

Developing Team Leadership: An Interview With Coach Mike Krzyzewski

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Teams increasingly are being relied upon to accomplish work both in corporations and a wide variety of other kinds of organizations. The quality of team leadership, whether from formal leaders or from other team members, is becoming increasingly important. Thus, the question, "What does it take to foster and develop superb team leadership?" is a critically important one.

To explore this question, we interviewed Duke University's renowned basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski, to obtain his insights, experiences, and advice for those of us whose day jobs centrally involve the study or development of individual and shared team leadership. Krzyzewski has coached the Duke Men's Basketball team for 31 years, and also has been head coach of the United States National Men's Basketball Team. He is one of only three coaches in NCAA history to have won four or more National Men's Division I Basketball titles, and in one remarkable year, his Duke and United States teams won the NCAA title, the Olympic Gold Medal, and the World Basketball Championship. He is the author of five books, a much-in-demand speaker, and the host of a popular radio show, "Beyond Basketball," in which he discusses leadership issues with a wide variety of guests from all sectors of society.

To draw on his extraordinary record of successful team leadership and leader development, we structured our interview around three general questions: How do you recruit and develop team leaders? How do you create a context for team success? And how do you develop and sustain your own team leadership capacity?

RECRUITING AND DEVELOPING TEAM LEADERS

You have had players who are quite different from each other, and one of your trademarks is

how you adjust your system and strategy to the composition of your team each year. How do you go about that?

Let me illustrate with an example. In our most recent team, we had senior co-captains who were supposed to be our leaders. They had two different personalities. One, Kyle Singler, was not a verbal leader; he led through example, and I never asked him to do much more than that. I said, "You play hard and you practice hard all the time. But every once in a while, just say something to a teammate like 'That's good' or in a huddle, say 'Let's go.'" If I asked him to do too much more verbally, I think it would have messed him up. In contrast, Nolan Smith was effervescent. He led us well on the road or in the locker room and on the court. But it was really difficult for him to confront somebody. So I also turned to the point guard and said, "During the game, you are okay to confront somebody." And then, as a staff, we had to do more confrontation because the two guys we had, it didn't fit their wheelhouse. I try to adjust my leadership based on who I have to help me lead the team.

You've said that each team leader should be asked to do different things depending on what their capabilities are. And you may be able to develop them, but you are not going to change who they are. How do you walk the fine line between encouraging them to develop new capabilities as leaders and accepting their liabilities?

I tried to meet twice a month with Kyle and Nolan, just empathizing with them, not trying to get them to be anybody different. I was concerned about insisting "You need to be this leader or that leader." I wanted them to be a player too, and I

didn't want leading to conflict with their natural playing abilities. I think that is important. Like in a business, when somebody is promoted to a certain position, you say, "I now need you to lead." Well, the reason they are up there is because they've got certain abilities, whether they're with sales, or whatever it is they do. We want to keep their strengths while working on their leadership. I have had other guys who just led the whole team, and being a leader helped them become better players. But that is not always the case. I will tell you, it's tough to find a lot of leaders.

Helping Budding Leaders Realize Their Potential

Sometimes the best leaders are the youngest or newest team members. How do you encourage them to step forward while still showing respect for the more seasoned members of the team?

Leadership is plural, not singular, so there can be a number of leaders. You want to make sure that as you are developing your senior leaders, you don't stifle a freshman who has great leadership qualities. You give them opportunities to help the older leader and then by the time they do get to be that older person, they are even better at what they do.

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I think it's important, before they ever join the team, that I have seen them on their high school teams. So I already know this kid has leadership ability, he has good communication skills, he is somebody who could lead by example or verbally. And then I try to encourage those who I think would be potential leaders to help out even as freshmen. What I try to do is not assume that just because the oldest person is the oldest that he is the leader. You hope that they are because they have the most experience, but not everybody on a team is a leader or wants to be a leader.

Individuals do not always realize how others are looking to them for leadership. They don't always realize how much power and influence they have, or that they have the ability to lead others.

How do you help them see what they have to offer?

