



For the Good of the Whole

Since becoming Ohio State University's Head Football Coach in 2001, Jim Tressel has quickly established himself as one of the premier coaches in the country. In less than a decade, he has led his team to three BCS Championship Games, seven Big Ten Conference championships, and an 8-1 record against the Michigan Wolverines.

Tressel, however, will be the first to tell you that he's about more than winning football games. A teacher by training, he sees football as a way to prepare young men for life. That is why he annually produces the *Winners Manual*, a binder that's now up to 450 pages of stories, quotes, and counsel on the attributes one needs to win in football and in life. This manual includes the Block O of Life, Tressel's depiction of the six core values he strives to instill in every player. It is required reading for his players, and thanks to the recent publication of a condensed version (*The Winners Manual for the Game of Life*, Tyndale House Publishers), it's available to everyone.

Tressel may be a football coach, but he is also the leader of a multimillion dollar organization with a staff that extends far beyond the field. *The CEO Advantage Journal* was privileged to talk with him about how he aligns everyone in his organization around a common purpose. In addition to enjoying an inside look at one of America's top football programs, this edited interview provides a refresher of winning principles for any organization.

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How is your role as head coach of a major collegiate football program similar to that of a CEO? How is it different?

It is hard for me to draw comparisons because I have not been a CEO. The CEO of our organization is Ohio State University President, Gordon Gee. From what I see, he wants to make sure he has good people running the various areas of expertise that make up this grand university. He does not pretend to be the expert in the medical field, the athletic field, the alumni field, or the agriculture field; he just has good people working with him.

The same goes for us in the football program. I want good people working with us. Of course, they need their respective areas of expertise, but it all starts with having good people. And we do have good people. Most of us have worked together before

at some point in our careers, so we know each other's character and philosophical approach to coaching.

My job is to make sure that we do everything in the right doses. That's where the Winners Manual and Block O of Life come in. We want our guys to learn more than football; we want them to know their purpose – who they are and what they are here to do. So my job, if it is indeed a CEO job, is to make sure that our guys are equipped to grow in all areas.

We are big believers in alignment being critical for leadership teams. How do you ensure that everyone in your organization is aligned around a common purpose?

I want everyone in this program to have ownership in the whole. Recruiting is a good example. By NCAA rule, our coaches are the only

people allowed to recruit. So we'll sit in recruiting meetings for hours, and of course, the line coach wants to recruit four linemen and the linebacker coach wants to recruit four linebackers. We don't have enough spots for what everybody wants. We have to spend a lot of time crossing each other's boundaries to come to a solution.

We start every day in the same room talking about where we're going to invest the time and effort of the players that day. The coaches, the academic people, the community outreach people – they all want time with the players for various reasons, but we've decided as a group that we're going to be comprehensive in the complete development of our players. All of our guys would love to play in the NFL, but even those who do will only be there for 3-4 years. We're passionate about helping them reach that goal (no one has more people drafted than we do), but we want to prepare them for well beyond the NFL.

So yes, thanks to a lot of comingling and understanding, we're aligned around a common purpose, and that allows me to trust everyone with their responsibilities. Very seldom do we get into the intricate parts of each other's world. For example, I don't ask what blitzes we're going to use, but I'll spend a lot of time asking what we're capable of doing. If we blitz, can our guys handle man coverage? If my coach tells me we can do it, I take his word for it and trust him with the details.

This type of collaboration is good for our assistant coaches, too. They're hoping to become the CEO – the head coach – of their own team someday, so it's good for them to see what is needed in every area.

So you do a lot of coordinating, perhaps even buffering, among a



Photo courtesy of Ohio State University

lot of different interests as you ensure that resources are not being overplayed in one area versus another.

Yes. What do you need to get the job done? Why are you using this particular gameplan? Those are questions I ask of my coaches and we ask of each other.

We must get the most out of what we have. Some coaches say, "This is my system and the players have to fit into it." I say, "These are the players we have, so let's develop a system in which they can be successful." It's not like the NFL where you can cut one guy and sign another overnight.

Let's say you have a left tackle that really ought to be a defensive end, but the tackle coach refuses to give him up. How do you get your coaches to look beyond protecting their own territory?

