

# Leadership Lessons from World-Class Coaches

by Donald G. Zauderer

Mike Krzyzewski of Duke University and Pat Summitt of the University of Tennessee demonstrate how a philosophy of practice can generate team resilience and exceptional results.

I don't look at myself as a basketball coach. I look at myself as a leader who happens to coach basketball.—Mike Krzyzewski

Each college basketball season draws millions of Americans into a compelling drama that culminates in March Madness. At the center of the drama are the coaches striving for a championship season. Pat Summitt, Mike Krzyzewski, and Gary Williams are all expected to field highly competitive teams year after year. Retired icons, such as Dean Smith and John Wooten, are remembered for their lifetime achievements in winning championships. These coaches have written books describing how they apply their craft as leaders of student-athletes. Emerging leaders in all fields can reflect on the ideas and instructive examples in these books to develop their own philosophy of practice. People interested in leadership are intrigued by two basic questions: How do these great coaches amass winning records year after year? What does their leadership philosophy teach us about how to build high-performing teams?

This article shares and interprets important leadership lessons culled from the books of two of these extraordinary coaches, Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K) of Duke University and Pat Summitt of the University of Tennessee. Although their personalities and styles differ in

many respects, each has a philosophy of practice that generates overall team resilience and exceptional results—a philosophy that can be applied to your leadership needs, as well.

Coach K has been at Duke University for twenty-six years and has ten Final Four NCAA tournament appearances and three national championships. Under Coach K, the Duke Blue Devils have posted a 680-191 record (a .781 winning percentage). He has been National Coach of the Year twelve times and was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2001. Only two of his players who stayed for four years failed to graduate. Coach K's book, *Leading with the Heart*, renders insight into how he generates energy, loyalty, and commitment from his players.

In thirty-two years at the University of Tennessee, Pat Summitt—the winningest coach in basketball history—has amassed a record of 913-177 (an .838 winning percentage). Under her leadership, the Lady Vols have reached the Final Four sixteen times and won the national title on six different occasions. She was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2000. Every Lady Vol who has completed her eligibility at Tennessee has received her degree or is in the process of doing so. Summitt's book, *Reach for the Summit*, provides a rich set of guidelines on how to evoke passionate commitment from players.

These coaches have unique philosophies comprising fundamental beliefs, concepts, and attitudes on how to succeed as a coach or leader. Both are deeply committed to certain principles of thought and action and are constantly refining the means by which they put them into practice. Their philosophies are grounded in the way they envision their purpose at the workplace; understand themselves; evolve as leaders; select, develop, and deploy talent; and turn a group of talented athletes into a high-performing team.

Table 1 shows a leadership framework organized in the form of questions, the answers to which can enhance a leadership practice. The sections that follow describe the leadership philosophy of these coaches.

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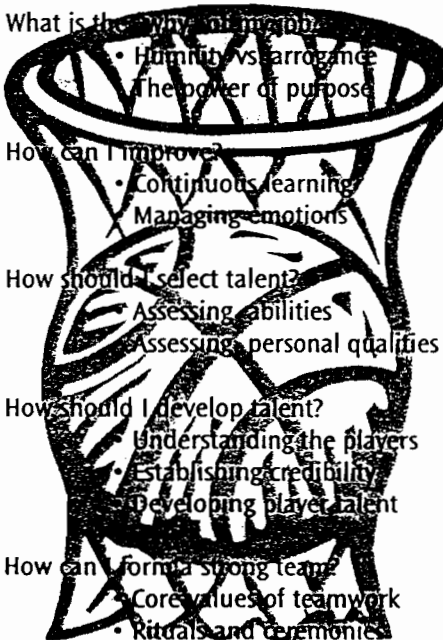
## What Is the “Why” of My Job?

Albert Einstein wrote, “The high destiny of the individual is to serve rather than to rule.” Service-oriented leaders exhibit humility and caring. They are humble in the sense of committing themselves to purposes that transcend the achievement of fame and recognition.

Coach Summitt is a George Patton “in your face” type of leader. She is a tough disciplinarian, and players are challenged to endure her demanding training protocol. However, her players also understand at a deep level that she is devoted to helping them mature as individuals and as a team. Summitt writes that trophies and financial gain are fairly low on the list of things that gratify her. She says, “I teach basketball, and through that, help young girls grow into women, and I broaden their ideas of what they are capable of.” The players learn that Coach Summitt is committed to helping them develop to their full potential and make good decisions. They also recognize how striving to reach their full potential creates habits of thought and action that will enhance their future lives.

