

# Becoming a Head Coach

By Bill Mills

Larry Wilson, founder of Wilson Learning and creator of Counsellor Selling, was a dear friend of mine. Sharing a meal with Larry was always fun and always educational. One meal that sticks in my mind, took place at the Rendezvous in Minneapolis. Larry had engaged our bartender and two patrons as effortlessly as a bird takes flight. They were instantly his friends. Larry never met a stranger, only friends he didn't yet know. Then he turned to me and said, "I'm turning 80 . . . and so are you." And with those words we were off into one of those conversations that leave you wondering, "Where did the time go?"

Larry was a masterful head coach and he urged me to become one. To understand what he meant, you need to know that few things delighted Larry as much as a unique definition, a paradox or a well-turned phrase. What Larry was urging me to do was to master the art of coaching people's brains to perform better, hence *head* coach. Larry said leaders must be able to coach people's heads.

Larry liked to say, "If I think the things I've always thought, I'll do the things I've always done and get the results I've always got." In honor of Larry's memory (he passed away a few years ago, at the age of 83), I'd like to share some head coaching skills.

When Larry needed to have a difficult conversation, he started from the premise that we are all FHBs (fallible human beings) who graduated from MSU (make stuff up). The stuff we make up isn't always true and it causes us to make mistakes. A good head coach will help people create the thoughts, conversations and actions that help them be more successful.

Here's an example: Joe is a recent hire. He's 26 years old. He's smart and articulate, but his approach to work is a concern to Joe's boss Linda. Almost immediately after being hired, Joe started sliding into work late. He also would leave early to meet

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friends. His work product was generally good, but sometimes deadlines would slip and Joe showed no concern. Yesterday Joe was 15 minutes late to a 1 p.m. company meeting. Joe is also an UBER driver and had taken a fare over his lunch hour that took a little longer than expected. Catching him alone, Linda spoke up.

**Linda:** Hey Joe, have you got a minute to talk?

**Joe:** Sure, what's up?

**Linda:** I need to talk about something I'm feeling uncomfortable bringing up and I think you'll be uncomfortable hearing.

Joe's heart starts racing. His face feels warm and his palms are starting to sweat. His breathing becomes shallow and carbon dioxide is building up in his blood, raising his anxiety.

**Linda:** The only reason I'm bringing it up, is because I want you to be successful here. I want our team to have a reputation for being capable, dependable, and professional, and I want you to be a trusted member of our team.

Joe's heart rate is coming back down. He's prepared to hear something very important.

**Joe:** What is it?

**Linda:** I've noticed there are times when you are unavailable to us. I've seen you come in late and leave early, even if your work isn't done. I've noticed you've been missing deadlines without explanation and today you were 15 minutes late for a meeting where our team was presenting our recommendations to the rest of the company.

**Joe:** I know, but I wasn't scheduled to do the presentation and lots of people set their own schedule here.

Knowing a deflection technique when she sees one, Linda doesn't allow Joe to be irresponsible and she does the unthinkable, she agrees with him which leaves him without an argument.

**Linda:** I agree with you, we enjoy a lot of freedom here. And still, the impact of prioritizing that freedom over your responsibilities causes people to make things up. I find myself giving the more important projects to team members I know I can depend on. I start to think you aren't interested in your job. At today's meeting, I felt embarrassed when I was asked why you weren't there and I had to say I didn't know.

**Joe:** Didn't you get my text that I was

running late?

**Linda:** I understand you felt your text was sufficient. Nevertheless, the expectation was that you would be here for the team and I felt let down.

**Joe:** OK.

**Linda:** I have a request, unless there are other reasons we need to discuss, I need you at your desk and working on time, every day. If you need help completing a project on time I need you to speak up. I need you to be a professional in every way.

**Joe:** I thought I was doing a good job.

**Linda:** I realize you were doing your best given your understanding of my expectations. That's why we are clarifying those expectations today. Is there anything you need from me to help you meet these expectations?

**Joe:** No, not really, but if its OK can we meet more often to discuss the projects I'm working on? Sometimes I get stuck and I feel stupid asking for help.

**Linda:** Absolutely, let's review what's working and what's not working once a week. When would you like to meet?

**Joe:** How about Tuesdays at 10 a.m.?

**Linda:** Perfect, I'll put it in my calendar.

People do things consistent with the thoughts and feelings they experience. A great head coach can make all the difference. Happy coaching!

Bill Mills is the CEO of Executive Group, a CEO and leadership peer group grounded in proven processes for success. Visit [www.mnexecutivegroup.com](http://www.mnexecutivegroup.com) to learn more. To purchase his book, "The Power of Conscious Conversation," send an email to Bill at [bill@mnexecutivegroup.com](mailto:bill@mnexecutivegroup.com).



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