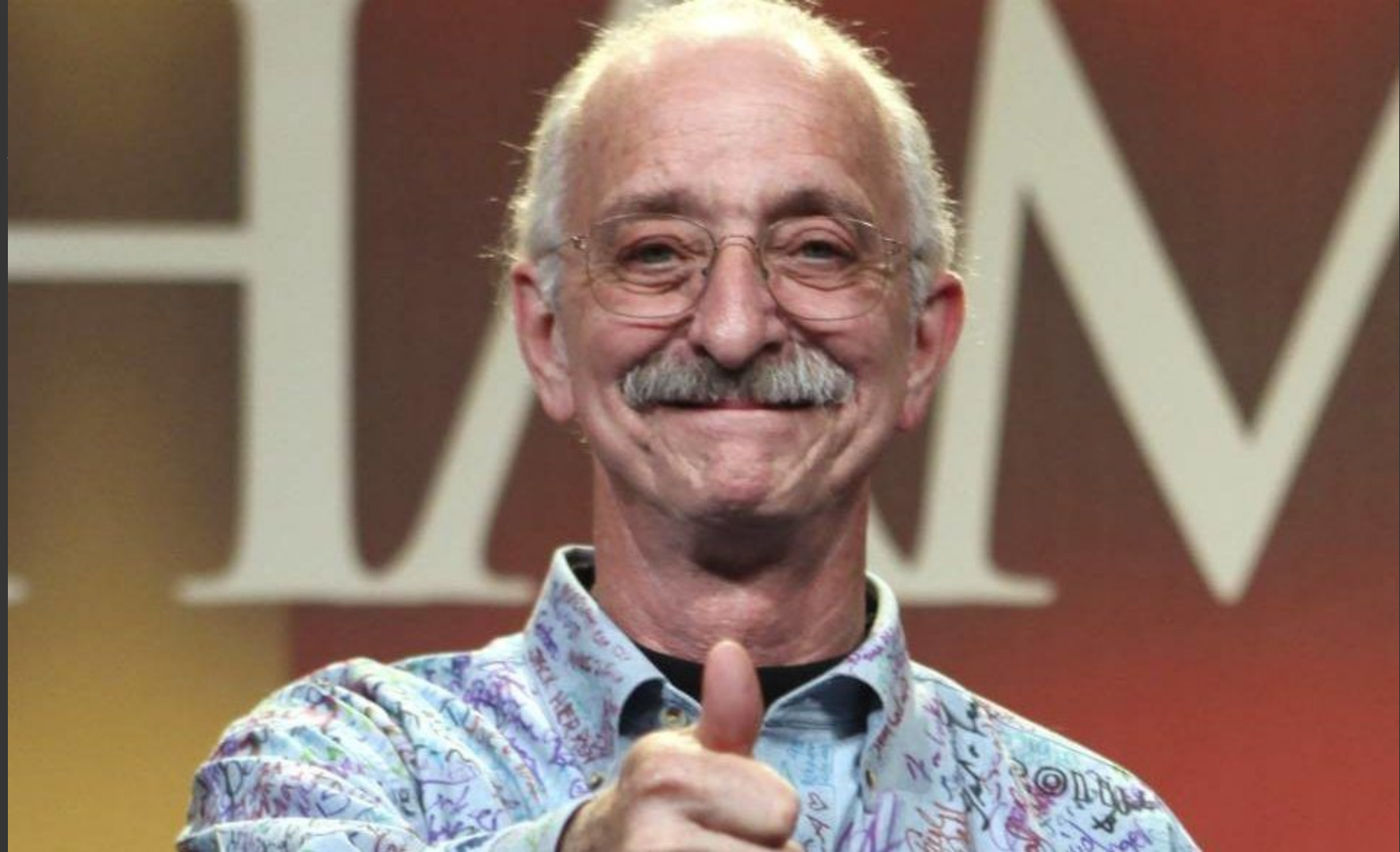

For Inspiration

Insights from the 2026 Woodie Flowers Conference

Eric Suydam
September 12, 2026





Dr. Woodie Flowers

Professor of Mechanical Engineering at MIT, Founder of FIRST, coined the terms “Coopertition” and “Gracious Professionalism”

Woodie Flowers Award

The Woodie Flowers Award celebrates effective communication in the art and science of engineering and design.



