

COMMANDMENT #1: Identity

Have a consistent plan and sell that vision

In 2001, my 7th year as head coach at Forest Hills Central, I knew that I finally had a team that was talented enough to win a championship. We were young, but these players had come up through the system, and we had the pieces to compete with anyone on our schedule. Our first two games were against tough opponents, and we lost them both. Then, we outplayed a talented team for our first victory of the season. We were 1-2 and frustrated with our record when we headed to Hastings for a non-league game that we all knew we should win. Hastings was a smaller school than ours and was not a basketball powerhouse; they were known, however, for being a gritty and competitive team. Coach Don Schils always had his teams prepared. We were much more talented and should have won the game. But, from the very start, Hastings was more aggressive and desperate. They had one player—I still remember his name (Dustin Terrell)—who made shot after shot all night. In the end, we were beaten 83-57 by a team with far less talent. It was humiliating and an indication that change was needed.

I will never forget that bus ride home. I seriously considered quitting. I was doubting myself and my career choice. I had spent countless hours over the past seven years trying to build a championship culture, and my most talented team ever was 1-3 and on the brink of disaster. On top of that, I was exhausted. My personal life was busier than ever. I had two young children, a challenging teaching position, a wife who deserved more of my time, and a new house that we had just moved into. I thought maybe coaching wasn't for me.

Deep down, I knew the problem. We weren't different. We were just like every other high school basketball team—or any sports team—for that matter. I decided on that bus ride home that we needed to find a way to differentiate us and how we played from every other team on our schedule.

So, on that bus ride home, I made two decisions: first, we were going to focus on a pressure/denial defensive philosophy and second, we were going to call ourselves “Rangerball.” The next day at practice, I gathered the team and explained that we needed to play our way. We needed to play “Ranger” ball. Then, to break the huddle, I said “Rangerball on three... one, two, three...” and the team repeated “Rangerball.” On that day in the old gymnasium, a championship program was born. It was the

day that changed the program forever. We went on to win several championships in the next 17 years and became known in West Michigan as one of the premier basketball programs.

Basketball is a pretty simple game when it gets down to it. You try to score while stopping your opponent from scoring. But, the intricacies of this process are multi-dimensional and innumerable. Deciding how your team is going to play and what your program is going to stand for is the first step in having a plan. To be effective, this plan cannot be confusing, haphazard, or even inconsistent.

The first step is to simplify. Deciding what you want to focus on in your program or with your team is usually pretty simple. Look at what you notice about other teams and programs you see on television or live. Look inside your heart at what you think is most important in life and in basketball. Then, look at your situation and see if what you want to focus on makes sense. I imagine you probably already know what you want your program or team to stand for before you even read this sentence. Just make sure you simplify because your plan should lack ambiguity and be able to be stated in one sentence.

Here are a few examples:

- We are going to be fast, strong, and explosive and physically impose our will on our opponents.
- We are going to shoot a ton of threes.
- We are going to show class and humility in everything we do.
- We are going to out-prepare and out-execute everybody we play against.
- We are going to play multiple defenses to confuse our opponent.
- We are going to improve the skill set of every player in our program through workouts.

You can see that these plans are usually a combination of on-court and off-court qualities. By no means is your plan a catch-all for everything you'll do as a program. But, the overall plan should provide a hook or a big picture for everyone associated with your program to hold onto. You've probably heard of the "elevator pitch." Well, imagine yourself in an elevator with someone who asks you what your program or team stands for. You should be able to start with your one-sentence plan and then expand on it for no more than 20 seconds. When that person steps out of the elevator, he should know your plan. He might not believe in it and could have a totally opposing viewpoint on how things should be done, but he at least should understand clearly what your vision is for your team or program.

If your elevator pitch sounds like this, you have a problem:

"Well, we were 12-8 last year due to injuries so we had to play some zone, but I don't teach a lot of zone so we never got very good at it. I didn't think our JV guys were ready for the varsity style

of play, so we played a lot of older kids who weren't that talented. We didn't have any good shooters this year, so we struggled to score unless we were pressing and getting layups. Next year, I think I'll be able to play 10 guys or so and be a faster team who plays more in-your-face man to man rather than pack line. We'll see. Every year is a different year."

