

Dental Service Adopts Coach Wooden's Philosophies

Legendary UCLA coach John Wooden instills timeless wisdom through training course.

By Dan Sussman

SEEING YOUR DENTIST dribble a basketball through his waiting room and fire off three-point shots at the spit sink is about as likely as seeing a college basketball team fill cavities and whiten spectators' teeth during timeouts. Nevertheless, basketball teams and dental practitioners have a lot in common, according to executives at Pacific Dental Services (PDS), an Irvine, California-provider of business services to dentistry practices in Nevada, Arizona, and California.

A basketball team's success depends upon the character of its players and their ability to work well as a team, and a dental practice's ability to flourish rests on the character and integrity of its employees and their ability to work well together to serve their patients. To drive home that point, PDS offers to its 1,700 employees an organizational and personal development course based on the teachings of legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden.

The relationship between PDS and The John R. Wooden Course proves how two startup companies with similar,

time-tested values at their core, can serve each other's needs.

As is the case in all healthcare fields, dentistry has become increasingly complicated in recent years, says Steve Thorne, founder and president of PDS. Managing insurance reimbursements, staff payrolls, patient record privacy, and office computer systems are imposing burdens on dentists that many did not anticipate when they entered dental school. For Thorne, who had implemented office computer systems for his father's dental practice and those of other doctors, the situation represented a business opportunity.

"I knew there was a core business opportunity to help dentists meet their business needs. They're good at being dentists, but most of them detest the business and administrative sides of their practices," he says. "We started PDS in 1994, and there's been just unreal demand from dentists. We fill that gap for them."

When PDS and a dental practice agree to "affiliate," Pacific Dental takes over all of the practice's business and administration functions and supplies the office's staff. The dentists and their clinical staffs continue to manage all aspects of actual treatment.

Employee development

For the first few years of its existence, PDS was a "mom and pop" business, says Robert George, the company's vice president of people and leadership development. But by about 2000, it had grown considerably, which precipitated a shift in the way PDS approached some aspects of its business. While the company had been focused on the performance of its affiliates, Thorne says the growth of PDS and its dental practices as well as increasing patient demands prompted the company to provide extensive training opportunities for its employees.

"For the past six or seven years, dentistry has been on a growth curve. This is largely due to the baby boomers keeping their teeth longer and a huge demand for more services, such as aesthetics and cosmetics," says Thorne. "As a result, a lot more training for dental personnel is needed."

Since that time, the company has established Pacific Dental University, which provides employees with a wide array of training courses that cover business and management topics as well as advanced clinical training. Courses are conducted both in classrooms and online. In addition, the university designs

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curricula for employees, based on their roles, and tracks their progress, says George.

Success, values, and teamwork

At the same time PDS was growing, Lynn Guerin, a friend of Thorne's, was working with Wooden to launch a training and development course based on the coach's philosophy. Wooden, who led the UCLA Bruins to 10 NCAA championships in 12 years before leaving the hardwood floor in 1975, had become a popular speaker on his philosophy of success, values, and the importance of teamwork (see sidebar on page 43).

Guerin, a corporate training executive who played on four sports teams in high school and attended college on a football scholarship, was electrified by Wooden's presentations and surprised to find out that his teachings had not been turned into a formal training course. Guerin and Wooden, who is now in his mid 90s, collaborated to create the John R. Wooden Course. Despite a somewhat slow start, the course has become increasingly popular. Since its introduction in 2002, more than 5,000 students have taken the Wooden course.

Wooden's course is based on the coach's belief in what Guerin refers to as "timeless wisdom." Using basketball as a metaphor, the course is based on Wooden's "Pyramid of Success," which he formalized in 1948 and which stresses behaviors such as industriousness, enthusiasm, team spirit, self control, friendliness, poise, and confidence.

"John Wooden and what he teaches has stood the test of time, and the foundations and fundamentals of Wooden are so solid that they have been impacting lives for seven decades," says Guerin.

In light of Thorne's and Guerin's relationship and the similar values of their respective organizations, PDS avidly adopted Wooden's course. All new managers are required to take the course, which is given at PDS twice each year.

"Like Wooden, we've tailored a lot of our training around the idea of a pyramid that people work their way up," says Thorne. "Wooden's core blocks in the pyramid are applicable to any business, and they fit with the culture of our company real well.

"For example, one of the blocks in Wooden's pyramid is teamwork, and as a company, we've developed a lot of sys-

tems that work around that consistently," he continues. "We have something we send out via email to our dental centers that we think of as our Exceptional Performance—or XP—Huddle. There's a motivational quote, and then there's a belief statement. It enshrines the importance of teamwork to a facility."

Patient satisfaction

Thorne also says that patients feel the result of the training through the company's commitment to creating the perfect patient experience.

"In dentistry, creating a perfect patient experience is tough," he says. "We know in advance that patients don't want to be there. We know we're probably going to hurt them. We know that we're taking away their time, and they know that they're going to have to pay us a lot of money."

In keeping with Wooden's teachings on the value of coaching, PDS evaluates potential affiliates' ability to be coaches and their openness to coaching from others in selecting affiliate practices, says George. In addition, Pacific Dental University utilizes peer teaching, in which employees who are advanced in the curriculum teach those with less experience.

While PDS integrates itself deeply into its affiliated dental practices, the principals of each practice retain ownership, and Thorne acknowledges that there is no guarantee all owners will buy into PDS principles. However, he also notes that alignment with those principles is a key determinant in selecting affiliate dental practices, so adherence to the core beliefs has not been an issue.