One of my best leaders by far of all time is Shane Battier, who now plays for Memphis. In the first practice of his senior year, the team had finished stretching, and I'm getting ready to talk to them to give them a bit of motivation—just a little 1-minute talk. Before I start, Shane gets them together and he says some things to the team. I said, "That's pretty good. I don't think I can top that." I told Shane after the workout, "That was good. If you want to do that every day, you can." He said, "I'll do it every day." I never again spoke to the team before practice for the rest of that year.

Here is another example. One of our standards is to show strong face. When we watch tape, it's not just watching how you shoot or defend. If I see a sequence where a player shows this magnificent face that's strong, I'll stop and say something about it. This past summer in Madrid, I stopped the tape as Kevin Durant, a great young player who I wanted to emerge, was coming down the court. He looks magnificent; he's just so strong. So I asked his teammate, Russell Westbrook, "When Kevin looks like that, how do you feel?" And he says, "Coach, when he looks like that, I feel like we're going to win." So I turned to Kevin and said, "Kevin, I want you to understand the power you have. Even before you shoot or defend, you can create an atmosphere where the people around you feel like they can win. How good is that, man?"

As you become more secure as a leader, it gets easier to share leadership, to empower others. Thank goodness I have had great leaders on the court for me. One of them is coaching at Harvard now, Tommy Amaker, a point guard who was a natural leader right from his freshman year, and then we had Quinn Snyder who also was a great leader. The more I got guys like that, the more I realized that I needed to give them more opportunities. It comes with experience.

Finding Leadership in Unexpected Places

Among your players, you have uneven talent, motivation, and need for glory. Yet you need to ensure that the team functions effectively as a team. How do you draw on the full range of talent in your team given the wide variety of players' skills and motivations?

In some organizations you only listen to talent. You've got to be talented before you can give advice or be recognized. We've tried not to have that culture. If you have a guy go from freshman to senior, sometimes the freshman that you bring in

is better than the senior. It wasn't always that way; it used to be that if you're an upper classman, you should always beat out the younger guy. Now, you can bring in three freshmen and they would start. So how is that senior going to be a leader when he is not the best player?

We had a walk-on who became a scholarship player and was a 5-year player, Jordan Davidson. Guys listened to him more than anybody because he had established himself. So I think some of it is credibility. If I'm having a team meeting, I might say, "Jordan, what do you think?" before asking anybody else, to accentuate my respect for him as a leader.

Aligning the Stars

It is a common human tendency, at least in Western cultures, to give the credit or blame for team performance to the designated team leader. Research on professional symphony orchestras, for example, suggests that both audiences and critics tend to hold the conductor accountable for how the orchestra plays. Moreover, guest soloists—the wonderful violinist or the extraordinary vocalist—sometimes come in and expect everyone to cater to their needs.

Players in top-ranked basketball teams, whether Duke or the Olympic teams you have coached, also are composed of high-level stars, people who are used to having the planets rotate around them. How do you deal with this? How do you help your players accept your own coaching and, ideally, the leadership that other players may be able to provide? And what do you do if it's an 18-year-old kid, someone not yet fully formed, who was all-state and recruited by five colleges, who also expects to start out as a star at Duke?

You actually do some things socially rather than on the basketball court. In fact, we wouldn't continue to recruit a kid who we felt would not eventually "get it," because his great talent could turn out to be destructive rather than constructive. So character is a significant part of our recruiting. Grades too, of course, but character is probably the main thing. I want to see that the kid is someone who will listen to his coach, that he has shown respect to his parents and other authorities he has dealt with, and that he is willing to learn.

It's important to look for things like that when you are recruiting someone for your team, even if he is a ridiculously good athlete. It is true that your best player can lead you to the Promised Land, but your most talented player can also lead you to the

junk pile. Because that best player is going to have a lot of influence, you want to make sure before he comes in that you can have a good relationship with him.

All the players who arrive at Duke are immediately humbled in some ways because of the level of the work, the speed at which they have to play, and the fact that they are not always the best player on the court. A lot of them never had to work that hard before because they always had been the best player. You come in here and you're not—you are potentially the best player but initially you're not. Someone else is working harder than you are and someone is running the sprints faster than you can. You become fragile during that time.