Coach K's style is less stern, although his intensity is palpable. He is also devoted to preparing his athletes for basketball and for life. For example, he makes a

**Table 1. Five Key Elements of a Philosophy of Practice**

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1. What is the “why” of my job?
    - Humility vs. arrogance
    - The power of purpose
  2. How can I improve?
    - Continuous learning
    - Managing emotions
  3. How should I select talent?
    - Assessing abilities
    - Assessing personal qualities
  4. How should I develop talent?
    - Understanding the players
    - Establishing credibility
    - Developing player talent
  5. How can I form a strong team?
    - Core values of teamwork
    - Rituals and ceremonies

handshake deal with every new recruit accompanied by the following words:

I'm going to give you my best. I'm going to give you 100 percent. In return, I expect you to graduate. You'll be coming to Duke for more than just basketball. If you don't understand that, then don't come to Duke. I want you to be passionate about basketball, but I also want you to obtain a great education.

His contributions to the lives of athletes, however, extend beyond a great education. Grant Hill, one of the greatest athletes ever to play basketball at Duke, says that Coach K taught him to set the bar high, to build close relationships based on trust, to sacrifice and give of himself to others, and to enjoy the journey. When student-athletes come to understand that their coach cares about every aspect of their development, they express their appreciation by bringing passion to the basketball court. Pat Summitt and Coach K could not have achieved historic levels of success without intensely caring about their players.

Emerging leaders, then, might ask whether their sense of purpose at the workplace transcends their self-interest and need for ego satisfaction. Does their larger purpose focus on the interests of other people, the team, the organization, and the citizens or customers served?

## How Can I Improve?

Many individuals in formal leadership positions become insulated and self-absorbed. They develop defensive emotional routines that block new ways of thinking and acting. Some can be heard saying, "All these new theories are a bunch of nonsense." In contrast, Coach K and Pat Summitt are always looking for ways to improve their craft. Coach K says, "Continual learning is a key to effective leadership ... events change, circumstances change, people change ... leadership is about change." To put this into practice, he invites several friends who are scouts for the pros to observe his practice sessions and discuss the upcoming season. Their comments give him insight on what other coaches are doing, make him rethink his own approach to coaching, and help him better understand the talent on his team.

In a similar vein, Pat Summitt says, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts the most." She describes how she learned the triple-post offense from coaches Phil Jackson and Tex Winter, how she adopted the Texas fitness program, and how she began to use

multiple offensive and defensive patterns in her game strategy. Great leaders, then, reflect on their positive and negative experiences, confront their own inclination to reject new patterns of thought and action, seek outside advice, and continually experiment with new approaches to enhance their craft as leaders.

Using their emotions in a constructive manner also plays a large role in their success. Coach K and Pat Summitt understand their emotional vulnerabilities and are able to choose constructive behaviors in demanding situations. When Pat Summitt started her work at Tennessee, she struggled to overcome a sense of resentment at the unequal resources deployed for the men's and women's basketball teams. Had she focused on the resentment, she may have not achieved the level of success that would ultimately enable her to rectify that situation. Coach K discusses how important it is to put your own emotions aside and choose constructive behaviors in demanding circumstances. He may feel like exploding at players during a time out, but recognizes that it would be far more effective to remain silent.

Both coaches caution that one should never let a single game break your heart. In Coach K's words, "Even when you have a loss, you must ask yourself, 'What is good about this? How can I turn a defeat into something that works for us?'" And Pat Summitt states:

I have a love-hate relationship with losing. I hate how it makes me feel, which is basically sick. But I love what it brings out. It forces our players and coaches to improve and to make better decisions. Only through adversity do we arrive at a more complete perspective and understanding of the game.

These leaders effectively manage their emotions and position themselves as life-long learners.

In reflecting on your own philosophy of practice, how does your emotional maturity influence your ability to integrate new thoughts and skills into your practice? Are you able to constrain destructive, impulsive behaviors? And despite these impulses, can you select a constructive form of behavior in challenging circumstances?

## How Should I Select Talent?

One of the most common problems managers have involves employees who are technically excellent, but who have a toxic influence on others in the organization. They generally want to know, "How can I deal with this situation?" This is an important question, but more critical in the long term is why this individual was

selected in the first place. What criteria has the organization used to identify and select talent? Most managers answer these questions by indicating that prospective employees need to possess the skills and competencies outlined in the job announcement or job description. In other words, their skill profile fits organizational needs. Sounds good, but this thinking process has a fatal flaw. While skills and competencies are important, the personal qualities of an individual may be more germane in predicting job success.

