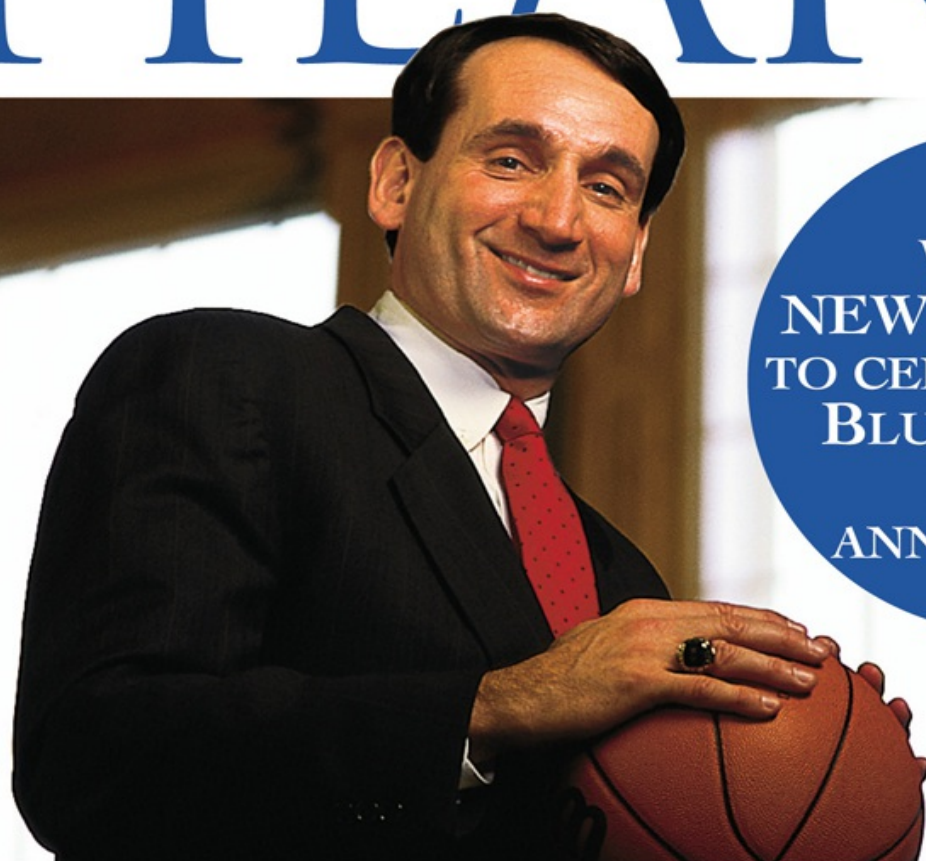


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COACH K'S

Successful Strategies for Basketball,
Business, and Life

MIKE KRZYZEWSKI

WITH DONALD T. PHILLIPS

FOREWORD BY GRANT HILL

LEADING WITH THE HEART

COACH K'S

Successful Strategies for
Basketball, Business, and Life

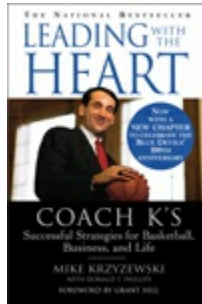
MIKE KRZYZEWSKI

WITH DONALD T. PHILLIPS



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*Dedicated to my brother, Bill, who has the biggest
heart of all*

FOREWORD

*D*uring high school, I was heavily recruited to play basketball at a variety of colleges and universities. Many coaches assured me that I would start or that I would get a certain amount of playing time. Some promised me the world. But not Mike Krzyzewski of Duke University.

“I’m not going to promise you anything,” Coach K told me. “If you choose Duke, you have to come in, work hard, and earn everything you receive.”

That really stuck with me. It also impressed my parents. And we began to believe that, by playing for him, I might not only become a better ballplayer, but a better person.

Then I visited Duke for the first time and attended the annual basketball awards banquet held at the conclusion of each season. The atmosphere was joyous and friendly, almost like a family reunion. I was most impressed with a speech made by departing senior Quin Snyder, who listed certain values he had learned from Coach K. They included: commitment, toughness, honesty, integrity, collective responsibility, pride, love, and friendship. Both Quin and people in the audience were choking back tears. After hearing that speech, there was never any doubt that I’d go to Duke.

