RESEARCH ARTICLE

Coach Red Holzman: Lessons for Today's Executive

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine what lessons, if any, executives and professionals can learn from Red Holzman, the New York Knicks Hall of Fame Coach, that goes beyond basketball. The methods of this research included a historical study of the career and life of Red Holzman. The results of this research indicate that there are key takeaways for executives and professionals that go beyond basketball including Coach Holzman as a strategist and leader along with his humility and simplicity. The conclusions of this study illustrate that all working professionals can learn valuable lessons from this Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame Coach.

Keywords: Red Holzman, Knicks, NBA Champions.

1. Introduction

The corporate training and leadership development industries are robust. Organizations such as small companies (100 - 999 employees), midsize companies (1,000 - 9,999 employees) and large companies (+10,000 employees) have spent over \$101.8 Billion on corporate training in 2022 -2023 (Freifeld, 2023). It is also estimated that organizations worldwide have spent over \$60 Billion on leadership development of its senior corporate leaders and high potentials (Yemiscigil, Born, and Ling, 2023).

What is also interesting to note is that CEOs, and not Chief Learning Officers, have the primary responsibility of developing its organization's training and leadership development budgets. As such a higher percentage of these training budgets are targeted for the development of senior level employees (Wentworth, 2016).

It should also be noted that many of these programs fail to meet their initial objectives. According to a recent McKinsey study, only 7.1% of CEOs believe their companies are developing effective global leaders

(Feser, Nielsen and Rennie, 2017). In addition, according to another McKinsey study, only 11% of executives believe their leadership development interventions achieved sustained or desired outcomes (Leading Off. 2022). Perhaps the reason why many of these training initiatives are failing to achieve impact is due to their standard and/or outdated content (Paine, 2016). Also failures may occur due to poor timing of training offerings. For example, for training to be effective it must be strategically offered so the employee can perform, develop and thrive within the journey of their current and future roles (Ismail-Wey, 2023).

Overall, the reason why this data is being presented is because perhaps there is a more cost effective way to develop the leaders of one's organization.

With this as a background the purpose of this research is to present a learning opportunity for executives by analyzing the professional career of Red Holzman, the New York Knickerbockers (Knicks) Hall of Fame Coach. With the philosophy that the most unexpected figure can provide a high impact learning opportunity, Coach Holzman's career and philosophies will be

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researched and analyzed with the goal to determine, if possible, leadership lessons that go beyond basketball.

2. Background and Career

Coach Red Holzman was born on August 10, 1920 in Brooklyn, New York to Jewish immigrant parents (Coffey, 2021). He attended Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn. Upon graduation, Coach Holzman attended the University of Baltimore on a basketball scholarship but transferred to the City College of New York (CCNY) after six (6) months (Berkow, 1998). It has been noted that the reason for the transfer was that Coach Holzman missed his mother's "Jewish Romanian Cooking" (The Story of Knicks' Legend Red Holzman).

At CCNY Coach Holzman, as a member of the Men's Basketball Team, would become an All American Guard and was coached by the legendary Nat Holman who was considered the "Babe Ruth of basketball at that time" (The Story of Knicks). Under Coach Holman's tutelage, Coach Holzman would develop the foundation of his coaching philosophy which included aggressive defense and ball movement on offense in search of the open shot (Holzman, 1991; Berkow, 1998). Coach Holzman also believed, with continued passing on offense, that basketball should be an "elegant affair" rather than a game of brute force (Village Voice, 1998). Upon graduation from CCNY Coach Holzman joined the United States Navy and served in the military from 1942 to 1945 (Coffey, 2021).

Upon completing his military service Coach Holzman played nine (9) seasons of professional basketball and was part of a professional championship team with the Rochester Royals (Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame). In addition, Coach Holzman earned Rookie of the Year Honors when he joined the professional ranks (Player Profile Red Holzman). He also served as Player/Coach for Milwaukee in 1953 prior to his retirement as a player (Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame). In a steady but not stellar playing career Coach Holzman averaged, during the regular season, 13 minutes per game of playing time, 6.1 points, 1.5 rebounds and 2.0 assists per game (Rochester Royals).

Upon retiring as a Player/Coach for the Milwaukee Hawks, Coach Holzman remained as the Coach with the transfer of the team to St. Louis but was fired midway through the 1956-1957 season (Player Profile Red Holzman). Soon after his dismissal from St. Louis, Coach Holzman secured a position of Scout for the New York Knicks which is a role he held for approximately a decade (Player Profile Red Holzman).

