

LEADING EXCELLENCE BOOK CASE STUDY



WAYNE BENNET - SUPERCOACH


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WAYNE BENNETT

ADAPTIVE LEADER – SUPERCOACH

- He **represented Australia** and Queensland in his sporting career.
- Achieved **12 Grand Final Appearances** with top-level teams from five different clubs.
- Secured **8 Premiership Wins** with three different top-level teams.
- Won **5 State of Origin Series** with one draw.
- Claimed victory in **6 International Series** in four different countries.



These are fantastic coaching stats compared to any other coach in the world. What makes them truly remarkable is the breadth of teams he achieved these stats with and the fact that these teams were often nowhere near being the favourites to win. How does a leader and coach accomplish these results, particularly with so many underdog teams?

This author grew up in the heartland of Rugby League. He has been watching and barracking for and against teams coached by Wayne Bennett for over 40 years. There is no better example of an adaptive leader who has achieved ideal results against all odds.

Wayne grew up tough in a small country town in Queensland, Australia. Rugby League was always part of his life; his father played, and his uncle Eddie Brosnan played for Queensland and Australia in 1948. Wayne's father left the family when he was 12, leaving the family poor and in a challenging situation.

Wayne got a job in the local Abattoir, which could easily have been his place for life. Although life was tough for Wayne, he had a good support network around him, which he leaned into. His uncle, Eddie Brosnan and neighbour Basil Phelan (an old farmer who lived next door to Wayne during this time) played a big part in supporting, coaching, and inspiring Wayne to move on to better things. Wayne, in turn, played that role for his younger brother and two sisters.

Wayne's uncle, Eddie Brosnan, was a police officer who helped Wayne gain a position in the Queensland Police Force, breaking away from the Abattoir and going in a new life-long direction. During his time in the Queensland Police Force, Wayne continued to play Rugby League: one of the most demanding games in the world. For those who don't know the game, think of Gridiron with no padding or helmets.

Wayne made it into the State representative team and the Australian International team. During this time, the more introverted Wayne got to know some great coaches who would inspire and support him to move into coaching.

The coaches who Wayne interacted with at this time included Bob Bax, Paul Broughton, and Jack Gibson. They were brilliant, and as Wayne has done for so many people himself, they supported and inspired Wayne to move into the career he would become so successful in.

Our author believes that Wayne learned so much and has been successful throughout his career because he is adept at sitting back, keeping quiet, looking, listening, and constantly learning. Wayne has an introverted personality and an innate desire to improve and succeed. His ability to observe others and consider the person and context surrounding them is second to none. His quieter nature supports this as he has never been one to seek the centre of attention and fill up air space that can occur with more extroverted personalities. Wayne is a man of few words who is always alert and learning from those around him. Wayne learned deeply from these early role models and continued throughout his career.

We have seen the fantastic statistics Wayne has achieved so far, but how did he do this? What are the secrets of his success? There are four ideal behaviours Wayne has used constantly throughout his career to achieve results that we will explore in this case study:

- 1. Understand and adapt to the individual, considering the context surrounding them.**
- 2. Define and align purpose and culture.**
- 3. Lead by example.**
- 4. Constantly look, listen, learn, and improve.**

UNDERSTAND & ADAPT TO THE INDIVIDUAL, CONSIDERING THE CONTEXT SURROUNDING THEM.

Wayne knows that to adapt and get the best from an individual, you must understand them first.

This understanding has two significant benefits:

1. Forms trust and respect.
2. Provides insights into the individual, allowing you to adapt to get the best out of them.

There are many stories of new team members joining Wayne's teams, with opportunities arising or purposefully created to allow Wayne to get to know a player as an individual, the context surrounding them, their backstory, and where they are currently in life. At a team lunch or dinner, Wayne looks for a spare seat near a player he has not had the chance to get to know well. After training, he will connect with players, and on the bus to and from games, he will purposefully choose who he sits next to.

These conversations are not formal; they are relaxed person-to-person conversations. Wayne will ask about their background/history, where they grew up, their family, and where their love of football started. He will find out how they are feeling now, what is going well and their challenges. He will ask questions about their goals moving forward for their career and outside of their career. Wayne will also share common ground about himself, sharing similar background stories and information, demonstrating humility and vulnerability on his behalf, forming an initial foundation of trust.

Wayne has a well known statement
"They don't care until they know you care".

This is such a foundation of respect and human relationships. Until another person knows that you care, how can anyone expect them to care?

By getting to know his players, Wayne gains insights and information on what inspires them, how to interact with them, and how to get the best out of them. This information is critical for any adaptive leader; understanding the person initially is necessary for you to truly consider the person and the context surrounding them to choose the correct behaviour to help them grow.

There are many stories of Wayne's ability to understand individuals and the context surrounding them and his ability to engage at the right time to support them in general and in tough times.

One story revolves around James Gavet, a young Māori player that Bennett had brought to the Broncos team he was coaching. Gavet, like many players, had a tough upbringing.

