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## Leadership and Recruitment: What Leaders Can Learn From Coach Robert Montgomery Knight

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## [Leadership and Recruitment: What Leaders Can Learn From Coach Robert Montgomery Knight: A Conceptual View](#)

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### Introduction

It has always puzzled me why organizations do not seem to take the same amount of time and energy to interview and recruit prospective employees as that shown by sports teams. In this essay, I will be looking at recruitment and leadership typically found in a business environment and that found in a basketball (sports) context; specifically Division I college basketball.

#### Recruitment In a Business Environment

Within the traditional business environment the normal recruitment process typically involves the organization either hiring a recruitment firm to find a suitable candidate (a head hunter), doing it themselves (going after) a star from another organization, or going through the usual process of advertising and having human resources sort through a pile of resume's. In very few instances is the prospective employee given the opportunity to actually demonstrate to the employer just how well they can perform their job responsibilities within the context of the culture they will be asked to work in?

The question I typically ask myself, and put forth to my MBA students, is why doesn't business adapt the same process of hiring employees, hopefully future leaders within the company, as athletic teams do in recruiting players to play competitive (college basketball) sports? It is hard to imagine a situation where a top college basketball team, or for that matter any athletic team, agreeing to allow someone to play who they have never seen perform? Not likely, but for some reason this is exactly what happens in business. College recruiters begin the scouting process as early as elementary school as was the case with LeBron James who was scouted in elementary school (8<sup>th</sup> grade) and currently plays for the Cleveland Cavaliers of the National Basketball Association (NBA). The same is actually true for competitive chess teams, debate teams, etc., any team that competes.

Every basketball player knows exactly how to play their position (their job). Each player knows the rules of the game (the culture), and what to do if a situation arises in which something out of the ordinary occurs (being proactive). The leader (the coach) of the team is there to guide and direct the team and respond to situations as they arise on the court (or in a given department). The leader is there to communicate and reinforce what needs to be done to reach the desired outcome; winning the game (taking a leadership position within their particular line of business). Coaches rightly assume that their players (employees) have the skills necessary to perform their

Why then does this same scenario not usually happen within a business environment? For some

unknown reason, in too many cases, corporations assume that their employees (the players) already know what to do. They may know their discipline but what about all the other factors that go into being a team player. These usually never reveal themselves until the person is already hired but what about learning how the game is played with regard to the culture of the organization? Do they get along with the others they have been assigned to work with? In the same way that a team has a culture, established by the head coach, so do companies (managers, directors, whatever you want to call them). I can't imagine a basketball program recruiting a player without watching them play. At the same time I cannot imagine a player signing on to play for a team without first understanding the personality of the coach (leader) as well as the other players (fellow employees) on the team.

I am continually amazed at how many of my MBA students are hired with just one or two interviews. Sure, they interview with the human resources department and then the individual that they will ultimately report to but do they know anything about the culture of the organization? Do they know anything about their soon to be immediate supervisor? Do they know anything about the other individuals in the department; in all likelihood, no? I once had a student who was going on a job interview and as a favor to me agreed to ask the human resources director to tell her about the culture of the company and contrast it to the culture of the department she would be working in. The answer she received was that the company had several employees representing a number of different cultures including India, Poland, Germany and even Africa. I would like to think that this is the exception rather than the rule.

So what separates leadership in business from leadership on the basketball court? In theory, nothing; in actuality everything. One of the greatest differences between leadership in sports and leadership in the corporate world is that successes and failure on the playing field, in this case the basketball court, is witnessed by everyone. This is not usually the case in corporate America. Every successful coach will tell you that they are always looking for someone on the team to assume the leadership position, both on and off the playing field.

Jim Evans, in his article entitled, "Commonsense Leadership", that appeared in Volume 1, Issue 1 of Academic Leadership, has stated that in part commonsense leaders:

1. have the vision to know themselves
2. have the vision to inspire others and generate commitment
3. have the vision to see beyond each challenge
4. have the vision to know what must be done
5. have the courage to do what must be done
6. are skilled communicators

Just how many leaders, managers, supervisors, whatever you want to call them in business, know themselves, inspire others through their works and deeds, take the time to see beyond every challenge, have a vision regarding what they know must be done to move to the next level, and have the ability to communicate clearly and effectively, to everyone?

The Leadership Style of Robert Montgomery Knight:

## Upfront, In Your Face, Blatantly Honest but You Know What to Expect

### Background

Bob Knight was born on October 25, 1940 in the small northeastern Ohio town of Massillon. After graduating from Orville High School, where he was President of the National Honor Society, Knight enrolled in Ohio State University where he played basketball for three seasons (1960-1963) including Ohio State's 1960 national championship team.

