

Coach K on Leadership: An Interview with Mike Krzyzewski

B Y S A N Y I N S I A N G A N D S I M B . S I T K I N

Mike Krzyzewski, known as Coach K, is recognized as one of the greatest basketball coaches of all time, leading the Duke men's basketball team to three national championships and ten Final Four appearances, being selected as Coach of the Decade of the 1990s by the National Association of Basketball Coaches, and being named National Coach of the Year twelve times. Recently, he was selected as the Coach of the U.S. National men's basketball team, where he will be applying his leadership in coaching professional players for the 2008 Olympics. His leadership skills translate beyond the basketball court as he is also a best-selling author, host of a successful radio program in which he interviews other proven leaders, and is asked frequently by Fortune 500 companies to appear as a motivational speaker. Because of his long-standing leadership record, ability to translate leadership lessons into application for business settings, and talent for developing other leaders, he was appointed to the faculty of the Fuqua School of Business in 2004. In this capacity, he is an Executive-in-Residence with the school's Fuqua/Coach K Center on Leadership & Ethics (COLE).

In the following interview with Coach K, we have structured the discussion to draw out his leadership story as an illustration for the Six Domains of Leadership, described in the preceding article.

Q: How do you define leadership?

A: First of all, you cannot have one definition of a leader. People always want to put others in a box and say this is what a leader is or isn't. To me, leadership is shown in so many different ways that you have to get to know your people and find out what type of leaders you have.

A vocal leader can be somebody who has the courage to stand up in a meeting and say, "Coach, I don't understand what you said" or "Hey, guys, what Coach means is this." But leadership doesn't have to be fiery. A simple statement by someone with

courage in a moment when people are together is sufficient. Another way of leading is just by example. J.J. Redick [a senior player on the team] leads through action rather than verbally. He works hard every day. He does extra work and as a result of others seeing that, he inspires those others to do more because he's doing more.

So leaders should be searching for leadership within their teams in a number of different ways and forms. The leadership may be vocal or quiet. If I see a really hard worker who is a good player, I know I've got a leader.

Q: Do you think that leadership can be taught? How do you teach or develop leaders?

A: I develop leadership by teaching it on an individual basis and sometimes on a collective basis to my team. I may take three players that I think are potential leaders and talk to them biweekly about ways that they could lead or things that they could try. On an individual basis, a good example is Greg Paulus [a freshman on the team in the 05–06 year]. I'm trying to develop his leadership and in learning about him, I discovered it's almost impossible for him to get angry. In contrast, I use anger in a positive way. Initially, in trying to teach him that, I was frustrated because he couldn't get angry. However, despite the difference in styles, I recognized that he can still lead and so we are working on how he can, with *his* personality, make people do the things that we are supposed to do as a group.

Q: How do you help the leaders on your team to remain authentic to their own style and be in roles that are best suited to their capabilities?



Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K) is head coach of Duke University's men's basketball team and COLE Executive-in-Residence at the Fuqua School of Business. Author of the New York Times best-seller "Leading with the Heart" and the forthcoming "Beyond Basketball—Coach K's Keywords to Success" (Warner Books), he is a frequent motivational speaker for many Fortune 500 companies. He is also host of the successful XM Satellite Radio show, "Basketball and Beyond."

A: Leadership is like a custom-made suit or shirt. That's the beauty of teaching leadership. There is no standardized test. There are levels of leadership and sometimes a person can be a leader, but they are unready to practice it at a higher level or they may

never be comfortable doing it. In spite of this, don't dismiss their importance in their leadership positions. As an example, my administrative assistant leads my sixth floor [office] but she doesn't have the comfort level and never will to lead my entire organization. Whereas with Greg Paulus, I might ask him to lead the freshman class while he's a freshman, but eventually prepare him to lead our whole team and be a coach someday. He's going to want to keep getting better and you just have to identify that with the individual.

You have got to be careful about thinking that everybody wants to be leader. Leadership is a heavy load for a lot of kids. They want to play. They want to score. You have to find the kids for whom leadership would be an exciting load because if they see it as a heavy load, you can potentially diminish the return on their talent.

That happens all the time because they are afraid that leading might take away from a talent that they have. I think that would be common in the workplace where someone who is really outstanding in a certain field and is comfortable in doing that activity does not want to expose himself or herself in another way

because it might diminish the activity. It could be perceived as a distraction and you as the leader have to be careful in how that will enhance that activity or hurt it.