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I liken it to the experience I had when I went to West Point. I thought I was really a hot ticket. But once I got there I got killed, and I needed somebody to help me out. So if you're the guy who provides that help, then you develop your relationship even more—you protect them and you keep them from completely falling apart. On the day they get kicked, you want to be there or you ask someone on the team to go to them, and that helps them develop. You ask the senior who is not as good as him—but who on that particular day is better—to go to him and say, "Don't worry man, you're going to become our best player."

What do players who are true stars need from their coach?

I've found that when I am coaching my Duke team, I need to be the best player's best friend. Being the best player is a lonely position. Even though you get accolades, no matter how good of a team you have, there is always some level of jealousy. Always. Because you're competitive. A little bit of it is not bad. But I want to make sure that I'm connected with that guy because in a tense moment he

also might produce better knowing that he's not out there alone.

With the Olympic team, Kobe Bryant told my youngest daughter an interesting thing: "Since I was in high school, nobody has tried to motivate me, they just pay me." But, he said, "Your dad and his staff try to motivate us every day, and that's so refreshing." Leadership is not just to let the star produce, but to be a friend of the star, to motivate the star. Your team is going to go a lot further if your stars push ahead, and everybody else has to work to catch up.

How about with well-established, highly experienced players? Is coaching them and developing them as leaders the same kind of thing as coaching college players, or does it require a whole different approach?

I remember when I was an assistant coach on the Olympics Dream Team that won the gold medal in Barcelona 1992. We had Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, David Robinson, Patrick Ewing, Karl Malone, Charles Barkley, Scottie Pippen. I'm at my first practice, and Jordan is the best player. He also is from North Carolina and I'm from Duke. So, in the totem pole there you have Michael Jordan at the top and well down the pole is Mike Krzyzewski.

So I was a little bit nervous, I didn't want to make a mistake. After the first practice, I'm having a drink of soda and Jordan walks toward me. I knew he was going to bust my chops, you know, do some Duke/Carolina stuff. But he comes up to me and he says, "Coach, I'd like to work on some individual moves for about a half hour. Would you please work with me?" And so we worked for a half hour and at the end he said, "Coach, thanks a lot." Of all the things that I learned on that trip, that meeting was the most important. I still get chills thinking about it. Those kinds of events are force multipliers for any team.

Jordan could have been the biggest prima donna in the world, but he wasn't. He understood that on that team there wasn't any totem pole, that everybody was important. He could have called out "Hey, Mike, get over here," and I would have run over there. And I would have felt like an idiot, but I would have done that job, and I would have lost respect for myself. He didn't want that, so he said, "Coach," and then he said, "Please," and at the end he said, "Thank you." How good is that? I think it was masterful on his part. It's a powerful thing when a person who is in Jordan's position does things like that to create an environment that's conducive to success. I don't know if he knew he

was doing that, but he did it, and I respect him forever for it—and it had a big impact on my own coaching back at Duke.

Clearly, a great deal of your coaching focuses on your individual players—helping them excel, but also helping them learn how to help their teammates. What does it take to get everybody on a team to help provide leadership?

One thing I tried to do in every practice with the Olympic team was to have my assistants do a lot of the technical things. I made it a point to talk to four to six guys every day, and about things other than basketball—"When is your family coming over?" or "I heard this is happening, what do you think?" That kind of thing. I got to know them as people, which helped me understand the dynamics that I had to work with on the team.

On the Olympic team I had this alpha dog in Kobe Bryant and I had another alpha dog in LeBron James. One had accomplished a lot, and the other wanted to accomplish what that other guy had accomplished already. I tried to have them interact. So I said to Kobe, "You need to be good with LeBron," and I said to LeBron, "You need to be good with Kobe." Well, LeBron has a really good sense of humor, he's an entertainer. So, when we would be in a team meeting, LeBron would imitate Kobe—he would take his warm-up pants and pull them up to here and go through a whole routine. And the team is laughing and Kobe is laughing because one of the best things about imitating you is that it means I accept you, I like you. Those two stars became, at least during that time, not competitors but just real good teammates. It set the tone for everyone else.