Coach K and Pat Summitt's philosophy of practice incorporates this reasoning into their strategy for selecting basketball talent. In Coach K's words:

At Duke, we search for good kids with strong character—not necessarily kids with great talent who can play, but great individuals who are willing to be part of a team and who are coachable. I don't hire anyone solely on their technical merits.

Pat Summitt is just as vehement in paying attention to personal qualities. As she says, "One lazy team member can sap the entire team of their motivation." In her meetings with recruits, she tells them, "If you are selfish or lazy, you won't make it with me." In addition, she pays attention to their academic commitment, citizenship, competitive nature, and willingness to reach for their full potential. The ability of these coaches to select talent with the right mix of personal qualities and basketball skill is certainly a factor in their extraordinary success.

In assessing your own philosophy of practice with respect to selection, what criteria do you use in assessing prospective employees? Have you paid attention to personal qualities in the selection process? What criteria will you use to select talent in the future?

## How Should I Develop Talent?

Many leaders make the mistake of believing that coaching starts with setting performance goals, observing behavior, and providing feedback to close the gap between expectations and performance. These, of course, are important coaching behaviors. But if you follow Coach K and Pat Summitt's approach, coaching starts with understanding the individual. These coaches invest large amounts of time and energy in getting to know players—their values, emotional makeup, and hopes and dreams for a successful life.

Pat Summitt makes a personal connection with players, but also ensures that players understand each other. She and her team members share scrapbooks of their lives prior to entering college. In addition, she has the players fill out a personality profile instrument and share the results in a group meeting. In these conversations, team members discuss their strengths and vulnerabilities and how best to communicate with each other. Coach Summitt also meets with players one-on-one. In her words:

I meet four times a year with each player on our team, individually. We look eyeball to eyeball and talk about everything from her fears to her ambitions. I spell out what her role is and what's expected of her, but more important, I ask what she wants. After those talks, I feel more in tune with her. I know what she needs to help her performance. And I have heard her.

Coach K has a different player over to his home every week to share a home-cooked meal and engage in a one-on-one conversation. Through these conversations, he gains insight on how to help each player thrive at Duke. His philosophy about understanding and adapting to the unique personality of each player is perhaps best exemplified by this quote:

At Duke, nobody is a number. Rather, we try to plant seeds that help people grow. We try to give every individual the freedom to develop their full capabilities. If you put a plant in a jar, it will take the shape of the jar. But if you allow the plant to grow freely, twenty jars might not be able to hold it. The freedom to grow personally, the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them, the freedom to work hard, and the freedom to be yourself—those four freedoms should be guaranteed by every leader in every organization.

This powerful metaphor helps us understand that many people, if placed in a role that fits their interests and aptitudes, will blossom to their full potential. The key to great coaching is to discover the hidden genius embodied in each individual. You will gain understanding and credibility by learning about the unique qualities of each person on your staff. If your span of control runs into the hundreds, then make sure that your subordinate managers are also spending time learning about their people.

Coaching is also about skillfully observing staff members, clarifying roles and responsibilities, challenging people to reach for their potential, and providing recognition. There is no substitute for having regular

performance conversations. Many individuals holding formal leadership positions are uncomfortable confronting mediocre performance. They lack the courage to tell the truth. Extraordinary coaches do not walk away from difficult performance conversations.

Coach K addresses this issue: “Leaders instill respect for authority by being direct, by communicating regularly, and by being honest. Confrontation simply means meeting the truth head on.” Staff members often have an imperfect awareness of how their behavior and technical performance enhances or detracts from achieving goals. A true leader recognizes that they have an absolute obligation to elevate staff performance.

Many leaders are equally uncomfortable providing positive feedback. Not so with these coaches. Pat Summitt even writes notes to her players. In these notes, she lets them know when she is proud of them, worried, or just wants to encourage them after providing some candid feedback. In her words, “When I go off on a player, I jot a note afterward. Usually, the notes say the same thing. They say, ‘Don’t let me break your spirit. I’m only trying to help you. I care about you. I want your best. Please, don’t take it personally.’” Players often pin the notes in their lockers or carry them around in their wallets. Despite Coach Summitt’s stern approach to leading, players are touched by this act of caring and are able to place the criticism in perspective.

