

# **The Ten Principles of Leadership I Learned from Coach Wooden**

By Swen Nater

<http://blog.coachswen.com/>

## **Principle 1: Know the Jobs of Those Under Your Direct Supervision**

Vince Lombardi, the great coach of the Green Bay Packers, once said, “Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.”

A perfect example of that is Abraham Lincoln. He had relatively little military experience before he became president—just a few months in 1832. However, by getting away from The White House and out to the battlefields with his generals, where he learned their jobs, he became one of our greatest Commanders in Chief.

During the Civil War, he routinely walked from the White House, next door to the Army telegraph office to hear the first news from the battlefields. But that only whetted his appetite for knowing what was really going on. As Commander in Chief of the armed services, Lincoln felt the responsibility to lead and he knew he could not do so from The White House. There were problems to be solved and that meant hard work. He needed to go to ground zero where the problems were, learn what his generals were doing, and make the necessary adjustments.

It wasn't easy travelling by steamer and railroad to over 15 battlefields, the first of which was The First Battle of Bull Run, July 23, 1861. The Union Army had been defeated and Lincoln wanted to find out why. After meeting with his generals, he made a change. Other daunting trips included Fort Monroe, Antietam, and four trips to southeastern Virginia to meet with General Grant. Not long after going to Gettysburg, he replaced General Meade with Grant, perhaps his most significant decision.

Just as Abraham Lincoln knew little about being a general prior to being president, Coach Wooden knew little about being a post player when he became a coach; he played guard in college. However, when joining UCLA, I was surprised how knowledgeable he was about the position. I learned later, he had studied up. Coach made me a better rebounder. I was already pretty good when I entered UCLA, leading all California Community College players with a 16.4 per game average. However, when Coach taught me his three rebounding principles—Assume every shot is missed, Get your hands up, and Go get the ball—I was able to take it to the next level.

When acquiring Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then Lewin Alcindor), he picked the brains of coaches that had success with tall players and also great post players like Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell. But he also learned post play by watching and listening to his players. For example, Bill Walton convinced Coach to add the lob play to the offense.

Abraham Lincoln and Coach Wooden knew the first principle of effective leadership: Understanding what those under their supervision did. The key word here is “understanding.” You are a leader only if

people are following and, when a manager demonstrates he or she understands what it's like to do the jobs of the workers, and learns how those jobs are done, they will follow him or her anywhere.

Vince Lombardi was right. Leaders are not born; they are made and it takes hard work. Any manager should know the jobs of his or her employees to the point where he or she can teach it. I work for Costco, a Fortune 500 company. Our CEO, Jim Sinegal, said it well,

If a manager doesn't understand that 90% of the job is teaching, he or she doesn't get it.

## **Principle 2: Prioritize Your Responsibilities**

The second principle for leadership I learned from Coach Wooden is "Prioritize Your Responsibilities."

The job description of a leader is usually extensive. Most are organized enough to know what the priorities are, but few understand what their "Primary Responsibility" is. Consequently, they don't fulfill it because they're too busy trying to do it all. A good example is the job of a principal. The daunting list of administrative duties is overwhelming, but what is the primary responsibility of the job? It is to be an Instructional Leader, making sure effective instruction is happening in the classroom. Those that don't understand this, spend most of their time in the office and little time where they should be: observing teachers in the classroom, meeting with them, providing extracurricular training for them, and monitoring their progress.

Coach Wooden also had a plate full, but he completely understood the number one reason he was hired: To put the best possible team on the basketball floor. Coach was a nice guy; he was fun to be around and a good friend. But there were times he had to be a disciplinarian in order to ensure his team was at its best.

My first year at UCLA, I redshirted (practiced but did not play in games). I practiced against two great forwards, Sidney Wicks and Curtis Rowe. For some reason, they thought they had earned the right to be late to the pre-game meal one Friday afternoon. They were seven minutes late. When they entered the restaurant, Coach didn't say a word. That evening, when Coach announced the starting lineup, their names were not on the list. As the team headed out to warm up, Wicks and Rowe remained behind because they wanted to talk to Coach. After they asked why they were not starting, Coach said, "You were seven minutes late for pregame meal and so you won't play for the first seven minutes of the game." They said, "Well we may not play at all." Coach said, "If you don't go in the game when I tell you, you won't play another minute for UCLA." Needless to say, they went in when their names were called.

The primary responsibility of some leaders, as they see it, is to be liked by everyone. This is a noble objective but has a built-in dead end. Like I mentioned, Coach was a nice guy, but if his priority would have been to be a friend to us, he would not have been able to meet his number one priority: To put the best team on the floor. By disciplining Wicks and Rowe, he convinced them he was boss. Once they understood they needed to do things Coach's way or not play, they became even better players and the team became better as well. Mission accomplished.

Along those same lines, about ten years before that, just two years prior to his first NCAA championship, Coach made a change that helped him put the best team on the floor. He decided to play only seven

players until the game was won or lost. As you can imagine, this was not a popular decision, especially among the players. It was difficult watching the game and knowing you were better than any of the players on the other team. But, that decision, combined with three others, made the difference that initiated a run of ten national championships in Coach Wooden's twelve final years of coaching.

Leaders that practice fulfilling their number one priorities seem to also do that away from work; it's a habit. Coach Wooden was no exception.

Some years ago, when visiting Coach at his condo in Encino, California, I asked him, "Coach. Are you going to watch the Lakers game tonight?" I was surprised at his answer.

After finishing his senior season at Purdue, Coach Wooden was arguably the best player in the world. The local professional basketball team asked him to play for them in the playoffs and, for his services, would pay him \$100 per game. He accepted and in the first game of a three-game series, he dominated and led his team to victory. At the start of the second game, he continued his excellent play and they were ahead. He was surprised when his coach called a time out. The coach pulled him aside and with a strong voice said, "Wooden! Don't you know this is supposed to be a three-game series? We're supposed to lose this game." Coach quit.

