

By *MARK EMERY*

The Fire Service Pyramid of Success

Part 1 – Meet John Wooden and his Pyramid of Success

Fire station success has *nothing* to do with your arm patch, your fire chief, years of service, how many firefighters or fire stations your department has, or how many alarms your department responds to. Fire station success has *everything* to do with you.

You can choose to be the leader of a “championship” fire station, life, crew and career. All you’ve got to do is begin; choose to begin building your Fire Station Pyramid of Success.

Success is *not* about perfection. Success is *not* about winning. Success is *not* about being better than another person, another crew, another fire station or another fire department. Success is *not* a game of you against *them*; success is a one-on-one game of you against *you*. None of us will ever be perfect; perhaps more accurate, none of us can *maintain* perfection, struggling to achieve and maintain perfection will turn you into a neurotic mess.

Success is about continuous effort to learn, continuous effort to improve, and continuous effort to make your fire station and the world a better place. When you make your fire station a better place you make your fire department a better place.

As a fire officer – a position of leadership – your responsibility is to bring a group of firefighters together so that they reach their greatest level of competence and potential. The real challenge is to bring individual firefighters together as a high-performance team. This can be extremely difficult and challenging. However, that is your primary job and that is your primary responsibility.

It is important to acknowledge that you are in total control of *your success* – not other firefighters, not other crews, not other fire stations, not your fire chief, not the mayor. It is entirely up to you. As a fire officer and as a

leader, all you can offer and all that can be asked is that you always do your best. With faith and patience, the Pyramid will show you how to be the best you are capable of being.

The original Pyramid of Success was developed by the greatest basketball coach of all time: John R. Wooden. Born and raised in Indiana, Wooden began developing the foundation for the Pyramid in 1934. The Pyramid of Success was complete 14 years later, when Wooden was named head coach of the UCLA men’s basketball team. It took another 15 years for UCLA to win its first of 10 NCAA basketball championships under Wooden. Many people believe that John Wooden is the greatest team-sport coach of all time.

The Fire Station Pyramid of Success will be offered in four parts. Part 1 will introduce you to John Wooden, his principles of leadership, and introduce you to his Pyramid of Success. Part 2 will establish a foundation for personal and professional excellence. Part 3 and Part 4 will build upon the foundation by establishing principles for character, preparation, and leadership. The finished “product” is for you to establish your Fire Station Pyramid of Success.

All recognition and praise for developing the Pyramid of Success belongs to Wooden. I am merely an inspired disciple sharing his principles by adapting Wooden’s Pyramid



“When you improve a little each day, eventually big things occur.”

—John Wooden

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of Success for the fire service. I hope that you find Wooden's Pyramid of Success as inspiring and powerful as I do.

The Pyramid Of Success

First of all, Wooden's Pyramid of Success is not about basketball, in fact the Pyramid of Success has nothing to do with sports, wealth or power; the Pyramid of Success is about life and leadership. Lasting personal and organizational "success" is enabled through personal and organizational leadership. To understand the Pyramid of Success, you must first understand Wooden's definition of success: Success is peace of mind that is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you gave your best effort to become the best of which you are capable.

Take a moment to read Wooden's success definition again. Did you notice that he does not equate success with winning or with championships? Wooden never coached a team to "beat" an opponent. The Pyramid of Success has nothing to do with wealth or power. Success at UCLA was about being the best you can be and helping others be the best they can be – both on and off the court. That is leadership. Wooden never tried to be better than another team or another coach. He focused on controlling the only thing he and his players could control: themselves. (Parents and coaches of youth sports could benefit from embracing these principles.) This is powerful stuff.

Between 1948 and 1975, John R. Wooden served as head basketball coach at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Among Wooden's achievements are the following:

- 620 wins, 147 losses as UCLA head coach
- Four perfect 30-win/zero-loss seasons
- 88 consecutive victories
- 38 consecutive NCAA tournament victories
- 149 wins, two losses at the Pauley Pavilion (UCLA's home court)
- 19 PAC 10 championships
- 10 NCAA national championships
- Seven consecutive NCAA national championships
- Six-time NCAA Basketball Coach of the Year

- 1970 *Sporting News* Sports Man of the Year
- 1973 *Sports Illustrated* Sports Man of the Year
- 95% of his players graduated (a rate far better than the entire UCLA student population!)
- The first of just two individuals enshrined in the Hall of Fame both as a player and as a coach (the other is Lenny Wilkens)
- 1964 California Father of the Year (married to his high school sweetheart,



Nellie Riley, together they had a son and a daughter)

- 1974 California Grandfather of the Year (seven grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren)
- Winning percentage of .813 during his 40-year coaching career (885 wins, 203 losses)
- Served four years as a full lieutenant in the U.S. Navy
- 1999 named by ESPN the Greatest Coach of the 20th Century

Wow. The man was – *and is* – remarkable. Born Oct. 14, 1910, in Martinsville, IN, John Wooden is 97 years old and still attends many UCLA home games.

