

The Leadership of John Wooden

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A decade ago, our Kravis Leadership Institute presented John Wooden with an award for outstanding leadership. As institute director, I had the great pleasure of spending time with Coach Wooden and presenting him with the award. He spoke about his well-known ["Pyramid of Success,"](#) a grouping of 25 behaviors that together create character. It is best known as a path for personal or athletic success, but it is also a blueprint for great leadership.

I thought I would honor John Wooden by sharing some stories and my own observations on Coach Wooden's visit to Claremont McKenna College and his interaction with our students. I also thought I would share the elements of Wooden's own character as a leader that were quite obvious, and distill those into some basic lessons for leaders.

Coach Wooden began his day at Claremont McKenna College by speaking to our student athletes and coaches. He asked questions and made observations. He later told me that he had not reflected much on NCAA Division III athletics, nor had he much contact with small colleges, such as ours, that offer no athletic scholarships - students play solely for the love of the sport. Just before his after-dinner speech, Coach Wooden turned to me and said, "I think if I had it to do all over again, I would coach Division III." I was stunned. Here was the greatest coach in the history of NCAA Division I sports, saying that he would give away all of the glory and attention for the "love of the game."

Lesson One for Leaders: Coach Wooden displayed his sincerity and his humility. Coaching was not about him, but about the student athletes and the success of their shared endeavor. The very best leaders are confident but display great humility.

At dinner that night at our Athenaeum, Coach Wooden engaged all of the students at the table (our head table with the speaker is reserved for students only - they made an exception in my case because I was presenting the leadership award). He spoke directly to each and answered questions clearly and honestly. I remember referring to the students as "our kids," and he gently and good-naturedly chided me, "Kids are baby goats, professor."

Lessons Two and Three for Leaders: Be transparent and present your true self to others. Like John Wooden, leaders should be both teachers and positive role models.

Coach Wooden made himself accessible to our student athletes - he wanted that to be a central part of his visit. Coach was told that one of our women's teams was away at the national playoffs, and that they were very disappointed to miss his visit to campus. When the team returned, he personally invited them to his home for lunch.

Lesson Four for Leaders: Focus on your people. Make leadership about the followers, not about the leader.

For decades I have told people that Coach John Wooden epitomized the very best leadership - in and out of sports. I will always cherish the brief time that I spent with him and remember his leadership lessons.