And I don't think you should make that call for everybody or assume that everybody wants that. So in teaching it, leave room for people to grow into it. I might ask a freshman to do something, and recognize that he's just not ready.

Or you may have someone who can only lead up to a certain point because if he goes past that point, it diminishes him. I may have a player who is not comfortable past a certain point. I ask him to do something and then watch to see if he does it. He might do a little bit of it or he might do none of it and if I see that he isn't ready, I shift direction or step in somehow. Over the course of time, I get to know what to ask of him and what not to ask of him.

Then you have players who have a great desire to lead. I love to lead, so that's always been natural, and when I was younger I could not understand how others—players or people—would not want to do that. But then as I've gained experience, I understand. I wasn't a great shooter—maybe if I had been a great shooter I wouldn't have wanted to lead as much because it would have taken me away from my focus, my art.

Q: Part of what we see in inspirational leaders is the desire to go beyond their own comfort zones and the ability to motivate their team to do so as well and reach for the next step. So is part of leadership development understanding what people are capable of and then being able to push them out of their comfort zones?

A: I think getting them out of their comfort zone is a good thing to talk about. Once you are able to do that,

they are going to feel really good about what they accomplish once they do it. I don't think there's any greater satisfaction than leading a group of people to do something they couldn't do alone or without leadership. If you know that a person is capable of more, you should excite them and not scare them about what they might be able to do.

Q: When you do that, it takes a lot of trust and part of that trust-building in our leadership studies involves people having a sense that you understand who they are and respect them. So how do you create that sense of trust?

A: Trust is built over a long time and you start building trust by developing a relationship. Trust has equity, trust never stops building or you always have to work on trust. I usually begin building that trust and relationship with my players throughout their recruitment. Before they even get to Duke, we would have achieved a certain level of trust and communication.

It's analogous to teaching your kids how to swim—you put them in the water and ask them to swim to you. They can tell you that they are afraid—and you overcome that fear by asking them if you've ever let them down. When the answer is “no” then they know that you will be there for them and that they can trust you.

I let my players know that there's no bad consequence of trying to lead in this situation right now. It's like a free shot when you're with me. Now, as you learn to do it, there will be consequences and results—I think you can do this; I think you can be the captain of our team; I think

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Leadership has no standardized test.
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you can coach at a major university. With some youngster who played for me, he may be an assistant coach for me, and then take his first coaching job. He can feel that he may not be able to do it. I tell him—you can do it, trust me, here are the things to get over the hump.

They think they can do it, they're just at times afraid to do it. A good leader innately believes they can do it, but they need a push every once in a while.

Q: As a leader, how do you deal with the risks and fears that accompany being outside your comfort zone? To what extent do you cope alone and to what extent do you depend on those around you?

A: I think really good leaders are alone at times—alone in their thoughts, in planning action—and when they share their thoughts, they expose themselves and are open then for criticism; they're open for defeat, victory, whatever it is.

I derive my strength from my strong infrastructure. I have leadership throughout my organization. I have a team behind me that's been there for a long time and when I say something, they will be open about what they think we should do, and tell me before we take action if there are pitfalls. That's the reinforcement I need. Whereas a younger person might need it from somebody saying just go forward. They may not even understand the complete situation, but they understand the person. For example, if I were counseling or mentoring you, there's no way I would have a feel for everything you're going to do, but I know you and so I would want you to be honest with me about your feelings and then I would give you advice going forward.

It's different for me in my position. There's nobody telling me “don't worry about it” and there hasn't been for a while. So when I go forward, it doesn't mean I'm not afraid at times. Fear helps you analyze the situation more carefully. It doesn't mean I never ask advice from other leaders, but I'll get that from my strong infrastructure, people who've been with me for a long, long period of time.

Q: How much do you delegate and how hands-on or hands-off do you need to be in order to cultivate other leaders?

A: First of all, you meet with them and even before you meet with them, you give them responsibilities that will put them in a position where they have to lead. You don't micromanage. You empower your personnel to make decisions and then let them develop a course of action in how to get their people to that decision in a positive way. You can't give them responsibilities without empowering them to use their capabilities, their leadership, their techniques to

accomplish a goal, whether that goal is how we fundraise or how we teach post defense.

Steve Wojciechowski is teaching post defense and I'll critique a bit, but he's teaching it. He'll come up with his own drills and plans and we'll discuss them from different perspectives—we hadn't thought of that, did we think of this, why don't we try that?

