

# Finding Your Confidence as a Newsroom Coach

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You've seen it happen: A star staffer, respected for her craft skills, gets courted.

"We need somebody with your talent and good judgment to lead the department," she is told. After a few of these flattering conversations, the staffer signs on. She becomes a boss.

The novelty of making decisions and offering insights at news meetings carries her through the first weeks. Then reality sets in.

She realizes she's out of her comfort zone. She's a step away from the community she covered. Or she's no longer designing the front page. She works longer hours. She gets no overtime pay. Her former peers and friends begin gossiping about her. Once she spoke her mind freely; now she worries about political fallout.

She begins to wonder if management is just self-sacrifice. Did she trade creative challenges for thankless administration? She becomes resentful. Maybe she even gets coercive. If she doesn't get to do what she wants, at least she can make others do what she wants.

Becoming a manager is supposed to give you power. But many managers, especially new managers, don't feel powerful.

In fact, some feel less important than ever. The move to management can be traumatic.

Managers may feel displaced when they begin their leadership careers, but this is a

problem that can be anticipated and addressed. The solution involves a simple shift in thinking. New leaders must shift their focus from themselves to their staff. They must change from doer to helper, from coach.

Where's the power coach? The manager is full of refereeing, but we're not Vince Lombardi, Pat Bobby Knight here. many coaches in this spirit.

To find the sort of management gurus we have to look to someone like John Wooden, the most successful coach in college basketball history. I'm not a basketball fan, but in researching the roots of the coach ideal, I found a lot to like in Wooden's leadership style.

Wooden is the only guy to be inducted into the basketball Hall of Fame as both a player and a coach. And, while he was a great player in his day, when Wooden became a coach, he didn't look back.

Wooden coached the UCLA Bruins to 10 national championships (seven in a row) in the 1960s and '70s. He was victorious not because he focused on being pow-



erful but because he focused on being helpful. He wasn't worried about his own importance; he was concerned with his players' growth.

And grow they did. Wooden had talented players over the years, such as Bill Walton and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (known now as Kawhi Leonard). Far from being self-important stars, Abdul-Jabbar and Walton were loyal to Wooden. They credit him not only with improving basketball but with

improving their lives. They still call their old coach, now 90, to ask advice or tell him they love him. They speak in reverent tones about the almost spiritual impact he has had on their lives.

Wooden was known as a consummate teacher; no aspect of the game went untaught. (Abdul-Jabbar used to wonder at Wooden's detailed instructions for lacing his shoes.) But, curiously, Wooden remained passive during games. He sat quietly on the sidelines. Unlike other coaches, he didn't rant, chew things, or jump up and down.

When the eyes of the world were upon

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him, Wooden stepped out of the limelight. He let his players shine.

How did they respond? They dug deep within themselves and found their own resources. They found ways to use the lessons they’d learned in practice to win crucial games.

Here is what Wooden seems to have known instinctively: If players continually look to the sidelines for direction, they won’t find their own, more profound inner direction. If they depend on the boss’s expertise, they don’t develop their own.

Coaches who inject themselves in the game make the game about themselves, not about the players. Players with self-important coaches don’t have to think as hard because they know they always have a backstop and a gatekeeper. They don’t internalize and personalize the coach’s drive to win.

True leadership fosters independence. Ironically, if you give your staff the tools they need to succeed, you make yourself more important than ever, as Wooden was to Abdul-Jabbar and Walton. You are lighting the path to your staff’s growth and fulfillment.

People invest more in their work if it’s *their* growth at stake, not just the boss’s satisfaction. To be truly engaged, they must focus on building their own competence, not on passing muster with the boss.

Where are the rewards in this for leaders?

Helping others know themselves, develop their talents, and do their best work is powerful. It fosters the growth not only of oneself but also of peers and staff, not to mention the organization. For many, it is profoundly rewarding. Helping others succeed is challenging, creative work.

And, as *Washington Post* Deputy AME/News Vince Bzdek said at Poynter’s Visual Journalism Leadership Conference

last year, “It’s liberating not to have to think about yourself all the time.”

If you’re still thinking like a player, however, you can’t experience the joys of being a coach. You can’t build your confidence and competence as a coach unless you let go of your glory days as a player.

Good coaching is about teaching and letting go. So why don’t more leaders do it? I suspect many leaders can’t let go – can’t share power – because deep down they worry that their formal authority is all they have. They secretly worry that they have nothing to teach, especially to the more able staff.

Many new managers feel pressure to know everything. This creates insecurity because nobody knows everything.

Living with this anxiety can make bosses grudging, secretive, and authoritarian. And here’s the sad thing: These insecure leaders are wrong. They unquestionably have things to teach: They can show others how to further the goals of the organization. They have that capacity, undoubtedly, or they wouldn’t have been promoted. Senior managers promote those who can carry out their vision. The job of the new leader is to coach others in seeing beyond themselves and meeting larger organizational goals.

Everybody needs a coach. Everybody needs feedback. Everybody needs a partner in progress. Even Michael Jordan, who this season returned to the game as a player.

If bosses really focused on helping the staff, what would that look like?

They’d quit trying to prove their craft expertise. They wouldn’t tell others how they would’ve designed the page or written the story. They’d concentrate on helping each staff member see the next step in his or her unique development.

Being a leader means keeping quiet when the answer is on the tip of your tongue, so

that others may make discoveries.

It means being silent on the sidelines, like Wooden during Bruins’ games, so that people find their own creative solutions.

It means doing all you can to help staff reach their potential.

It means being willing to say, “I don’t know; let’s find out” to staff, and being open about the fact that bosses have things to learn, too.

Many leaders find that in nurturing others they nurture themselves. If you give freely of yourself, you help create a more generous world.

That’s the power in coaching.