

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

TRUST, TALENT, TIME



Leo McGarry (pictured to the left) is a fictional television character on the series THE WEST WING. He was portrayed by the late John Spencer as the President's Chief of Staff. Throughout the six season run, Leo was at the right hand of the President of the United States (the POTUS for you West Wingers). He was in the office every morning before the POTUS. He was in the office until the POTUS left for the day. He coordinated the daily functions of the office. He never let a problem get passed his office to the oval office. He provided the POTUS with input when asked. He had ideas of his own, most of which were never used, but never was off message with the message of the POTUS. He literally took a bullet for the POTUS and figuratively on many more occasions. And on most days, no one ever knew who he was.

In other words, Leo McGarry was the ultimate ASSISTANT COACH.

Although I never saw him with a whistle or a clipboard, I found myself keeping a notepad handy jotting down thought after thought about coaching as I watched the DVDs. I didn't watch a single episode of the series until it was actually off the air. But thanks to the wonders of modern technology (and lack of cable after moving to Seattle) I was able to watch the six year run in less than two months.

I took my West Wing notes and combined them with various notes I have gathered over the last 13 years as an assistant coach. From the backs of napkins to pizza box tops, I have been collecting various people's thoughts on the qualities and actions of good assistant coaches. Whether it was sitting on Vic Schaefer's couch watching him break down film or sitting in on Kelly Bond's recruiting meetings, I was observing and trying to learn. I have read as many on-line blogs from Bob Starkey and Kevin Eastman as I could get my hands on and randomly picked the brain of many other coaches from all sports and levels.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

This last season, I have been trying to organize them all into my own philosophy and a presentable format to share with others...taking all the anecdotes, sayings, tips, lists from others and merging them with many personal success and failures. Now, with the help of Newsletter members, I believe I have it down to the simplest BACK-OF-A-NAPKIN formula.

To be a good assistant coach, I believe your Head Coach needs three things from you:

TRUST
TALENT
TIME

Each of these have many facets. Each of them can be accomplished in many different ways. Each of them may carry slightly more importance to certain head coaches. Each of them may carry particular emphasis based on your job duties... but in my experience, all 3 are necessary if you want to be the best for your head coach.

We will begin with TRUST for two reasons. One, it is normally the first thing head coaches mention when they talk about the loyalty factor. Two, because to me as an assistant, TRUST is what keeps us from having to be perfect on a daily basis.

For each of these labels, I am simply going to list the various notes that I categorized under each. They are in no particular order of importance and some of the elements overlap.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

TRUST

Loyalty is a common word when you begin picking brains of head coaches. I feel TRUST is the highest form of loyalty so I choose it as one of the three benchmarks. In today's times, TRUST is hard earned and valuable. When a head coach feels TRUST, you can make mistakes. You can have errors in a scouting report. You can miss evaluated a potential recruit. Because they TRUST in your intentions rather than your actions. So, let's list some ways you can earn TRUST.

REMEMBER IT IS NOT YOUR TEAM... The team belongs to your head coach. They are the ones who are responsible for every aspect of the program. While your investment is certainly valuable, it is NOT your team. In all your actions, you are valuable but never irreplaceable. You are important but not necessary. There are 100's if not 1000's of people who would love a shot at the job you have. Keeping this in mind in all your actions and decisions go a long way to earning TRUST.

MAKE YOUR POINT BUT NEVER ARGUE IT... The very best assistants understand it is their job to make suggestions and the head coaches job to make decisions. State your case, back it up with evidence, and then let head coach make the decision on it. And then move on. Don't allow your pride to be hurt if the idea isn't implemented. Don't sulk. Don't debate it with other assistants on your staff or friends on other staffs. MOVE ON. A great scene from the West Wing has a presidential candidate say to an "assistant coach"... "I will give you all the time you need to try to talk me out of doing something. But once we open that door and walk out, I'll expect your full support". That is pyramid messaging. And that is something every great assistant coach must master.