This, and the fact professional basketball was not the team game his pure mind believed in, turned Coach off to pro ball. But I didn't know that when I asked him the question, "Are you going to watch the Lakers game tonight?" His answer was, "Not if I can help it, Swen." Coach had better things to do with his time than watch a Lakers game. I guess he had his priorities away from the basketball court as well.

Many leaders, if asked, can tell you what their responsibilities are but not what their number one priority is. If you are one of them, take a lesson from Coach Wooden. Lee Iacocca, CEO of Chrysler Company, understood the importance of leaders focusing on what they are primarily responsible for. He said, "If you want to make good use of your time, you've got to know what's most important and then give it all you've got."

### **Principle 3: Leading is Skilled Teaching**

As mentioned before, Jim Sinegal, CEO of Costco, said, "If a manager doesn't understand that 90% of the job is teaching, he or she doesn't get it."

That statement alone says it clearly; leadership is not leadership unless teaching is happening. In order to lead a group of people to success, you must train them to do the jobs that, collectively and collaboratively, help reach the goals of the organization. There is no way around it. Coach Wooden understood that. Ron Gallimore and I, in our book, *You Haven't Taught Until They Have Learned*, propose that the primary reason for Coach Wooden's success at UCLA was teaching. Coach was a great leader, in part, because he was a master teacher.

The role of a teacher in the coaching profession is different than in business. In corporate America, managers teach only those directly under their supervision. A coach has a double job because the

players and assistant coaches are all under his or her guidance. Following is how Coach was a teacher to both.

## Teaching Players

Those of us who played for Coach Wooden had other coaches as well. It is our general consensus, Coach got more done in a two and one-half hour practice than most coaches accomplished in two days, or maybe even a week. This takes extreme skill in how to speed up learning. I'm going to share four principles I witnessed, that I believe were key to Coach's teaching success. These four facilitated maximum learning during UCLA practices.

### 1. A Learning Environment

In any organization, if people look forward to coming to work, it's a good sign, a learning environment is present. Effective leaders like Coach Wooden, create a culture where everyone wants to come to work, and believe me, all of us looked forward to practice. Why? Because of two factors: Motivation and Fun.

Coach redirected our innate motivation—to try and become better than others—by convincing each of us, personal success should be measured internally, in proportion to the amount of effort made, to become the best you are personally capable of becoming.

Don't try to be better than someone else. Instead, focus on your own improvement. Concentrate on coming as close to your ultimate potential as possible. That's success and no one can ask more of you than that.

This self-appraisal system rendered near-immediate inspirational results because one inch of improvement was a step toward success, and there's nothing more motivating to an individual than progress. Focusing on my own improvement was important to me because I knew I would never be able to match Bill Walton's skills.

The second way Coach created a learning environment was making practice fun. One way he did that was creating fundamentals drills that were competitive. The rest of practice was pretty much two-on-two, three-on-three and so forth. We competed a lot and there's nothing more enjoyable than that. However, once in a while, something happened that was really fun.

As a freshman, Bill Walton could not play varsity but coach let him come over and practice with us. The first day that happened, Bill showed everyone how good he was. During scrimmage, Sidney Wicks, our very talented forward and NCAA player of the year, stole the ball and sprinted down the court to make, what he thought would be, an uncontested lay-up. (Dunking was not allowed in the NCAA.) Bill wouldn't have any part in it. He caught up to Wicks and, high above the rim, blocked his shot. You should have seen our reaction. Our jaws dropped and some of us fell on the floor laughing.

Play resumed and, as it happened the very next play, Wicks stole the ball again and began his dash down the court. Again, Walton chased him. Oddly, Sidney slowed down and let him catch up. Wicks went up for his lay-up and, like before, Walton went up with him. This time, however, Sidney dunked the ball so hard, it took a minute for the basket to stop shaking. Again, we were laughing and rolling on the ground.

You might think, because of the rule, Coach would have disciplined Sidney Wicks and sent him to the showers. Not so. Coach thought, 'Why not have a little fun?' So, he told us, "So you guys like to dunk? Well, let's have a dunking contest. Everyone gets one dunk and I'll decide who wins." That was fun. I don't remember who won, but it wasn't me.

## **2. The Whole-Part Method**

Metaphors and Similes are effective in writing and poetry because they help the reader make connections that create understanding. In the same way, Coach Wooden used The Whole-Part Method to help us make the connection between a drill and a play. For example, when teaching an offensive play, he first had five players walk through it, in slow motion, while he explained the how and why of every move. Then, when he divided the team into small groups and sent us to baskets where we practiced the parts, it all made sense.

## **3. The Four Laws of Learning**

This is going to seem like common sense and some of you will think you already do this but, believe me, few understand The Four Laws of Learning. As a coach, I thought I did but, after learning the laws from Coach and returning to my own practices, I discovered I didn't have a clue. The Four Laws are:

- Demonstration/Explanation : Demonstrate and Explain Until They Get It (This is where I didn't get it.)

- Imitation: Have Them Imitate What You Demonstrated.

- Correction: Correct Every Error, on the Spot.

- Repetition: Have Them Repeat until they can perform the correct method and then drill it to automaticity through repetition

Coach used The Four Laws all the time, in everything he taught, from fundamentals to five-on-five scrimmage.

## **4. Innovation**

As effective as The Four Laws of Learning are, there are times a little more is needed to help a player learn. Coach was an artist with innovation. Because he believed teaching didn't happen until the student had learned, he came up with whatever it took to make that happen. But it was always preplanned.