Fast forward to the 1967-1968 season and the Knicks were 15-22 under their current coach Dick McGuire (Day in History). The Knicks would then dismiss Coach McGuire midway through the season and hire Coach Holzman who secured a 28-17 coaching record under his watch for the remainder of that season (Day in History). Coach Holzman would continue to Coach the New York Knicks until he was dismissed after the 1977 season only to be rehired again in November 1978 (Berkow, 1998). Coach Holzman returned as Head Coach because he believed that "when the company needs you, you come back" (Papanek, 1978).

Coach Holzman would eventually retire from the Knicks after the 1982 season (The Story of the Knicks).

In terms of accomplishments, Coach Holzman led the Knicks to three (3) Eastern Conference Championships (New York State Basketball Hall of Fame). He also led the Knicks to two (2) NBA Championships in 1970 and 1973 (The Story of the Knicks). The Knicks have not secured an NBA Championship since. Coach Holzman was also the NBA Coach of the Year in 1969-1970 (Basketball Reference). In addition, Coach Holzman was listed as a Top 10 Coach in NBA History in 1997-1998 and a Top 15 Coach in NBA History in 2021-2022 (Basketball Reference; Top 15 Coaches). Furthermore. Coach Holzman, on March 10. 1990, was honored at Madison Square Garden by having a Banner which showcases his 613 Knicks Victories as the Head Coach forever displayed in the Rafters of the "Worlds Most Famous Arena" (Coach Red Holzman Honored at MSG). Also, in addition to his induction into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, Coach Holzman was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in 1988 (William "Red" Holzman, International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame).

Overall, Coach Holzman not only brought excitement to Madison Square Garden, the former "Mecca of Basketball", but he also was the "molder, conductor and architect of one of the most unusual, most thrilling and, for the involved basketball fan, most gratifying teams ever assembled" (Berkow, 1998). In addition, the Knicks, under Coach Holzman's tutelage during the height of their success, were considered one of the most feared teams in the NBA (Sokolow, 2023). Lastly, Phil Jackson, a former Knick player under Coach Holzman who is also an eleven time NBA Champion as a Head Coach, considers Coach Holzman as a mentor (Berman, 2013).

3. Materials and Methods

A historical study of the career and life of Coach Holzman was conducted. Upon the conclusion of this research key takeaways were developed on what current executives, corporate leaders and managers could learn from this New York Knicks Hall of Fame Coach that goes beyond professional basketball. The goal of this research was to also uncover how all professionals, regardless of industry or function, could learn from Coach Holzman's decision making and professional journey.

4. Results

Two (2) central themes emerged within this case study regarding Coach Holzman's approach to his work which can be seen below.

4.1 Theme #1 - Strategist and Leader

Coach Holzman understood the technical aspects of basketball. As a scout for the New York Knicks for approximately a decade prior to taking on the Head Coaching position, Coach Holzman, in his role, traveled throughout the United States, in search of With this as a background, Coach Holzman talent. was able to not only assemble the entire Knicks 1970 championship squad, through his scouting work, but he also, as a result, had intimate knowledge about his players (i.e. history, personalities etc.). Such a background allowed Coach Holzman the ability to secure players that would thrive within his basketball philosophy and allowed him to lead with a true understanding of his players (The Story of the Knicks).

In addition, as the Head Coach, with a background and expertise in scouting, Coach Holzman helped engineer impactful trades for key players such as Dave Debusschere and Earl Monroe. This occurred due to his technical knowledge and expertise as a scout (Berkow, 1998).

Coach Holzman further was one of the first coaches to utilize film within scouting and game preparation. Such an innovative tactic, coupled with his effective attention to detail, attributed to his success as a scout and coach (Bourgase, 2007).

In addition, Butch Beard, a former Knick player and Assistant Coach, described Coach Holzman as a great tactitioner with his knowledge of the game (1-on-1 with Butch Beard). His professional attention to detail was also second to none (The Story of the Knicks). By virtue of his technical expertise from scouting, Coach Holzman knew immediately, upon witnessing his collegiate play, that Larry Bird would be a once in a generation NBA player. (Elderkin, 1982).