My first team meeting in the fall of 1990 was an awesome day. I remember being excited, anxious, and nervous when Coach K walked in. He paused for a moment to make sure that we were all looking him straight in the eye. And the first thing he said was: “We’re going to win the national championship this year.”

I later learned that he had never before said that at an opening meeting—and he would rarely ever say it again. It was a remarkable statement for him to make because he had lost three starters from the previous year’s team. And *that* team had suffered an embarrassing 30-point loss to UNLV in the national championship game. “Is this man crazy?” I remember

wondering. But when the meeting was over, I walked out of the locker room believing we were, indeed, going to win the national championship. That's one of Coach K's most valuable qualities. He's inspiring. He makes you a believer.

We did win the national championship that year, the first in Duke's history. And we won it the next year, too. As a matter of fact, in my four years playing for him, I participated in three Final Fours and three national championship games. More important, however, were the lessons I learned from Coach K about life and leadership. They include: setting the bar high so that you can strive to be the best you can be; the value and rewards of a hard-work ethic; building close relationships based on trust; setting shared goals; sacrificing; giving of yourself; winning with humility; losing with dignity; turning a negative into a positive; being a part of something bigger than yourself; enjoying the journey.

By attending Duke University, I joined more than a basketball team. I became part of a legacy. In a coaching career that spans more than a quarter century, Coach K's achievements are extraordinary. Fifteen NCAA tournament bids and the highest winning percentage in NCAA tournament history. Eight Final Fours in fourteen years. The only back-to-back national championships in the last twenty-five years. Six years as national Coach of the Year. Five-time ACC Coach of the Year. A career winning percentage of .717. An impeccable reputation for honesty and integrity that is unquestioned in the sports world. And thousands of friends.

Coach K has shown he can win with a lot of talent—and he's shown he can win with a little bit of talent. He brings kids in from all around the country, from different cultures and different backgrounds. He teaches them to transcend their differences for a greater good. He helps them learn to get along together, to work as a team, to respect one another, to care for one another.

I know. I was one of those kids.

They say that "patience and the mulberry leaf in time form a silk gown." As a freshman, I had doubts about myself. I thought I wasn't good enough to play at Duke, that I was in over my head. But Coach K always felt I was better than I ever believed I could be. He constantly reassured me. He told me that I would be something special. It took a while for me to believe in myself. But he always believed in me. And he was patient. With time, he helped me develop my skills as a player and he helped me gain the confidence I needed to make it to the NBA.

But the most important thing of all about Coach K is that he taught me principles and values that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Those principles and values transcend basketball. They can be a guide for success in whatever you do in life—whether it’s running a big business, ministering to a church, coaching a sports team, or simply trying to achieve your dreams.

When I was very young, my father used to tell me that an army of deer led by a lion will defeat an army of lions led by a deer. At Duke, Coach K was our lion. He was also our friend, our mentor, our coach, our leader.