Ron Gallimore told me this story because it happened the year after I graduated. Ralph Drollinger, a center, had the bad habit of holding on to the basketball too long after he obtained a defensive rebound; we were a fast break team. The Four Laws obviously had not kicked in yet and it frustrated Coach Wooden to no end. So, during a practice, just as Ralph grabbed a rebound, Coach yelled, "Ralph! Pass it to somebody short!" It worked.

## **Training Assistant Coaches**

Coach Wooden was a master teacher on the court. That's a well-known fact and, when referring to Coach as a teacher, most think of that. But, ask any of his assistant coaches, and you'll learn, he also taught them how to teach. As mentioned, in business, generally speaking, those that teach, teach one level down. For example, Starbucks' Howard Schultz does not teach an employee how to add that foamy milk to a Cappuccino. Costco's Jim Sinegal does not teach a lower-level employee how to work the computer system to project sales. But in sports, coaches must not only teach players, they must also prepare their assistants to become head coaches. His office was off limits when the staff was planning practice but, from what I hear, Coach taught his staff there, as well as during practice with on-the-job training. He produced some pretty good coaches including: Jerry Norman, Denny Crum, and Gary Cunningham.

## **Conclusion**

The success, especially long-term, of an organization, is developed and secured by a commitment to teaching. It starts from the top and works its way down to every leader. When that happens, like at UCLA, the organization will have the strong pulse of progress, fostered by a culture of the collective pursuit of perfection.

"Effective teaching is intrinsic to effective leadership, the kind that can build and maintain a successful team. I am unaware of any great team builders who were not also great team teachers."

John Wooden from Wooden on Leadership

## **Principle 4: Create a Learning Laboratory**

What is the primary job of a classroom teacher? Is it to use the classroom as an Information Dispensing Center and teach the curriculum so students test well? After all, there are standards to be met. If that's all teachers do, they will graduate a group of students whose heads are filled with knowledge. At the most, they will be equipped to apply some of that knowledge to life after school.

Socrates didn't believe in giving information for information sake. The Dictionary of Education presents the Socratic Method as, "a process of discussion led by the instructor to induce the learner to question the validity of his reasoning or to reach a sound conclusion." Socrates did not think of himself as one that gave out information. Rather his actions implied he considered himself more of an intellectual midwife. When he presented ideas, he followed them with comments and questions that caused his students to dig deep and discover meaning for themselves. In this way, he created thinkers, not parrots. In other words, Socrates did not teach in a classroom; he held class in a laboratory.

Creating a Learning Laboratory is good leadership. Leaders who don't give out fish, but rather teach their people how to fish, develop employees who take initiative to improve things because they will question the quality of the status quo, and will generate suggestions on how to improve things. That's great leadership.

I want to introduce you to a leader like that. Coach Wooden believed a person should continue to learn until the day he departs from earth. Two statements many of us have heard him say often were:

If you're through learning, you're through."-Chris Sonksen

"It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."-Harry S. Truman

He practiced that himself but he also encouraged us to do the same.

The year he became head coach of UCLA, 1948, Coach began his own research and development system. Each off season, he tackled one aspect of basketball—like half-court offense, half-court defense, the full-court press, rebounding, and out-of-bounds plays—and mastered the subject. He used the standard "Scientific Method," moving through the steps: Defining a Research Question, Selecting a Sample, Developing a Survey Instrument, Procedures, Data Collection, Data Analysis, and finally, Drawing Conclusions. I imagine, by 1964, he had a pretty good handle on the game. Perhaps that explains, at least in part, why he ran off ten national championships in the next twelve years.

As a leader, Coach Wooden believed his team should practice self-improvement as well. He became a better coach through study and experimentation and concluded, his team would benefit in the same way. So he turned the gymnasium into a laboratory of controlled experimentation.

Let's talk about offense. With the basic framework of the plays in place, he allowed us to test them against various defenses. Plays work perfectly when no defense is present. Put some opposition against them, and it's a different story. Intelligent defenses attempt to cut off the primary options of an offense. If the players can't adjust, everything comes to a halt. That's when it's time for some improvisation and coach applauded our initiative. Well, he applauded it when it worked. There were many times he said, "No, no, no. That's not what to do."

At the beginning of Bill Walton's sophomore season, when I was a junior, Coach had him staying close to the basket most of the time. By the middle of the year, because of Bill's passing talent, he was allowed to go to the high-post once in awhile. That started in a practice session when, all of a sudden, as the forward was overplayed, Bill ran up the key, received the ball, and gave Larry Hollyfield a gorgeous backdoor pass for an uncontested layup. By the time Bill was a senior, the entire offense ran through him. He touched the ball almost every time down the court, at the low-post and the high-post (freethrow line area).

Great leaders like Coach Wooden know, you can teach the workers how to do things, but 90% of most jobs involve solving problems that come up. Give workers the freedom to learn how to solve their own problems and you create thinkers. Create thinkers and your team/group/company will, in time, develop a culture of improvement. It all happens in the laboratory.

"I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think."-Socrates

## **Principle 5: Create a Family**

The early 1970s was the time of the miniskirt and every day, UCLA was like a Miniskirt Fashion Show. The best seat in the house was on Bruin Walk, a long stretch of asphalt that started at the Student Union and ended at the top of the hill where all the classrooms were. There, girls displayed their petite

garments and guys stopped to judge. No class credit was given to Mini Skirt watching, but we didn't mind. Education was education, credit or not. We were dedicated students and committed to learning.

The guys positioned themselves at the start of the runway and, when an experienced and good-looking girl began her ascent, they followed, grading her on fit, glide, and creativity. But once in a while, a girl would take a right turn and head for the long and steep stairway that led to the Student Union. As soon as she made her turn, guys, like vultures, circled and converged to the area at the bottom of the steps, where the view was best and they could judge with the most accuracy. On one occasion, I was one of them.

