



It All Starts with the Socks

By Tom Wagner

At the first team practice each year, legendary (10 national championships) UCLA basketball coach John Wooden demonstrated the correct way to put on athletic socks and basketball shoes. Coach Wooden believed that success began from the ground up, and always paid attention to the details. Said he, “Once you recognize the connection between sweat socks and success, you have acquired one of the most valuable assets for effective leadership, namely, that little things, done well, make big things happen for you and your organization.”

Attention to fundamentals is important in any worthwhile pursuit. I recently talked with the sales director of a firm who said most of his company’s new customers *left* direct competitors because their calls were not returned. Not returning customer telephone calls in a service business??

Unfortunately, many “little things” are no so obvious. Think for a moment of organizations – business, religious, governmental, volunteer – with which you’re involved and ask, “What would happen if we got better at [these three] things?” Identify things you now do well, and imagine, “How can we take these bright spots and spread them throughout our organization?”

Open your eyes to barriers – physical, procedural, mental – that are restraining your best people. Do they need new basketball shoes? What about extra pairs of socks? How about regularly scheduled time to discuss problems and opportunities? Managers, is your foot resting on the brake pedal?

John Wooden saw himself first as an educator, not a sport coach. His goal was to help each player achieve his personal best, and he knew you built excellence on a firm foundation. For coach Wooden, winning games (he would prefer to call that outscoring an opponent) was the natural consequence of hard work on basketball fundamentals.

Think about the natural consequences of what you do, and then follow advice John Wooden received from his Dad: Make each day your masterpiece.

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