Paul Sancya / Associated Press

On the Same Page

A Conversation with **Joe Dumars**

The Detroit Pistons of the National Basketball Association have been to six straight Eastern Conference Finals from 2003-2008, including one NBA Championship. What's even more impressive is that they have done it with three different head coaches. In June 2008, they hired coach Michael Curry to continue this legacy of excellence. Even with records that most teams can only dream of, Joe Dumars, President of Basketball Operations, refuses to stand still. He has never been afraid to make a move that he feels will improve his organization.

Dumars's record is impressive. He burst on the sports scene as a guard for the Pistons in 1985. During his 14-year career, he was a six-time All-Star, won two NBA titles, and was named Finals MVP in 1989. He is also the namesake of the "Joe Dumars Trophy," which is awarded each year to the winner of the NBA Sportsmanship Award. As Pistons President, Dumars has developed a reputation as one of the league's top executives thanks to his many shrewd personnel moves, often capitalizing on players who are unwanted by other organizations. He was named Executive of the Year in 2003 and elected to the Basketball Hall

of Fame in 2006.

Off the court, Dumars was the Founder and CEO of Detroit Technologies, an automotive supply company. He is also the Founder of the Joe Dumars Fieldhouse, and he serves on the Board of Directors for First Michigan Bank.

In this edited interview with Scott Bahr and CEO advisor Jim Woods, Dumars describes his strategies for organizational success. His humble leadership and disciplined commitment to core values provide a powerful model for success to any organization.

When you hired Michael Curry to be your head coach, you said that you were looking for someone who would be "on the same page." Why is that so important above all other considerations?

Simply because I don't think there can be any disconnect along the way. Michael and I see vision, discipline, and organization the same way. It doesn't mean we don't disagree on some methods of how to do things – I'm not really interested in someone agreeing on every method that I want to use – but the basic premise of how you're going to do things has to be the same.

When comparing talent with common vision, values, and goals, is one more important than the other? Are you willing to sacrifice organizational alignment for superior talent?

That's a good question, and a very timely question, as well. My staff and I were recently discussing a situation similar to what you're describing. I told them, "Listen, I'll go back to what I say to you guys when you go out and you're scouting a player: that guy has to be a great leader on the court or a great follower. If he's neither, we're going to run into issues."

My point is that you can't have twelve leaders (in basketball, there's a 12-man roster). It doesn't work. You can't have twelve followers, either. If the guy is a great leader and a great athlete, he's going to have success on the court, and people are going to follow him. There are also great players who just aren't leaders, but they will run through a wall for you and do whatever is necessary. When I played, the one guy who I thought was a great follower was Dennis Rodman. He wasn't the leader or the captain of the team, but the guy would do anything.

So I told my guys, "You tell me how you're going to win with somebody that's neither. If a guy's not a great leader, he'd better be a great follower. You have to be very careful with the guys who are neither."

That doesn't only apply to professional sports and athletics; I think it applies across the board. If that person is not leading or following the vision of your organization, you've got a problem because he's not pulling in the same direction as you.

What is the ideal balance of leaders and followers?

If I have eight great leaders and four great followers, I'm going to live with that. If I have eight great followers and four top-notch leaders, I'm going to live with that. I don't worry about the balance. As long as they're in one of those categories, you're not going to have any issues.

Is there ever a time when you would take someone with superior talent even if he didn't share your values and vision?

You're asking the same question that my scouts asked. We have a player who's a great talent, but he's not a leader, and he's not following what we're trying to do. He's a great talent, but what is that talent doing? He obviously has to be doing his own thing on the court. It's not our thing because he's not following it, and it's not our thing because he's not leading it. You have to be very careful.

This is not a theoretical question for me. I've turned down players with superior talent because I knew they were all about doing their own thing and would ruin what we were trying to do. There's no way we would have had this kind of success if I had brought those guys in.

Would you take a chance on a less talented player just because he fits your character mold, believing that you could develop enough talent in him to make him a contributor?

It's all relative what I'm talking about here. I'm not talking about passing on a supreme talent of '10' in favor or a talent of '2.' What I'm talking about is from '10' to '8.' It's a given in this league that the guys are talented, so you're never going to be turning down Kobe Bryant for a guy who's a 12th man. It just doesn't happen. I'm talking about a guy who's a '10,' and he's headache, and he's going to kill your culture, and a guy who's an '8', and he's a great teammate. I will get more out of that '8.'

During your playing career, you spoke of the physical and mental discipline required to be a professional basketball player. How does that discipline now apply to running your organization and how do you, as the leader, instill that discipline in your people?

First of all, discipline is on display by your actions, not by what you say. In my current position, they have to see me come in every day, never waver on what we believe in, and lead by example. If I take a risk, I need to take accountability for it. If it works, great. If it doesn't work, I need to say, "I made a mistake."