When the girl arrived on the tenth step, I was so in awe of her polished skill, I was literally in a trance, oblivious to everything else around me. When she approached the midway point of her inclined runway, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I thought it was one of the guys about to say, "One of the best, don't you think?" But it was not one of the guys; it was Coach Wooden. I should have known he would spot me out, me being almost seven-feet tall. I thought, 'How can I convince Coach that this is an art?' I couldn't. So I turned toward him, trying to put on an expression that communicated normality, and said, "Hi, Coach." That's when he said, "Swen, what are you doing?"

I was a quick thinker and said, "Coach, I'm looking for Russ," knowing he wouldn't buy the "art" thing. During the summer, I earned money by working for Russ on campus, but I stayed in touch during the school year. Coach knew Russ.

Coach looked up to the top of the steps, where the Mini Skirt Supermodel approached the pinnacle of her performance, and said, "Well, Swen, I don't think you're going to find Russ up that girl's skirt."

Great leaders care about those that work with them, not only as employees, but as people. They know where the boundaries are, but they, like parents, guide their workers in the areas of morality and civility, for example. They also take an active interest in the lives of their personnel, like family, hobbies, and dreams. They rejoice with them, hurt with them, and show concern when it is needed. In this way, leaders become the head of a kind of "family" at work. This is exactly why Coach Wooden got away from the office and out on the campus. He wanted to be involved in our lives, not to the point where he told us when to brush our teeth or what clothes to wear. However, he did teach us how to tie our shoes and put on our socks properly.

At one time or another, Coach played the role of father figure for all of us. Among us players, there are countless stories that will second what I'm saying, one of which is rather well-known. Bill Walton protested the Viet Nam War by taking part in a protest by lying down in the middle of Wilshire Boulevard, a very busy street in west Los Angeles. Coach talked to him and, after listening to Bill's reasoning, he convinced him to write a letter to President Nixon. Coincidentally, the United States withdrew its troops shortly thereafter.

Catching us doing things wrong was not the only way Coach practiced being a father to us. He also made it a point to warn us, so that we would avoid error. For example, during the pre-season, the last thing he told us before we left the floor after practice was, "You have worked hard on conditioning, but you can



tear yourself down between practices more than you can build yourself up during.” That helped make me eat well and leave the dormitory recreation room at a reasonable hour.

And, like a father, he praised us when we did things right. For example, once or twice a season, Coach would read us a letter he received from a custodian that worked for a school we had recently visited for a game. Those custodians told him they appreciated how clean we had left the locker rooms. His smile, after he read the letters, made us feel good about ourselves. We had pleased our father.

Leadership is more than helping people do their jobs and making them successful workers. It’s even more than taking the time to make workers feel like they are making a difference, as important as that is. The real leader is like a father and takes a genuine and heart-felt interest in the lives of those under his or her supervision. They study people for one reason: To find ways to help them develop into successful individuals, equipped with ingrained principles of morality, consideration for others, and a dispositional default to what is right. In this way, those leaders become the head of a family and, in time, develop that family into one where people trust each other, like to be around each other, and look out for each other, just as the leader has done.

By the way, since that day I helped judge the UCLA Mini Skirt Fashion Show, I didn’t do that anymore. From that point on, when I passed the Student Union steps on my way to class, I kept going, although I may have taken a glance or two to see if Russ was there.

## **Principle 6: Develop a Team**

Behind every great team, you’ll find a great leader.

My first year in the ABA, I was fortunate to win Rookie of the Year. When I returned to LA for the summer, Coach Wooden called me and asked if I would make a guest appearance at his basketball camp in Thousand Oaks. Of course, I accepted. The plan was for me to teach the players something about post play. So, I studied up and wrote my notes down on 3 X 5 cards. I was going to show them how to execute a hook shot and a counter move. I was to speak for about an hour, right after the campers had lunch.

When I walked into the gym, the counselors were playing a full-court pickup game while the campers watched. Most of the counselors were college players. Some of them were pretty talented and they were doing their best to show the kids how good they were. The scrimmage was a perfect demonstration of the complete opposite of what Coach was trying to teach the campers, complete with lots of one-on-one, trash talking, and chest pounding. The debacle was in its most primitive form when Coach walked into the gym.

He watched for about one minute and called the head counselor over. By that time I was standing pretty close to him. He told the counselor, “From now on, there will be no more counselor games.” That was that.

If there was a “signature attribute” of Coach Wooden’s teams, it would have been “Impeccable and Unselfish Team Play.” How did he accomplish that? It was a tough task because each one of us was

capable of scoring 30 points in a game. How did he take a bunch of high school and community college stars and convince them to sacrifice what they could do for themselves, and instead do what they should do for the group? How did he get us to believe, an engine, where all cylinders share the load, will go farther than one that puts the load on the two best ones? How did he get us to believe, the only chance we had at a championship was to send the NCAA's best team, not its best players?

The task at hand was not one exclusive to sports; wherever a group of individuals have a common goal, the default is towards looking out for number one, not working together. It takes a leader to bring them all together and mold them into a group of eager and likeminded team players. It takes a skilled leader to help them understand, teamwork is a two-sided coin. On one side, individual success is dependent on the help of others. The other side is where team success is contingent on the contribution of the individual. Rudyard Kipling captured that concept in his poem, "The Law of the Jungle," of which the end reads:

Now this is the law of the jungle,

As old and as true as the sky.

And the wolf that shall keep it may prosper,

But the wolf that shall break it must die.

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk,

The law runneth forward and back.

For the strength of the pack is the wolf,

And the strength of the wolf is the pack.

How did Coach develop a real team? Any book, speech, or article cannot cover the subject completely because it's far too broad. But I can tell you four things he did that, if you do them, will get you started toward creating a coordinated and focused unit. It has to do with "connections."

