

The Words of Legendary Coach John Wooden

Coach John Wooden's UCLA teams reached unprecedented success.

His coaching molded the lives of many young players at UCLA, such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Walton, who both went on to become professional NBA legends. Under his guidance, the Bruins won 81 percent of their games and set all-time records with four perfect 30-0 seasons, 88 consecutive victories, 38 straight NCAA tournament victories, 20 Pac-10 championships, and 10 national championships—seven of them consecutive.

During a 2003 ceremony at the White House, President Bush honored Coach Wooden with America's most prestigious civil award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Q: How is coaching employees in a business or an organization similar to coaching a sports team?

Wooden: Being the head of anything, you have to set an example. You have to be firm about the things you want and the things you believe. But if you listen to your followers you will get better results. I don't think there is enough listening going on. As a leader, you don't want people who just say yes and feed your ego. You want people who contribute. The leader needs to let people contribute, and if what they offer works, he needs to give that person credit. If not (the leader) needs to take the blame.

Q: How did you deal with unmotivated players?

Wooden: Every one of us is different. We are similar in so many respects, but we are not identical. The person in leadership must carefully analyze everyone under his supervision to the best of his ability. People are imperfect, and they are not going to perform accurately all of the time.

You have to give people the treatment they have earned and that they deserve. You have to make that decision. You can be inaccurate. In many ways you have to treat the people the same, but not in every way. You are not going

to like all the people who work for you the same, and they aren't all going to like you the same. You have to be strong enough to not let your personal feelings influence the decisions you make as far as the business and your profession are concerned.

Q: A lot of people like to be liked, or need to be liked—especially at the highest levels. Does that ever get in the way of doing the right thing for the business or the team? How do you overcome that?

Wooden: When you say a lot of people like to be liked, you're wrong—I think everybody likes to be liked. If you are just trying to be popular out there, you are not going to succeed. I wanted respect from my players. I hoped they like me, but it was much more important to have their respect. If you can get it across to your people what you are trying to accomplish, the better it will work.

Q: We use sports as a metaphor for teamwork. Is that always appropriate?

Wooden: Not always. Sports are in the limelight. And someone in the limelight will react differently than they will when they are out of the limelight. Not everyone, but for most people that is the case. Teamwork is going to come from being considerate of the other person. I think—and I don't think I am right about everything—the fact that my (UCLA team) managers had respect for me is that, for me, they were one of the players. They were not there as a service for the players. They did not pick up the towels and gum wrappers for the players. They did not carry equipment for the players. The players had to do that for themselves. I (used to receive) letters from custodians from schools we played (on the road) telling me that the UCLA basketball players left the locker rooms cleaner than anyone else. When you get that kind of attitude across to your players, some of them are kind of reluctant. But before long, that makes a better team.

Q: When you were recruiting and looking from one class to the next, were you looking at how those pieces would fit together?

Wooden: Always. You always need to be thinking about how the pieces will fit together. You don't want to get overloaded at one position. But you are never going to pass up an outstanding player.

Q: A lot of organizations talk about bench strength. How important is that?

Wooden: You hear so much from TV basketball commentators talking about how a team “doesn't have much depth.” That never bothered me (as a coach). I was going to have seven players. We were going to work hard on fundamentals and in drills. I wanted a few that were well trained and working together, instead of a (larger) bunch that wasn't working together. For most of my years, I worked with seven players. The same five would almost always be the starters, and I would have one extra man in the back line and one extra man in the front line. The current UCLA coach doesn't do that, but he is still very successful. That shows that what is right for one leader is not right for another.

Coach John Wooden was interviewed by **Rex Davenport**, former editor for *T+D*.