If you are to understand the value of the Pyramid of Success, there are a few things you should know about Wooden and his basketball dynasty. Wooden never gave pep-talks to his teams; Wooden didn't like artificial (and temporary) emotional highs. He believed that his teams should have a focused and consistent level of intensity that is achieved through mental and physical preparation.

UCLA practices were 90 minutes, not 100 minutes and not 95 minutes.

“The best way to improve the team is to improve yourself.”

—John Wooden

It didn't matter if it was the middle of the season or preparing for an NCAA championship game, practices were 90 minutes. Each of those 90 minutes was planned in detail. Practices were fast and furious with each player moving and working constantly. Each 90-minute practice included a degree of pressure and intensity. Down by one point with two seconds left on the clock? Not a problem, because UCLA was accustomed to pressure and intensity, and because they were so well prepared, they were able to keep their cool and remain focused.

Before big games and during the NCAA playoffs, future opponents rarely scouted the Bruins or looked at film. There was no reason to. There were no secrets, no tricks, no new schemes and no complex plays. Wooden's playbook was simple and short. Wooden's teams relied on physical conditioning, mental toughness and *flawless execution of the basics*. UCLA would often full-court press an opponent for the entire game. Wooden's Bruins would literally wear opponents down both mentally and physically. No other college basketball team in history has exhibited the character, the conditioning, the poise, and the confidence of Wooden's UCLA Bruins.

Philosophical Smoke & Mirrors

There are all kinds of self-help books on acquiring health, wealth, and success. Most of them are nothing more than marketing smoke and mirrors akin to the exercise devices sold on television infomercials that promise quick results with minimum effort. If you've read any of these books you are aware that long-term application of the "success package" is difficult. If these books and programs actually worked, our troubles would be over, we would all be in a permanent state of health, wealth and happiness.

Often, the only people that acquire wealth and happiness from these

“I don’t believe poise and confidence can come about until all the blocks (of the Pyramid) are in place.”

—John Wooden

books are the authors and the publishers. A good example is *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey. Although his basic philosophy is well conceived, programs like The Seven Habits never seem to stick. Many organizations spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in an attempt to hang their future on what amounts to an organizational ThighMaster that will soon collect dust next to the organizational Abdominator. Wouldn't it be great if there was a too-good-to-be-true philosophy that not only works, but would endure? The key difference between organizational phi-

losophy and organizational fluff is purpose and application.

Many personal and organizational quick-fix programs are developed without roots in reality. In other words, the creator never used the program to change, develop and improve an actual organization. There is no history of success to validate their philosophical package. Many of these consultants have never run an organization, let alone try to improve one.

Organizational and personal change do not happen by reading a book and later referring to a wallet-size card. Even Stephen Covey cannot boast that: “For 20 years, The Seven Habits helped me and my associates become the greatest company/team/school/group in history. I’m here to share the secrets of our success.”

On the other hand, Wooden achieved unprecedented success with his program. He had a single altruistic and focused purpose: he wanted to provide his players with a roadmap for a full and productive life after basketball (success on the basketball court would be icing on the

cake). The furthest thing from his mind was selling books and profiting from the Pyramid. His goal wasn't to retire and hit the road as a consultant promising *organizational* six-pack abs.

Because overwhelming evidence exists that prove the validity and reliability of Wooden's principles, the power of the Pyramid of Success transcends academic smoke and mirrors. His Pyramid worked for a decade before a Pyramid book was published and for decades before his principles hit the corporate lecture circuit. Because he believed the principles of the Pyramid should be shared freely,

“You can’t live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you.”