### **1. Create Connections**

Turn on almost any college basketball game and you'll see one or two players handling the ball too much and everything is out of sync. In Coach Wooden's system, the ball moved and each player had a defined role, with boundaries, to make the play work. Each role was connected to all the other roles. One could not work without the others. Connections create dependency.

### **2. Explain Connections**

Coach was very good at defining each role and explaining how they were connected and, every situation, how they could help each other. All of us were looking to score when the opportunity came and he wanted that, but he explained clearly we were to be primarily concerned with doing what was necessary at the time, to create the best shot possible, no matter who would take it. And that required detailed explanations of how connections worked.

### **3. Recognize Good Connections**

After one of our televised games, Coach was asked if Bill Walton could be interviewed. He told the announcer he was going to have two players there: Bill and me. In my opinion, my contribution to UCLA's success was not very much, but Coach thought it was and wanted to let everyone know how much I helped Bill in practice. Coach rarely recognized the leading scorers but he rarely failed to recognize players that made contributions not found on the statistic sheet. This helped create a team.

### **4. Fix Loose Connections**

What do you do if a player is not connected to the others? Coach always said, "The bench is a coach's greatest ally." The leader can fulfill numbers one, two, and three above but, if he does not "bench" those that become "islands," he will not develop the best team possible. In fact, it will fall apart.

Now back to Coach Wooden's basketball camp. I did a pretty good job, showing the hook shot and counter move. I even had a player or two come up so I could teach him. When my hour was almost over, I opened it up for questions. Like always, someone asked, "Can you dunk?" So I dunked the ball. Then another camper asked, "Can you do a 360?" (That's where I do one complete revolution in the air before dunking.) I was about to fulfill the request when, guess who stopped the show? Yup. Coach did and I don't need to say why.

## **Principle 7: Set Goals and Then Set Them Aside**

After one of us made a guest appearance at his summer basketball camp, it was customary to give Coach Wooden a ride home. His Encino condominium was on the way. The conversation was always good, usually including catching up, a little about basketball, and a joke or two.

The trip I remember most was the one after my rookie year. We walked from the gym to my car and we both got in. Coming to the camp, I had my radio turned way up. However, I failed to turn it off before shutting the engine down. So, when I started the engine, guess what? Right. The music was so loud, it rivaled a Metallica rock concert. Coach actually jumped in his seat. With quick reactions (developed during UCLA practices I'm sure), I turned the volume down to almost zero and apologized. "Sorry, Coach. I didn't realize I had the radio on."

He thought a couple of seconds (You know, with his index and middle finger pressed against his pursed lips; eyes moving right, left, right left) and said, "Swen, may I ask you a question?" I knew something humbling was about to happen but I told him to go ahead." (He was going to anyway.) He continued, "Are you hard of hearing? They have doctors for that, you know."

That was how the trip started but that's not what I wanted to tell you. A few minutes later, as we floated onto Highway 101 (I went speed limit.), I learned what Coach believed about setting goals. That season, UCLA had lost to North Carolina State in the first game of the Final Four. I wasn't about to bring it up but Coach did. He told me, "I know exactly why we lost that game. I let the players get away with too much. (I thought, 'Glad I wasn't there.') Swen, I've got a team this year that I will have no problem with. They're talented but they really play together. Don't tell anyone I said this but, we're going to win it all." I didn't, and they did.

As he went on, I learned, that prediction was not a wish. It was the product of a formula he developed and perfected, that would, with little margin for error, predict the winner of any upcoming game. He told me, "Every year, sometime during the summer, I predict the win/loss record for the next season. I was rarely wrong." (In hindsight, I should have taken him to Vegas with me.)

I asked him his secret for being so accurate. He said, "I take all things into account, even things not under my control." He went on to say, one game at a time, he determined the winner by considering the following: Home or away, Who the coach was, Talent vs. talent, Style vs. style, Time of day, Time of year, and Who the officials were. Lastly he said, "Nellie is the only one I give my prediction to. When I have finished, I seal it in an envelope, put the envelope in my desk drawer, and forget about it. For me, it's kind of a game but it's more than that. When I set the goal—and that's what I was doing—I get that part of it over with. From that moment on, I can concentrate on preparing practices. It's practices that can get you to your goal. Writing down and putting it away, for me, was like burying it. It helped me focus."

Imagine a basketball coach telling his team, "We've got to beat that team this Friday," or "We're one game out of first place. Let's win this next one." You don't really have to imagine, right? That happens. And it happens in business as well. Bosses go around reminding employees of the goals that need to be met. Hey, boss! They know. You don't have to tell them. You're wasting your time and theirs. The horse already knows the carrot is in front of his face. You put it there. You don't have to put up a sign that reads "carrot" also. He gets it, all right?

It's important for employees to know what, collectively, they are shooting for. In business, it's important for leaders to communicate the objectives like profit or market share. But that should ring for a minute, followed by the bell to go to work. At UCLA, we already knew our first goal: to win the conference. (You couldn't go to the playoffs if you didn't win league.) That was perfect for Coach. He didn't need to waste time saying it and that kept the focus away from the championship banners hanging above the grandstands, and down to the grindstone, the basketball floor. In a real sense, by getting our minds on daily improvement, he put the ultimate goal "away in a drawer."

A great leader sets reachable but challenging goals, and gets employees to focus on the process it takes to get there. But that didn't mean Coach didn't think about winning games during the season. On the contrary, he and his assistants were constantly studying statistics and evaluating chemistry to improve the team. But they also prepared for upcoming games. Coach said he didn't scout other teams because he was more concerned with our improvement than the opponents. Then how do you explain the fact,

the second team (of which I was a member) ran the opponents' plays during practice? He didn't scout by physically watching games, but he did know what the other teams ran.

Coach Wooden set the goal of winning the conference championship and we understood that, although it was unwritten and unspoken. Then, he had us focus on the journey to get there. Smart leaders set goals and then get their people doing what it takes to reach those goals.