This plan sounds like no plan at all. I understand that your personnel will change every year—we're not coaching at Kentucky. So, it makes sense that you'll have to tweak your system and make adjustments all the time. But, if you don't stand for something and have a clear plan, I bet your elevator pitch sounds like the one above way too often.

After the disappointing loss to Hastings, I began to use the term Rangerball to describe our in-your-face defensive style and our offensive

philosophy of playing as fast as we could and shooting a lot of threes. The style of play and this term—Rangerball—gave these guys something to work for and something to separate themselves from other teams. We had t-shirts made that said Rangerball, and I made sure to break every huddle and start every practice with this term.

Suddenly, the guys believed they were different. They believed they were part of a group that worked harder, prepared more specifically, and played more together. They went into every subsequent game that season thinking we had won the game before it was played. We won seven in a row after that game and 16 of our last 17 games. We finished second in the league that year, but the foundation was built for a championship season the next year.

It is your job to build a brand with your team. Look at the most successful college teams over the past several years, and they all have something they are known for. Take this brief matching test to prove that this is true. Match the team on the left with the “identity” on the right.

1. Michigan State	A. Talented freshmen
2. Kentucky	B. High/low offense
3. Syracuse	C. 2-3 matchup zone
4. Virginia	D. Matchup zone, full court pressing
5. Louisville	E. Packline defense, patient offense
6. Kansas	F. High scoring transition offense
7. North Carolina	G. Hard-nosed man to man defense

If you follow college basketball, this is an easy test. Is it any wonder that year after year these programs are at or near the top of their league standings and usually make deep runs in the NCAA tournament? Each of

these teams and coaches stands for something. They have a way that they play that has become their brand. I believe the brand goes beyond just the style of play, too.

Part of MSU's brand is four-year players and the Izzone. Part of Duke's is Christian Laettner, Bobby Hurley, JJ Redick, and Grayson Allen—players who were and are uniquely despised by fans and players from other schools. And, part of Kentucky's brand was outlined in Calipari's book called "Players First." Come to Kentucky, and I'll let you showcase your talents for a year before you go to the NBA. As controversial as it may be, you can't argue with the success that program has had. It's their brand.

What's the lesson from this test? Well, if you're going to have a championship culture and build something that sustains itself over time, you need an identity.

Choosing how you're going to play

As high school coaches, we know that we don't get to choose our players. Some of you might disagree with this statement considering all the crazy school-jumping that has been happening lately.

But, generally speaking, high school coaches coach the players who grow up in their district. You can't recruit long, athletic players who would excel in a zone like Jim Boeheim does at Syracuse. You can't recruit big men who can shoot it like John Beilein has done to fit his offensive system at Michigan. Your players are your players because of where they live. So, can you play a certain system and then mold your players to fit the system? Or, do you need to change your style of play every year to fit the players on your team that year?

The answer is somewhere in the middle. You can certainly build a program that relies on full-court pressure and teach your players to outwork your opponents. But, if you have a slow-footed, unaware player who happens to be the best shooter to ever come through your school, you had better find a way to fit him into your system. Adjusting to fit your personnel is absolutely necessary, but without a doubt, you can define a way that you're going to play and use your best players within that system.

Once your plan is established in your mind, it is time to communicate that plan to your team and those close to the team like your assistants, managers, and athletic director. This isn't done through email or with a handout. Your plan is communicated through the consistent, repetitive,

and pointed actions you begin to take. Having a plan for your team is similar in a lot of ways to having a plan for your own children. You can tell your kids that the plan is you can't use your phone after 10 p.m., you need to be at family meals, and you have to read 30 minutes a day. That's a great plan. But, telling them that and actually matching your actions to that plan are very different. Until your actions match this plan, your son or daughter will be sitting in his room late at night on Snapchat after missing the family dinner without any idea what a book even looks like.

