

Cultivating Your Ecosystem – Part 2

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The guiding pillars of the ecosystem, 1) Culture, 2) Competency, 3) Capacity, 4) Competition and 5) Coaching, should provide the singular heartbeat and blueprint for the vision of your organization. As strength and conditioning coaches, we are compelled to breathe life and energy into the entire ecosystem, specifically within the training environment. Just like cultivating crops, cultivating an ecosystem takes time, patience, love and a clear understanding of what processes (pillars) are required to yield the desired results (winning). This constant struggle of “process based” versus “results based” outcomes is the reality we coach in, where ultimately we are only judged on results, i.e. – winning. The number of football coaches being fired after only one or two seasons and mid-season firings confirms this. How you execute your ecosystem should be dependent on this tumultuous relationship of process based outcomes and results based outcomes. It is a perplexing question to focus on the processes required to develop the pillars of the ecosystem, only to be evaluated on the end result. This relationship between process based and results based outcomes has created a paradigm shift in how we shape our perspective of the ecosystem. This paradigm shift in the perception of our ecosystem reality is precisely why the ecosystem must be resilient, organic, adaptable and always evolving.

The purpose of **Part 2** of this article is to provide a more realistic and adaptable blueprint of how an evolving ecosystem should be viewed and to avoid ecosystem and team failure. From a cultural development standpoint, common reasons teams fail are:

- 1) ***They don't have a blueprint for their vision*** to ensure their results are explainable and repeatable (if you can't explain how your team won, then it's probably not repeatable).
- 2) ***Teams lose sight of their original cultural values*** (this is usually done at the expense of winning; i.e. “the end always justifies the mean” mentality or recruit elite athletes with questionable character).

- 3) **Overall poor implementation** of their cultural expectations.
- 4) **There is a disconnect in the relationships** within the team; especially coaches and players.

Recall that an ecosystem, biologically speaking, is a community of living organisms interacting with a symbiotic flow where every facet has an effect on the functioning of the system as a whole (3). A biological perspective of this ecosystem gives us principles, laws and systems to help us structure the ecosystem and organize it all into an optimal matrix to efficiently and effectively achieve the desired adaptation, winning (6).

Our perspective on how we view our ecosystem must parallel this results based system of evaluation. Your ecosystem is only truly effective if it consistently generates wins. We are not evaluated on how effective our process based outcomes are; only that the process equals winning. Wins are the only statistic that the ecosystem will be evaluated on by the administration, donors, alumni, owners, shareholders, general managers, the media, the competition and prospective recruits. Wins and Losses are one of the few measurable and quantifiable statistics within the entire ecosystem. Highlighting the complexity of the above mentioned paradigm shift, the pillars within the ecosystem, 1) Culture, 2) Competency, 3) Capacity, 4) Competition and 5) Coaching, however, must be built and executed with a process based outcome methodology. Process based outcomes have been obtained by performing a series of functions that ultimately leads to the specific and targeted outcome. The ecosystem blueprint must then allow freedom for the process based outcome pillars to be cultivated but still focus on the underpinning results based outcome of winning.

Conventional wisdom would dictate that the blueprint of this described ecosystem should be constructed following the John Wooden Pyramid of Success illustration (Figure 1):

