

**KEY COACHING TRAITS**

# Inside the Mind of a Coach:

## Five Leadership Traits You Can Apply to Your Team



info@lc-consultants.com  
www.lc-consultants.com



# Inside the Mind of a Coach: Five Leadership Traits You Can Apply to Your Team

## Life's Defining Moment

Do you ever think back to what it was in your childhood that shaped who you are today? What was the defining moment or person that influenced you most and gave you the clarity to say, "This is who I want to be like when I grow up"?

My defining moment was listening to my dad's welcome speech to all new players and parents at the beginning of every sports season. Regardless of whether it was baseball, which is both America's Pastime and mine, basketball or football, at our first practice my dad always told the kids and parents on my team the same thing:

*"I have three goals for our team this season – Number 1. We will have fun. That's why we're here. Number 2. The kids will each learn more about the sport. I want them to be better at it when the season is over than when we started. They need to gain an appreciation for it. Number 3. We will win. We want to compete, and it's always more fun when you win (chuckle). These three goals are in order of priority."*

That introductory speech stuck with me. It has served as part of the foundation on which the sports teams I coach have been built, as I share these exact same goals a generation later when coaching my son's baseball teams: 1) Have fun, 2) Learn and 3) Win. But beyond that, I learned by playing on a team what it meant to be a good sport, a teammate, how to win with dignity and lose with grace, and many, many other life lessons. It was through my dad and other coaches that followed that I based my approach to coaching – and connecting with – those that play for me. At Learning Curve Consultants, our principal focus is very simple, as we work to help clients Unleash Your Talent®.

## The Buck Stops with the Head Coach

Let's be honest. Managers, just like coaches at all levels – regardless of the team sport – are repeatedly forced to make split second decisions. Sometimes these are made on the World's biggest stage like the Super Bowl or World Series and can result in moments of "fame" or "shame". Making it to the pinnacle of a sport – its championship – takes hard work. A Head Coach, whether it's right or wrong, is often credited or takes the fall if his or her team succeeds or fails.



# KEY COACHING TRAITS

While millions across the country are considered “sports coaches”, the truly good ones – those that separate themselves from the pack – share inherent traits and have a knack for connecting with their athletes, sharing life lessons and doing things the right way. When you look at the most historic head coaches across the different major sports – people like Paul “Bear” Bryant, Pat Summitt, John Wooden, Bobby Cox and Coach “K” – they share several common traits that every corporate leader should embrace. Let’s look more closely at them.

## Essential Coaching Traits for Team Success



### Trait #1: Articulate a Clear Vision for Success

Successful coaches are able to articulate their expectations of the team and individuals on it, and more importantly, their philosophy or approach to coaching. Athletes know where they stand at all times when playing for a good, organized coach. There is no confusion about what is expected. John Wooden, one of the most famous college basketball coaches in the modern era, is known for authoring the Pyramid of Success. This philosophy taught his players how to win in both basketball and life and helped lead UCLA to 10 national championships.

Success often hinges on a coach’s ability to articulate his or her philosophy, which requires the person to know his or her own make-up. An understanding of self is paramount for one to be able to lead others in the same direction and ultimately to wins. This means understanding one’s strengths, vulnerabilities, or “blind spots”, and what is needed to offset those weaknesses. Knowing who you are and “what makes you tick” must be identified and embraced. One’s personal values should be shared as well, and these need to be tied to (support) that of the organization. Honor, integrity and respect for one another should be cornerstones to all relationships and team principles.

Bobby Cox, fourth most winning Major League Baseball (MLB) Manager of all time, was revered for the professionalism of his teams and the clarity his players had about their role on the team. He dealt with dissension and protected his players so they could focus on their jobs, as evidenced by his MLB record 161 ejections for arguing with umpires. It is widely held that ejections are a sign of a manager protecting his players.



**TRAIT #1 ACTION PLANNING QUESTIONS:** What is your vision for the team? Do you have goals and a short- and long-term strategy for your team? Do your employees know what it is and do they embrace it? How often do you revisit it and measure success? Does your team know and share your values?