PYRAMID MESSAGING... From the simplest thing like calling a spot on the floor the same thing as your head coach to more in depth concepts such as enforcing the culture of the program, the message from the head coach must be echoed from the head assistant to the head manager. Each link must stay on message.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

ENFORCE THE CULTURE OF PROGRAM... Once the Head Coach has established the culture of the program, it is the job of every assistant below to accept nothing less. We all know through experience, that we will get from our players what we tolerate from our players. So, you must never tolerate anything that is inconsistent with the culture of the program. We must get players off the fence and on point.

BE THE HEAD COACH OF YOUR DUTIES... Once you are given a responsibility, become the HEAD COACH of it in your thinking and your actions. Immerse yourself in that area. Become an expert in that field. Know the rules. Know the decision makers. Be aware of changes in the field. Have full knowledge and accountability when it comes to these things.

WEED THE GARDEN... When you show the leadership and confidence to handle things that don't need to be enter the door of your head coach, you will begin to earn TRUST. The hard part of this is learning the things your head coach wants to know about when they happened and the things they want to hear about after you have handled them. This one is a trial and error and no doubt you will learn quickly from your mistakes.

DON'T BE A "YES" PERSON OR A "NO" PERSON... If you have a different idea, express it. A former head coach once said to me "If we all have the same ideas, someone is obsolete." Have the confidence and the evidence to support your opinion. But you also don't want to take this to the extreme and all the sudden become that person that NEVER agrees and is always in the devils advocate position. While it is certainly wise to look at an issue from all angles, you will lose your effectiveness and the TRUST of your head coach if you are always on one extreme or the other.

TAKE A BULLET... Step up and admit a mistake that you make that could reflect poorly on your head coach. Maybe you miss handle an academic situation with a tutor. Before that tutor can contact their supervisor and tell them what an ass you are, reach out and take the bullet. Sometimes it might not even be your fault.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

NEVER LET YOUR HEAD COACH BE SURPRISED... This one goes hand in hand with WEED THE GARDEN. While you want to keep some things from making it down the hall to the head coaches office, there should never be an instance when you head coach is made aware of a serious situation in one of your areas. Keeping them in the loop is easy with the technology we function with in 2012. Shoot them a text and let them in on things. The last thing you want as an assistant in charge of academics is for your head coach to learn of an eligibility issue. Way easier to deal with the situation as it is occurring rather than after the fact.

BE THERE FOR YOUR PLAYERS... when all else fails around you, be there for the players. Be there when they need you most. They don't need you when they hit the game winner, they need you when they miss it. Be there when the head coach rips them a new one in film. Be there when they failed a test. Be there when they have a flat tire. Be there when they bounce their first check. But be there for them. Don't be the first person off the court after practice in a race to get back to something in your office.

BE OVER PREPARED... Whether you are ever called upon to speak in a meeting, be prepared to. Whether you are ever asked to lead a segment of practice, be prepared to. Whether you are ever asked to give input on a situation, be prepared to.

IT'S OKAY IF YOU DON'T KNOW AN ANSWER... While you always want to have the correct answer in every situation, that simply isn't reality. If you don't know something admit it. I followed that advice someone had given me in a Sweet 16 against Vanderbilt in 2010. Coming into a timeout with 26.7 seconds to play and the ball on the side in a tie game, I was asked what defense the Commodores would be in. Based on 12 game films and the previous 39 minutes, the answer was simple... I HAD NO IDEA!! They had given us five different looks and routinely throughout the year changed defenses in these situations. So the head coach drew up a play that would work against a man or zone. Long story short. The play worked. We advanced to the Elite 8 as a result and I had earned a level of TRUST.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

NEVER USE THE PHRASE “I UNDERSTAND YOUR FRUSTRATION”... When you are meeting with a player, never let any words come from your mouth that would under cut the head coach. The second you do this in an effort to be-friend a player for some reason, you have lost TRUST. This speaks toward the staying on message with your head coach but is a specific situation that I see so many young coaches make as they are learning to separate themselves from the players. While you can say you see they are frustrated or share with them methods to cope, you can never let them for one second feel that the head coach is NOT making the best decisions for the team. Unfortunately, we all probably know coaches who have advanced in this game as a result of not doing this, I can assure you they won’t last in the long run.