People want to see leadership, not excuses. Discipline comes from putting yourself out there, taking the risk, and taking the responsibility that comes with it. My players and coaches are looking to see how I react to things, and they're going to take their cue from me. If I'm filled with excuses and finger-pointing, I promise you that will ooze throughout the organization. I refused to do it as a player, and I refuse to do it now.

In your business, people are obsessed with "winning now." You've been successful with building an organization for the long-term that still has a chance to win now. How do you find that balance?

I say this all the time; I think my guys get sick of hearing me say it: you cannot be afraid to fail. That's what I believe every single day that I wake up. If you're

not afraid to fail, you're going to make moves that give you a chance to win now *and* make moves that are good for you down the road. In this business, we're expected to do one or the other. I have refused to do that. But when you refuse to do that, you're bucking the system, and anytime you buck the system and go against the trend, there's a backlash. I think that's what stops people from doing it. It's not that they don't believe it's the right thing to do, but the 24-7 scrutiny that we live under in this business will stop people from doing what they know is right.

You guys have been at or near the top for a long time. Having achieved consistent success, how do you maintain an organizational hunger for greatness?

Expectations.

When we first had some success after ten years without it, everyone was excited about winning again. But at a certain point, you expect them to do it. It's a lot harder when it's expected. To be quite frank, I think it's honesty that maintains high expectations.

My players sell it more than I do at this point. When a new guy shows up, the veterans tell them right away, "Trust me, mediocre is not accepted here. Even if we get back to the conference finals for the 7th straight year, it's not going to be accepted." So they start laying that foundation of expectations.

We get used to the daily scrutiny of this business. We know the criticism that's coming, and we're motivated to succeed each year because this is a "right now" world. What we've done for the last six years is nice, but if we don't perform this year, we all know that the criticism will come. When you live in that world day-in and day-out, it becomes somewhat a part of your DNA and how you deal with things. So my guys know what's expected and what will happen if it doesn't work out, so we may as well gear up and go for it.

As an executive, does the scrutiny ever sow seeds of doubt in you, or are you really just immune to it?

It doesn't, and here's why. You get used to it. You know you're going to be questioned, second-guessed, criticized, and scrutinized. Ultimately, you don't even allow it to bother you because it just does no good. This is the world I've lived in for 20-some years, and I'm used to it.

Last year, (Pistons forward) Antonio McDyess said that after being a part of the Pistons organization, he does not want to play anywhere else. Other players have expressed similar sentiments. What is it about your organization that makes them feel that way?

People.

For me, the people aspect is first and foremost. I'm not really concerned how much basketball you know; I'm just concerned with how you deal with people. If you're not a good people person, I probably won't hire you. Our organization is filled with good people, so everywhere our players turn, they're dealing with good people. Guys like McDyess come here and tell stories of how bad it is in some other places, and I've heard those stories since I was drafted in 1985. I'm

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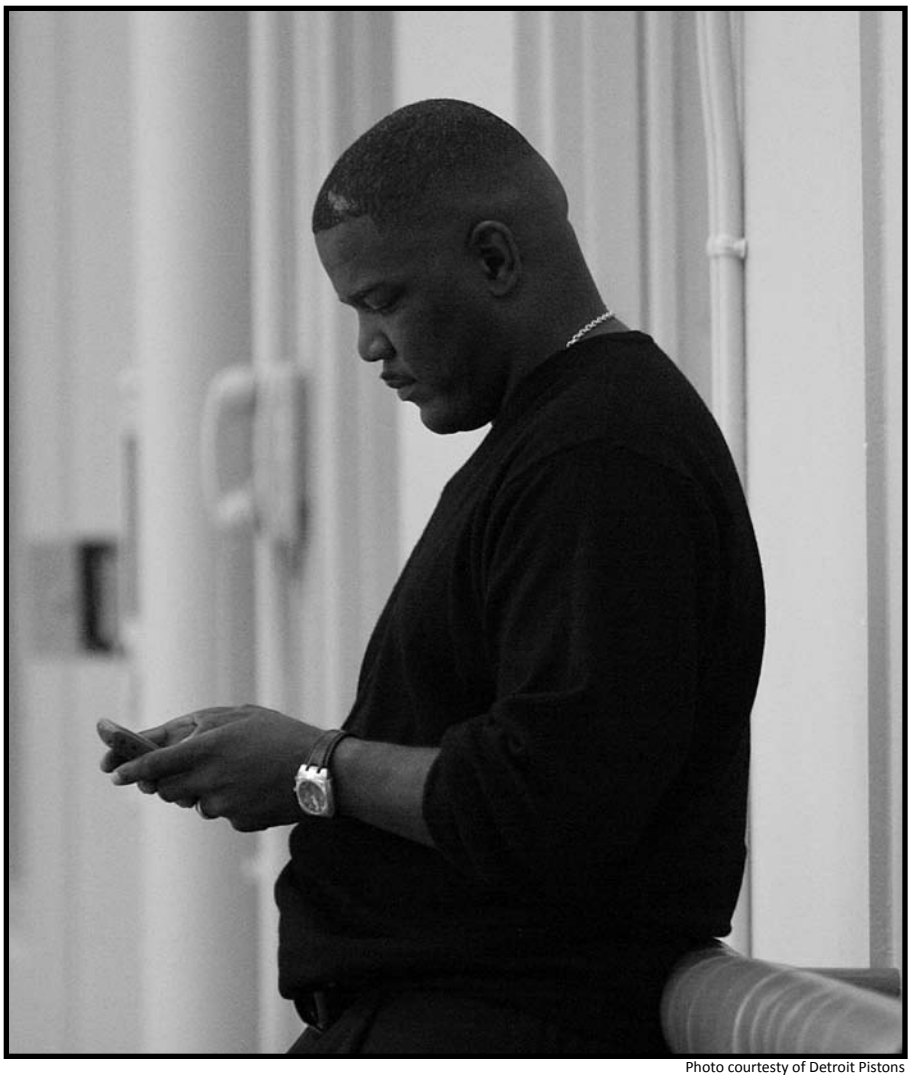