### Trait #2: Assess, Develop and Manage Your Talent

Successful head coaches ask the right questions to assess the current situation once they take over the team. They strive to determine what is needed to transform the team so identified goals can be achieved. In short, they begin making the necessary changes to the team chemistry so their vision and plan can be put into action. Setting individual performance goals that are tied to the team/department goals is crucial to successfully managing employees. Employees must understand how their performance will be measured, and the rewards that follow should be tied to meeting or surpassing goals that have been set. In sports, salaries are often based on personal statistics over the course of a season. Because performance numbers, in many cases, don’t lie, companies have utilized the same approach over the years by using





dashboards, leader boards and performance metrics tied to one's responsibilities. Used in conjunction with the human factors such as communication, teamwork, impact on others, this type of an approach is very effective.

Restructuring a team to fit a coach's vision includes adding and changing coaching support staff and teammates to impact team chemistry. Practice routines, game plans and strategies are introduced and enforced. Those who do not buy into the vision are asked by successful coaches to leave or are forced out.

Player development can take many forms. It's building knowledge of the coach's game plan, offensive and defensive plays and strategy. It's also skill building, as specific physical abilities often need to be strengthened. Paul "Bear" Bryant, a legendary college football coach, is notorious for his intense training workouts to prepare his football teams for the coming season. Those who survived his 10-day training camp at Texas A&M became known as the "Junction Boys".

**TRAIT #2 ACTION PLANNING QUESTIONS:** Do your employees know where they stand with regards to their performance? How are you holding them accountable? Are you creating an environment of continuous development and learning? Do you have formal and informal training set up for roles and positions? Are you supporting training with opportunities to practice and hone their skills?



### Trait #3: Make a Personal Connection with Each Individual

Successful coaches know the importance of relating to each of their players. A "one size fits all" approach does not work, especially with younger players (college athletes and below). While team goals are vital to overarching success and give people a single purpose to strive for, understanding each person and what motivates them is crucial. You must set individual goals to drive their performance in a specific direction and stretch their capabilities in a controlled fashion.

Bill Snyder, legendary Kansas State football coach, relates to each and every one of his football players because he explains his philosophy (16 Goals for Success) and wants the best for each player personally. He explains that the only limits to your ability are those you place upon yourself.

**TRAIT #3 ACTION PLANNING QUESTIONS:** What are you doing to connect with your employees? Do they have their own "game plan" for development? Do you collaborate on career goals and aspirations? Are you giving them opportunities to make strides toward these goals?



### Trait #4: Set Stretch Goals

An executive I once worked with told me that, in order to be successful, think two jobs ahead. Otherwise, you'll never really grow. I passed this message along to the high potentials who participated in the programs I managed. I think the same can be said of sports coaches. A player should never be satisfied with last year's performance, accolades or statistics. Live in the "now" while thinking about what must be done today to stay a step ahead and get better. Many successful athletes train as if someone else is working harder than you and wants to take your

## KEY COACHING TRAITS

spot or position on the team. With that thought at the forefront of your mind each and every day, it pushes you to constantly focus on doing what it takes to get better.

Pat Summitt, historic head women's basketball coach at the University of Tennessee, was known for setting goals prior to every season. She believed strongly in setting stretch goals that pushed her team but were realistic and attainable with hard work. This helped lead her teams to 8 national championships and more wins (1098) than anyone in women's college basketball history. She believed in setting goals not just for the season, but also for every day. Summitt had teammates hold one another accountable, and was a big fan of giving rewards for hitting goals and setting consequences for failing to follow rules.

**TRAIT #4 ACTION PLANNING QUESTIONS:** Are you identifying stretch goals and opportunities for your employees? What are you doing to push your employees and grow their skills? What else can you be doing? Do they have accountability partners?