DON’T CHASE EVERY JOB THAT OPENS... As an assistant it is natural to have ambition. It is natural to want what is best for your family and your personal situation. It is NOT okay to go after every job that opens and especially those that might be perceived as lateral. In a perfect world, you have a clear idea of your path and you share that with your head coach. This way they are aware of your ambitions and will help you reach them. They are much more likely to pick the phone up on your behalf when they TRUST that you pursuing only the jobs that are consistent with your goals. Give them a list of schools that are your DREAM jobs and work from that. Obviously, they may change of your career but a yearly “check-up” with your head coach is healthy in developing the TRUST factor.

TWO EARS ONE MOUTH... God gave us one two ears and one mouth for a reason... to listen twice as much as we talk. Loose lips sink ships is a saying for a reason. You have to keep your team business within the team. So many young coaches get caught up in the gossip game. Those coaches rarely survive the long run.

Once you have earned the TRUST of your head coach, you are a big step toward having a great working relationship that is mutually beneficial. When you have this situation, only something out of that head coaches control will jeopardize your role as an ASSISTANT COACH... an alcohol related issue, violation of NCAA or school policy, or inappropriate relationship.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

TALENT

TRUST alone is not enough. We all have friends we trust with our biggest secrets that don't possess the necessary talents to help us succeed. TALENT becomes our second point every ASSISTANT COACH needs.

LEARN YOUR CRAFT... When you are given an area of responsibility, learn everything there is to know on the area. Read books, attend seminars, seek out experts in the field, and then make them your own. If you are in charge of recruiting and don't have computer skills, you are behind. In today's world of technology, if you can't create a FACEBOOK page or a TWITTER account you are behind. If you can't organize a database you can't function. If you aren't comfortable on the phone with people you may not know, you are behind. If you are assigned PLAYER DEVELOPMENT and you don't understand the psyche of the players you are working with, you are behind. If you are in charge of film breakdown and can not operate your editing system without I.T. department by your side, you are behind. You MUST learn your craft. The best of the best are on the cutting edge of everything and are never in catch up mode. The best of the best are setting the trends that others are following. In today's world of technology there is no excuse for ignorance.

BE WILLING TO DO ANYTHING HEAD COACH NEEDS DONE... Too many young assistants rank the importance of duties in their own mind and are influenced as a result of their own perspective. If it is assigned, it is important. Being willing to things no one else is willing to do is a talent just like being able to do something no other assistant can do. This makes you valuable. The more indispensable you are to a head coach, the better your team will function and in turn the better your career will advance. No job is too small to be important to you. There is NO job outside of your "job description" as an assistant.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

ANTICIPATE THE NEEDS OF HEAD COACH... this is a talent that requires some experience and trial/error. Each year as things happen in our program, I make a note in a calendar so that when the next year rolls around I have a blueprint of when things happen. For instance, each year when a season is beginning, every player on the team has aspirations of playing time. Before you have played a game, every player is hopefully of a certain number of minutes they might play or maybe that they will be named a starter. As a result, as that first scrimmage arises, every team goes through a period where some players' hopes are not realized. For us that time is in late October. Therefore, we have a team building session each pre-season that helps us address this and better prepare our players for the situation. This can also be related to daily basis situations. I once worked for a head coach who always forgot their socks on road trips, so I learned to pack two. I also worked for a head coach who always forgot to bring a whistle to practice so we made sure managers sit one out daily. Most of the time, these are simple things you learn by just paying attention!!

