



Saturday Blueprint With Michael Lombardi (January 18, 2025)

We spoke to Daily Coach co-founder and UNC Football's newest General Manager about assessing teams, evaluating talent within organizations, and building a championship team culture.

Beyond the decorated accolades of Michael “Lambo” Lombardi—three Super Bowl rings in an NFL career spanning over three decades, working alongside coaching legends like Bill Walsh, Al Davis, and Bill Belichick—his journey stands as a masterclass in leadership, strategy, innovation and serving others.

As the co-founder of *The Daily Coach* with Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall-of-Famer “Coach” George Raveling, Lombardi's influence extends far beyond the football field and boardroom. From his books [Gridiron Genius](#) (2018) and [Football Done Right](#) (2023) to VSiN, his appearances on ESPN's *The Pat McAfee Show* and his support of over 150 leaders in business and sports within the [Daily Coach Leadership Peer Groups](#), his impact is undeniable.

Recently, reuniting with his close friend and trusted confidant, Coach Belichick, Lombardi takes on a new challenge and opportunity as [General Manager of UNC Football](#). Yet beyond the titles, he is a devoted husband, father, grandfather, friend, mentor, and an inspiration to countless individuals striving for greatness and that competitive edge.

Our team at *The Daily Coach* spoke with our co-founder and UNC Football's newest General Manager about assessing teams, evaluating talent within organizations, and building a championship team culture.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Why is it important for leaders to ask, 'Who do we intend to be?' and how does this question shape an organization's direction and assessment?

Leadership is a function of questions, not just answers. If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. You might be making great time, but you're on the wrong road to nowhere. And that's the challenge—how do you assess when something's bad if you don't even know where you're trying to go?

To me, this is one of the biggest problems in most organizations. Management is about answers, but leadership is about asking the right questions. The first question every leader has to ask is: *Who do we intend to be?* Not *What are we going to do?* but *Who do we want to be?*

That's what drives real assessment. It's how you figure out if you're heading in the right direction or if adjustments need to be made. Maybe you haven't hit the right market share, or the right timing, or the right audience yet. But if you know who you intend to be, you can stay the course or pivot with purpose. Progress isn't always fast, but it's measurable when you have clarity.

Look at the Detroit Lions. For years, they were stuck because nobody in that organization could answer *Who do we intend to be?* They just didn't know. But now they've figured it out. They're a big, physical football team that controls the line of scrimmage. That's who they are. It's clear. And because they know that, everything else starts to fall into place.

So much of the problem with assessment comes back to a lack of direction. If you don't define who you intend to be, how can you ever figure out what's wrong with your organization? Without that clarity, you're just lost—making really good time, but going nowhere.

How do you build a strong team culture, and why is storytelling so important when assessing and leading a team?

Culture is all about a story, and the storyteller must tell the story of *us*, not *I*. If you're going to assess the team, you have to see yourself as part of it. If you're looking down in judgment, the team won't accept it. But if you're looking down as someone trying to make the team better, you've got a better chance.

And how do you create that? Dr. Doolittle said it best: *We may not look alike, but we just belong together.* That's the heart of it—creating a sense of belonging where no one is judged by money or celebrity. Instead, they're judged by what they do for the team. You can't assess a team until you create that sense of belonging. Without it, your feedback will feel like criticism, not coaching. People will think, *Oh, they just don't like me*, or *Things aren't going well.*

You've got to create a sense of belonging so people can take coaching, not criticism. Building a team is a spiritual challenge—it's about creating a connection that's bigger than any one person. It's a profound communion between people, tied to a purpose greater than themselves. When you have that, you can assess the team. Without it, you're building on shaky ground. You might be right; you might be wrong, but there's no real foundation.



How do you approach scouting and evaluating talent, and what separates good from great?

Scouting and finding talent is all about elimination. The system you build should really be built to eliminate people, not to find people. When you have criteria set and then build a system around those criteria, you start eliminating people.

As a scout, the hardest thing to do is separate what's good from what's great. It's hard for us to do that in real life. Scouting is an art form. Sometimes, what we think of as greatness is simply someone who is really good. So, what separates the player who is great, who becomes a Hall of Famer, who becomes the best, from the player who's just good?

It comes down to the evaluation of character and mental toughness. Does he have the qualities to work? Does she have competitive stamina? This is where we separate good from great. Their personal behavior, their job execution, their ability to work at their craft—how important is the craft and the game to them? Do they get in trouble on or off the field? Are they ready to act like an adult? All these questions are what we're asking the scout to answer.

So, how does this apply to business? It's the same concept. Everyone who sits in front of you in a business meeting usually comes with high recommendations. You review their resume, but it doesn't truly tell you who they are. Without a clear grading system to evaluate candidates—or a well-defined understanding of your organization's identity—you lack the specific criteria needed to make informed decisions about who aligns with the team's needs and vision.



University of North Carolina Athletics

What are the key principles and distinctions leaders must prioritize to build a championship culture within their organization?

Building a championship team starts with understanding a few fundamental principles, and the first one is crucial: the person in charge of the organization must explain the difference between *devotion and loyalty*, because this gets really screwed up.

People who are devoted to you don't tell you the truth. Muhammad Ali had a guy named Drew "Bundini" Brown in his corner every time. "You're the champ, you're the champ, you're the champ." But Bundini never told Muhammad the hard truths—like that he wasn't working hard

enough, that he needed to get out on the track, or that he needed to train harder. He only told Muhammad what he wanted to hear: that he was the greatest. That's devotion.

Loyalty, on the other hand, was Muhammad's trainer, Angelo Dundee. Angelo wasn't afraid to say, "Muhammad, you're going to have to work harder. Muhammad, you're going to have to do this." That's what we want. For a team to become a championship team, it starts with understanding this distinction. Devotion doesn't build greatness; loyalty does.

Once that's clear, the next principle is understanding the difference between *accountability and responsibility*. Coach Walsh was *obsessed*—underscore the word obsessed—with making sure every detail was immaculate, even down to ensuring pictures on the wall were perfectly straight. If someone noticed a crooked picture and waited to be told to fix it, they were accountable. But Walsh wanted more than accountability; he wanted responsibility. Responsibility means seeing the crooked picture and fixing it yourself because you're connected to the organization's principles. Accountability is being told what to do; responsibility is taking ownership.

Too many organizations today have people who claim accountability but lack true responsibility. And without responsibility, there's no real sense of winning.

The next piece is understanding the difference between *being on the same page and being aligned*. When a season starts, everyone will say they're on the same page. But the first bump in the road? That's when things fall apart. Alignment is different. Alignment starts with everyone deeply understanding and committing to the core principles. It's about being able to have honest, sometimes hard conversations about what's working and what's not, without losing sight of the mission. Being on the same page can feel temporary; alignment is enduring. It holds the organization together when things get tough.

Ultimately, building a winning culture comes down to these three core areas: devotion versus loyalty, accountability versus responsibility, and being on the same page versus alignment. If you don't have these worked out—if you haven't clearly defined them and built your organization around them—you have no chance of building a championship team, no matter how much talent you have. But when you focus on these principles, you create the right culture. And when you create the right culture, the right people will follow.

Michael Lombardi — [X](#) | [Instagram](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Gridiron Genius](#) | [Football Done Right](#)