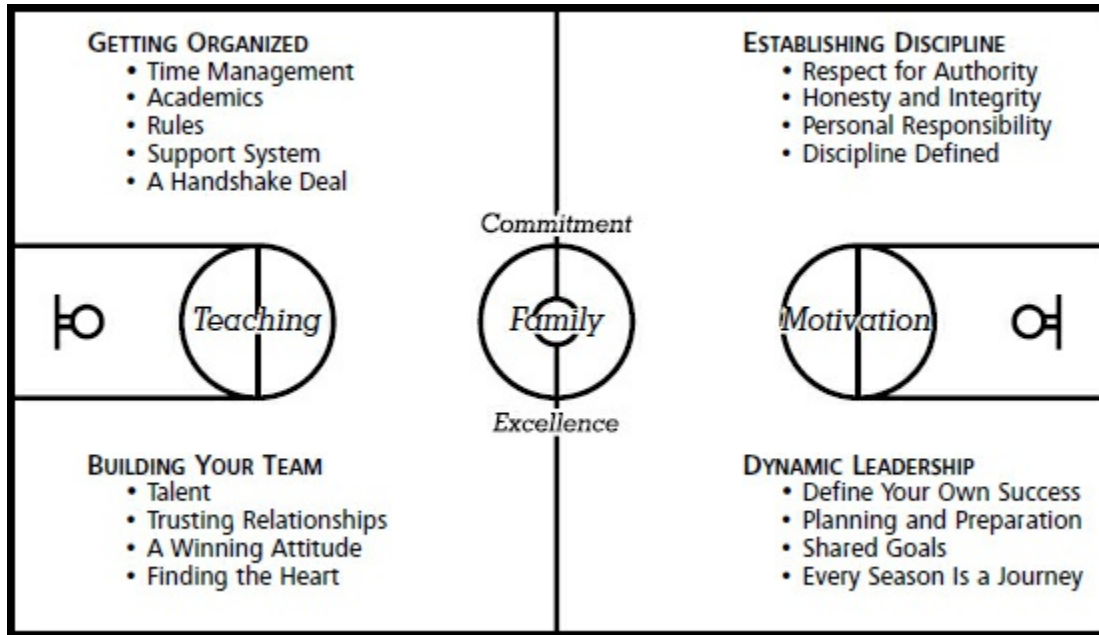
I graduated years ago, but I’m closer with Coach K now than I was in college—and we were very close back then. Today, I’m proud to say we’re good friends. And I know that’s the case with a lot of his former players.

When I look back on my time at Duke, I feel lucky to have played for him. I took it for granted then. I was young. I didn’t realize what I had. But I appreciate it now. In fact, I appreciate it more and more as the years slip by.

I wish I could go back and relive that experience. I wish I could be a freshman at that first meeting in the team locker room. I wish I could look into Coach K’s eyes and hear him tell me, once again, that I was something special.

—Grant Hill July 1999

PRESEASON



“My goal in preseason is to get to know my players and what they can do. My total focus is finding out who we are and developing a personality on our team.”

—COACH K

1

GETTING ORGANIZED

“Too many rules get in the way of leadership. They just put you in a box.... People set rules to keep from making decisions.”

—Coach K

“The deal is the handshake. The deal is that there won’t be any deals.”

—Coach K

“Every team I was on over my four years at Duke, he coached differently.”

—Grant Hill (1990–1994) on Coach K

Okay, everybody, listen up.

“We have only one rule here: Don’t do anything that’s detrimental to yourself. Because if it’s detrimental to you, it’ll be detrimental to our program and to Duke University.”

As the team gathers together in our locker room for the first time, I try to get my only rule out of the way fast. I won’t dwell on it because I’d rather not ruin the moment. *This* is a great day—a day that I’ve been looking forward to with anxious anticipation for months. You can *feel* the excitement in the air. You can *see* the spring in everyone’s step.

Even though the preseason begins around the first of September, it’s really like springtime—time for the birth of a new team. All the players come in fresh. They bring whoever they are to that first meeting. They bring innocence with them. And they’re ready to grow.

Looking at the young faces in front of me, I see myself more than thirty years earlier. And I think back to 1969.

“I want to tell you a story,” I’ll say next. “It’s a story about how I first became a basketball coach.

“In 1969, right after I graduated from West Point, I was assigned to Fort Carson, Colorado. One of the first things I did was begin to work out and play in my off-duty hours with the post basketball team. But my direct superior, a colonel, called me in and told me that I could not participate. He didn’t like the thought of me fraternizing with the enlisted men.

“‘No officer of mine is going to be wasting his time playing basketball,’ he said. ‘There are other things you should be doing.’

“Shortly after that, I received a call from Major General Bernard Rogers, the new division commander at Fort Carson. General Rogers had just received that assignment after having served as the commandant of cadets at West Point, where, of course, he knew me as the captain of the varsity basketball team. The general had just been to a post basketball game and he called to ask why I wasn’t playing with the team.

“‘Sir, my colonel would rather that I not play,’ I responded. ‘He feels it’s not a good thing for officers to do.’

“The general then went to the colonel.

“‘Why isn’t Lieutenant Krzyzewski playing on the post basketball

team?’ he asked.