ADD VALUE... Give your head coach/team something that adds value. Spend the off-season on a project that adds value to your program. Develop overseas contact. Meet with academic support staff and implement a plan to check classes. Spend time with experts learning how to better use iPads within your team. Have lunch with admissions department people who can make or break your life at the college level. Vacation near a coach you respect and spend a couple of days shadowing their every move. Work with marketing department on ways to increase attendance. Read books. Add value.

HAVE POSITIVE BODY LANGUAGE... This one was a personal challenge. As a young coach, I was so invested into the wrong things that sometimes my body language wasn't positive and quite frankly was distracting at times. I became so engrossed in games/practices at times that my body language didn't reflect well upon me as an assistant and hindered our team from progressing. This goes to Kevin Eastman's point of "evaluation vs emotion"... as an assistant we should be in constant evaluation mode. This is not to say there isn't a time and place of a well timed "explosion" but it certainly loses its effectiveness if it's the rule rather than the exception. The negatives of poor body language far exceed anything positive...

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

BE AN ENERGY GIVER NOT A TAKER... this is very similar to what we just previously discussed about body language. This is an over all energy though. If your head coach is constantly spending time pumping you up, that is wasted time and energy that could have been spent on a current player, a recruit, or some other area of your program that needs attention. **DON'T BE NEEDY!!!**

WORK WITH THE RESOURCES YOU HAVE... ask for what you need, but realize you're never going to have everything you want. Work with the resources you are provided and make the most of them. Your head coach will work to provide every thing in their budgetary ability. But those coaches who are always talking about what others have don't last long in this game. If you really need something the budget doesn't allow, buy it with your own money. When ipads were first introduced, it fell during a time that we had utilized our budget for that year. Rather than wait until the next fiscal year, I bought one with my own money. It hurt the discretionary budget personally but the value it added to our team was worth more than anything I could have used it on personally. If it's THAT important, make it happen. If you can't, at least don't complain about it.

BE A CONNECTOR... cultivate ability to connect with players, recruits, administration, parents, etc. Your head coach has so many "other duties as assigned" that your ability to connect with people key to your program can be extremely valuable. If you can build a relationship with a core group of people around your program you are improving the quality of your head coaches day as well as improving your own worth. The ability to serve as a buffer is valuable to every head coach. Many times this goes from being a "buffer" to being a "leader" when dealing with certain aspects around your team. Some people might call this brown-nosing or schmoozing... it's not, it's a necessary component of every successful program.

HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF EVERY ASPECT OF PROGRAM... while you want to be Head Coach of your main areas of responsibility it is also crucial to have a grasp of all aspects of the program. You don't have to have the depth of knowledge in these areas, but is important to know they exist and are valuable to the head coach. This can be done without stepping on toes of those in charge of those areas. The best of best do this.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

WANT IT RIGHT NO MATTER WHO HAS THE IDEA... Being an assistant coach is very competitive even within staffs at times. But the very best staffs embrace this idea. You can't worry about who had the idea or who gets the credit. If you do worry about that, you will either drive yourself crazy on your current staff or burn yourself out of the game completely.

GROW THE GAME... the very best assistants find time to mentor younger, less experienced staff members. Although it is certainly not a must, the very best do. The most confident do. As with the above paragraph, some assistants are afraid to help others grow because they worry it will reflect poorly on them. That should never be the case for a good assistant. They should be confident enough to share their experiences. Has this backfired on people? Sure, but in the long run it is best to be out of those situations anyway.

Talent is ever changing and ongoing. Just like with our players, we want to constantly be striving to improve on our weak areas while continually growing stronger in areas we already excel. The very moment that a good assistant becomes content and feel like they'll know it all; somewhere, someone else is surpassing their efforts.

Who could have predicted in 2000 that the ability to build a FACEBOOK or MYSPACE page would be a valuable asset? Who could have predicted that we could build Aps on our phone to help organize our daily routines?