Another example is from the Olympic Dream Team. Arguably, Jordan was the best player, but we had two older great players on the team in Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. Head Coach Chuck Daly was running a staff meeting with Lenny Wilkens, P. J. Carlesimo, and me. Jordan came in and we talked about who should be captain and he says, "I do not want to be captain, Larry and Magic should be captain. You make sure." Unbelievable, right? He did a great thing.

Dealing With Derailers

How do you handle "derailers," people who cause problems no matter what team they're on—be it in business or athletics or music or whatever. When they're there, bad things happen. Such people exhibit a lack of integrity, or they are unable to see what the world looks

like through any eyes other than their own, or they bring out the worst in their teammates. So imagine that somebody passed the recruiting screen and now you've got a sophomore or a junior who is a derailer and is souring the team. Do we try to save him or do we kick him off?

You save him. With the Olympic team, we would never select them because you don't have enough time to help them. It's a different mission when you're coaching a college team. A kid can get side-tracked, and he might be a derailer because of insecurity or for any of a number of reasons. Saving a kid is important, because it might just be that he lost his starting job, or he's discovered that he's not good enough no matter how hard he works. Part of it can be redefining what success is for that kid. Before, his idea of success was, "I'm going to be a pro, I'm going to be a top draft pick," and then all of a sudden, "I'm not even starting on my team. Holy mackerel, my whole life is horrible and I'm going to make it horrible for everyone else."

So I would try to counsel him, individually and doing things face to face, not yelling but just saying, "Look, you're not on the team right now. I mean, it's not that you're kicked off, but you're not part of us. Why would you do these things? Tell me. I'm going to try to understand. Or do you not know you're doing them?" You deal with it on a one-on-one basis.

TEAM LEADERSHIP AS CREATING A CONTEXT FOR SUCCESS

When you started at Duke over 30 years ago, you didn't already have a successful program or a culture that fostered both winning and mutual respect. How did you get the right conditions in place, and how have you sustained them?

We could not have succeeded if I were not on a great team myself. By that I mean that Duke University was a great team under the leadership of Terry Sanford as president and Tom Butters as athletic director. I always felt that I was on their team, and that has been true with every president and athletic director since then. I worked hard to develop a good relationship with them. Not that it has not been the other way around, expecting them to develop a good relationship with me. I knew how much I depended on them and needed their commitment while I was learning how to do this. I learned a great deal from them and the people around them.

Maintaining Stability

In today's college basketball, there is rapid turnover among the star players, just as many corporations face personnel churn among the most talented, and MBA programs also confront the problem of trying to forge a community when students are in the program for only a short period of time. How do you create a "cocoon" that allows member leadership to develop on your teams? And how much of a problem is it that every year it's a new team with a different mix of players?

The culture of college basketball has changed. With the "one and done," you don't know who you're going to have from year to year. There are a lot of different dynamics right now in our sport. The thing that we do know is that we're going to make sure our own culture is the same.

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The question is how do you perpetuate that culture, the environment that this new group is going to come into? Where is the stability? Well, one thing is me: I've been at Duke for 31 years, and my staff also has been stable. And a huge thing is having my former players on the staff. They end up being like the seniors on the team—they know Duke, they know me, they know college basketball. Another source of stability is our managers. We have about 12 managers on our team and they are terrific kids. They do all the logistics to set up everything for us and they have equal footing with our players. They are here from freshman to senior year. We've tried to adjust to the new dynamics in college basketball, and it's worked out fairly well. But I'd still much rather have the continuity of having a kid from freshman through senior year, with the seniors teaching the young guys.

It is also important for our national Olympic team to have stability. There is stability in leadership from Jerry Colangelo, who runs United States basketball. Colangelo said in 2006 we were going to start building a program where we get to know

our guys and there is some continuity. Before, we thought that selecting 12 people and a coach meant that you had a team, which is absurd. It has been a huge help for our Olympic team to have some stability in membership and leadership. I've signed up to coach our team again in 2012 for the London Olympics. Even though I am not with these guys during their seasons, I'll call or write them to maintain a relationship with them along the way.