“When the colonel responded that he just didn’t think it was good for an officer to participate, General Rogers replied: ‘Well, Colonel, the question is not, “Should Lieutenant Krzyzewski be playing basketball on our team.” The question is, “Should we *have* a team?” If the answer to that question is, “Yes, we should have a team,” then we should have *the best damn team we can possibly have.*’

“The colonel then agreed that the post should have a basketball team.

“‘Well, Colonel,’ said the general, ‘then Lieutenant Krzyzewski *will* play basketball. And not only that, he will *coach* the team.’

“That’s how I began coaching basketball. And the first year, we won the Fifth Army championship. General Rogers eventually became the Army Chief of Staff and the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

“But that’s not why I’m telling you this story,” I’ll say in conclusion. “There’s already been a decision made here at Duke that we’re going to have a basketball team. So *we’re going to have the best damn team we can possibly have.* That’s why all of you are here today. You were recruited specifically for this purpose. Each of you is special. I don’t want you to ever forget that.”

Even though our first formal practice is still six weeks away, I’m already comfortable with the kids on the team. I’ve spent a good deal of time recruiting them from all over the country. At Duke, we search for good kids with strong character—not necessarily kids with great talent who can play, but great individuals who are willing to be part of a team and who are coachable. Some of the students have been with us for one, two, or three years—and some are incoming freshmen. I’ve worked hard to get to know all of them. And even if I don’t yet understand every aspect of their personalities, at least I know the fabric of who they are. I like them as players and as people.

We usually have the initial meeting in our locker room because it’s where we’re going to be for many intimate moments in the future. So I think it’s a good place for us to take that first step. In addition to the players, the rest of the team is present, including: the trainer, the team physician, the managers, my administrative assistant, and our three assistant coaches.

It’s important to begin using plural pronouns right away. “Our” instead of “my.” “We” instead of “I.” “Us” rather than “me.” I don’t want the guys to be thinking this is “my” team—Coach K’s team. I want them to believe

it's "our" team.

The principle that "we're all important" is also something that needs to be demonstrated immediately. That's why the head coach isn't the only one who talks at this, or any other, Duke basketball meeting. Different people will speak to the players. The team trainer will discuss schedules for upcoming physicals. The team managers will say something about what they do and what is expected. Then I'll usually pop in with something like: "Just remember, the managers are part of our team—as is everyone here. Treat them right. We're all equal."

Time Management

At the first meeting, we pass out notebooks and pocket calendars containing a variety of logistical items. Important dates for the upcoming semester are marked and reviewed, including things like: our first practice, the day new recruits are in town for a visit, special events at my home, and, of course, our schedule of games.

We'll also point out when fall break occurs, and when might be a good time to leave for the Christmas holidays. We'll encourage the students to plan ahead, to schedule their flights and trips well in advance so as to save money.

Time management is a lesson that the students learn through us—not only as it relates to them individually, but as it pertains to a group. In other words, we make certain that they realize right off the bat that they have responsibilities to the team as well as to themselves alone.

Academics

We also really hit hard on academics. One member of our staff will talk about the students getting their schedules set up and in on time. They will be reminded to tell professors of their athletic schedules, when they have to miss class, and what they plan to do to get the materials they would miss.

Basketball players are simply not going to scrape by in their studies at Duke University. They are going to have to work. As a head coach, I personally do not want to represent a school that brings in twenty people over five years and have only two of them graduate. I expect every player

we recruit to graduate. And I tell them so right up front.

We also want university life to be a total experience for them. That's one reason there are no athletic dorms on campus. They just serve to separate the athlete from the rest of the student body and rob him of the opportunity to integrate with others. To me, that's one of the most important aspects of a college education.

While it's always up to the individual student to graduate, I also believe it's incumbent upon the school to positively influence its athletes in their studies. So, throughout the year, we keep close track of how our players are progressing. Once the schedules are in, we obtain a syllabus for each course so that we know when project due dates and midterm tests will occur. As the head coach, I receive weekly updates throughout the year on significant events in each student's academic life—and then take action accordingly.

At the first team meeting, I'll take a minute to stress honor in academics. "What is the worst thing that can happen to you academically?" I'll ask. And usually someone will respond by saying, "I get an F."