Growing up in Auckland, his youth was impacted by alcohol and gang violence. Before getting to the Broncos, James had bounced around several other teams. He was looking forward to a fresh start with the Broncos when he suffered a year-ending injury in his first game.

Bennett knew this was not a good outcome for Gavet and that he could be suffering, so he went to his apartment to check his condition. As soon as Bennett walked into the apartment, he knew things were not right; the apartment was a mess, and so was Gavet. Wayne initially worked on cleaning the apartment and then sat on the lounge next to the young footballer, opening the conversation about how he was feeling.

Gavet was not in a good way; he was struggling with depression and missing his son and family back in Auckland. Wayne looked at Gavet and said directly you need to go home and be with your son and your family. Bennett put a plan into motion to help Gavet get home; he sent a trainer from the team in Auckland to help Gavet find the best gyms and medical centres to attend; he connected Gavet with a local team in Auckland to train with over this time while he was back with his family recovering (Webster, 2024).

Another story comes from one of Wayne's longer-term team members, Darius Boyd, who played for Wayne in several clubs. He talks of Wayne's ability to adapt his style to get the best out of the individual (Crutcher, 2020). Boyd noted that Wayne will be more direct with some players, and players he knows will respond to more direct comments and feedback. He adapts his style with other players to a more supportive open coaching approach that helps get the best out of them. Boyd notes that Wayne can do this as he knows the individual and builds trust early in any new coaching relationship. This is an example of being an adaptive leader who serves the growth of others.



SOURCE: GETTY IMAGES

DEFINE & ALIGN PURPOSE & CULTURE.

Wayne Bennett defines and leads purpose and culture with every team he coaches. Again, how he does this varies depending on the club and the team's players.

Stephen Renouf, one of Wayne's early team members at the Broncos club, talks of The Broncos' Creed, which the team developed in 1989. Renouf credits these commandments with playing a large part in defining and improving the team's culture and performance, which resulted in its first premiership win in 1992 (Gould, 2023).



BRONCOS' CREED

- 1 Come to each game mentally and physically prepared for a 'best on the ground' performance. Self-motivation is always the best. You are responsible for your performance.
- 2 Do not carry on with falsehoods or bull****t in the rooms before a game. Just think about your game and the contribution you are about to make. If you don't mean it, don't say it. Don't be a liar.
- 3 Commit yourself to the coach's game plan and objectives. One plan is better than 13.
- 4 Minimise mistakes in your 30-metre zone.
- 5 Get 'your' defence right. Communication - Desperation.
- 6 Control the play. Don't push the play. Be ready to take the opportunity when it comes.
- 7 Work for a good field position. Good chasing game. Minimum errors in attack and defence.
- 8 Play to the referee's instructions.
- 9 Bring your brains to the game and play with them. Smart, committed players will always beat dumb, committed players.
- 10 Build your game each week. If a mistake is made or you can't get into the game, go back to doing the basics as perfectly as possible and don't compound problems by trying to do something spectacular
- 11 Play the game in blocks of six tackles. When we have the ball, and when they have the ball. Forget about the past and don't plan for the future. Focus on the present six.
- 12 Compete on every play - be mentally tough for 80 minutes. Don't give in to your feelings. If you don't give up, anything can happen.

In more recent times, Wayne has helped teams define simpler values and behaviours, such as with the English team (Bennett, 2022):

1. RESPECT YOUR FANS, TEAMMATES, YOURSELF, COACH, AND SUPPORT STAFF.

2. BE ON TIME.

James Graham was the captain of the English team that Wayne coached. He mentioned the few values and behaviours of focus for the team in a Podcast he recorded with Wayne on his show, The Bye Round. In a way, the value of respect is all-encompassing, and the capstone behaviour of being on time leads to so many other disciplined behaviours and cultural outcomes. In both instances, Wayne created with the team a cultural standard that could then be led in an adaptive way.

Respect has been a common value foundation for Wayne and his teams over the past decades, with behaviours of focus altering slightly. During the 2015 season with the Broncos, a principle or behavioural rule was brought into the team of "no mobile phones at team training, which linked back to respect as we are a team here to work together to improve. We are not doing that when we are staring at a mobile phone". Another principle that Wayne uses is "the standard you walk past is the standard you accept". This principle/behavioural rule is for the whole team to lead.

A story is told of one night when some of Wayne's St George players were out celebrating. Two players were known for drinking too much and sometimes partying too hard. Two other players out that night did not behave in that way, yet they allowed their teammates to behave as they did. At the next team meeting, Wayne fined the two players who stood around, letting the other two get drunker and drunker, their behaviour worse and worse. They accepted that behaviour and didn't put their teammates in a taxi for home. They walked past and accepted a standard that was not good and let it continue.

Wayne believes many leaders don't call poor behaviour; they want to be liked too much. Wayne believes that leaders need to be willing, not always to be liked, and be willing to make hard calls even though everyone finds this difficult, even Wayne. Wayne believes it is essential to be clear about where you are going and why and what acceptable behaviours are. This creates an aligned, unified environment in which people can succeed.