### Trait #5: Be a Role Model



Integrity comes in many forms: treating others the way you would like to be treated ("Golden Rule") and treating others as they want to be treated ("Platinum Rule") help establish a mutual sense of understanding between two people, regardless of the personal or professional relationship. If the vision and goals you set (Trait #1) don't specify "acting with integrity and respect", it is important that you make this standard clear through your actions. As a father of three, I am not trying to be my children's friend. I need to teach them life lessons and what it means to be a person of integrity. My goal is not to have my kids like me; I want them to respect me. That should be how you approach relationship with your direct reports: they should be a collaborative business partner and not a close personal friend of yours. Keep your business matters separate from your personal (private) life. You will be much happier by doing so!

### Essential Coaching Traits for Team Success

- 1: Articulate a Clear Vision for Success
- 2: Assess, Develop and Manage Your Talent
- 3: Make a Personal Connection with Each Individual
- 4: Set Stretch Goals
- 5: Be a Role Model

Managing your employees based on mutual respect, as well as business practices embedded in integrity, will help you prepare others to lead. In sports, establishing "bench strength" in both player personnel and with one's coaching staff gives head coaches the flexibility to meet unforeseen challenges and adversity. In addition, it helps everyone grow, develop and strive for something more. The ultimate testament to a head coach's success – outside players' personal and sports development and winning—is the ability to give assistant coaches enough tools to leave and become head coaches elsewhere. If you are able to "pay it forward" and prepare others for leadership, you, your direct reports and the organization all benefit.

Mike Krzyzewski, affectionately known as "Coach K", is the legendary head NCAA basketball coach at Duke. Over the past 30 plus years, Coach K has accumulated the most wins (over 1,000 and counting) in history. He is believed to have one of the largest "coaching trees", or assistants of his who went on to become head coaches, of any coach. It is because of his approach and willingness to delegate to his assistants that he has been able to groom other successful coaches.

**TRAIT #5 ACTION PLANNING QUESTIONS:** Have you identified employees who possess leadership characteristics as well as a personal interest in leading others? Have you identified the next "head coach" to take over your team? What can you do to prepare employees to take on leadership and management responsibilities? What opportunities can you provide to help them grow?



### #1 Key to Success: Consistency and Simplicity

The five traits of a successful head coach outlined above have been proven effective for many, many years. They can work for your team if applied correctly. When clear goals are set and shared, and you demonstrate your passion to lead others and treat them with respect, your employees will be willing “to walk through walls” for you. Showing loyalty to your employees and understanding their motivations is, in turn, contagious. Be willing to “walk the talk” and do what you say will do, as actions speak louder than words.

Take the three simple goals my father and I utilize as the foundation of our teams:

- 1 Have Fun** – If you don’t have a passion for what you do and enjoy it, your employees will see it. The old adage of “work hard, play hard” is a good one. Show your employees that if they buy into what you are building as a team and do the little things you ask of them, then individual and team success (as well as personal and professional development) will follow, as will rewards and fun.
- 2 Learn** – You must always be teaching and helping the team you lead, as well as each individual, find ways to improve. Celebrate individual and team successes and accomplishments, but emphasize the importance of quickly turning attention to the next business challenge. Leverage your skills in reflection, motivation and planning to focus your team. Stretching everyone to do more and expanding their capabilities helps you, each individual, the team and ultimately the organization.
- 3 Win** – In sports, the ultimate “win” is a division or league title or sports championship. In corporate America, winning takes many different forms: from an increase in earnings per share or stock price to an acquisition of a new client or competing company or debut of a new product or service. It is your job to tie team and department goals to the larger goals of the organization so employees understand how their contributions are making an impact and a difference.



Knowing your management style and strengths, articulating your vision to your employees, setting both individual and team goals and preaching a consistent message, all while practicing integrity and respect, are crucial to ensuring your team reaches both short- and long-term success.

### Figure Out Your Game Plan

So what are your next steps? There are some questions you should ask yourself when determining which traits you might want to incorporate into your coaching game plan:

- What would your team say about you?
- How can you create an environment that is fun and stimulates innovation?
- What can you do to help bring out the best in each of your “players” (employees)?
- How can you help your team and the individuals on it win on and off “the field”, much like the successful coaches highlighted earlier?

*Let Learning Curve Consultants® help your leadership team devise a winning game plan that is right for you and the organization. We can partner to Unleash Your Talent®.*

