

# The Net Effect

Enduring Insights on  
Leadership and Team  
Building from  
Outstanding Coaches

**Cory Dobbs, Ed.D.**

The Academy for  
Sport Leadership  
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## [THE RELATIONAL LEADER]

*The relational leader changes lives by building positive and enduring relationships. Relational leaders believe that people are the solution to the problems that confront us. They are forever growing and developing others. Relational leaders have an unyielding dedication to those they lead. Simply put, they change the world by engaging in changing the future of those they lead.*

## Leader Profile

# The Relational Leader: Coquese Washington

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## Coquese Washington

**HEAD BASKETBALL COACH**  
**PENN STATE, 2007 – PRESENT**

In his best-selling book, *First things First*, author, speaker, and management expert Stephen Covey opens with an essential leadership question: “If you were to pause and think seriously about the ‘first things’ in your life—the three or four things that matter most—what would they be?”

Coquese Washington, women’s basketball coach at Penn State, has thoughtfully answered this vital question. As a coach of a major college women’s basketball program, a former professional player and collegiate student-athlete, Washington has

pulled resources from her vast experience to bring together a set of principles, that while not necessarily complex, are very practical. Stressing a family approach to team building and a leadership focus on excellence, Washington is clear on her “first things.”

For Washington, relationship building is exalted as one of the most important factors in driving performance and ultimately the success of the team. In the interest of putting first things first, Washington establishes the relationship building process at the very beginning—recruiting the right people to join her program.

*“Relationship building starts right away. For us relationship building begins in the recruiting process. We put a lot of effort into identifying what kind of players we can coach well. There’s a certain type of player I can coach well, given their temperament, personality, and such things as what’s important to them. We try to do a great job identifying players that can come into the Penn State culture and thrive in the larger community—and in our women’s basketball community. It’s imperative that we bring in players that are a good fit for the culture here.”*

These days the demands on leaders can be crushing. To survive, many leaders simply look to fill positions with people qualified to perform the work, not necessarily a fit with the organization’s culture.

The problem with hiring only for skills and ability rather than for fit with culture is illuminated in the dynamics of the team building process. When personalities clash, rather than click, and the culture of your team won't inspire cooperation and collaboration, you're likely to end up with a dysfunctional team.

*“We have a humorous way of looking at recruiting to our culture. We say we don't like to manage drama, so we don't recruit drama.”*

Ultimately, team dynamics will determine the environment in which work happens, and to a large extent, the quality of a team's results. Are the team member interactions helping or hindering the team's ability to make progress?

*“For us, relationship building—developing relationships—is every bit as important as the game.”*

It's evident, that for Washington, it is the quality of relationships woven into the fabric of teamwork that makes all the difference. The inherent tension that exists as individuals work to become a team is accounted for and used to develop positive and enduring relationships.

*“For me communication is about connecting and building strong relationships. To connect with my staff and my players I try to communicate in a manner that is respectful and honors who they are. It's important to be respectful and honorable even when I disagree or we have different viewpoints.”*

Washington's family approach reduces the complications of bringing together unique personalities and skill sets.

At Penn State, it is the unity that multiplies the strength of the individual. The team

lives together, works together, and wins together. One thing is clear, unity matters.

## **A DEEPER LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP**

There are basically two ways to execute one's leadership practice. One way is that of an order-giver order-taker exchange. In this relationship the employee serves the interests of the boss. The other way to execute the practice of leadership is for the leader to serve her followers. Either way of leading requires aligning actions and values. The difference lies in the values the leader is aligning.

*“Being a leader to me means helping others achieve their goals. It means being a resource—providing resources or knowledge to help others reach their goals and dreams. Sometimes it's setting a vision for the person, and other times it might be serving as an example.”*



*“You can serve as a model, demonstrating how to do things. I learned a great deal from Muffet McGraw (women's basketball coach at Notre Dame). She provided me an example of how to be a working mom in this business. We didn't sit down and have meetings on how to be a*

*mom. I watched how she lived it. She provided an example for me to model.”*

Relational principles of leadership do not depend on what sector you work in. In today’s world of work, people want to matter. They want leaders to improve the team’s performance while raising the quality of life inside the team. Sport psychologist and leadership writer Jerry Lynch says, “To be a good coach, mentor, and teacher you must be a good student and learn what needs to be known from the student (the athlete) in order to teach them what they must learn.” Lynch also says that “the way to be a success is not just to win games but to win relationships.”

*“I can coach and mentor better when I know the person—know who they are. I want to get to know them. I’m spending a lot of time with them because I want to know what’s important to them. What makes them laugh and cry, and what drives them.”*

To anyone who cares to lead, whether as coach or a corporate manager, it should be obvious that building positive relationships is one of the foundations for building high-performing teams. Too often we ignore our common sense when it comes to leading people. If you want high performance, high commitment, and high involvement, put people first. By developing deeper levels of relationship with those around us, we create an encouraging environment that shapes our future in a healthy and positive way.

*“So when we get into a rut in practice or a game, I’m going to get on them. I’ll be very demanding—but never demeaning. I will express displeasure at the lack of effort or focus or communication on the court.*

*Because we have a strong relationship they trust me, and I trust that they’ll take my coaching as a way to correct problems and get better. Again, I’m demanding, not demeaning.”*

Washington’s commitment to relationship building is highlighted by her willingness to take the time necessary to get to know her followers and them getting to know her.