In a speech to Queensland teachers in 2010, Wayne commented that winners come together in groups to solve problems and move forward towards their purpose and goals. Losers come together to bitch and complain about others. Being clear on where you are going and why, together with what is behaviourally acceptable and not, is at the foundation of the high-performing cultures Wayne has created time and time again. In this book, we call this the Core Belief System.

You may be thinking, how does Wayne foster this culture once he has defined it with the team? This leads us to the 3rd Ideal behaviour Wayne exudes that fosters ideal results – Lead by Example.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE.

Wayne Bennett believes that talk is cheap; your actions and how you make people feel are what counts as a leader. A common statement Wayne makes is "a true leader does not see themselves as a leader. They become one by the quality of their actions and the honesty of their intent."

Wayne leads culture by living it himself out with the players at the front line. A story told by Hayden Knowles, who was a trainer with Wayne when he was supporting the coaching of New Zealand, talks about this. In training camps, players can easily disrespect themselves and their health by letting go of what they eat and drink. This can easily lead to weight gain and other adverse performance outcomes.

At one of the first meals of the New Zealand Rugby League team, the players and staff were lining up at a pub to order a meal; Wayne was at the front of the line. He casually turned to the player behind him and said that he typically hates the food at these camps; it doesn't help his waistline or health. Wayne then ordered the grilled fish and salad, the players behind him observed this. A standard was set that the rest followed: grilled chicken or fish and salad rather than large steaks, pies, and chips.

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Wayne exudes respect for how he engages his team; he is always on time and will fine himself if he turns up late, ensuring the team knows he has done this.

Wayne believes in not asking anyone to do anything he wouldn't do himself. He leads with respect by staying around after practice to help the trainers and groundsman pick up all the gear; he is there for his players during the moments that count, like with James Gavet previously mentioned, along with countless more examples.

Even though Wayne is now 74, he will still join in gruelling preseason training sessions. Of course, he is not able to keep up the pace that the young men do, but he is still in it with them. Wayne exudes leading from the front with respect. This behaviour builds the ultimate respect in his team members towards him. So, few players have experienced coaches who will get in and get their hands dirty with the team; most stay clear of what the team are doing, purely using words (talk is cheap) rather than actions to build respect, lead culture and performance.

A story that Wayne often talks about choosing the right behaviour and leading by example is the Cherokee story of two wolves:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he told the boy. "It is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

He continued, "The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too."

His grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

Wayne mentions that we all have wolves in us; he openly admits he has both, and he is not perfect; it is the one we consciously feed that counts. Wayne was not born with these skills; he failed early on as a coach and has not had a smooth career.

Wayne's fourth ideal behaviour has kept him current and coaching high-performance teams for over 50 years: constantly looking, listening, learning, and improving.

CONSTANTLY LOOK, LISTEN, LEARN, & IMPROVE.

Wayne's coaching career has been a constant experiment with constant learning. He understands the player and his team; he is constantly alert and learning about them. He then improves his approach to ensure success.

One example is Wayne's time coaching of St George Illawarra. St George is a famous club with a proud history of winning the premiership for many years running throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s. The challenge was that the club had not won a title for many years, becoming the runner-up to several of Wayne's past coached teams and others. Wayne noticed early on that the player's energy and behaviour slumped if winning the premiership was mentioned.



Wayne has an innate ability to sit back, look, listen, and learn from what he observes. He knew that the pressure of past success and recent failures weighed heavily on the team. Wayne implemented a new principle/rule for their season with the team: no one would mention the finals or winning the premiership at any stage. They would focus on the leading behaviours they could control, improving these in a structured manner. They would focus their energy on keeping teams under 16 points through high-quality defence.

The story of St George's 2010 campaign culminated at halftime in the grand final, down 8 points to 6 against the Sydney City Roosters. Wayne again was in the stadium looking at their plays, listening to his coaching staff and feedback from the ground. He used the information to learn and think deeply about his ideal behaviour at halftime to help his team recover from a deficit to win the grand final.

The story goes that Wayne walked into the dressing room at halftime, stood silently in front of the players for what would have seemed like an eternity to them and said,

"Why don't you start being St George? Why don't you start being the team that got us here? The team I am watching is not St George".

He walked out; the players were stunned. Then, one of them rallied and fired up, which created a chain reaction across the team room. St George won that final 32 – 8, keeping the Sydney City Roosters scoreless in the second half.



In conclusion, Wayne thinks deeply about what he is seeing and hearing, what he knows about his players and the context surrounding them. He is adaptive to the individual and the context surrounding them at the time, a true adaptive leader. He does the same, considering his own behaviour and performance. Throughout his career, Wayne has been a constant learner, looking up to the great coaches of past and present. He reads and studies widely, using knowledge to help him grow and improve to support his players better.

Wayne Bennett and many other great leaders are ultimately defined by the people they help, the people they grow and develop to live a better life for the people and things they serve. They are adaptive leaders who serve the growth of others and themselves. Wayne has helped many young men who otherwise may not have reached their potential and whose lives could have worked out differently. Wayne's career statistics are impressive, yet our author is sure the players and his family he has served and helped grow towards their potential make him the proudest!

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