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# Committing to a Winning Team

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**Mark Eaton**

Former NBA All-Star and Leadership-Building Expert



## Mark Eaton

Mark Eaton, former National Basketball Association All-Star, joins Jack Zenger in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series to discuss Mark's four commitments of a winning team, basketball as it relates to teamwork, overcoming fatal flaws, and more.

Mark played for the Utah Jazz for 12 years and was a two-time Defensive Player of the Year. Mark is a frequent speaker on the subject of teams and teamwork, teaching the skills honed during his professional sports career and later while leading successful business organizations.

Legendary Jazz coach Frank Layden once remarked, "You can't teach tall." At 7 feet 4 inches tall, Mark learned how to utilize his greatest strengths.

You can visit Mark's website at <http://www.7ft4.com/>.

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## **What lessons did you learn while playing on a variety of collegiate and professional basketball teams that apply to corporate America?**

The first thing I learned about being on a team is that there is no space on the court for any type of internal competition. We had to get along with each other out there on the floor, and if we didn't and we started losing two or three games in a row, our employment could change dramatically.

The one thing I bring to the speaking platform is that ability to understand that a team has to work together and there is no space for any in-fighting or office politics on a basketball team and I bring that message to corporate America.

I give a presentation that I call "The Four Commitments of a Winning Team." I talk about the important aspects that are fundamental to a team on a basketball court that are just as fundamental to people in business today.

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## **Let's talk about these four commitments of a winning team.**

The first commitment is to know your job and to do it well.

I was an auto mechanic that became an NBA basketball player. I gave up basketball in high school and was later recruited by a junior college coach who talked me into leaving my toolbox behind. I had given up on the idea of playing basketball because I didn't see a place where I fit. He was able to show me how my height, which I had considered to be a liability, could be my greatest strength. This began a journey of how



I learned to become an athlete again, to become part of a team, and to play my role on that team.

Later while at UCLA, Wilt Chamberlain pulled me off the court and said, “Why are you running up and down the court trying to chase all of the small guys that are faster than you? Your job is to park your rear end under the basket, block shots, and stop other players from scoring. That is something that you could be really good at.”

Through that interaction, I became focused on the one thing that I could do well. So beyond being tall, Wilt showed me what I could do to take my team to the next level. This became the cornerstone of my career as an athlete. I became defensively focused. I made an entire NBA career out of doing just one thing well.

In business, most of us spend a lot of time doing a lot of things. I think that we need to narrow our focus, know our job, and do it well.

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## What is the second commitment of a winning team?

The second commitment is really execution and doing what you are asked to do.

When I was at UCLA, I didn’t play that much. My junior college coach told me that if I wasn’t going to be playing in games that I had to make practices my games. I had to do extra things when no one was watching to improve myself, things like running, shooting, and going to the weight room. He said that if I did those things, I’d have an opportunity to try out for an NBA team. I didn’t have a lot of reasons to believe him at that point in time, but I trusted him so I did what he asked me to do.

In business today we talk a lot about exceeding expectations, but we sometimes forget the basics. Our job in business is to do what we have been asked to do, to do what our customers have asked us to do, and to do what our bosses have asked us to do.

In my presentation I challenge people to get back to those fundamentals and to think about how well they execute other’s priorities.



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## What is the third commitment of a winning team?

After you know your role and the importance of execution, the next commitment is to make other people look good.

When I came to the Utah Jazz, which was a bad team in a bad market, we had only 17 televised games that were mostly shown on tape-delay at 11 p.m. It was a difficult situation. Our coach, Frank Layden, was born in Brooklyn, coached in upstate New York, and ended up as the General Manager of the New Orleans Jazz only to find out two weeks later that he was moving to Salt Lake City.

Frank focused on getting us to play together. Professional athletes are notorious for focusing on themselves: How many minutes am I going to play? How many shots am I going to get? How much money am I going to make?

Frank turned all of that on its ear by telling us, “If the team succeeds, you’ll succeed. If you focus on making the people around you better, you’ll look better. No one cares if you are scoring a lot of points on a losing team. Everyone wants players from a winning team.”

We took that to heart, even though we were a group of ragtag players—players that had worn out their welcome with other teams and players that didn’t have much experience. We started passing the ball to our teammates. We started trusting each other. We stopped that internal competition. We started getting better and winning more games. Soon the individual accolades started showing up. Soon we were being recognized as a winning team.

In my presentation, I ask people how focused they are on making the people they work with look good and what they need to do to be better in this area.



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## What is the fourth commitment of a winning team?

The fourth commitment is protecting your teammates.

What I did well on the basketball court was protecting the basket. This gave my teammates the ability to try to steal the basketball and to take chances because they knew that I had their backs. They knew they could count on me.

This commitment is really about building trust and loyalty with your team. This trust and loyalty is built by letting your teammates know that you are there for them. This goes beyond being there for them when they are doing their jobs; it is more about your commitment to them as human beings.

In my presentation, I challenge people to write down three names of people they need to let know this week that they have their backs. This exercise gets people to think about their commitment to those people they work with. Is it just a surface-like relationship or do they really care about these people as human beings? This is the deeper part of being a team. You don't need to go out to dinner with them all the time or have them over to your house, but you need to understand who they are, know what their objectives are, and understand where they are trying to go in their careers. You need to put this all together and let them know that you are really there for them.

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## You own a restaurant and have been involved in other businesses. Do you see a difference in how you apply these four commitments on the basketball court versus how you apply them in a corporate setting or in a small business?

I have been an entrepreneur for more than 19 years. I've operated four restaurants. I've done corporate speaking. I've done non-profit work. And I've done broadcasting. I have yet to find any situation that I could not relate back to one of these four commitments.



In the restaurant business you need to take care of the fundamentals. You are only as good as your last meal. Execution is key—making sure your customers feel cared for and know that you are there for them. You need to make sure that your employees can count on you. All of these things go hand in hand with success.

These commitments have become a value system that I ascribe to. They are a part of who I am that I have been able to apply in a wide variety of arenas. In the public-speaking circuit, I go between energy companies talking about safety and teammates to sales organizations. I have found that these four commitments address all of the biggest challenges we face in the business world today.

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**We talk about the importance of strengths, but we also recognize that people sometimes have fatal flaws—some behaviors or characteristics—that really gets in their way. Did you see that in the basketball world?**

There were players that had difficult personalities. I think the coaches would try to address these players by first positioning them to succeed by giving them opportunities and putting them in the right spot where they could soar. Sometimes that worked out great. If not, sometimes they had to move on. At some point a coach would say, “This is unworkable. It’s dragging everybody down, and this can’t go on.” Sometimes this is the best thing that you can do for that person, to send him somewhere he can succeed.



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## Looking back, were most of these “fatal flaws” some kind of prickly behavior?

I think the ability to get along with teammates was probably the biggest challenge. Every player that comes into the NBA has a skill set: they’ve worked on their games and they’ve developed certain skills. Although some might need some fine-tuning, most everyone who comes in can play the game.

I think the biggest challenge is to get players to understand their roles and understand how by performing those roles that they are going to contribute, personally succeed, and be a part of something larger than themselves.

I always had a player on my team that averaged more than 30 points a game, which meant that the player on the other side of the floor didn’t get as many shots and maybe felt like less than an all-star. The coach’s job was to help this player understand that what he did on one side of the floor allowed the player on the other side to succeed, which helped everyone succeed and helped everyone’s value increase.

It was always difficult to get some players to buy into this idea, but this is how a team like the Chicago Bulls, with Michael Jordan scoring all the points, was able to succeed.





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