From a leadership perspective, Coach Holzman was "fair" to all of those he led (1-on-1 with Butch Beard). He believed that there was a responsibility in wearing that Knick uniform that included a style of play of tenacious defense and unselfish offense (The Story of the Knicks). Coach Holzman also held players accountable (Maloney, 2024). The players along with the entire Knick organization bought into Coach Holzman's vision (Holzman, 1967). Coach Holzman's "Basketball Philosophy", as previously stated, included an aggressive and suffocating style of defense where a player always knew the location of the ball while striving to pass to the open player on offense (Sokolow, 2023). Coach Holzman's philosophy of "team first" and that you "cannot replace team play with ability or anything else" allowed his players to thrive (NBA Vault). Coach Holzman would further not tolerate selfishness on the court (The Story of the Knicks). His philosophy in action can be seen during the Knicks 1969-1970 championship season, where all five starters averaged more than ten (10) points per game during the regular season and playoffs. This uncommon accomplishment illustrates the impact of his vision and executed strategy (Berman. 2013).

Coach Holzman further empowered and inspired He at times allowed them to devise his players. plays in the huddle during critical moments of a game (Berman, 2013). In addition, Walt Frazier, the Knicks Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame Guard and current television analyst, indicated that Coach Holzman was instrumental in building his confidence when he was not playing well (Kirshenbaum, 1969). Coach Holzman further treated his players as adults (Tracy, 2010). He was also not negatively critical of them. According to Knick Player Bill Bradley, Coach Holzman "never criticized a player, and he would rarely say much about a player. I think that was a very self-effacing way to lead" (Tracy, June 3, 2010).

Coach Holzman, as a leader, further handled the pressure well. More specifically, Coach Holzman never panicked even if he was surrounded by game time chaos (D'Agostino, NBA.com). He also handled the pressure well and did not dwell on previous performances. He learned from experience and focused on the future (Bourgase, 2007).

Coach Holzman further was very communicative to the referees during NBA games. He stated his position firmly often in a "vociferous" manner or with a specific and telling glare (Berkow, 1998). The referees often times would rile Coach Holzman with a call he disagreed with whether the game was close or not (Goldaper, 1973). Coach Holzman's critical approach to the referees was part of his leadership style.

Overall, Coach Holzman's style as a leader and strategist was "one of authority with equal focus on professionalism and attention to detail" (The Story of the Knicks). Such an approach, coupled with his technical expertise as a scout, generated success for Coach Holzman.

4.2 Theme #2 - Humility / Simplicity

Throughout the research there are numerous examples of Coach Holzman's humble and simple approach to his profession and life.

It has been noted that Coach Holzman was "pathologically modest" throughout his career and association with the Knicks (Zachter, 2019). Coach Holzman preferred to stay "out of the limelight" when the Knicks became the "hottest ticket in town" (The Story of Knicks' Legend Red Holzman). For example, Coach Holzman owned nine (9) suits all of the same color (Berkow, 1998). Also, in the age of technological advances, Coach Holzman still only owned a "black and white" television and would often state "what's wrong with black and white" (Zachtner, In addition, despite his professional and 2019)? financial success, Coach Holzman remained with his wife Selma in their modest home in Cedarhurst. New York from the 1950s until his passing (Zachter, 2019). Also at first he was not interested in being the Knicks Head Coach however his mind changed when he stated "I realized if I did not take the job I might not have a job"(Berkow, 1998). In addition to taking the Long Island Railroad to Madison Square Garden, Coach Holzman would rather have been "faceless" and has described himself as a "simple man with simple tastes" where nobody knows him (Goldaper, 1973).

Coach Holzman's Jewish Faith was also important to him (Tracy, 2010). While he did not attend Temple regularly, Coach Holzman did fast for Rosh Hashanah. Coach Holzman was also pleased in accomplishing 613 victories as the Knicks Head Coach especially with the significance "613" has within the Jewish Faith. More specifically, "613" is the number of the Mitzvot or Commandments in the Hebrew Bible. (Tracy, 2010).

When receiving awards and recognition, Coach Holzman's humility and simplicity were apparent. Interestingly, during Coach Holzman's Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame Induction, which is his industry's highest honor, he thanked former colleagues and friends including Dick Isaacs and Fuzzy Levane for "always getting me a job when I needed one" (William "Red" Holzman Basketball Hall of Fame Enshrinement Speech). Furthermore Coach Holzman, on March 10 1990. Coach Holzman was honored at Madison Square Garden with his Knicks victories as a head coach (613) placed on a banner and lifted into the MSG Rafters. Within his speech Coach Holzman thanked former players for "making me such a good coach", thanked former coaches and even thanked the media as they "always gave me an even shake and when I got too big for my bridges they put me in my place" (Coach Red Holzman Honored at MSG). These statements illustrate his humility, gratitude, understanding and perspective.

