

Leadership: Going Through the Hoops

Leaders have to encourage mental readiness, first in themselves and then within everyone else.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Nov 01, 2015

I'm a lifelong basketball fan—and I still play as often as possible. I'm especially drawn to the flowing movement of this multifaceted game. At a high level, individual basketballers with very different strengths and limitations gel together into a single-minded unit. As San Antonio Spurs championship coach Gregg Popovich said, "Teamwork is the beauty of our sport, where you have five acting as one." Yet many leaders live in a world where co-workers may only weakly unite for common projects or disregard, disrespect, or even outright undercut one another. Here basketball leadership principles can provide excellent methods for coordinating human performance.

First, let's dispel some common myth perceptions shared by both basketball and leadership. While the game may appear linear—first offense and now back on defense—this two-way approach is actually simultaneous. While trying to score, a good team also positions its players to prevent opponents from getting their own points. Similarly, best leadership is simultaneously two-way, balancing a "preserve and protect" approach to sustain what's still working along with a "propel and progress" focus on continuously upgrading, not settling for mediocre status quo actions. Second, some erroneously believe prevailing in either leadership and basketball is only for the highly aggressive. Sure, great players and superior leaders can help produce more wins, but even the greatest in their prime are limited in what they can accomplish. As NBA championship-winning coach Dr. Jack Ramsay contended, "Teams that play together beat those teams with superior players who play more as individuals." Additionally, remember that a leader's impact is potentially significantly more diluted in companies with hundreds or thousands of people than in basketball, where only five play at a time.

Here are five winning basketball principles that directly apply to highest-level leadership.

- *Think beyond "winning."* At its highest level, basketball goes beyond only a win-lose game. Pat Riley teaches "It's what you get from games you lose that is extremely important," and record-setting coach Pat Summitt reflected, "Sometimes you learn more from losing than winning. Losing forces you to reexamine." That is, if you have the right leadership mindset, which often means flexibly changing strategy to reflect the strengths of the players you have. Contrast this to lesser leaders whose approach is, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."
- *Build on "mistakes."* While, of course, they want everything to always go according to plan, highest-level organizational leaders understand this won't always happen. In fact, they embrace setbacks as being temporary and as learning opportunities. And, knowing that arrogance ultimately leads either to lowered performance or outright failure, they first question/look at their own part, rather than reflexively and defensively blame their "players." Part of puncturing overblown "I-never-make-mistakes" arrogance entails putting performance ahead of "being right" or "doing it MY way." Coaching legend John Wooden: "Leaders are interested in finding the best way rather than having their own way." In contrast, I've seen too many corporate leaders who seem more highly wedded to their own brilliance at the expense of getting things done. Continuing to blame others for not acting safely, being "stupid" or "willful" or whatever, just doesn't work and actually furthers the divide between management influence and workers.
- *Support, sustain, and streamline team leadership.* Listen to some college coaching icons: Jim Valvano: "A person really doesn't become whole until he becomes a part of something that's bigger than himself." Mike Krzyzewski: "It's not about any one person. You've got to get over yourself and realize that it takes a group to get this thing done." Though these university coaches have relatively short-term players, they've been able to sustain records of high-level success. How? Through inspiring and transmitting principles of teamwork (Pat Summitt: "Teamwork doesn't come naturally. It must be taught.") This applies to everyone in any organization. It's critical that each person, beginning with those at the top, examine and know his or her role and how best to contribute. NBA scoring record-holder Kareem Abdul Jabbar explained, "One man can be a crucial ingredient on a team, but one man cannot make a team." Like executives and managers, basketball coaches don't actually play the game, don't shoot or defend. They have to work through others. That means providing and reinforcing the communication skills and team-first mindset essential for on-court team play. This partially entails recognizing all who contribute to winning—not just the "star" who makes athletically amazing shots. It's critical to acknowledge all have to work well for the team to progress: someone who sets a screen, blocks out, gets the rebound, outlets a pass to another who passes to the scorer (even the bench players who cheer these on). What this ultimately means for both basketball and companies is to nourish a wide range of leadership skills needed for success, well beyond the "dominant superstar" who tends to get an undue amount of kudos for team performance. For example, consider basketball great Bill Russell: "Create unselfishness as the most important team attribute." And "The most important measure of how good a game I played was how much better I'd made my teammates play."
- *Keep moving.* Stagnancy loses in both basketball and organizations. You have to try new things,

pilot new "plays," work in different ways with team members, and vary how to present needed training.

- *Practice and play mindfully.* These are skill sets that anyone can strengthen. No one knows how and where the ball will bounce, nor where markets will trend, nor what events will unseat the best-laid plans. Leaders have to encourage mental readiness, first in themselves and then within everyone else.

When Mike Krzyzewski says, "There are five fundamental qualities that make every team great: communication, trust, collective responsibility, caring, and pride," he might well be advising all of us how to become much more effective organizational leaders.

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