Stay on the cutting edge of technology. Maintain contact with a core group of peers who you can readily share ideas and thoughts with. Read the latest books on leadership, management, and psychology. These are all ways to ensure you are not left behind or stuck with a dead idea.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

TIME

Once a head coach believes they can TRUST you and you have proven to have the necessary TALENT to accomplish the duties assigned, they want to be sure you have the TIME to do it happen effectively. You have to present a clear picture to your head coach that you have your life balanced in all aspects so you can meet the time demands that are often placed upon an assistant coach. You can be a single person with a fish or a married person with six children and do this equally as well... and every situation in between those two extremes.

Each presents unique challenges, but the head coach must know you can manage the TIME aspect of this profession. We have all seen unsupportive partners cost people jobs. We have seen single assistants with time consuming hobbies lose their jobs as a result. We have seen coaches young and old unable to find TIME to do the job.

There is no ideal profile. But one thing the best assistants have is TIME.

It just seems like they have more than the 24 hours everyone else does.

So, how do you go about proving you have created a lifestyle for yourself (and/or family) to your head coach?

WORK SMARTER... We are all afforded 24 hours in day, 168 hours a week, 8750 hours a year. It's what we do in those hours that separate us. You must find ways to maximize the hours you have to perform your duties while still maintaining your life away from the team. Lean too far one way on your job suffers. Lean too far the other and you risk burnout or losing your life outside the game. The very, very best have this balance. It's easy to spot the assistants who don't have this. They are work alcoholics and when they are on the job they don't even appear to be having fun!! As is true with all other areas of basketball, you must determine what works for you, have a plan of attack, and the discipline to execute it. Again, gather the best organizational ideas and make them your own.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

GET THINGS DONE IN A TIMELY FASHION... when assigned a task, get it done. Don't stress over perfection because it never will be perfect. Do it to the best of your ability and let your head coach know you are ready for the next task. This gives your head coach confidence that you can function independently and do not require constant follow up or monitoring. We have assigned tasks to people who ask so many questions and for so much input that in the end, we feel like we did the project and could have saved the time just doing it our self. When your head coach sees that you can complete tasks in a timely manner they sense you have balance.

TAKE THINGS OFF THE DESK OF THE HEAD COACH... You can accomplish this a couple of ways. The best way is take them a completed task that wasn't even assigned. For example, I am a nut for stats. I used to memorize the backs of baseball cards and have my uncles quiz me on batting averages and rbi's. As a result, I am fascinated by stats and trends. A couple of years ago, I began tracking our line-up efficiencies... the points scored minus the points allowed for each line up we used in a game. Over the course of a single game it didn't yield much useable information. But after five games and then ten games, I saw specific trends that helped us better manage our substitution patterns and in turn win extra games because we played our most efficient line-ups accordingly. The second way, is simply to ask your head coach if there is something on their desk or during their day that they simply hate to do. It might be paperwork or it might be their radio show. But by asking and showing desire to help, you might find yourself voting on the Top 25 or sitting in on a post game interview.

BE OVERPREPARED... Maintain a list of ideas beside your computer for when you head coach seeks input on any aspect of the program. Think ahead of the game and "outside the box". Being over prepared will demonstrate that not only do you have time to complete your assigned duties but you also have time to perform more. If you consistently offer no new input, it appears that you are bogged down in the things you are assigned. This is not possible unless your main duties are covered but this is a sure way to show you are ready and capable of more. At the very least, it builds your head coaches confidence that you are capable.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

HAVE A “TO DON’T” LIST... must of us make a TO DO list to help organize our day. A good piece of advice I also implemented was a TO DON’T list. For example, it might say, DO NOT open my email until I have been at my desk and written three personal notes to recruit. DO NOT open Facebook until I have return all the day’s emails. DO NOT return any phone calls an hour before practice. DO NOT leave for the day until I have communicated with three current players and checked on them for the day.