"No, that's not the worst thing," will be my comeback. "You can get an F even though you may try like crazy. The worst thing you can do is cheat. Now what do we mean by cheating? Well it's easy to copy off of someone else's paper, use someone else's paper, bring information into a test that you're not allowed to bring in, things like that. But let me tell you that here in the Duke basketball program, all those things are absolutely unacceptable."

And then I'll explore the issue somewhat deeper.

"Now, *why* would you cheat? *Why* would you cut corners? Well, time puts more pressure on you than anything else. That's one reason we're trying to teach you effective time management. In other words, if we know when your paper is due, we can remind you so you're not waiting until the last minute.

"Fellas, don't put yourself in a position where you have to cheat. That's the worst thing you can do as a Duke basketball player. If it happens, you're going to be punished severely by the school—and I'll support that punishment, whatever it is. But we should never get to that point. If you just say to me, 'I'm stuck or I'm in trouble,' then we'll work on it together. We'll be there to help you. But you also have to learn to help yourself."

Rules

At our first meeting, I give the team only one rule to live by. And it's pretty general, at that, because "not doing anything detrimental to yourself" covers a lot of things. It includes drinking at two o'clock in the morning, taking drugs, cheating in academics, and so on. Of course, the only one mentioned specifically is "no cheating." But I don't have to tell the players all the details. The upperclassmen will spend time letting the freshmen know what is expected. That, in turn, fosters additional leadership. And leadership on any team should be plural, not singular.

Too many rules get in the way of leadership. They just put you in a box and, sooner or later, a rule-happy leader will wind up in a situation where he wants to use some discretion but is forced to go along with some decree that he himself has concocted.

Of course, a few leaders like to be backed up by a long list of do's and don'ts. "OOPS, you did this on the list. I got'cha." Well, I don't want to be a team of "I got'chas." I got'cha means "I" rather than "we." And a leader who sets too many rules is making it appear that it is "my" team, rather than "our" team.

The truth is that many people set rules to keep from making decisions. Not me. I don't want to be a manager or a dictator. I want to be a leader—and leadership is ongoing, adjustable, flexible, and dynamic. As such, leaders have to maintain a certain amount of discretion.

At times, there may be extenuating circumstances for a person violating a rule. Take being late for practice as an example. If a senior like Tommy Amaker, who's done everything right for nearly four years, is suddenly late for a team bus or a team meeting, I would wait a couple of minutes for him. He's built up trust by being on time over the long haul. Well, when he finally shows up, Tommy will look me in the eye and tell me why he was late. He might say, "Coach, my car broke down and I don't have a car phone. I ran all the way here." Or he might say, "Coach, I just screwed up. No excuse."

However, with a new player who has yet to build trust, I might be less flexible. I recall, for instance, when freshmen Johnny Dawkins and Mark Alarie were late for a team bus. We didn't know where they were, they had not called, and every other member of the team was on time. So we left them behind. Eventually, the two caught up to us and I remember being ready to hammer them. But after hearing that they had overslept, I began

to wonder why other members of our team had not checked up on them. So I talked to the entire team about setting up a buddy system where everyone looked out for one another. “If one of us is late,” I told them, “all of us are late.” Now if I had punished Mark and Johnny and let that end the matter, I would never have gotten to the heart of the problem.

The fact that I *don't* have a hard and fast rule gives me flexibility in cases like these. It provides me the latitude to lead. It also allows me to show that I care about the kids on my team and it demonstrates that I'm trying to be fair-minded.

When Johnny and Mark explained their situation to me, they looked me straight in the eye—and I could tell they were being truthful and sincere. Throughout the season, I look into my players' eyes to gauge feelings, confidence levels, and to establish instant trust. Most of the time, they won't quibble with me—and they certainly can't hide their feelings from what their eyes reveal. So I ask all members of our team to look each other in the eye when speaking to one another. It's a principle we live by.

I know that when my wife, Mickie, and I look at each other, we know what we're going to say is the truth. And we've tried to teach our daughters, Debbie, Lindy, and Jamie, the same thing. “Look each other straight in the eye, tell the truth, full disclosure.” And as our daughters have gotten older, they've really become our friends. They knew that their mom and I weren't going to chew their heads off every time they talked to us. Rather, we were going to be there for them.

