



Wooden on Leadership: How to Create Winning Organizations (2005)

By John Wooden and Steve Jamison

Reviewed April 2016

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During March Madness, a colleague recommended two books on leadership by college basketball coaches with relevance to nonprofit organizations. So I checked out *Leading with the Heart* by Duke's coach Mike Krzyzewski. Then, before I could get beyond the first 10 pages, Coach K reminded me why I hate Duke basketball when he [blatantly lied about an Oregon player](#) after Oregon's defeat of Duke.

So I didn't read it. I'm sure it sucked.

Instead, I read [Wooden on Leadership: How to Create Winning Organizations](#), by UCLA's legendary coach John Wooden with co-authorship by Steve Jamison. (The book came out when Wooden was 95, so I don't begrudge him the co-author).

I'm glad I read it and can definitely recommend it for those looking for leadership ideas, either as self-motivation or to teach others. With that said, it's a light read that wouldn't be my top choice among leadership-focused books I've reviewed.

Wooden's theory of team leadership centers around a leadership pyramid consisting of 15 building blocks. The foundation consists of five traits: industriousness, friendship, loyalty, cooperation, and enthusiasm. The second level consists of self-control, alertness, initiative, and intentness (which probably is better called persistence). The third level consists of conditioning, skill, and team spirit. The level just below the top consists of poise and confidence. The top is competitive greatness.

Wooden doesn't just name his pyramid, he uses a combination of anecdotes from his own life and others to demonstrate the elements of the pyramid and how he used them to build UCLA into a basketball powerhouse.

Here are a handful that stood out to me as particularly interesting for their cross-over lessons for nonprofit organizations:

- Wooden was persistent (what he calls "intentness."). He had been a head coach for 29 years before he won his first championship. But he had a system and he was seeing progress, so he stuck with it rather than chasing the latest fad. I've seen nonprofits who were seemingly building success who veered away from it by chasing money or some other bright shiny object.

- Wooden discusses his method of teaching, distinguishing between telling people what to do and teaching them how to do it as distinct activities. I have seen too many nonprofit training programs to count (including some of my own!) that focus too much on the former and not enough on the latter. Wooden's essential method for teaching basketball skills (explanation, demonstration, imitation, correction (if necessary), and repetition) are a valuable roadmap for teaching the skills nonprofit employees need to know.
- Wooden calls out the importance of an organization holding true to its values and living them by example as a route to attracting the right team. He tells the story of his courting of Lew Alcindor (who subsequently changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabar). What sold Alcindor on UCLA wasn't past team success or Wooden's charm, but evidence that UCLA took the value of racial equality seriously.
- While "competitive greatness" is the top of his pyramid, it's the result of all the other building blocks not the starting point. Indeed, Wooden emphasized repeatedly, with sidebars written by his players corroborating, that he never spoke to his team about the importance of winning, not so much as uttering the words prior to national championship games. Instead, he always told them to judge success based on whether they had played to the best of their ability. He focused on recruiting a team that shared this ethic – who weren't satisfied with winning – but would constantly strive to improve themselves. In the nonprofit world, my own experience similarly shows that those organizations that excel are those populated by team members who look to constantly better the team's performance rather than focusing on meeting goals and then coasting.

Of course, no book is perfect. This one was a bit repetitious. And the interweaving of Wooden's personal life story (if not for a snow storm and downed telephone line, he'd have been coaching the University of Minnesota)) with his leadership lessons was clunky. Some of the testimonials submitted by his former players were interesting, but others seemed to just be puff.

With that said, *Wooden on Leadership* is worth the quick read it is for anyone looking to generate ideas for their own leadership and for how their own organization instills leadership.

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