Coach Holzman also illustrated his humility and simplicity by stating "I don't think there is such a thing as a coaching genius...just hard workers" (Berkow, 1998). He further stated:

On a good team there are no superstars. There are great players who show they are great players by being able to play with others as a team. They have the ability to be superstars, but if they fit into a good team, they make sacrifices; they do things necessary to help the team win. What the numbers are in salaries or statistics don't matter; how they play together does.

(Jimenez, 2016).

Overall, through these statements Coach Holzman did not put himself up on a pedestal. He preferred to be in the background and only speak to the media when it was required. His humble and simplistic approach to his work and his life must be noted.

5. Discussion

Per the findings there are two immediate takeaways that are relevant for today's executive and emerging leader. They include both Employee Branding and Humility in Leadership.

Once again, it should be noted that Coach Holzman's area of expertise was "scouting". As stated previously, he did not want the Head Coaching Position of the New York Knicks when it was presented to him. He enjoyed the work and life of a scout. In essence, his technical expertise was in scouting when he was thrust into the head coaching role. This is not uncommon as many organizational leaders can be highly specialized within a specific function (i.e. Finance, Marketing, Scouting) prior to taking on a greater management role. (i.e. General Management or Head Coaching) (Kotter, 1982).

With this as a background, one thing Coach Holzman did well within his work with the Knicks was Employee Branding. Overall, Employee Branding can be defined as how a company or organization is seen by current and future employees with the goal of winning the war on talent (Martin, 2005). Coach Holzman, as a scout, recruited future players to the New York Knicks that were aligned with his philosophy of basketball which included pressure filled defense while playing unselfish offense hitting the open teammate for the shot.

In order to successfully execute an Employee Branding strategy there must be a psychological contract established with each employee that is central to the branding process (Miles, 2004). In addition, there must also be a covenant established with potential and current employees on items such as corporate image, corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate reputation (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2017). Furthermore, Employee Branding is much more than a "means end" approach as it must be presented as employee centric where all stakeholders feel seen, heard and inspired (Ronda, Valor and Abril, 2018). In addition, effective communication of the vision to the stakeholders, who all have competing interests and priorities, is key within an Employee Branding process (Hewage, Sandeepanie, Prasadini and Dinoka, 2023).

Overall, Coach Holzman was able to envision the type of basketball he wanted represented as the New York Knicks "Brand" and was able to employ all stakeholders to execute on that brand promise.

Executives must take note. Coach Holzman's success was a direct result of the basketball tactics and overall Knicks Brand that was presented during the NBA season. Delivering on such a strategy is not easy but Coach Holzman was able to make it happen. He was able to orchestrate a targeted brand of basketball that all stakeholders not only bought into but also executed successfully.

The second takeaway is Humility in Leadership and there is certainly documented research within this area. It has been noted that top down leadership, in most settings, is considered outdated and unproductive (Cable, April 23, 2018). Furthermore, the companies that became "great" within Jim Collin's historic study had CEO's with "humility" and an "indomitable will" (Collins, 2001). It has also been noted that humble leaders listen more effectively, inspire great teamwork, focus on the institution's goals and understand that they are not the smartest people in the room (Hyman, December 10, 2021). Humility within leadership also includes self-awareness and being able to recognize the contributions and potential contributions of your team (Kelemen, Matthews, Matthews and Henry, 2023). It has been further documented that humility within leadership can bring on positive effects to a team (Maldonado, Vera and Spangler, 2022).

Overall, executives must take note. Coach Holzman's humility was a key takeaway in how he approached his work and life within the New York Knicks organization and beyond. Such an approach appeared to have resonated among his followers. To Coach Holzman no individual was bigger than the team.

6. Conclusion

After conducting historical research on Coach Holzman's professional career, there are certainly learning points for today's executive and high potential leaders. First, Coach Holzman was a humble individual and unique leader with a technical expertise in scouting. This was his foundation and his functional background. In addition, coupled to this DNA was his strong belief of the specific style and brand of basketball that should represent the New York Knicks uniform. Overall, these were the key pillars to his success. In Coach Holzman's Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame citation he is described as a "street-wise basketball gym rat" and also a "coaching genius". Others have described him as a New Yorker "through and through". Such descriptors further complement this New York Knicks "Coaching Icon".

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