Three Insights to Share

Drive

Support

Aspiration



Drive

Motivation
Is
External

**Inspiration
Is
Internal**

Inspiration

To be inspired, you need to make sure this is something you want. This is about choosing effort, about choosing discomfort over the easy way, about showing up.

Inspiration requires CHOICE. There's always a choice between the right way, and the easy way.

Mindset

You need to CHOOSE to ignore the voice in the back of your head that says you can't do it.

- Our job as mentors is to help them see those possibilities
- Get in the habit of using the word “Yet!”

Possibilities

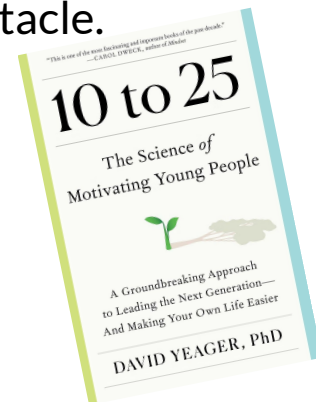
Each team has one or two team members that seem to do everything - they are your leaders

The rest of the team will naturally look to them to understand what is possible, and what is impossible.

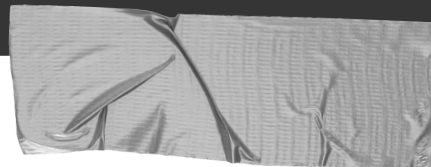
Grit

Our potential is greater than we realize

We are often our own biggest obstacle.







Brock is one of the team leaders - not by title, but because the rest of the team looks to him. He's already decided that they can't win. The rest of the team's attitude is molded by him.



Expectations

Enforce

Mentor

Neglect

Protect

Support



Support

Communication is Opportunity

To strengthen the
student-coach
relationship

To shape student
thought patterns
and beliefs

To fortify the team
and its culture

As a coach / mentor, you are likely to be one of the biggest adult influences in their lives for the season



Long Term Objectives: Respect, Protect, and Build Autonomy

1. How am I shaping their **worldview**?
2. In what ways am I developing their **confidence**, independence, agency, and ownership?
3. How am I creating space for them to practice the thinking work? **Practice how to think.**

Framework: Student Modes

Disengaged

Checked out,
distracted, or
overwhelmed

Insecure

Doesn't know
what to do

Tries to guess at
what to do

False
appearance of
being
productive

Rote

Does what they
have seen done
before

Follows
step-by-step
directions and
instructions

Deliberate

Understands
the objective,
but recognizes
that the steps
are unknown

Consciously
aware that they
need to identify
the path

Intuitive

Moves fluidly
from task to
task without
step-by-step
direction

Identifies a
critical path and
executes

—

“What should I do?”



“What should I do?”

Remember: communication is a gift. They could have guessed, they could have wandered off. They **WANT** to contribute.

Acknowledge this gift. “Thank you for asking”

Try not to answer this question with a command / assignment. This is a red flag for a student in Rote mode. Answering will reinforce Rote mode. Ask **open-ended questions** instead:

- “do you know what the goals for the day are?”
- “Do you know where to find those goals?”
- “Do you know what the next goal is?”

—
“This part is broken”

**(or the broken part is found with no
explanation)**



“This part is broken”

Want them to continue coming to us and telling us.
You are hell-bent on knowing why. Resist!

Thank them for the interaction. One approach, “out of curiosity, do you know why the part broke?”

Ask yourself if this is something you want to know.

Eventually there will be a need to understand why and prevent recurrence, but not in the heat of the moment. One-off, not a big deal. Keep an eye out for trends. Is it inexperience, lack of training, failure to following procedures, other?