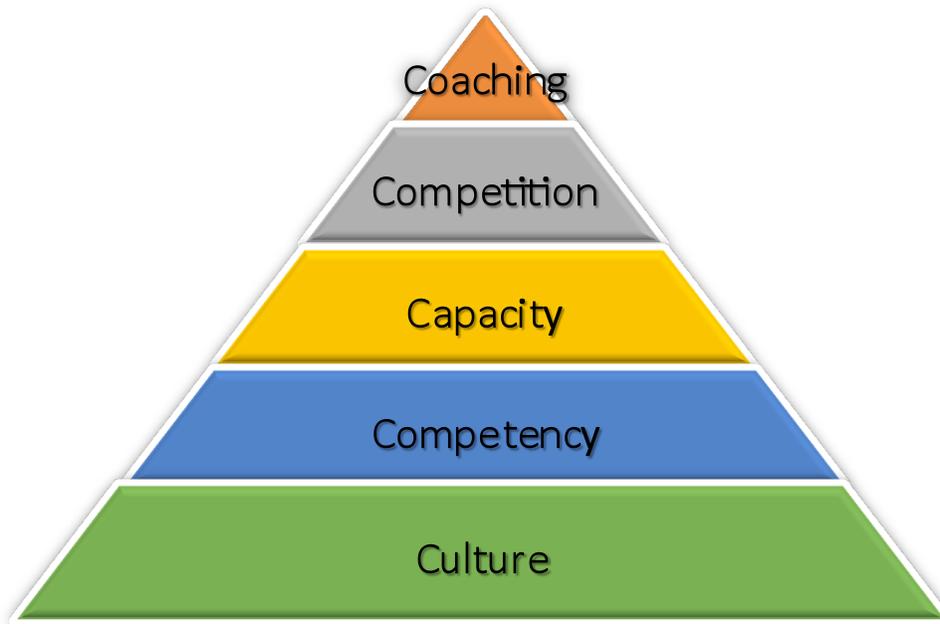


Figure 1 – John Wooden’s Pyramid of Success

The pyramid represents a strong foundation of hierarchy that is built from the bottom up and illustrates a process based outcome system but not a result based outcome system. The ecosystem pillars are laid in a very centralized order with Culture being the foundation and constructed first and then Competency, Capacity, Competition and culminating with Coaching at the top. The top block of the pyramid, Coaching, is constructed last because it requires the previous four pillars to be built properly first and in that specific order. Due to its pinnacle placement upon the pyramid, Coaching therefore is the most important pillar in cultivating the ecosystem.

The John Wooden pyramid and its brick by brick building philosophy is an exceptional graphic representation of the pillars of the ecosystem. There are several flaws however with this logic for an ecosystem. An ecosystem constructed like this would greatly diminish the key components of a successful modern ecosystem including adaptability, symbiotic relationships, holistic integration, self-awareness, energetic, athlete centric and avoid operating in isolation. If your goal is to develop an ecosystem that is authentic to your team, the blueprint can't be to standardize the personality of your ecosystem or the training environment permanently; this would not allow for the ecosystem to learn or be organic (1).

The ascending levels of the pyramid also signify that those specific pillars of the ecosystem have been completed; successfully cultivated ecosystems should always be upgrading and evolving with the ever changing landscape. It's also hard to assess each pillar of the ecosystem when viewed within the confines of the pyramid. Once you have reached the Coaching pillar in the pyramid blueprint, you are literally and metaphorically extremely far removed from your Culture; as previously mentioned it is mission critical to never lose sight of your culture. It's hard to stand on the "shoulders" of the ecosystem pillars when you can't look down and see where you've come from and what you've had to build to acquire the position you're currently in.

The fact is we compete in a results based business. This is somewhat counter intuitive to logical performance adaptations which tend to be highly process based. This can be better cultivated if we utilize a living and breathing blueprint for our ecosystem; a baseball diamond (Figure 2).

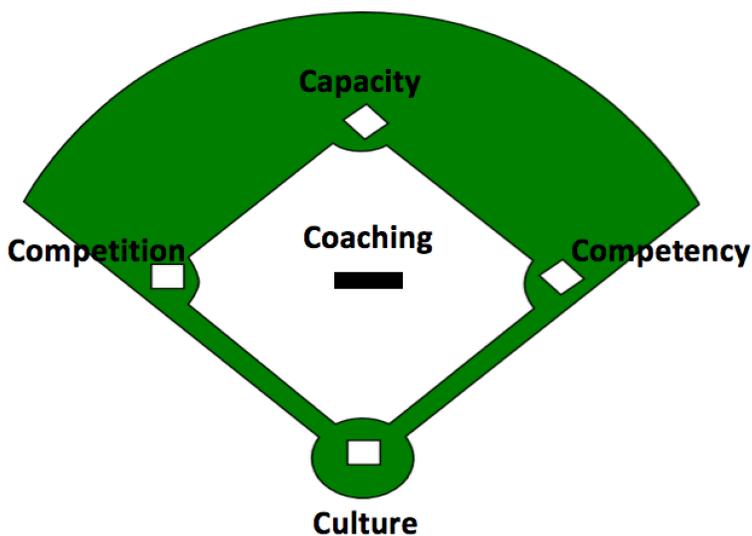


Figure 2

The genius behind this ecosystem perspective, is not the baseball diamond so much as it is the sport of baseball and how you win in baseball. Winning in baseball reflects the results based system. Baseball itself relies on producing runs and great pitching for results that then lead to winning. How you actually produce runs and pitch throughout a game represent the “processes” required within this model. Obviously, there are processes involved in each pillar of this system, but the effectiveness of the ecosystem is only evaluated on winning. This perspective allows for a deeper engagement of each pillar. There is a clear correlation between these processes and the vision that supports the ecosystem to plan strategies, build infrastructure and utilize sufficient resources that are required to achieve long term winning. The baseball diamond will highlight the prerequisite’s necessary to cultivate a successful ecosystem and allow it to flourish.