I work for Costco, a Fortune 500 company. Every year, our CEO sets the budget objective—a determined margin of profit. But he tells us how to get there with “Our Mission” and “Our Code of Ethics.”

### **Our Mission**

To continually provide our members with quality goods and services at the lowest possible prices. In order to achieve our mission we will conduct our business with the following Code of Ethics in mind:

1. Obey the Law
2. Take Care of Our Members
3. Take care of Our Employees
4. Respect our Suppliers

If we do these four things throughout our organization, then we will achieve our ultimate goal, which is to:

5. Reward our shareholders

I learned something from Coach Wooden on that ride to his condo. Good leaders set goals and monitor progress towards those targets. But they don't allow their people to get so wrapped up in them it takes focus from what it takes to get there. It's like repeatedly looking at the scoreboard during a game. You can't concentrate on the game. Oh yes, I learned something else too: Turn that darn radio off before you shut the engine down.

### **Principle 8: Make Progress Assessment**

In the last posting, I presented how Coach Wooden set goals. He first predicted his win-loss record for the year. His first team goal was to win the conference championship. However, as a leader, he believed, in order to maximize his chances to reach that goal, paradoxically, he had to take his team's attention off it, and direct it toward every day improvement. And he did. He led us by taking our concern about hanging another championship banner in the Pauley Pavilion rafters, and shifting it to doing what was necessary to get that done. This posting presents how, as a leader, he did that.

In my three years at UCLA, Coach never mentioned the word, “win,” once. Words he used were “go,” “faster,” “again,” “hurry up,” and “bear down.” Oh yes. “Goodness gracious sakes alive.” Almost forgot. Coach believed success was not measured by how many banners you manage but rather by how much effort you made to reach your own potential, as an individual and as a team.

He first learned the concept as a boy from his father, Joshua, who said “Don’t try to be better than someone else but never cease trying to become the best you can be.”

When he got older, he ran across a poem by a Major League umpire, George Moriarty, called, The Road Ahead or the Road Behind. A close look at the poem will reveal four things that helped solidify Coach’s belief in the concept.

First, the poem helped him understand, the surest way to come short of winning the conference title was to give it too much attention.

*Yet there lives on the ancient claim-  
We win or lose within ourselves.  
The shining trophies on our shelves  
Can never win tomorrow’s game.*

Second, it is only through giving all that you can win it all.

*So you and I know deeper down  
There is a chance to win the crown,  
But when we fail to give our best,  
We simply haven’t met the test  
Of giving all and saving none  
Until the game is really won.  
Of showing what is meant by grit,  
Of playing through not letting up,  
It’s bearing down that wins the cup.*

Third, fate is determined, to a large degree, by us doing our best.

*And so the fates are seldom wrong,  
No matter how they twist and wind;  
It’s you and I who make our fates,  
We open up or close the gates.*

Last, even if the fates are wrong, success is measured by self effort, not what anyone else thinks you can do.

*For who can ask more of a man*

*Than giving all within his span.*

*Giving all, it seems to me,*

*Is not too far from victory.*

As a third base umpire, George Moriarty was an expert on this subject. After all, he watched thousands of batters come to the plate and fail. After striking out, the umpire watched them walk back to their dugouts, hunched over with heads looking down at their feet and body language that communicated disgust. Yet, some were more erect and, while walking back, seemed to be thinking, 'I have practiced and I failed today. But I'll practice more and I'll be back next time.'

From Joshua Wooden's words and from Mr. Moriarty's poem, Coach created his Pyramid of Success, not only for his own use but also so he could help his high school English students realize success. You see, he knew not all of them had the talent to get an A in his class, but their parents didn't agree. He gave them the opportunity to be successful anyway. His definition of success was,

Success is the peace of mind which is a direct result of the self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best of which you are capable.

When Coach Wooden came to UCLA in 1948, he brought the Pyramid with him. Although he rarely referred to the structure and blocks by name, he taught it, every day in practice and in games. Here are some examples I heard often:

Industriousness: "Don't try to do shortcuts. There's no substitute for hard work."

Enthusiasm: "We are here to do our best, but don't forget, this is a game. Have fun."

Loyalty: He was there, every day, for us. We did the same for him.

Cooperation: "Put the balls back in the rack! Those managers are not your servants."

Initiative: "I'd rather see you do something and make a mistake than not do something you're supposed to do."

Condition: "The way you get in top shape is to go as far as you can, and then go one step further."

Team Spirit: "Don't forget; you can't score if we don't pass you the ball."

Poise: "Don't force it! Just be yourself. It will happen."

Confidence: "Be confident but not cocky. Respect every opponent. They will always come into Pauley playing their best game."

So what does the Pyramid of Success have to do with assessing progress? I propose we continue to assess company progress by watching the numbers. After all, it's about profit and the bottom line. However, I also propose employee performance appraisals be linked to Coach Wooden's Pyramid of Success. Let's teach the Pyramid and assess employees on how much effort is being made to master the fifteen blocks. Do you think that will work?

American Agencies, a California-based collection agency believes so. For years, they have tied their employee performance reviews to the Pyramid because it fits, especially blocks like cooperation and self-control. Is it working. See for yourself. One employee states "Prior to learning all this, I was just somebody here for the paycheck, doing what I needed to get by. Now I use it inside and outside of work, and I think Coach John Wooden has a lot to do with the person I am today."

[http://www.americanagencies.com/about/john\\_wooden.php](http://www.americanagencies.com/about/john_wooden.php)

I recently went back to UCLA to visit. I walked into Pauley Pavilion. No one was there. I sat down in a seat and looked up to the rafters. Wow! All those banners. What history. Never really noticed them before.

Hanging on the wall in the master bedroom bathroom of his Encino condominium was a sign.

"I am me. I am the best me there is. I will always be a second-best somebody else."