It's an ongoing discussion. We have personnel meetings nearly every day to discuss what we currently have and what we need to recruit. For example, we have four defensive linemen committed, and there's another one that we'd really love to have but can't fit in. Just this morning, we went through each position to see if there was anywhere we could take one less. Of course, no coach wants to give up a slot in his area, but more than anything, my guys just like to know that we're going to talk about it together and have a clear rationale for the decisions we make.

Again, it goes back to your people. If you have someone that's only in it for himself, it's not going to work. We have people that really believe that team is the most important thing.

How do you recruit your team? I'm not talking about the players; I'm referring to your staff. What do you

look for? How do you gauge their coaching talent and their fit within the culture of your organization?

When I was hired by OSU in 2001, I had to put together the best staff I could. I hired three guys from my previous staff at Youngstown State, kept three from the OSU staff, and three from other entities. I hadn't worked with all of them before, but someone on our staff had, so we were pretty clear on what we were getting. Since then, we have lost some guys to retirement, other head coaching jobs, and the NFL. Change is not always bad. We hate to lose someone, but when we do, we see it as an opportunity to get even better. We ask (1) "Is he the right kind of guy?" and (2) "Does he help us get better?"

Have you ever had a player or coach who was not the right fit? How did you deal with that?

That does happen, and when it does, we just keep working with him. This college football experience is about more than what happens on the field, and we want to do everything we can to help our guys be successful. Sometimes, that just isn't possible. A player might abuse the freedom that comes with college or maybe things aren't going as he had hoped on the field, so he starts seeking his self-image in the wrong places. Those guys usually weed themselves out.

As for coaches, in 25 years, I've only let one guy go, but only after working with him for four to five years to help him fit what we needed. It just didn't work out. I tried to make it work, but it came to a point where I had to make the call.

I worked with a long-time inner-city principal more than twenty years ago. I was really distraught that a couple of my kids weren't succeeding academically, socially, and athletically. I said, "I'm not connecting with these guys. I don't know

what it is, but I can't seem to get them to understand." She said, "You know, you can't save them all." Being a Type A "I can save the world" kind of guy, that was very healthy for me to hear. Not everyone is going to fit into our scheme – coach or player. Sometimes I have to make those decisions for the good of the whole.

You said you try to develop a system that will help your players be successful, but are there ever times when you pass on a great talent for fear that he won't fit your program?

Certainly. Talent is obviously the first requirement, but once we verify a player's ability and that he fills a need for us, we thoroughly research the academic and character components. We talk to cafeteria workers, assistant coaches, other kids at his school, other coaches in the conference – whatever helps us find out everything we can about him.

So there's a lot of detail behind the scene.

A ton. We are still wrong sometimes. When that happens, we have to be tough enough to say, "We made a mistake, and we're not going to let that mistake compound." Then it's decision time.

College football is big business, but it's still education. As such, we probably err more on the side of patience. If someone is not working out, we will work with them a long time before we think about letting them go. We want to help our guys succeed.

Ohio State has a tradition of picking team captains. Talk about how that works and how it contributes to your players' development as leaders.

The team votes on the captains. We encourage seniors. Actually, we put a lot of responsibility on our seniors,

in general, simply because they are experienced and feel a sense of urgency that “this is it.” They help make various decisions, spend more time with the media, and get lots of opportunities to address the team. They’ve learned some lessons and often want to share those with the group.

The bottom line is for us to have a good team, we need a good group of seniors. That experience and internal mentoring is invaluable.

What is more difficult – achieving excellence or maintaining it once it has been achieved?

That’s really a non-issue for us simply because we’re always going to work hard. Each spring, the media asks, “What are you working on this year?” and I say, “Everything.” If something is going well, it’s going well because we worked on it, and it won’t continue to go well unless we keep working on it.

So is complacency always a threat regardless of the level at which you’re performing?

Complacency results from a few things. One is past experience. It’s the guy who assumes that because we did something last year, we’ll do it again. The second is immaturity – not understanding that success comes from things being done well; it doesn’t just happen. The third is listening to people who have no idea what it takes. A young player says, “They said on TV we’re going to be good this year.” That’s a nice thing to say, but it’s not going to get it done.

