

## **So You Want to be a Mentor: What We Can Learn from John Wooden**

So you want to be a mentor for a young lawyer? It is a great responsibility with an opportunity to make a difference for the firm, its clients and most importantly the mentee. What does it take to be an outstanding mentor? Perhaps looking at the most outstanding coach in the history of sports can provide us with some meaningful clues.

The UCLA teams coached by John Wooden, "The Wizard of Westwood," remarkably won the NCAA championship 10 out of 11 years from 1964 through 1975, with a wide variety of different players and different teams. John Wooden concluded his coaching career in 1975 with a record of 885 wins and 203 losses, an unequaled winning percentage of .813. He coached UCLA to 88 consecutive victories. He also coached teams to a never-equalled four perfect seasons of 30-0. His UCLA teams won a record-setting 38 straight NCAA Tournament games. During that period the opposition tried a wide variety of tactics, including stalling for an entire half. No matter what the opposition tried, UCLA prevailed. What made John Wooden such a great coach and how can we use his techniques to be effective mentors?

John Wooden was, and remains, a man of impeccable character and an unwavering allegiance to principle. He had an interesting way of distinguishing between "character" and "reputation." He said: "Be more concerned about your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are while your reputation is merely what others think you are." He set the example for his players by his work and his deeds. He was trusted by Lew Alcindor, by Bill Walton and all those players who played for UCLA between them. He didn't permit one of his players to criticize another or to use profanity. He required that his players be clean-shaven. When Bill Walton told Wooden he would not shave, the Coach replied: "Well, I have great respect for people who stand up for what they believe, I do, and we're going to miss you." Wooden believed it was important to back up the rule, regardless of the player. As Bill Walton put it in his reflections on Coach Wooden: "Coach gained respect with a very simple method: He worked harder, longer, smarter, and was more dedicated, loyal, concerned, caring, detailed, meticulous and enthusiastic than anyone I have ever worked with."

As mentors, we lead by example. We are role models for the mentees we serve and for others in our firm. We must demonstrate our integrity, character and credibility by our behavior. If we expect excellence from them, we must perform to that level ourselves. Even more, as Steven Covey puts it: "The most important ingredient we put into any relationship is not what we say or what we do, but what we are."

Like Wooden, we must also gain the trust of the mentees we serve. Before we can offer advice, before we can offer criticism, we must earn their trust. They will evaluate us based on what we do far more than what we say. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "Who you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying." We must demonstrate that we are putting the interests of the firm, its clients and the mentees ahead of our own. In this process we must take the time necessary to understand what makes our mentee unique and special. Only then can we provide meaningful advice.

While he coached outstanding teams with outstanding records, John Wooden defined success differently than the final score. In 27 years as coach of UCLA, he never used the word “winning.” He once said it was possible to win and be outscored or to lose even when you outscored an opponent. To Wooden, success is a peace of mind that is the direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming. He believed anything stemming from that success is simply a by-product, whether it be the score, the trophy, a national championship, fame or fortune.

Young lawyers will want to compare themselves with their peers and others. Many who do will grow very unhappy in the profession and burn out after a few years. As mentors we need to instill in our mentees that they need to focus on becoming the very best lawyer they can possibly be. A very fine lawyer may actually be coasting, while a less outstanding lawyer may be achieving the maximum level possible. A good mentor will be able to tell and will encourage the mentee to become the best he or she can be.

The Wooden-coached UCLA teams did the little things well. In fact, it was the combination of doing a lot of little things well that enabled UCLA to win the big games. UCLA was always in superb condition. Wooden's philosophy was that UCLA would play its opponent evenly for one half and wear them down the second half. He stressed fundamentals, discipline on defense and quickness. He frequently said: “Big things are accomplished only through the perfection of minor details.”

Excellent lawyers pay close attention to the minor details. Several years ago the ABA Task Force on the Legal Profession issued the McCrate Report, which outlined fundamental lawyering skills. Those included:

1. Problem Solving;
2. Legal Analysis and Reasoning;
3. Legal Research;
4. Factual Investigation;
5. Communication;
6. Counseling;
7. Negotiation;
8. Litigation and Alternative Dispute Procedures;
9. Organization and Management of Legal Work;
10. Recognizing and Resolving Ethical Dilemmas.

The first three skills listed above may be considered part of the “science” of law. Hopefully new associates will be well versed in those when they begin their careers. The

last seven skills are more the “art” of lawyering. These are the fundamentals that we as mentors must help our mentees learn.

John Wooden adapted to changing circumstances. When UCLA won the first NCAA championship with Walt Hazzard and Gail Goodrich, no player on that team was taller than 6 feet 5 inches. When UCLA won with Lew Alcinder, he was over 7 feet tall and played the low post. John Wooden changed his offense to accommodate the change. The year after Alcinder graduated, Wooden went back to a high post offense, which gave forwards like Sidney Wicks and Curtis Rowe room on the side of the court to make their moves. Later, when UCLA won with Bill Walton at center, Wooden changed the offense once again. While changing some of the strategy, Wooden never changed his principles.

The legal profession is changing. In the last five years there has likely been more change than in the 95 years preceding it. The manner in which law firms and lawyers provide their services has provided the greatest changes. Our clients are taking a more active role on the team. They expect us to understand their businesses and industry, to be more efficient and to communicate better. As mentors we must make sure our mentees understand changes in our clients’ expectations and be prepared to respond to them.

John Wooden prepared his UCLA teams to win. He did not just prepare for one game, but also prepared for the entire season. He strongly believed that hard work, which he defined as industriousness, is essential to success. Interestingly though, that did not necessarily mean long practices. His practices were, in fact, among the shortest duration of any college team. John Wooden also had a practice philosophy. He used to say: "Don't mistake activity for achievement." He focused on fundamentals: shooting, passing, cutting, dribbling, blocking out on rebounds, and defense. His practices were well planned and each had specific goals.

As mentors we need to teach young lawyers to prepare for their career, not just for the assignment they are handling at the time. We need to convince them that their future is based on how well they invest their non-billable time. In this era, work and family life balance is important. Young lawyers need to know that being industrious is not the same as putting in long hours. As John Wooden put it: “You can work without being industrious , but you cannot be industrious without work.

So you want to be a mentor, what can we learn from Coach Wooden? I am sure there are many things we can learn, but for me, John Wooden teaches us five principles:

1. Character and principles of the mentor and how he or she treats those under him is essential. We must gain trust by our actions before we can effectively offer advice;
2. Convey to mentees that their measure of success is whether they are becoming the best lawyer they can be;
3. Teach Mentees to do the little things right. If they do, the big things will follow;

4. Being industrious and preparation and planning are the keys to success; and,
5. Anticipate and be prepared to make changes to stay on top.

John Wooden created “The Pyramid of Success” which provides a deeper understanding of his ideas for creating a successful team.

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**John R. Wooden, Head Basketball Coach, Emeritus, UCLA**