In baseball, when each batter is up to bat, they start at the same spot – Culture. To physically produce runs, a batter must round *each base* (touch the Competency, Capacity and Competition pillars of the ecosystem) and always returns home back to its culture. Thus, you never lose sight or touch with your culture; as noted this is a major reason teams don’t succeed. Since these four pillars have to be involved in order to produce runs, this eliminates the potential for any of these pillars to operate in isolation. A baseball team must rely and utilize all the batters in their lineup to attempt to produce runs; i.e. - everyone in the organization is equally involved and must contribute to the same unified vision of the ecosystem. An ecosystem can’t operate as a stand-alone or stand still system. It requires constant nurturing and multiple moving parts.

In contrast, the pyramid model illustrates a very clock-work universe and machine world view (5). Reaching the top of the pyramid only signifies that all of the processes of the ecosystem have been built (and much like a well-made baseball bat, it should be “crafted”, not built) but does nothing to highlight the results, winning. Once you’ve reached the top of the pyramid, what guarantees or measures are in place to allow for continued cultivating of each pillar? Well cultivated crops require constant water, fertilization and love to be applied to the entire crop including the soil, the seed, the stem and the end crop product. How many crops would a farmer be able to produce if they only watered the leaves of an individual crop and left all the other living parts of the crop isolated and uncared for? This simple analogy goes unnoticed in unsuccessful ecosystems.

This baseball blueprint of the ecosystem is merely an attempt to help the organization grasp the results based reality and change our framework of how an ecosystem must live to avoid failure. This concept allows you to stay connected with your priority (winning) and provide a constant reference point of origin for your team’s vision and intentions. It’s a fairly constant given, that there will never be a blueprint that can be utilized with any permanency that would still allow for significant changes, upgrades and adaptations. A permanent model (think pyramid model) would only allow for refinement and optimization (5). The dynamic adaptability of the baseball blueprint allows for multi-tasking within each pillar and within the entire ecosystem itself. Good baseball teams utilize multiple batters and pitchers, but only one batter or pitcher can play at a time.

Like any great baseball team, they have to produce runs AND have great pitching. This is represented by the Coaching pillar in the ecosystem. This relationship of producing runs and pitching also helps magnify the importance of “relationships” within the ecosystem. One of the elements of great coaching is having compassion and developing connections with your athletes. To have lasting success, your ecosystem needs to invest in all the people involved and create a

culture centered on servant leadership (Simon Sinek). The greatest commodity for cultivating the ecosystem is coaching, but the most critical element in producing results is the relationship between coaches and players.

Our perception creates and forms our reality and the reality is win consistently or face ecosystem degradation and be replaced. I by no means am downplaying the significance of John Wooden's Pyramid of Success but we are coaching in a tremendously different financial and revenue driven era compared to when John Wooden was coaching. Not to mention different media and business agendas. Similarly, I'm not saying to put all of your focus into the results at the expense of the processes and relationships necessary within the ecosystem. I'm hoping this baseball blueprint for your ecosystem will allow you to adopt a model that allows for more critical thinking that can adapt to the evolving landscape.

Utilize the strength and conditioning concepts below to assist you with developing a credible plan to execute:

- Execute your ecosystem developing strong *A.C.L'S* – **Authentic Content** that you can **Leverage** all the encompassing pieces of the **System** into a unified vision.
- Processes that can potentially drive results of cultivating your ecosystem are dependent on how well you:
 1. **Teach** – how you communicate and deliver your ecosystem to your team.
 2. **Tactical proficiency** – how you implement your ecosystem.
 3. **Train it** – how you energize, cultivate and adapt your ecosystem; does the ecosystem become resilient?
 4. **Transfer** – how you utilize and evolve your ecosystem; does the ecosystem produce wins?

Culture is a trendy topic in sport and business right now. Everyone wants their organization's culture to be unique to create a competitive advantage over their competitors. The problem is, organizations are simply copying other organizations cultural blueprints and expecting it to cultivate itself. Manufactured culture will eventually fail. An ecosystem is built to be resilient so that it can adapt and be prepared for crisis. If we as strength and conditioning coaches can continue to be innovative in how we contribute to the overall ecosystem, the ecosystem itself will supersede the singular notion of "culture". When this happens the ecosystem becomes iconic.

There are no guarantees in sport and this forward thinking allows us to continue to strategically invest into the ecosystem. The logic within the pyramid ecosystem will get you from A to Z; the imagination within the baseball ecosystem will get you everywhere (Einstein). The baseball blueprint creates a living ecosystem model that accentuates the cultivation and relationship between the process based pillars of the ecosystem 1) Culture, 2) Competency, 3) Capacity, 4) Competition and 5) Coaching and when culminated together results in winning. This critical analysis leads to critical thinking, which leads to a growth mindset. ***"We are all apprentices in a craft where no one becomes a master" – Hemingway.***

If the Chicago Cubs can win the World Series, this baseball ecosystem concept might just be crazy enough to work!

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