Knight assumed his first head coaching position at the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1965. He would go on to compile a 102 and 50 record over the course of six seasons, a record no other basketball coach in West Point history has been able to duplicate. On April 1, 1971 he began what would become a 29 year tenure as head coach at Indiana University, one of the top collegiate basketball programs in the country. While at Indiana he would go on to win 11 Big Ten Conference Championships, finish the 1975-1976 season with a perfect 32-0 record while at the same time winning the first of what would eventually become three NCAA National Championships. He would also become the youngest coach to ever win 200, 300, 400, 500, 600 and 700 games. Before being forced to leave Indiana in 2000 he had compiled a record of 763-290. He then assumed the head coaching position at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. In his first two years at Texas Tech he took a basketball program that had a history of losing seasons to two NCAA appearances. He was elected to the International Basketball Hall of Fame in 1991.

### Bob Knight Recruiting, Leading and Winning

In the 1988 book, *Bob Knight: His Own Man*, by John Mellen, Knight is quoted as making the following statement to his first team upon assuming the head coaching position at Indiana, "We're going to win the national championship" he told them. "That's everyone's goal. But we're going to do it with good people the right way" (Mellon, 1988). There is absolutely no question regarding the vision, the goal, the commitment, the people, or who was going to make it happen. I have asked my MBA students if they ever encountered a manager this clear in laying out what had to be done and who was going to do it. The answer is usually no.

In 2001 a book entitled, *Quotable General: Words of Wisdom, Motivation, & Success By and About BOBBY KNIGHT, Basketball's Unrivaled Teacher*, by Monte Carpenter, joined the Bob Knight bibliography. The next several paragraphs, followed by my comments, are offered as examples of leadership as put forth by Bob Knight in his own words. As you read these quotes keep in the mind their real life applications in the business world.

In leadership, you're trying to get people to be better than they think they can be, to reach within themselves. You're trying to get a guy to do something he doesn't want to do – and does it well.

Can you picture a business or department within a business where this philosophy is part of the culture? Where everyone believes this, lives it, and is concerned with creating an environment where helping co-workers work to their fullest is the norm.

I think being decisive is one of life's greatest qualities. I try to impress it on my own kids. Most people don't like to make decisions.

Very few people like to make decisions. The role of the leader is to find these individuals and nurture them to their and everyone else's benefit.

Coaching is motivation. Coaching is leadership.

Coaching, at whatever level is all about motivating. Supposedly everyone who has been hired (recruited) has the skills necessary to effectively do their job (play their position). The leader continues to build and nurture these skills.

I like decisive people. When Truman fired McArthur it wasn't a matter of being right or wrong. It was having the guts to do it.

Once again, doing what is necessary.

He has me doing things I used to believe were impossible. He makes us better basketball players, but first of all, he makes us better men. Is that bad?

If I owned a business and had individuals in leadership positions with this type of attitude the sky would be the limit.

The following selection from a 1984 interview by David Israel appeared in Playboy Magazine and provides some additional insights into the leadership philosophy of Bob Knight.

PLAYBOY: All right: Besides being a nice business, what is coaching?

KNIGHT: Coaching is motivation. Coaching is leadership. Coaching is basically understanding human nature. Human nature is, very simply, this: Human nature—for you, for me, for anybody—dictates to us that we do what we have to get by. We got to go beyond just getting by. And if we can do that, then we got a chance to be successful as a team. So I got to understand that.

Then the next thing I got to do is get these players to play harder than they think they can play. I got to get them to work harder than they think they can work. John Ritter, who played on my first team at Indiana, said something about my approach to coaching that will never be topped. He said, "Well Bobby Knight just gets us to play better than we ever thought we could play." I could never have anything nicer said about what I'm trying to do. And in any leadership role, you're trying to get people to be better than they think they can be. You're trying to get people to work harder than they ever thought they could work. You're trying to get people to reach within themselves. Leadership. You're trying to get a guy to do something he doesn't want to do—and to do it well. That's what leadership is.

### Conclusion

I have intentionally not written about what some would call the "dark" side of Bob Knight. The purpose of this article is simply to illustrate how certain leadership traits exhibited by basketball coaches could be adapted by business leaders (managers and coaches) not only in getting the best worker, player, but making sure the "fit" is also the best "fit" possible for everyone involved.

In addition to Bob Knight two other present day coaches are certainly worthy of mention in any discussion of leadership; Mike Krzyzewski, who played basketball for Knight at West Point and has

gone on to win three national championships while head coach at Duke and Pat Summitt, head women's coach at Tennessee, winner of five national championships. The common thread that these coaches have is that they mirror Knight's philosophy and in the case of Pat Summitt his volatility. Krzyzewski, on the other hand, takes what seems to be a less excitable approach but still one that feeds off the same basic leadership tenants; ones he learned from Bob Knight.

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