



One of the classes we had to partake of in seminary was “Pastor as Leader,” trying to hone our leadership skills not just for our grandmother’s style of church, but for congregations that would be undergoing drastic changes in the years to come (unfortunately, a global pandemic was not on the course syllabus for that semester). One of the projects our professor expected us to present to our classmates was focusing on a particular leader and discuss their style and perspective. Most of the good students chose leaders in the church, of course, whether past or present. Others branched out into the business realm. I, obviously, had to be different. Maybe, deep down, I was trying to impress our professor by taking a road far less traveled. So, I decided to find someone in the sports realm.

Now, I am very well aware that Cleveland Browns fans throughout northeast Ohio and beyond are convinced Kevin Stefanski is the greatest leader and coach in the history of athletics within a year’s timeframe, but since he was only a 27-year-old assistant quarterbacks coach for the Minnesota Vikings at the time, not too much research material was available on him, then. Instead, I was drawn in by this man who grew up on a farm in Indiana with no electricity back in the early 1900s. He would get up every morning to help milk the cows and other chores before going to school. Soon enough, his passion became the game of basketball, which he would play with his three brothers using a homemade ball and a tomato basket as a hoop in the barn. During his teenage years, the family moved to Martinsville, Indiana, where he would lead his high school to the state championship. He went onto Purdue University in West Lafayette, earning All-American honors three years in a row, and even becoming the national player of the year. It was only natural that he became a coach of the game, but as the story so goes, his understanding of leadership truly evolved not on the court, but as a teacher in the classroom.

It was the subject of English at South Bend Central High School in the Hoosier state, when he started to notice parents getting frustrated over their children getting C’s for their grades. That was just fine for the neighbor children, because, evidently, they were just average anyway. But these parents were not satisfied. That C made them feel as if they failed as fathers and mothers, or that their own children were basically failing. The teacher did not agree with such a mindset. As a leader, he needed to come up with his own definition of success: that it wasn’t about attaining a certain letter grade or however many points on the scoreboard or even pulling in more money or property in adulthood. Then, he remembered something his father taught him down on the farm: “never try to be better than someone else.” Too much of that is beyond the student or the player’s control anyway. Instead, success is, “Peace of mind...in knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you [are] capable.”

It’s safe to say that this particular teacher and coach pulled in his best effort to which he was capable both in the classroom and on the court in his near one hundred years of life. Yes, John Wooden would lead UCLA to ten national championships, but his ultimate success was helping players and students achieve that peace of mind in focusing on giving their best not just for themselves, but their families, their places of work, their communities. That’s what ultimately drew me in to Coach Wooden: that his example should receive its due consideration for an ever-evolving church.

He came to mind, yet again, when hearing this Samuel and Eli story, where Eli helps Samuel recognize God urging him to use his personal gifts, maximize his best effort that would end up shaping Israel for generations. Eli was not a perfect leader by any stretch of the imagination, and neither are of any of us called to be perfect, or to be better than another Christian, or even to shape a better congregation than another one down the road; but we are all called to be leaders. God sends us out to be leaders of love, hope, joy, compassion, the very Gospel brought to life for the whole world, and yes, leaders in the sense of helping others recognize that their best can very well alter the world God still loves for the better.

With that in mind, one of Coach Wooden's favorite lines of poetry was this: "No written word, no spoken plea can teach our youth what they should be; nor all the books on all the shelves — it's what the teachers are themselves." Leadership in the church is not reserved for the ones wearing the clerical collar. God calls us all to be leaders in how we carry ourselves as disciples of Christ every day, including for such times of these. And yes, we have more than enough to do exactly that regardless of what stage we are in our life, because God has already given us the very best of all heaven and earth in Jesus Christ, our still-Risen Savior and Lord, who will always insist on leading us in showing us the very love and hope that conquered death itself, that new life may reign in all of us forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

Source: Ted Talks (2001), John Wooden

https://www.ted.com/talks/john_wooden_the_difference_between_winning_and_succeeding?language=en