetenhall. And it's Har-

ris who's prepared to throw himself on the sword.

"I do take responsibility," Harris admitted. "This should have been longer and worked out better. Bob asked for my judgment. Could we have done better? I don't know. I guess you're not a complete success if you leave after one year."

Harris, a highly respected lawyer, was in Toronto on business when he received a call from Wetenhall Tuesday night, alerting him to the developing scenario. Wetenhall, who spends his off-season between Florida and New York, advised Harris to deal with the situation. Harris and Lalonde spoke on Thursday. The conversation was brief and Lalonde left the city, unavailable for comment on Friday.

"Getting the chance to work in football again is something I truly enjoyed," Lalonde said in the team's release. "The pieces are in place for a suc-

cessful season, both on and off the field."

The organization, Harris said, will be in no rush to find a successor. Not only was Lalonde under a personal services contract to Wetenhall—perhaps earning \$400,000 annually—senior executives remain in place to steer the ship. Harris, the interim president between Smith and Lalonde, also is available as a resource.

"Training camp," Harris said, "now will be all about football. Maybe some good news will come out."

Perhaps even a contract extension for head coach Marc Trestman?

He's entering the final season of his deal—and don't think he didn't notice the five-year extension GM and head coach John Hufnagel received from Calgary this winter.

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