—John Wooden

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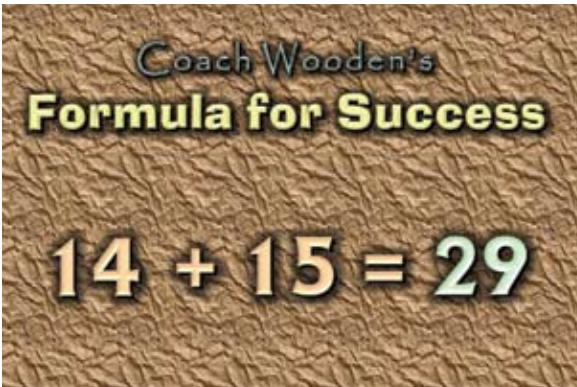


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“Talent is God-given, be humble. Fame is man-given, be grateful. Conceit is self-given, be careful.”

—John Wooden

Wooden chose not to have the Pyramid of Success copyrighted.

Wooden didn't create the Pyramid of Success in a vacuum or in an ivory tower. Nor was the Pyramid of Success an overnight success. During the 14 years it took Wooden to develop the Pyramid, he was in the trenches testing his principles. Once Wooden's Pyramid was finished, it took another 15 years before he and the Bruins won the first of 10 NCAA national championships. Wooden summarizes this 29-year period with two words: *faith* and *patience*. Even today, decades later, Wooden's players will tell you that their

personal and professional success is a direct result of Pyramid of Success principles. These players include Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton, Sidney Wicks, Gail Goodrich, Walt Hazzard and many others.

Building the Pyramid Of Success

The Pyramid of Success is comprised of 15 blocks arranged in five levels. (To fit the fire service, I've taken the liberty of changing the top-level and final block of his original Pyramid.) Wooden believes that it is impossible to experience true, lasting success without having each block of each level firmly in place.

As with all structures that have en-

dured the test of time, the Pyramid of Success is supported by a strong foundation. This foundation is comprised of five blocks. Two of the five blocks serve as foundation cornerstones and are crucial to the Pyramid's strength and stability: at one corner is Industriousness and at the other corner is Enthusiasm. Between the foundation cornerstones are Friendship and Cooperation. Positioned at the center of the foundation is the keystone: Loyalty. The second level is comprised of four blocks. These four blocks serve as the character level of the Pyramid: Self-Control, Alertness, Initiative and Intentness.

Level three is the preparation level and is comprised of three blocks: Skill, Condition and Team Spirit. Level four, the leadership level, is comprised of two

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blocks: Poise and Confidence. Wooden believes it is impossible to demonstrate true poise and confidence before the first three levels of the Pyramid are firmly in place.

At the top of Wooden's Pyramid of Success is "Competitive Greatness." At the top of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success is a single block: Professional Excellence. In the context of the fire service, the Fire Station Pyramid of Success is intended to establish a legacy of personal and professional excellence.

Peace of Mind

Wooden's definition of success is simple, yet profound. According to Wooden, success is about peace of mind and self-satisfaction. This peace of mind is the direct result of knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you are capable.

That is all Wooden asked of his players.

If UCLA lost to an opponent, but Wooden believed that each player made the effort to do their best, he was proud and happy, thanking each player for their effort. If UCLA dominated an opponent, winning by a wide margin, but Wooden believed his players didn't give their best effort, he would be ashamed and unhappy.

Winning and losing was secondary to Wooden. He considered each team member to be more than a basketball player (Wooden never considered a player disposable). Each player was first a student and second a future citizen of the world - they were future husbands, fathers and neighbors. Wooden had just four years to prepare each player for life after basketball. His players showed their appreciation by making the effort

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to do the best of which they were capable. Wooden fostered a culture of hard work and mutual respect. (Wouldn't it be great if your fire station fostered a culture of hard work and mutual respect?) Wooden's principles, none of which have anything to do with sports, created what is perhaps the greatest sports dynasty in modern history. What if Wooden's principles helped you create the greatest fire station in history?

May the Fire Station Pyramid of Success help you discover the peace of mind that comes from knowing you have done your best to become the best you are capable of becoming.

Next: Part 2 - Five blocks that will establish a strong foundation for your Pyramid of Success: Industriousness, Enthusiasm, Loyalty, Friendship and Cooperation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Books: *Wooden; Wooden on Leadership; They Call Me Coach; The Essential Wooden; You Haven't Taught Until They Have Learned*
Website: www.coachjohnwooden.com
DVD: *John Wooden: Values, Victory and Peace of Mind*

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