Based on results measured by PDS, the Wooden training has proven successful thus far, says George. Employee turnover is a critical concern for large dental practices, but PDS has a turnover rate among its best-paid dental assistant of less than 3 percent, he says.

"Elsewhere in the industry, turnover rates are 10 times as high. It can be extremely costly," he says. "The other measures we use concern direct educational results. For example, when a dentist learns socket grafting, does he actually do socket grafts? We view our reports,



Source: The John Wooden Course

The Words of Legendary Coach John Wooden

Coach John Wooden's UCLA teams reached unprecedented success.

His coaching molded the lives of many young players at UCLA, such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Walton, who both went on to become professional NBA legends. Under his guidance, the Bruins won 81 percent of their games and set all-time records with four perfect 30-0 seasons, 88 consecutive victories, 38 straight NCAA tournament victories, 20 Pac-10 championships, and 10 national championships—seven of them consecutive.

During a 2003 ceremony at the White House, President Bush honored Coach Wooden with America's most prestigious civil award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Q: How is coaching employees in a business or an organization similar to coaching a sports team?

Wooden: Being the head of anything, you have to set an example. You have to be firm about the things you want and the things you believe. But if you listen to your followers you will get better results. I don't think there is enough listening going on. As a leader, you don't want people who just say yes and feed your ego. You want people who contribute. The leader needs to let people contribute, and if what they offer works, he needs to give that person credit. If not (the leader) needs to take the blame.

Q: How did you deal with unmotivated players?

Wooden: Every one of us is different. We are similar in so many respects, but we are not identical. The person in leadership must carefully analyze everyone under his supervision to the best of his ability. People are imperfect, and they are not going to perform accurately all of the time.

You have to give people the treatment they have earned and that they deserve. You have to make that decision. You can be inaccurate. In many ways you have to treat the people the same, but not in every way. You are not going

to like all the people who work for you the same, and they aren't all going to like you the same. You have to be strong enough to not let your personal feelings influence the decisions you make as far as the business and your profession are concerned.

Q: A lot of people like to be liked, or need to be liked—especially at the highest levels. Does that ever get in the way of doing the right thing for the business or the team? How do you overcome that?

Wooden: When you say a lot of people like to be liked, you're wrong—I think everybody likes to be liked. If you are just trying to be popular out there, you are not going to succeed. I wanted respect from my players. I hoped they like me, but it was much more important to have their respect. If you can get it across to your people what you are trying to accomplish, the better it will work.

Q: We use sports as a metaphor for teamwork. Is that always appropriate?

Wooden: Not always. Sports are in the limelight. And someone in the limelight will react differently than they will when they are out of the limelight. Not everyone, but for most people that is the case. Teamwork is going to come from being considerate of the other person. I think—and I don't think I am right about everything—the fact that my (UCLA team) managers had respect for me is that, for me, they were one of the players. They were not there as a service for the players. They did not pick up the towels and gum wrappers for the players. They did not carry equipment for the players. The players had to do that for themselves. I (used to receive) letters from custodians from schools we played (on the road) telling me that the UCLA basketball players left the locker rooms cleaner than anyone else. When you get that kind of attitude across to your players, some of them are kind of reluctant. But before long, that makes a better team.

Q: When you were recruiting and looking from one class to the next, were you looking at how those pieces would fit together?

Wooden: Always. You always need to be thinking about how the pieces will fit together. You don't want to get overloaded at one position. But you are never going to pass up an outstanding player.

Q: A lot of organizations talk about bench strength. How important is that?

Wooden: You hear so much from TV basketball commentators talking about how a team "doesn't have much depth." That never bothered me (as a coach). I was going to have seven players. We were going to work hard on fundamentals and in drills. I wanted a few that were well trained and working together, instead of a (larger) bunch that wasn't working together. For most of my years, I worked with seven players. The same five would almost always be the starters, and I would have one extra man in the back line and one extra man in the front line. The current UCLA coach doesn't do that, but he is still very successful. That shows that what is right for one leader is not right for another.

Coach John Wooden was interviewed by **Rex Davenport**, former editor for *T+D*.

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and the courses that have the greatest business performance results are the ones that we run most often.”

Thorne sees continued growth of PDS as dental practices consolidate to realize economies of scale and to be more responsive to patients.

“Healthcare in general is going through big changes that relate to the consumer,” says Thorne. “Consumers are much more involved in what they’re paying for, based on price and quality. The only way we can deliver what they need is through larger group practices, which will continue to grow.”

As the company grows, it plans to expand its educational offerings. George says the company is refining its curricula based on employee roles and adds that the company’s post-doctorate education program will be expanded as well. This includes a hands-on orientation in which dentists throughout the company each spend two full days with PDS senior owners and doctors. In addition, the company plans to emphasize training in implant technology and the use of computer-assisted design tools.

But regardless of growing customer demands, new customer services and whiz-bang technologies, it all comes back to attitude and execution. Like John Wooden’s UCLA teams that would run drill after drill in the quest for perfection on the court, PDS keeps pounding away at its own fundamentals through ongoing training.

“It’s never ending,” says Thorne. “We train and train, and we stick with the same principles that we teach over and over, because those principles work.” **TD**

Dan Sussman is an Arizona-based freelance writer who specializes in technology and business improvement topics; dsussman@cox.net.