Support System

It was exactly this type of family environment in which I was raised—in a Polish neighborhood in Chicago where there were always flowers outside the homes, where people swept the sidewalks and the streets themselves. Whatever you had, you took care of. And, usually, the kids had more than the parents. In our neighborhood, there was total commitment to the development of the children.

My brother, Bill, and I were particularly lucky. Our dad, William, was an elevator operator in Willoughby Tower in downtown Chicago. Our mom, Emily, was a homemaker and a cleaning woman who scrubbed floors at the Chicago Athletic Club. I saw little of my dad because he worked nearly all the time and we didn't talk much. That's the way ethnic families were back then. But my mom was always, always there for me.

My parents had little in the way of material things. In fact, I remember that in my mom's closet there were always two dresses. They were clean and they were in great shape. But there were only two. My parents were people who never had anything, but they had everything. There was a lot of love and a lot of pride in our house.

It was easy for me growing up because I was always surrounded by a support system. And as I got older, I wondered what gave my mother, my father, my brother, and my best friend, Moe Mlynski, the ability to feel good about what I did. The fact is that whatever happened to me happened to them, too.

The best example I can think of involves sports. I was fairly successful as a point guard in basketball when I attended Weber High School, an all-boys Catholic prep school, which, by the way, my parents paid extra money to send me to. Moe went to Gordon Tech, which was our rival. But when we'd play Gordon, Moe was always cheering for *me*. And when I had a good game, he'd come up to me and say, "Hey, Mick (my nickname back then), that was a great game." And I could see in his eyes that he was really happy, that he really meant it.

Then Moe would drive me home. Actually, he was the only guy in our group who had a car. And during the entire ride home, he'd tell me how great I was during the game. And when I got to the house, my mom would be waiting up—not to check on me, but to talk to me a little bit. She may have even been at the game. Sometimes she'd go and not tell me and I wouldn't even realize she was in the stands.

Mom would tell me that I played a great game. "I'm very proud of you," she'd say over and over again. And then she'd ask me how I felt. Somehow, just the fact that she would wait up, that she would take the time, meant more to me than the actual conversation.

Anything that I felt good about, my mom and dad felt better about. Everything that I did was supported. I think this type of sustenance had a lot to do with me being confident as an adult. For some reason, I'm not afraid to lose. I wasn't back then, and I'm not now.

In general, I'd like to think that what my mom felt about me, I can feel about the players on our Duke basketball team. If I can provide that kind of support system for our team—where the managers feel good, the assistants feel good, the freshman feels good about the senior, and the senior about the sophomore, and so on—then we're going to be that much stronger a team.

Not only that—it’s a pure kind of feeling. That kind of support system—the family kind of support system—is like getting a shot to keep away jealousy. Your culture doesn’t allow jealousy. That’s what the best families are all about. There’s real love, real caring, pride in one another’s accomplishments, and no jealousy.

So we emphasize at our initial team meeting that the new guys are not just joining a basketball team, but a basketball family. We then hand out laminated cards that include the home and business phone numbers of every member of the team—including players, assistant coaches, and so on.

“Carry this card around,” we tell them. “And whenever you’re in harm’s way, make a call. If it’s two o’clock in the morning and you’re in trouble, someone on this card will help you. When there’s a chance to make a mistake, remember that you’re part of our family. Remember that you’re not alone. And remember that whatever happens to you, happens to all of us.”

As a coach, as a leader, I’m going to provide that safety net—that family support system. And all I’m really doing is passing along something that was given to me many years ago.

A Handshake Deal

Long before the first team meeting, during the recruiting process, I’ve made a handshake deal with every one of our players.

To each kid, I say: “I’m going to give you my best. I’m going to give you 100 percent. In return, I expect you to graduate. You’ll be coming to Duke for more than just basketball. If you don’t understand that, then don’t come to Duke. I want you to be passionate about basketball, but I also want you to obtain a great education.”

That early conversation usually works out very well. But every now and then, a new recruit will ask me to promise that he’ll be a starter or that he’ll get a certain amount of playing time each game. I won’t do that. I’ll promise him only that I’ll be honest and fair—and that he’ll be rewarded on his performance.