Complacency is a natural human tendency. If you get punched in the nose, you instinctively react. But if things go well, you don’t instinctively think, “This went well, but I’m afraid it won’t go well again unless I work hard to ensure that it does.” You have to discipline yourself to

think that way. We fight complacency all the time.

How do you fight that complacency to get consistent execution from your coaches and players?

Evaluation. Constant evaluation.

Successes and failures?

Yes. We evaluate everything. We challenge our coaches to grade what they see on film the same whether we won or lost. When you win, it’s easy to say, “Everything’s fine, relax.” If you lose, the attitude is “We’re terrible, we didn’t try.” Neither is automatically true.

We do tend to evaluate based on the final outcome, don’t we?

Right. Realistic, honest, constant evaluation is the only way you have a chance. You have to be real about the performance regardless of the outcome.

What first prompted you to put the Winner’s Manual together, and how do you use it with the players?

When I first became a head coach, I thought we needed very specific organization to be efficient. I also thought we needed a plan for what we wanted to accomplish. Yes, we want to win games, but what is it we really want to do? That’s what prompted the Block O, our litmus test for everything we do.

We start every morning with 15 minutes of quiet reading time followed by a discussion of what we read. I ask the kids to set goals in each area. Our job as teachers is to help them learn and achieve their goals, so we need to know what they want. Each player’s thinking changes every year; their goals change as their maturity level grows.

The most fundamental things in that book have nothing to do with Xs and Os. We go through eighteen prin-

ciples. (They’re combined into the “big ten” principles for the published book.) The quotes, stories, etc. illustrate those principles, helping us live by the Latin phrase *Macte Virtute*, which means “increase in excellence.”

Every year, we welcome submissions from the players for new material, so it’s a little bigger every year. I got a text yesterday from (former player) James Laurinaitis that said, “When you get the Winners Manual printed, mail it to me.” I’ve had a number of players do that.

People say, “Didn’t it take forever to write that book?” and I say, “Yeah, 25 years!” It’s what my staff and I have been teaching all along.

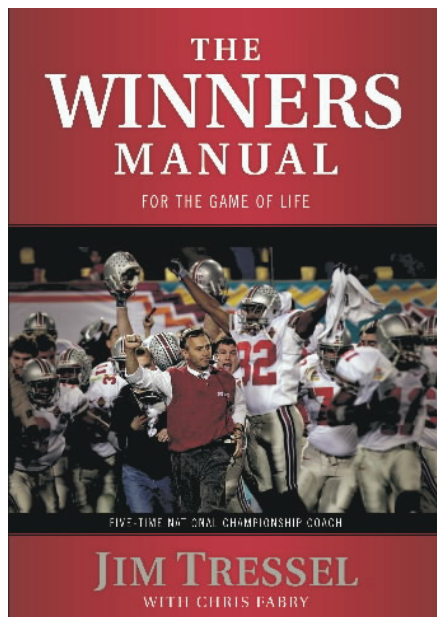
So these fundamental disciplines and attitudes are as important to you as a player’s talent?

Oh yes. They’re the characteristics of winners. We tell recruits that this is not just about football. We don’t want you to come here, go to the NFL, then retire at 27, run out of money, and wonder what you’re going to do with your life. We want to prepare you for that day when you’re retired at 27 by giving you the tools to enjoy a happy, meaningful life.

Is that your purpose as an organization?

Yes, to prepare our players to succeed in life. We love to compete and we want to be the best, but we want to prepare our guys for when they leave and nobody remembers how many college games they won. Our players have been told “you’re the man” since they were eight years old. Sooner than they think, someone faster and stronger will come along, and they won’t be “the man” anymore.

In the book, you talk about how you used to take a week to study and learn from great



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leaders and organizations. Do you still do that?

I struggle to find time anymore to go away for a week like I used to. I do it more now by bringing people in here. People want to come and see what we’re doing, and we pick their brains whenever we can. I love to read about successful groups and successful people as much as possible.

In such an intensely competitive environment, I’m sure burnout is a struggle.

When the economy dipped a few years ago, I heard business people saying, “It was tough letting people go, but we’re probably more efficient.” I’m sure that’s true, but my question is whether your people will be burned out five years from now. That’s our struggle as coaches. But we love our work! It’s a privilege to help contribute to the personal growth of young men – but no question, it is a demanding calling.

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