—
“I’m Done”

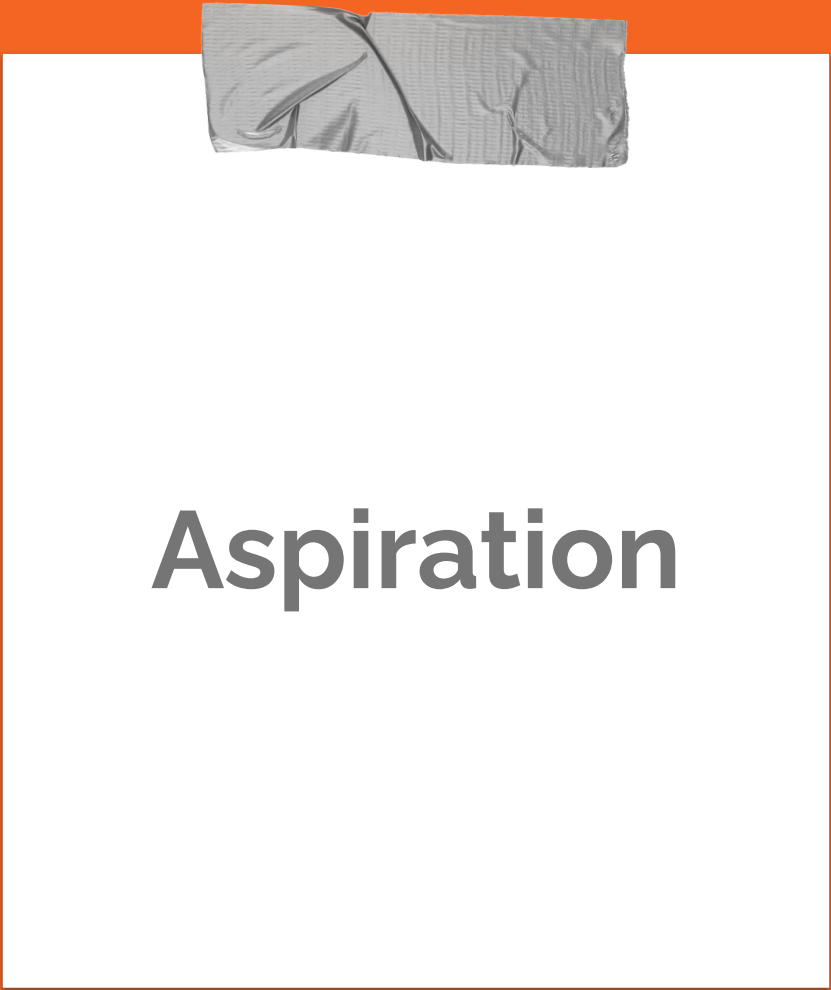
(in fact the work was NOT all done)



“I’m Done”

- Start using more specificity. “List out the things you did”
- Use open ended questions. “What is the next thing that needs to be done?” “What tool could tell you what needs to be done next?”

This isn’t school!



Aspiration

HongKong



IFT



Three Insights to Share

Drive

Support

Aspiration



—

Thank you!

Break (9:40 to 9:50)	
Workshop Session 2 (9:50 to 10:30)	
Room 1	Engineering Portfolio by Nadiya Rudomino, Rocket Robotics
Room 2	Outreach and Fundraising by Cheryl Courson, Infinity Tech
Room 3	Game Theory and Strategy by Chris Wood, Liberty Bees
Room 4	Building Mechanisms by Ed Thai, Lightning Robotics
Room 5	Programming Subsystems in Java by Julien Vanier, Rocket Robotics
Break (10:30 to 10:40)	
Workshop Session 3 (10:40 to 11:20)	
Room 1	How Judging Works in FTC by Ravi Sambhara, Robo Challengers
Room 2	Practical Team Management Tips by Heather Wood, Liberty Bees
Room 3	Fasteners & Hardware in FTC by Tim Strand, Bionic Bulldogs
Room 4	CAD with OnShape by Eric Suydam, Infinity Tech
Room 5	Auton Programming with Pedro Pathing by Kanthan Rajendran, Infinity Tech
Lunch Break (11:20 to 12:00) Cafeteria Bring Your Own Food or Pizza/Snacks for Sale	
FIRST HQ Broadcast (12:00 to 12:30)	
Theater	BIOBUZZ presented by RTX Kickoff Broadcast
Game Field Reveal (12:30 to 13:30)	
Pit	First Look at BIOBUZZ Game Field and Elements by Lightning Robotics