Your actions will depend totally on your plan. Let's take the first example from before: *"We are going to be fast, strong, and explosive and physically impose our will on our opponents."*

This plan could be the entire basis for a successful varsity basketball program for 20+ years. What defensive and offensive systems the team uses might vary slightly from year to year depending on personnel, but the plan from the head coach is that this program will focus on being "fast, strong, and explosive." From day one—and then consistently for as long as you run the program—you need to stick to this plan with your actions (and words) to make it the basis for everything else you do.

So, step one would be to set up a weightlifting and agility program yourself or through your school's strength coach. Step two would be to focus part of every off-season workout on strength, speed, and agility. Even ten minutes out of an hour workout is enough to communicate that your plan is intact, important, and invariable. Step three would be to make sure that all of your players understand that an empty spot in their schedule during the school year should be filled with a weightlifting class if your school offers one. Lastly, you would need to ensure that part of every in-season practice focuses on improving your players' bodies. This would be true for every level within your program: freshman, junior varsity, and varsity.

My program's plan could be summarized in this sentence: "We are going to shoot a ton of threes, deny every pass, and out-prepare our opponents." Of course, this plan didn't come to light until about halfway through that bus ride in year seven. Up to that point, the program was somewhat successful, gaining momentum, and providing some exciting basketball for the community. We were winning more than the program did the few years before, the guys were committed and together, and the coaching staff and players were working very hard. But, the results were still inconsistent overall—a direct result, I believe, of an inconsistent plan.

That day in 2001, I decided on a plan, named it "Rangerball," and began to sell that plan to everyone involved. That changed everything.

The second part of the first commandment is “sell the vision.” Having a plan in place is one thing, but convincing others that it’s the right plan might take some work. Sometimes, wins and championships can do that for you, but before those happen on a consistent basis, you have to essentially become a door-to-door salesman with your players and the people connected to your program.

Start with the first group that has to buy into your plan: the players. Consistently communicate your plan to them. Sometimes come right out and say it; other times, communicate it subtly and stealthily. Your players will sense your excitement and belief in the plan based on your words and actions. Mention examples to them of other players/teams/programs who have had success with a similar vision. Praise players who put in the work necessary to support your plan.

For instance, with our plan of shooting a lot of threes, we always had groups who would get together and spend hours on the shooting machine in the gym. When players put in extra time shooting, I made sure to mention it publicly when all the players were together. Even a subtle mention of a player putting in extra time shooting often led to other players asking for more gym time. Over the past 15 years, my players put in more time shooting on that machine (we have gone through a few of them) than you could imagine.

Our plan was based on shooting threes and a pressure defensive system. My belief was that anyone could play in the defensive system with the right coaching and a high level of effort. So, while many of my players lifted weights as part of a class or for other sports, until the last two years of my coaching career, we didn’t do as much in the weight room or with agility or explosiveness. We spent our extra time shooting. In the last two years, however, our school implemented a required team lifting/agility program so my teams worked with our strength coach quite often.

The focus for me, however, continued to be shooting, shooting, shooting. I’m sure other coaches in the area would say that their number one concern before playing us was defending the three-point shot.

The next people to sell the plan to are the parents and community. This process should happen naturally as your plan takes shape. The parents will see what your focus area is because their son or daughter will be involved in the extra shooting, lifting, etc. Once your team hits the court and demonstrates your plan, the community can start to buy into the system and see that you have a vision for the program. Winning isn’t a necessity early on, but playing with emotion and energy and a system is. Too often, I’ve watched an entire basketball game and still had no idea what one team’s plan was—almost invariably, that team lost.

Have a plan that you believe in. Take steps to initiate that plan and make it known. Then, sell that plan to everyone associated with the program. Even in a losing season due to a lack of talent, injuries, or a tough schedule, if you have a plan and sell it, your program will still move forward and take steps towards winning championships.

Things to consider:

- 1. If you asked five of your players to write down the top three things your program stands for, would they repeat most of the same principles?**
- 2. Can you explain the basics of your plan in 30 seconds or less?**
- 3. Do you do the extra things to give your plan the basis for success?**
- 4. If someone watched one full practice and one full game, would your plan be clearly evident?**