

# John R. Wooden, Stephen R. Covey and Servant Leadership

A Commentary

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The lead article by Jenkins identifies two iconic and influential leadership figures. Both contribute important themes about the philosophies underpinning living a high quality life. I won't pursue whether or not Covey or Wooden were either Paternalistic or Servant leaders – my preference is to suggest that they demonstrated characteristics of many leadership styles which reflect their contexts. Instead, I will concentrate on how the article – especially points made about Wooden - might be used to help generate better understandings of leadership and leadership development. I begin with general comments and then move to address what I would hope promising post-graduate students might make of it.

The concerns which occupied both Covey and Wooden have hardly ever been more important. Overall, this confirms that what it takes to live well is both elusive and slippery, even more so as a leader. Further, routine daily behaviours that did not even exist 20 years ago, such as surfing the internet on a mobile phone, are weaving a tapestry of brain effects whose complexity is only beginning to be understood. Daily, we experience the effects of globalisation and the world of second life on our strategic attention and inter-personal relationships [1]. All have profound implications for leadership, wherever it is demonstrated. With a majority of 20-year-olds never knowing life without immense connectivity, and Covey and Wooden having made their contributions with little cognisance of even the idea of globalisation, the challenge of making their work relevant is underlined even further. With a particular piquancy for leaders and for leadership, a recent report on the brain and digital technology [2] commented, “The digital landscape simultaneously unites people from around the world, and distances individuals who are sitting across each other at dinner [2, p. 19].

## **LEADERSHIP THEMES AROUND WOODEN**

I found considerable contradiction and ambiguity around both what has been written about and by Wooden. These point to how Wooden developed and to his progression into what I would regard as a ‘wiser state’. Importantly though, these features need to be seen in terms of what was acceptable and/or normal through the immense societal changes affecting the US in the post-war years. Contextual sensitivity is essential to every leaders’ development and, in many cases, their effectiveness [3].

Perhaps indicating my own hope that the best leaders follow something of the ‘Great

Man' narrative, it is clear that Wooden had an ugly side, in his early days, at least. Who wants to be known for being "a holy terror", "naturally disliked" and "simply ugly" [4, p. 315]? Just as important was the "professorial" demeanour which he appeared to deploy to disarm the unwary. This speaks to his appreciation of the importance of impression management, which may have been helpful for indicating Poise and Integrity. Either way, it clearly contributed to some early success, although those biblically-oriented notes stored in a wallet were clearly not powerful enough to always help Wooden overcome his personal demons.

Yet, I question what 'love' meant in regard to players in his squad; to what extent was this reciprocated at the time, or was it an explanation along the lines of ends justifying means? This seems more than selective; I wonder what the referees and players from others squads whom he "ragged unmercifully" [4] thought of his 'love'? Wooden's 'love' of players also reminded me of the notion upheld by many that 'Family is all'. Importantly, such notions are not entirely beneficent. They offer considerable harm to commitment to wider societal processes and for trust levels within any community [5]. Putting these comments together, I wonder what Wooden would have said about his approach at the different times in his coaching life.

The pyramids, ladders and the other paraphernalia he used to help sell hundreds of thousands of mass appeal books also looks decidedly convenient, if cumbersome, even allowing for their heuristic value. It also seems to offer an alignment that Wooden rarely experienced personally, so I wonder at their relevance to leadership development. The origins of his framework have the whiff of 'apple pie' about it too; who is likely to be unaffected by the figures he named as influential, especially in the US? Overall, this seems a little self-serving and on-message for the white, conservative preferences of middle America. That left me wondering, who are the more legitimate role models that modern day leaders can identify with and feel safe in that association? Recent work [6] has advocated investigating job applicants' role models to identify how they will behave in managerial roles; in Wooden's case the question is more about authenticity of these 'influences'.

## **PROMPTING STUDENTS INTO CRITICAL THINKING**

In my second theme, I was thinking of how this article might be used to prompt discussion about research-related leadership issues with post-graduate students. Importantly, and notwithstanding the qualities identified in Jenkins' account, I wondered how well it would help students to ask pertinent and depth-seeking questions. Two questions that the account around Wooden encouraged me to address were linked to: i) the consistency of the framework; and ii) the research concept of credibility [7].

## **CONSISTENCY**

Fundamentally, there can be little doubt that Wooden's record meets any criteria for being identified as a serial winning coach. Yet, it is important to consider how well any contribution aligns with the highest quality evidence. Inevitably, this seems to favour what is new and discovered through advanced technologies; Wooden didn't seem to have much interest in science *per se*, yet much of what he proposed was his *modus operandi* chime well with what contemporary neurobiology is showing about optimising brain functioning. Not least of this was his attention to delivering learning welds in few words; "Be quick, but never hurry" [8, p. 6] has a stamp of coaching genius. It is also prescient given current concerns about humans' limited, yet still declining, capacity to deploy strategic attention [1, 2].

Equally, I was impressed by the liberating effects of his idea that the team that makes most

mistakes is the one that will succeed. My final thought around consistency relates to how well his ideas transferred cross scenarios. His links to English teaching were regularly identified and I wondered how effective Wooden was in that domain and with that constituency of students, while deploying his key principles.

### CREDIBILITY

I'd be hopeful that students would like to look beyond the account to apply more meta-cognitive processes to consider the merits of the claims for the respective leadership styles. These types of 'thinking about thinking' and 'thinking about knowing' [1] are considered important for twenty-first century learners [9] and can be applied to how any leader tries to present him/herself. I hope that students might ask the question worth asking of any major theorist; who was their work based upon? In Wooden's case, his frameworks relate most fully to selected, young, athletic, men, living in California. Possibly as a test of the relevance – and transferability – of his ideas others might ask how Wooden was regarded as an English teacher, where, presumably his classes comprised of more than his athletic protégés. As with the sampling that underpinned Maslow's original hierarchy [10], which was nevertheless widely endorsed in the catholicons of social psychology, this important limitation – and doubtless many others too - needs to be more fully acknowledged. Crucially, none of these frameworks can speak to the issues facing modern-day workplaces which feature diversity around gender, age and ethnicity.

### CONCLUSION

In this Commentary I have made some general comments about the limitations of the auto/biographer's stance for advancing leadership sciences. Central to this is to help potential modern-day leaders see the relevance of the lives and the thinking of people who lived differently and in less technologically advanced times. Drawing on examples around legendary basketball coach, John Wooden, I have suggested that a single summative account, such as provided by a framework, does little to portray the important nuances of leadership development, irrespective of that leadership style. As valuable as biographical sources are, almost inevitably they imply neat pathways of serendipitous, generalisable links between concepts (and behaviours) and seamless progress into effectiveness and success. In contrast, a critical stance is more likely to reveal the realities of their development and show the convoluted pathways into and out of leadership approaches. That route offers a better best chance for improving the science of leadership.

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