BE CONSISTENT... in other words, don’t be MOODY. Don’t be high as kite one day and down in the depths the next. Sure you are going to have good days and bad ones. But you can’t be a rollercoaster of emotion. This gives off the signal that you are not balanced. A consistent demeanor displays that you can handle the crisis mode days that often arise in this profession. It displays that no matter what happens, you have a response in mind and a plan to execute it.

GATHER INFORMATION... have a wealth of information readily available. Many times it won’t be used or asked for by your head coach. But having it in the times that they do makes a big impression. This is something that comes from observation. Have stats ready to back up a statement about offensive or defensive production. Have film clips ready to show if you want to implement a new inbounds series. Have access to more if more is needed. Don’t present an idea without evidence to support.

OVER PREPARE THE HEAD COACH... If they are going on a road trip, program the various directions into their GPS as well as hand them a file with printed off directions and confirmation codes. If they are married or have a partner, send a copy to them as well. They will appreciate this (might want to ask early on in your career as they might NOT want them to have it... haha) If they are off to do an interview on an opponent they have yet to watch film, hand them a very preliminary scouting report so they can speak intelligently about them. One of the best techniques I have used, is placing a card on the head coaches chair or computer after they leave for the day with something we have the following day. This is there in case they beat me into the office and start their day.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

FIRST ONE IN OR LAST ONE TO LEAVE... I see too many inexperienced coaches worry about being the first one in AND the last one to leave. While I think that is certainly admirable, I don't feel it reflects directly toward their ability to manage time. Sure it shows dedication, but I have learned the very best head coaches want assistants who work until they are done. Very rarely if ever do I now set a time on what time I am going in the office or what time I am planning on leaving on days without set meetings or events. I have for the last ten seasons followed this one however... If one day the head coach beats me to the office, I stay until they leave that afternoon. If I beat the head coach to the office that day, then I work until I am done and check in with them to see if there is anything else they need for me for the day.

ANSWER YOUR PHONE... or reply to a text/email. Technology allows us to stay linked more closely than ever. That can sometimes be a challenge. But never be that assistant who ignores a call or delays a return call to your head coach. I see it happen every single year on the road recruiting and I just shake my head. What kind of relationship do you have that you don't take their calls??? Are there going to be times you wish you hadn't, surely. But by answering it when it rings or replying quickly, again you are showing that you have enough balance in your life to effectively function away from your desk. This also builds TRUST that we spoke of initially.

CHECK IN WHEN YOU ARE AWAY... Take a vacation. Get away from the gym. Do something totally non job related. But before you leave, make sure your head coach knows where you are and when you will be returning. While you are gone, check in with them just to see what's up. Upon return, hit the office and get back on task. Taking the time away will insure your head coach that you DO HAVE A LIFE. It will display to them that you can balance your life and are not nearing burn-out. This will reassure them that you are handling the responsibilities they have give you and may be ready for more.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Jacob Lew. Bruce Reed. Ronald Klain. David Addinton.

Any of those names ring a bell? Yeah, not to me either. Those are the last four White House Chief of Staff. They are the real live Leo McGarry's. These are the people who are closer to the President than even the secret service. These are the people who are behind the scenes making sure the most powerful man on the face of the earth is one time, prepared, and looking Presidential.

If you are reading this piece there is a chance you have chosen to be an Assistant Coach. A profession that much like the White House Chief of Staff goes unnoticed unless you screw something up. It's a career that is often under paid and over worked. It's a career that has about the same life expectancy of an NFL running back. Yet you still choose it.

So to survive in it, you better be one of the best.

Hope this piece helps you in your efforts. Again, I don't claim it should be the only resource you consult. Gather all the good ideas then make them into your own. Read a couple of new books. Google articles on the internet. Speak to other assistant coaches. Observe good and bad. Take your own notes.

Then go to your local Best Buy or used DVD store and watch season 1 of the West Wing. If you can't see yourself as a Leo McGarry or C.J. Crane or Josh Lyman or Donna Moss or Toby Ziegler, then you might want to rethink your career choice. If you can, then get to work being the best Assistant Coach you can be.