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You know you've built the right type of culture and environment when mistakes stick out like a sore thumb.

not here to question other teams, but I don't want anyone to ever say that about us. So I want to surround myself with the best people I can. They're smart, they're tough, and they know their jobs, but first and foremost, they're good people. It always comes back to people.

When it came time to put a staff together, I recalled all the people I knew during my 14-year playing career, and I went back and started plucking people out that I knew were good people. Once you're in this position, people put on a great face for you, but for those 14 years, there was no motive. Either they were a good person or they were not. I recalled all those things, so it wasn't hard for me to find the right people.

Do you feel that you've built an organization whose principles will outlive you?

Only if the right people are here when I'm gone. It's not like it is just because of me, and it won't stay like this just because of one person. It has to be an organization full of the right people.

Is it important to you that the organization maintain this level of excellence even after you are gone?

It would be a shame if it didn't because it's taken years to build this culture and to have this good will throughout the NBA. It's taken a lot of hard work, sacrifice, and people going above and beyond to be the right type of people, and it would be a shame if it just went to the wayside because of the wrong people. I would love to see this legacy maintained, and I know this for a fact: it can remain like this because it's been built, but it's only going to happen with the right kind of people.

What if you find you have the wrong people? How do you resolve those situations?

I've made mistakes, whether it's been drafting a player, trading for a player, signing a player, or hiring someone to my staff. The good thing about it is when it's a mistake, it sticks out like a sore thumb. That's when you know you've built the right type of culture and environment. If you hire the wrong person and he doesn't stand out, then something is wrong.

Do you think that the wrong person sees it as clearly and quickly as you do?

Yes, because they become very uncomfortable. I want them to be uncomfortable in this environment. I'm not going to adjust the culture here for somebody who doesn't fit what we're trying to be. Either they're going to adjust to our culture or I'm going to have a polite conversation with them and invite them to find another place.

It sounds like you may not even have to have that conversation. They might figure it out all by themselves and go look for another place.

You know what? I've had that before. I've had players say, "Joe, I think I'd be better somewhere else," and I've said to them, "I think you're right; let me make that happen for you." I've had front-office people leave because they felt they had a better opportunity somewhere else. I knew it, they knew it, and we both accepted it.

What defines success in your position? Is there an end-goal that, if reached, will tell you that you're done?

Success is quantified by what's expected of you, internally and externally. Our people expect to vie for a championship, and we're expected to be one of the best. I think that's success in itself. Outsiders consider us one of the best organizations. Guys like McDyess say, "I don't ever want to play anywhere else." That's success because it means we've created the culture and environment of a championship status. In this business, that's where you want to be.

Does that translate to any organization in any business?

No question about it. In any business, if you've got bad people, selfishness, ulterior motives, whatever, it's going to affect your business in a negative way. I don't care what business you're in. We just happen to be talking about NBA basketball right now, but this applies across the board.

When/where/how did you develop your management philosophy?

Life lessons.

I grew up with working-class parents growing up in Louisiana. I had a father who drove an 18-wheeler all over Louisiana, and he had to deal with a lot of people. He taught us how to be comfortable with anyone. I'm the youngest of seven – five brothers and one sister – and we always said, "You can drop me off at the White House or by the house in the ghetto, and I'm going to be okay because I can get along with anybody."

With that outlook, it's really not about you; it's about you learning how to deal with other people. From a very young age, I've been hearing this and seeing it in my mother and father. Now, at 45, it's just part of my DNA. It's what I know. I don't have to think about it. It's just part of who I am and how I deal with people.

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