This is my “fair but not equal” policy. I’ll be “fair” in everything I do, but the players won’t be “equal” with regard to on-the-court playing time. If I gave everybody equal playing time, it wouldn’t be fair to the team as a whole. That’s because the group may be more effective if Johnny Dawkins

plays thirty minutes and Tommy Amaker plays ten. It also wouldn't be fair to individual members of the team. If, through hard work and excellent performance, Dawkins demonstrates he deserves thirty minutes of playing time, he should get thirty minutes of playing time. People who deserve to do more should do more.

This handshake agreement is a clean and honest deal. There are no hidden agendas. Everything straight up front and nothing behind anybody's back. Every kid can look around the room and know that I didn't promise anyone that they'd be a starter. The deal is the handshake. The deal is that there won't be any deals.

Mutual commitment helps overcome the fear of failure—especially when people are part of a team sharing and achieving goals. It also sets the stage for open dialogue and honest conversation. Early in the preseason, I'll often have a casual conversation with one of our players about his personal life. And because we already have that commitment to each other, it's easy for us to talk. He already knows that I'm on his side and that I'll always be there for him.

The same principle holds in business when, for example, a manager walks in and talks to an employee about something other than a job assignment. It shows not only that the leader cares, but that he also might know a little something about the employee's personal life. In general, it's another way of helping people feel like they're part of the unit. I think it's very important for leaders to take time throughout the year to show they care. Ongoing communication reinforces the handshake.

I'm always really excited at the beginning of each first team meeting. But the exhilaration I feel being with the team causes me to be even more excited toward the end of the meeting. That's because for nearly an hour—and for the first time—I've been interacting with them as a group rather than only as individuals.

But every meeting has to end, so I usually wrap up this one by first giving the guys some advice about the coming year. For instance, I may ask them to concentrate on individual physical conditioning over the coming six weeks so that they are in really good shape by mid-October's first day of practice. And almost always, I will remind them about their studies. "It's September, fellas, and you should think about getting off to a good start academically," I'll say. "Once practice begins, things will get busy in a hurry. Remember that you'll be a better player if you're not

behind in your studies.”

Grant Hill once perceptively remarked that every team he played on during his four years at Duke, I coached differently. Actually, every team I’ve had in my coaching career, I’ve coached differently. That’s because each year brings with it a new team, with new people who have different personalities and different skills. If I hope to get the most out of these players as a group, I *have* to coach them differently than previous teams.

I believe that each team has to run its own race. So when I conclude our first meeting by providing a glimpse of where I think we’re headed, part of what I say will depend largely on the guys sitting in the locker room. I might tell them that we’re going to have a lot of fun this year, that we’re going to grow as a team. Or I could tell them that we have a chance to be a really good team. Heck, I may even say that I think we can win the national championship. But whatever I tell them will be realistic and something that I believe in my heart.

By this time, I’m really anxious to get started. Not knowing how the season is going to go is stimulating for me. And the anticipation of the upcoming journey is so exciting that I get goose bumps on my arms and legs—something the players often notice. Jay Bilas, for instance, once told me that he could never remember questioning me or my commitment to the things I was saying to him and the other players. “When Coach K got those goose bumps, you knew he was not giving you some ‘rah-rah’ speech,” said Bilas. “You can’t fake goose bumps.”

After gaining everyone’s complete attention—so that they’re all looking me straight in the eye—I will say one final thing to them. I’ll say:

“I’m really looking forward to coaching every one of you this year.”

And am I ever.

COACH K'S TIPS

- Recruit great individuals who are willing to be part of a team and who are coachable.
- It's important to begin using plural pronouns right away: "Our" instead of "my," "we" instead of "I," "us" instead of "me." Remember that leadership on a team is not singular, it's plural.
- Demonstrate the principle "we're all important" by making sure that you are not the only one speaking at a meeting.
- Teach time management, not only as it relates to individuals, but as it pertains to a group.
- Stress honor in all things.
- Don't be a team of "I got'chas." Too many rules get in the way of leadership.
- Preserve the latitude to lead.
- Set up a family support system for your team. It's like getting a shot to keep away jealousy.
- Hand out a laminated card with the telephone numbers of the players and staff. Remind them to call somebody when they're in harm's way.
- Believe in a handshake.
- Mutual commitment helps people overcome the fear of failure.
- Each team has to run its own race.