How about timing? Are there particular times when you focus on different leadership activities?

Some things can be done quickly; others take a lot of time to establish. And once you are in the game phase, when you actually start your season, there is a faster rhythm. That is when you see the results of whatever you've done in the off season to develop your team. During practices you are not judged by whether you win or lose, so I can take a little more time. For example, I might say to a player, "Look, today at practice, I'd like for you to say a couple things. I don't care when you say them or how you say them, but we need to address this." Hopefully some of that will be used later, in the game phase. But it really is a different rhythm.

Setting Standards and Clearing Away Distractions

You are dealing with fast-changing, fishbowl team environments. What do you do to keep all team members on the same page?

We try to not have any rules on my teams. I have what I call "standards." When I went to West Point we had a bunch of rules, all of which I didn't agree with. Usually when you're ruled, you never agree with all the rules, you just abide by them. But if you have standards and if everyone contributes to the way you're going to do things, you end up owning how you do things. In my experience, the best teams have standards everyone owns.

With the Olympic team, I met with the individual stars. I met with Jason Kidd individually and then LeBron, Kobe, and Dwayne Wade before we had a collective meeting. I told them, "I'm going to have a meeting tonight, not about offense and defense, but about how we're going to live for the next 6 weeks. I am going to tell you two of the standards that I want. When we talk to each other, we look each other in the eye. That's one. The second one is we always tell each other the truth. If we can do those two things, trust will be developed, which will be the single most important thing for our foundation as a group." And then I said, "You don't

have to tell me now, but I would like for you to contribute to the meeting and say at least one thing tonight. And whatever you say will become, if everyone agrees, one of our standards."

We had a great meeting in which we came up with 15 standards. Each of those guys put their hand up; they took ownership. It was no longer just their talent; now it was also the things they said. LeBron said, "No excuses. You know we have the best talent. We're playing for the best country. So, no excuses." And that was our first standard. Jason Kidd said, "We shouldn't be late and we should respect one another." I said, "We should respect our opponents because they've been beating us for the last few years. So we should prepare and we should never have a bad practice." And it went on from there. We never had a guy late and we never had a bad practice. I really felt it bonded us because it wasn't just me putting on them something that I believed in. It was me asking them, "What do you guys believe in?"

You said nobody was ever late, but what if somebody was? Would people have looked at you to deal with it, or would the team have taken on responsibility for enforcing the standard?

If someone was late for the first time I probably would have taken the initiative. I would have said to a couple of the most respected players something like, "You know, Dwayne was late, do you want me to take care of that?" They would have said that they would take care of it. And then if it happened again, I would have brought it to the whole group. I would not have been hesitant to do that if the players did not take care of it themselves.

What do you do to ensure that problems get resolved and minor issues do not become big ones that distract from team goals?

I continue to pay close attention to the team's context. Sometimes I'll meet with my team or my staff and I'll say, "I want you to think about irritants. We'll have a meeting on irritants and let's try to get rid of as many irritants as possible. In other words, let's not let Duke beat Duke because every day we can't stand something." I try to make sure, even with the Olympic team, "Ok, let's have a meeting. What's bugging us right now . . . food, whatever? Nothing? Good, let's go." You can lead better if everybody is not distracted.

Asking people how they feel or if there is something that is bothering them demonstrates your concern. It affirms that they are an important part

of the team. And it also recognizes that they have eyes, that they can see things that you, the leader, may have missed or be blind to. You want everyone's eyes on the team and how things are working. If there's something that is keeping one of my assistants from doing the best job possible, then we need to change that.

There are two things in any bureaucracy that block good ideas. One is to think, we've never done that before, so why should we do it now? The other is that it would cost too much, we don't have the money. So we're not going to talk about the good idea any more. I've tried to address those two blocks over the last 15 or 20 years of my career by raising money on our own so we can put in place what we need to succeed.