## **Principle 9: Details Make the Difference**

It was on the verge of embarrassing, going to lunch at Fromin's Delicatessen with Coach Wooden. I love that place though. The moment we walked in, I was pleasantly met by the soothing aroma of mouth-watering chicken soup with matzo balls. Instantly, I felt at home. The host, a kind lady, greeted us. "Hello, Coach. How are you? And who is this tall gentleman with you? Is he one of your players?" I couldn't blame her for not knowing me; when I played at UCLA, she was playing in her crib, watching our games through the spokes, on a black and white TV. She led us directly to a window booth without asking where we'd like to sit. Obviously, Coach had his favorite spot. We were given water and handed menus accompanied by a formal invitation to enjoy ourselves.

We perused our menus. Actually, I perused my menu. Coach didn't even open his; he knew what he wanted. Now from my experience, once the customers have their water and menus, it is customary and generally good restaurant etiquette, for the waiter or waitress to come over after everyone has closed their menus. I still had mine open when she approached the booth. Was she in a hurry? Of course. Coach had trained those servants to be quick, just like he trained his players. I thought, 'Hello! I'm still on page one, barely past the Cold Sandwiches section. What happened to the "wait" in waitress?' But I had my eye on that Hot Corned Beef Sandwich (whole, not half) and the Matzo Ball Chicken soup (bowl, not cup). Coach was buying.

"And what would you like, Coach," asked the waitress. This is where it got on the brink of embarrassing.



"Young lady, I'll have the Tuna Fish Sandwich." Before she could ask what kind of bread Coach wanted, he said, "I'll have that on Rye and toasted." Again, she was about to say something but Coach went on (She acquiesced by pushing her shoulders forward a little and shifting her weight to the other knee), "Now mind you, I'd like it toasted to a golden brown, but not too brown and certainly not too light. Can you do that?"

She said, "Yes, of course."

He continued, "I'm not sure if I want the macaroni salad or the coleslaw. Who made the macaroni salad? Was it (he mentioned the cook's name but I can't remember because I was trying to get my jaw back up off the floor)? She confirmed it was not, so he ordered the coleslaw. I'm not going to go through the rest of it but he took plenty of time for me to decide what I wanted. I ordered the Corned Beef on Rye. The exhausted waitress, shifted her weight back to the other knee and asked me if I wanted macaroni salad or coleslaw. I didn't really care but I chose the macaroni salad. We waited for our food.

Ever gone car shopping? Two cars can look very much alike on the outside. Headlights, taillights, door handles, paint, instruments, and the bells and whistles operate well in both cars. When starting them up, both engines purr like well-oiled sewing machines. Both good cars, right? Yet, one will go 250,000 miles and the other will be in the junk yard in ten years. What's the difference? The difference is in what you cannot see on the surface. It's in the workmanship, gauge of metal, quality of the nuts and bolts, quantity of nuts and bolts, and the value of all the other little things that hold it together. The difference is in the detail.

In any organization, attention to detail always starts at the top and filters down. Coach Wooden once told me,

The difference between the number one and number two teams is attention to detail.

Coach was more detailed than anyone I have ever known, as you might guess from the story about Fromin's. As I look back to the UCLA days, it was Coach Wooden's consistent and sustained modeling and monitoring of detail that created the same habit in us players. That culture led to championships. Details make the difference.

You may be thinking by "detail" I mean the fine points of the fundamentals of basketball. However, long before our first practice, we were introduced to doing everything the right way, every time. Many have heard that Coach taught us how to put on our socks. In his book, *Wooden on Leadership*, co-written with Steve Jamison, Coach explains that his practice and teaching of details began with the sock demonstration. But it really started a half-hour before that. The sock demonstration took place during our first and only team meeting, two weeks before the first practice. The details started by being on time for that meeting. About one-half hour in, Coach had us take off our shoes and socks. He showed us the step-by-step method for putting on our socks. The purpose was to eliminate blisters. A blister may mean missing a game and that could result in the team not performing as it could.

I'd like to say that I was totally into Coach's performance but I wasn't. I kept thinking, 'Come on! I've been doing this since I was eight (maybe a little sooner but not much)! Let's get on the court.' He also demonstrated how to tie the shoe, one step at a time, so the tension on the laces was evenly-spread and it was the correct tension, not too tight and not too loose. Again I thought, 'What does this have to do with scoring points?' I would soon find out, great leaders are detailed in everything they do, not just in the functions of the job, and when that trait becomes contagious to the point where employees take it on, productivity increases.

Another example of Coach Wooden's habit of detail was our pre-game meal. It was always the same: A 16 oz New York steak, Baked potato with two slices of butter, Two slices of Melba Toast, A cup of peas, and a Fruit cup. Everything was measured to the ounce.

It was no surprise to me that his attention to detail carried over to the practice session. Practice started at 2:59, not 3:00 and ended at 5:29, not 5:30. He taught the fundamentals with the precision of a brain surgeon. "Elbow above the ear at finish, feet a little wider than the shoulders, and chin up." "When you make your cut, step on the elbow of the key." We had this drill called, "The Three-on-Two Conditioner." You entered the play by coming from out of bounds at half court and touching the center circle. You would not have wanted to be the guy that missed it by an inch. Inches missed were inches away from being the best. His detail was in everything and for an entire season. He never let up.

When we first enrolled at UCLA, I don't believe any of us were in the habit of paying attention to detail, at least not to that degree. But in time, we caught on. At some point I became convinced that those little things, when added up, ended up being a big factor. As it turned out, that big factor was the difference between being number one and two. In both of the finals I was a part of, we didn't beat ourselves; the other team beat itself with costly turnovers that we took full advantage of.