In thinking about your own philosophy of practice, to what extent do you attempt to understand your staff? To what extent are you helping staff develop to their full potential? Are you willing and able to have difficult performance conversations with staff? What emotional and managerial skills would help you evolve as a first class coach?

## How Can I Form a Strong Team?

In today’s organizations, success is often determined by the quality of teamwork, yet it is surprisingly difficult to achieve. Effective teamwork is undermined by self-serving behavior, envy and jealousy, and unresolved conflict. Although these negative behaviors are commonplace, staff members also have the capacity to develop trusting relationships and subordinate their own interests for the larger good of the team. These coaches give enormous effort to bringing out the best of the human spirit in the service of the entire team. The use of language is a good place to start exploring how they build an effective team culture.

Coach K insists that his team use the words “our, us, and we” rather than “me or my” or “the coach’s team.” Pat Summitt will not permit players to use negative judgmental language when referring to colleagues. If they have an issue with a fellow player, they are obligated to deal with it head on. Players are trained in “conflict resolution” to equip them to resolve interpersonal issues.

Coach K has made forming bonds a firm expectation for each member of his organization. In his words:

Bonds have to form among all members of the team—player to player, manager to player, administrative assistant to head coach, head coach to player, head coach to assistant coach, assistant coach to assistant coach, seniors to freshmen, sophomore to juniors, and so on. Every individual must have a trusting relationship with every other member on the team.

Coach K works hard to create an environment in which every person establishes trusting relationships with others in the Duke basketball organization.

Coach Summitt emphasizes over and over again that each person plays an important role in the overall success of the team. She dramatizes this during the initial week of practice by passing out wooden pencils to her twelve team members. She then states, “What if I take twelve pencils and I bind them together with a rubber band? Now try to break them. You can’t.” Her symbolic ritual sends a clear message to players. If they become a tightly knit team, it will be hard for any competitor to prevail on the basketball court.

Coach K talks about “Embracing the hell out of pride and personal responsibility.” Each player is expected to bring his personal best to practices, meetings, and game situations. Equally important, they are expected to be collectively responsible for ensuring that others on the team meet expectations on and off the court. Upperclassmen are expected to teach younger players technical basketball skills as well as the norms of behavior that define the Duke basketball culture.

Both coaches draw the analogy of team as family. In coach K’s words:

I’d like to think that what my mom felt about me, I can feel about the players on our Duke basketball team. If I can provide that kind of support system for our team—where the managers feel good, the assistants feel good, the freshman feels good about the senior, and the senior about the sophomore, and so on—then we’re going to be that much stronger a team.

Pat Summitt expresses a similar thought: "As in a family, you have to be generous enough to take pleasure in someone else's success, not just your own. And have the smarts to realize that no one succeeds alone."

Like these athletic teams, a government or business organization will not perform to its potential if team members hold feelings of envy, jealousy, or alienation. This is toxic to any organization. In examining your own approach to enhancing team effectiveness, you might ask whether you clarify expectations on team-based values, train in conflict resolution, hold rituals and ceremonies that stress the importance of teamwork, create a family-like environment that helps staff members feel valued and included, and emphasize the value of both individual and collective responsibility in creating a high-performing team.

## Conclusion

Although Pat Summitt and Mike Krzyzewski have different leadership styles, many aspects of their philosophies are remarkably similar. They both

- ◆ commit themselves to purposes that transcend their own self interest,
- ◆ remain curious and devoted to continuous learning,
- ◆ select talent on the basis of an assessment of basketball skills and personal qualities,
- ◆ devote long periods to gaining a deep understanding of their players,

- ◆ exhibit courage by providing players with candid performance feedback, and
- ◆ build a family-like team culture.

These elements constitute a philosophy of practice that helps explain their extraordinary success in engaging the hearts and minds of their players and amassing a remarkable record of success as basketball coaches. Perhaps their philosophy does nothing more than embrace the golden rule to treat others the way you wish to be treated. The principles of success are deceptively simple, yet hard to recognize in a culture that sometimes values form over substance, politics over integrity, and arrogance over humility. These coaches are great because they embrace aspects of virtue that have been important throughout history. As emerging leaders, you are invited to think about how you might incorporate these ideas in your leadership practice. By doing so, your staff will become tenacious and resilient in attacking difficult challenges and achieving desired outcomes. ❖

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