

March Madness: 5 Lessons You Need to Know

By Jude Rake



It's March Madness again, and business leaders can learn a lot by studying how the best college basketball coaches optimize the performance of their teams.

For more than three decades one of my favorite avocations has been coaching youth athletics. Over those years I've read several books written by successful basketball coaches that have informed my passion for coaching overachievement. The works of John Wooden, Pat Summit, and Dean Smith are my favorites. Each of these coaches achieved monumental success by inspiring their players to achieve more than many thought possible.

I've also studied the behavior of coaches who were not as successful over the long haul. It's astonishing how clueless many of them are when it comes to motivating their players to peak performance. They spend a large percentage of time running up and down the sidelines barking orders to fix this or that ASAP. Now I'll be the first to admit that it is rare that you can't find a player on the court doing something wrong, even on the most competitive teams. These coaches are determined to catch as many mistakes as possible and steer each player in the right direction, pronto.

It's become clear to me that coaches who persistently call out and berate their athletes for mistakes are mostly in it for themselves. Many are former athletes who did not fully realize their sports dreams in their prime and are trying to live through the players they now coach. While the players might not understand the psychology behind their coach's behavior, I can often see in their eyes that their coach has lost them. Maybe not entirely, but their level of enthusiasm and desire has been stifled. Consequently, I've coached many underdogs who have risen to conquer much more talented teams with the

assistance of opposing coaches who did not know how to tap into the full potential of their players. These coaches were blinded by their own egocentric motives.

Sound familiar? The parallels with business are abundant. Companies are littered with managers who elbowed and bullied their way up the ladder fueled by outsized ambition, sound technical skills, and impressive intellect, only to flame out as leaders.

Bad Coaches and Leaders

Most coaches and leaders ascend to ever-increasing levels of influence because they are smart and assertive. They may deliver good results short-term but not necessarily because they are great at bringing out the best in other people. Here's why:

1. They are unprepared.

Most organizations are complicit because they treat leadership as though it is an innate ability. Something you're born with. Something that just happens naturally. While most organizations readily invest in teaching their employees requisite skills, they provide little development when it comes to leading people. This is one of the reasons why so many organizations are under-led and over-managed, and why so many people feel disengaged from their organization's mission and goals.

2. They blame, belittle and stifle others.

The true test of leadership comes when times get tough. Bad coaches and leaders try to compensate for their shortcomings by commanding, controlling, and even attacking others. This leads to a cover-your-ass culture that consistently under-achieves, rather than a vibrant culture of learning and growth. There's a difference between holding people accountable, and ridiculing and punishing people for delivering poor results. The end result is an unhealthy culture of failure avoidance. And this fear of failure leads to a lack of courage to take smart risks.

3. They are out of touch.

This "gotcha" approach to leadership has always had its limitations, but it's increasingly ineffective in a more socially connected world that expects more from leaders. The continued progression of women into leadership is having a profound impact on the way companies run because they tend to have higher levels of emotional intelligence. Further, the attitudes of the Millennial Generation are accelerating progress toward a workforce that expects emotionally intelligent leaders who engage and inspire rather than boss and bully.

Good Coaches and Leaders

While the best coaches and leaders are certainly demanding and they set a very high performance bar, they don't let their drive to win get in the way of motivating their teams

to unprecedented levels of performance. They lead their team to achieve more than they thought possible by revealing what success looks like, catching individuals doing something well, and showing their gratitude (often publicly and always genuinely). They understand that people need a model of success much more than they need a critic.

1. They accentuate the positive

The best leaders go beyond praise because they understand the value of teachable moments. When an individual elevates his or her game, these leaders highlight the success attributes others need to emulate to perform at a higher level. Capturing and socializing that “ah-ha moment” is an exponentially powerful and force-multiplying leadership tool, and much more influential than publicly criticizing someone for poor performance. These leaders tap into their teams' strengths and their innate desire to make a difference, and they instill a belief that the combination of teamwork, courage, hustle, and resourcefulness can overcome many shortcomings.

2. They have integrity grounded in a strong sense of personal purpose.

Integrity is much more than simply being honest. It's about walking the talk: operating transparently, delivering on promises, and remaining steadfastly focused on doing the right things.

The best leaders have a strong sense of personal purpose. They tend to be more motivated by opportunities to learn and grow, increase their influence, be recognized for their contributions, and lift up others who want to do the same. Of course money is important, but leaders who are motivated first and foremost by money at the expense of more noble aspirations tend to lose their moral compass over time.

3. They are self-aware.

Similar to Wooden, Summit, and Smith, the best leaders are self-aware enough to know that their keen desire to win can be misinterpreted as intolerance of bad news. So they bend over backwards to welcome bad news and mistakes in need of resolution, and they establish fact-based scorecards to ensure objective assessment of performance.

These leaders cultivate healthier cultures of trust because they are capable of being vulnerable with the people they lead. They are in touch with their emotions, and fully aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

4. They manage their emotions.

This self-awareness enables them to deal effectively with ambiguity and even crises because they don't panic. These are the moments that set them apart. While others recoil toward self-preservation, these leaders suspend judgment, analyze the situation, and draw out the best thinking of their teammates in search of win-win solutions. Their ability to self-regulate helps them make tough and sometimes unpopular decisions, even while respecting the feelings of others, because they don't confuse empathy with

sympathy. It also helps them avoid impulsive temptations, sending a powerful message to the people they lead that integrity matters as much as results.

5. They have a growth mindset.

These leaders send an important message when they salute those who have the courage and initiative to come forward with bad news and a plan for smart course correction. This encourages people to seek opportunities to improve performance rather than hide screw-ups. The ultimate result is a vibrant culture of collaboration, innovation, and accountability that fuels sustained growth, rather than a culture that misses learning opportunities because people hide mistakes to avoid punishment.

At the end of the day, leadership is about exponentially enabling the organization you lead to perform to its full potential. Many leaders learned at an early age that being a leader requires them to be tough on the people they lead. But the best leaders, just like the best college basketball coaches, know that it takes much more than that to optimize performance and long-term results.

As with so many things in life, it's about striking the right balance. The best coaches and leaders are able to strike that balance over the long-haul because they are fueled by the strong sense of responsibility they feel toward their team.

Learn more about the coaches and leaders who inspired me over the years, along with useful leadership tips and tools in my book, [The Bridge to Growth](#).



About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that guides family-owned businesses, private Boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams to achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding JDR, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for eleven years in both private and public organizations. In each of these roles he built and led successful leadership teams that fueled significant improvements in workforce engagement, collaboration, accountability, and results. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results And Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at jdrgrowthpartners.com and [The Bridge to Growth](#). Follow Jude on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).