So you're still a part of everything, but what happens when you empower is you create ownership and that is critical in the development of a total team. If my players

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Trust has equity.
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are playing for *me*, we will never ever achieve the level that we can. If the players play because of us, we will have a greater chance of being who we can be. It's simple to understand, but it is not easy to get that across in practice because it has to be ongoing.

Q: How does that empowerment help take the team or organization to the next level and what does that mean for its ability to sustain success?

A: The outcome of that empowerment is the ability to share ideas and contribute ideas across the board. The other thing that happens if you get that going, is if the leader leaves or is no longer there, that team has a greater chance of still going forward because it wasn't just the leader. The values, the way you did it, belongs to the team. If a leader has done a great job with his team, then that team can function without the leader at a certain level—whether that leader is on leave or just leaves. This gives an unbelievable base to whatever the new leadership is.

The new leader should then be careful about not having everybody adjust to him or her. If you take over a successful organization that's going pretty well and you are the new leader, you have to be careful that everyone else is not just making the adjustments. The leader should adjust as well.

To come into an organization with the notion that "It's my way or the highway" is really a ridiculous thing because in that adjustment period, if everyone is only adjusting to the leader, your team will lose share. It will lose market share and it may lose its personality along the way. It may never develop a new one.

I'm going through that right now in putting our national Olympic team together—I've tried not to have everyone adjust to me. People are instinctive in what they're doing, especially when they're successful. So if you come in as a leader and tell them specifically what to do, then the learning curve to become instinctive can be tragic.

Before you do anything you should always do a complete analysis, and then adjust, as I have adjusted with our national team. There are things I'm doing because I'm coaching pro players that I wouldn't do in coaching college players. The players already know certain

things and they are at a different age so I'm going through a leadership exercise right now as our national coach for the next three years and making those adjustments. I'm living that right now.

Q: You have these players coming from high school where they were the best of the best in their world and now they're here and there are others who are better than them. Some will be leaders, whereas others will take a

more supportive role. How do you deal with the human dynamics of that?

A: In dealing with the human dynamics, I remind each player: "Each of you will run your own race. Don't judge yourself by the race another one of your classmates is running. Then as a group we run a collective race, where I'll try to bring all of your races along properly."

What can happen is a youngster can get fixated on his own race with someone else on the team and not the race that the team is on. The best example of a great race

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You can't give people responsibilities without empowering them to use their capabilities.
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that was run by two players would be Elton Brand and Shane Battier—who came in at the same time.

Once they were here, Elton’s physical capabilities were more advanced and by the end of the sophomore year, he went pro and was the number 1 pick overall and the college player of the year. Shane was a starter, but not an all-American. In his next two years, he became an all-American and the college player of the year. His race took four years. Elton’s took two. They both became national players of the year. Now that’s the ultimate two—those are nice races to run.

Sometimes it doesn’t turn out that well. A player comes in with another player and is constantly looking at that other player as the barometer of how successful he is and he might transfer or never achieve the level that he could have achieved because he never felt good about himself because he always felt he wasn’t good enough no matter what you said to him because of what that other kid was doing in his class. I mean those are the dynamics that go on in the workplace and on teams all the time and sometimes you can control them and sometimes you can’t.

So you have to be very careful about how you bring people along and the competition that they see within their own class or within the team or within the business.

Q: Every talk we’ve heard you give, you’ve always mentioned your family in some way. How do you use your family as a model for providing context for your team in terms of this infrastructure you’re talking about, in terms of modeling leadership?

A: My family gives me the most balance because at the end of the day that’s what is important. Winning basketball games is important, but the most important thing is how you take care of your family. Is there love and

support? Are they healthy, are they all a part of what you’re doing? So that the main support you get and the main safety net that you have is your family. I learned that from my mom, who was always there. That’s the kind of safety net I want to give my family and it’s what they give back to me. There’s no way that I can fail in the eyes of my family as long as I’m doing everything in an ethical manner. I can lose games and still be dad, granddad, husband—that’s not going to shake the foundation. The result of my actions in my business life will never weaken my family strength.



The other part for me is to be in a good state ethically, faithwise, healthwise—so I’m not weak. I don’t want to feel guilt in some other area of my life. To keep a good balance, so that when I say we’re going to do this, I have my full force going forward. I’ve learned over the years that for me, I have to have a really good balance.

In many ways, by modeling that for my players, it’s helped to remind them that even though winning is important, let’s keep it in perspective. In other words, my players, as long as they work out and they are good people, they can define their own success or failure. ■