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CULTIVATING AND SUSTAINING YOUR OWN TEAM LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Taking Care of Yourself

Coaches also have emotions and get angry. "Did you come to play today or did you just come to stop by?" Now that's a really cutting thing to say, but the coach is angry and shows it. How do you keep yourself in balance, not faking your own emotions, but also not going too far in expressing them?

On a day-to-day basis you do have to have balance and be clear headed. So you need to make sure you have your personal stuff together so that when you encounter these obstacles you don't fly off the handle. I like to deal with everything face to face, right away. It is a big thing for me to stay fresh and balanced. I try not to have irritants in my own life so that when I come to my business life, I'm not bringing my life into the business. I've found that maintaining a fairly active health life, faith life, and family life are pillars that help me to become a better leader. I don't know how it works for everyone else. But I start every day fairly fresh and with a pretty clear conscience. That creates my own atmosphere conducive for success, and then I try to bring that atmosphere to the team.

That's visible to the players even though you probably don't advertise it. It's a kind of leadership around issues of character and health and general well-being that they can see. No doubt at least some of your players are saying to themselves, "Gee, I'd kind of like to have that kind of resilience, too." That has to be helpful to them as they are learning how to grow up.

You still can fly off the handle occasionally. But when you do, I think it has more impact than if you're flying off the handle all the time. I've learned over time that to lead you have to be able to listen and see and feel. And if you create obstacles for yourself—whether you don't allow yourself to see other people's vision, or you don't ever talk to anybody, or you're not keeping in good health—eventually you're going to have more bad situations than you would if you keep those avenues open.

Learning Continuously

You have been coaching for a long time. What do you do to make sure you keep on developing as a leader?

I've learned so much from getting outside of my area. I think you need to get involved—whether it be a charity, a hospital, or working with a kid's group—to keep actively learning. If you look, you'll see natural leadership happening around you all the time. I'm used to leading, going against other college basketball coaches. Now, internationally, I'm going against the best coaches internationally. They think differently. One's not right and one's not wrong. They think differently and it forces you to think differently. I believe that you have to do that if you want to constantly get better in leadership.

You can learn about being a better leader from everybody. You can go and study an orchestra. You can go study a basketball team, a business, or whatever. That's why I love talking about leadership. There is so much you can do to develop it. And that's why I've loved my association with the Fuqua School of Business. It gets me out of my area and I say, "You know what, that was really a better way of putting it" or "I never thought of it that way." I think people who want to understand leadership have to have that approach. It's exciting.

In developing leadership, you're not just helping a young kid on your team become a better leader. By attempting to teach that person, you're developing your own leadership. I learn from every speech I give. We have our own radio show where instead of being interviewed, I interview and I take notes

all the time. That's how I look at it. It's not going to happen all at once. It's not, "Okay, I got it. I'm the leader," because then you just forfeited your right to be one.

Being Yourself

One of the things that you see sometimes among students who anticipate a career in management or aspire to leadership positions is that they will read a book or hear a speech and they'll say, "Oh, I want to be like that." You frequently refer to others from whom you have learned. Do you have any advice for the rest of us who see in you or in some other leader a model for ourselves?

I was lucky that I got coached by one of the great coaches of all time, Bob Knight. Through him I met two other great coaches, Henry Iba and Pete Newell. And I'd just listen to them. A couple times when Coach Knight went away, both Iba and Newell said, "I know you've learned a lot from coach and he's great. But you have to be yourself. If there's something that you want to talk about with your teams, figure out what you want to teach and then use your own personality and your values to do it. Don't ever try to be like one of us." They were three of the great coaches of all time, right there in one setting. And what they said made a lot of sense to me.



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I tell the guys who work for me: "don't ever try to be like me." I tell players the same thing. "I don't want you to be this guy. I want you to be you. Let's figure out who you are, what kind of a leader you are, and what we can do to keep making you better." That's why I'm not someone who will read an autobiography and say I want to be exactly like that person. Come on, you can't be exactly like that person, that's ridiculous. What you can do is learn about the experiences of other leaders and then take some of the lessons that they have learned and incorporate them into your own mix of skills. That's what I try to do with my players, and I think the same approach would work just as well in other kinds of teams and organizations.



Mike Krzyzewski



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