Was Coach Wooden's insistence on punctuality, putting on the socks, and tying the shoes the difference between number one and two? You decide. We saw that kind of thing day in and day out. He picked up trash outside Pauley Pavilion, had us put the balls away after a drill, and helped us clean the locker room before leaving the gym we visited. Great leaders model and monitor detail, even when it seems, to the novice, to be irrelevant to the bottom line. They will soon know, details are the difference between being first or second.

I work for Costco. Presently, I'm in the buying office but I started my career in the warehouse. My first day at the Aurora, Washington, Costco, I was walking through the building with the manager, Ray Allen. As we started down the first aisle, Ray saw a small piece of paper on the floor. He picked it up. Later, I discovered that this practice began with our CEO, Jim Sinegal, years before that, when Costco was opening its first warehouse. Today, every Costco employee is committed to detail and it started with a small piece of paper. For us at UCLA, it started with being on time, how to put on your socks, and how to lace your shoes.

The waitress brought us our sandwiches and salads. Coach Wooden watched me carefully and, after I took my first bite of macaroni salad he asked, "A little too much vinegar, right? I only eat it when the other cook makes it." I looked around to make sure the waitress wasn't listening.

## Principle 10: Lead by Being Careful

We have come to the tenth principle of leadership I learned from Coach Wooden. The first nine are:

1. Lead by knowing your workers' jobs Know what they do and how they do it This builds respect
2. Lead by prioritizing your responsibilities Focus on your main job; the bottom line This gives them the big picture
3. Leading is skilled teaching Learn the art of teaching This will make them skilled employees
4. Lead by creating a learning laboratory Get people involved in company improvement This will make them fulfilled employees
5. Lead by creating a family Be like a parent and be interested in their lives This will make work their family away from home
6. Lead by developing a team Create a group that works together and where no one cares who gets the credit This will accelerate production
7. Lead by setting goals and then setting them aside Set goals but work on the process to achieve them This will help realize those goals
8. Lead by making progress assessments Use the Pyramid of Success as a tool for employee development and also for assessment This will give them something they really want: To know where they stand and what they need to do to improve
9. Lead by paying attention to detail Be particular about the little things This will teach them the difference between number one and number two

The tenth principle is the most important. In fact, it is the only way to make the first nine happen. Leadership is first and foremost, leading by example. Better said, Leadership is leading by the right example, every day and every minute.

For Coach Wooden, there was nothing more important than maintaining his integrity. He worked on it every day and was very careful to do what he could to make his reputation equal his character. He understood and was completely aware of the fact, if he screwed up even once, his position as "leader" would be weakened.

For that reason, he took leadership very seriously and understood that we, his players, were watching his every move. One thing that convinced him of that was a poem he quoted often, one credited to Reverend Claude Wisdom White, Sr. If a leader understands the four warnings of this poem and lives them as Coach did, his chances for success will be greatly increased.

A Little Fellow Follows Me

Rev. Claude Wisdom White, Sr.

### **1. Be Careful; They Follow**

*A careful man I ought to be.*

*A little fellow follows me.*

*I dare not go astray,*

*For fear he'll go the self-same way.*

The only time we really got to see Coach and his wife, Nellie, together for any length of time was on road trips. I think he made a special effort to show us how to treat a woman. He opened doors for her, sat down after she did, and gently patted her on the back often.

"Everyone is a teacher to somebody." - John Wooden

### **2. Be Watchful; They Copy**

*I cannot once escape his eyes.*

*Whatever he sees me do, he tries.*

*Like me, he says, he's going to be,*

*That little chap who follows me.*

As I arrived at Coach's condo, he opened the door and let me in. He led me into the den and told me to sit down while he finished something. He was opening mail and answering it. I asked him how many pieces of mail he received a day. He told me, "I get about twelve and I try to answer them the same day I receive them." I'm still not good at it, but I've tried to do the same.

"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them." -James Arthur Baldwin

### **3. Be Fearful; They Trust**

*He thinks that I am good and fine,*

*Believes in every word of mine.*

*The base in me he must not see,*

*That little fellow who follows me.*

During games, Coach had a rolled up program in his hands. He used it for two reasons: To know the freethrow percentages of the other players and, to talk to the refs so we couldn't hear. On one occasion, after a bad call, Coach said, "That's a terrible call!" While running past our bench toward the other end, the ref replied with a smile, "They liked it on the other end." Coach smiled too. He told me years later, "Maybe I should not have said anything."

"The time comes upon every public man when it is best for him to keep his lips closed." Abraham Lincoln

#### **4. Be Mindful; They Become**

*I must remember as I go,  
Through summers' sun and winters' snow,  
I am building for the years to be,  
In the little chap who follows me.*

After a game, I don't believe I ever saw Coach pass up the opportunity to talk to a little boy or girl. But I can remember several times he avoided talking to a UCLA alumnus.

"The philosophy of the classroom today will be the philosophy of the government tomorrow." -Abraham Lincoln

Employees and players learn the same way little children do. First they follow, then they copy, next they trust, and last they become like their teachers. And most of it is done by example.

I was driving Coach to a restaurant where we were to have dinner. It was about the tenth time we were to eat there. As we left the parking garage he said, "Now Swen, make a right on White Oak." I told him I knew where the place was but thanked him. Just before Ventura Boulevard, he said, "Swen, don't go all the way to Ventura. Make a left into that driveway." I told him I knew that and could do it blindfolded." Then he said, "Now watch out for that corner. Sometimes a car coming the other way cuts it close." I asked him why he gave me the same instructions every time we went to the restaurant. He teasingly smiled, patted me on the thigh, and said, "I just wanted to remind you."

And I want to remind you (and me) that the first nine principles of leadership are important. You lead by knowing their jobs, prioritizing your responsibilities, teaching, creating an environment of continuous learning, creating a family and a team, setting goals but working on the process, making progress assessment, and by paying attention to detail. But it's your everyday example that will be the best teacher.