*“We invest a lot of time in one-on-one meetings. We do this so the players have an opportunity to give me their feedback in a safe environment. I try to be very mindful of providing them an opportunity to give their opinion without any judgment. Relationship building is something I’m always looking to do.”*

## **LIVE TOGETHER**

Management consultant and organizational expert Margaret Wheatley writes, “Relationships are all there is.” She says, “We humans want to be together. We only isolate ourselves when we’re hurt by others, but alone is not our natural state.”

In Western societies, the urge to set one’s self apart from other, to be different, is a compelling force. However, this sets up a familiar contradiction of human nature. That is we want both to belong and to stand out from the crowd.

To say that living together is a challenging endeavor does not undermine the desire to live together. People will act in their self-interest until they see that cooperation with others is beneficial. Teaming together, then, demands cooperation. And the nature of cooperation is built on trust. Washington knows the way to build a high-performing team is through trust.

*“Trust for us is a big word. We talk about it frequently. I ask my team all the time, “Do you trust me?” It goes back to the relationship we built before they ever stepped foot on the campus. They know they can trust me, and because they trust me they allow me to coach them.”*

Trust starts when you extend it and communicate openly with your team.

*“I frequently tell our team, you can count on me to be honest with you all the time and tell you the truth. Because they know me and trust me, they can make the appropriate and necessary decisions and changes.”*  
*“We have some really honest conversations. Players tell us what they want, together we locate where they are and then discuss what we have to do to bridge the gap to get them where they ultimately want to go.”*

You also need to make sure your employees are able to build trust with one another. You do this by establishing a social climate of respect.

*“I try to be respectful in my communications at all times. I’m working on becoming a better listener. I think it’s important to understand what others are saying, but just as importantly what they mean. And what they mean by what they’re not saying.”*

*“I tell our players that how you talk to each other matters. The words you choose to use in conversations with each other really do matter.”*

*“Words have a huge impact—Huge*

*power. So why don’t we use words to uplift, empower, and encourage one another. And not use words to belittle, demean or tear people down. We have that choice every time we speak.”*

*“So if we choose our words wisely when communicating with the one’s we love, care about, and spend time with—we’re going to build a heck of a team.”*

Rarely can you get the results you want without trust. Yet, it takes a while to build trust. Trust is about how people relate to each other. But it’s also about the outcomes of relationships.

*“These young women have to be nurtured, taught how to become adults. We show them how to become championship students, players, and championship women. We want them to become leaders who can go into their communities—no matter where it is—and make a difference.”*



## **WORK TOGETHER**

It happens all the time. Teams with members deeply committed to each other outperform teams with superior talent.

For these teams, the whole greatly exceeds the sum of the parts

What brings these teams victory is that team members are selfless—focused on doing what’s best for the team. They work together to win, submerging ego, statistics, and other personal gain for the opportunity to win as a team. The coach is at the center of this; getting everyone and everything into alignment, ensuring that the team and its members get the support they need.

*“To compete for championships we don’t need someone secretly harboring resentment toward a teammate. We don’t want a player privately thinking ‘I hope she gets hurt’ or ‘I hope she has a bad game so I can play.’ We want to take that out of the mix.”*



*“With my staff I want companionship and camaraderie. A cooperative group that doesn’t care who gets the credit. We’re not into titles. We all roll up our sleeves and get the job done.”*

Shared values build trust and link team members together. They establish a team’s identity and support its mission. Shared values provide guiding principles that everyone on a team can aspire to put into practice every day. When team members

are truly in alignment with one another they create a culture where everyone can go home at night knowing the team is healthy and in good shape.

*“We want harmony and camaraderie in the locker room. We don’t want players feeling like they have to compete with someone else. When that happens we don’t develop the chemistry we need to develop a competitive team.”*

What do leaders have to do differently to build and lead effective teams today? It’s the smart coach that takes advantage of the individual strengths of her players to develop a strong team. A wise leader takes stock of what she has and develops and adjusts her plans accordingly.

*“We really put a heavy emphasis on the fact that players are not competing with one another. We want them competing against their best effort and what they’re capable of doing.”*

*“We recruit complementary pieces. Everybody has a role. Players are recruited for a specific purpose. They are never in competition with anyone on the team. They’re always competing against themselves, regardless of the position they’re playing. They don’t compete against each other; instead they complete each other.”*

## **WIN TOGETHER**

The success of today’s best business leaders depends not only on inspiring and engaging employees, but finding ways to guide team members into powerful and productive relationships; the kind of relationships where one plus one equals three.

Rather than simply issuing commands and asserting power, outstanding leaders utilize influence to gain commitment and agreement. Further, leaders like coaches, figure out how to build the next level of capability. They do this by connecting team member aspirations to opportunities for development. They know how to enable and support individual and team growth—and they make both enjoyable.

Today, you have to unmask yourself to your people in ways leaders never had to before. People want leaders that demonstrate real-life vulnerabilities while relating in an authentic manner. In the past leaders were formal and distant, removed from their people by a hierarchical-based facade.

That's changed: your employees expect to relate to you in a more informal, egalitarian way—kind of like a family.

*“A core value for us is excellence. We strive for excellence in everything we do. Another core value is family. I don't have a Penn State basketball family and a personal family. We're all one big family. My children come to practice and travel with the team—as do my mom and my husband. Family is really important to me. We operate as a family. We care about each other as family.”*

A recent study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership sought to identify what distinguishes an effective leader from an ineffective leader. After carefully sifting through mountains of data the CCL found one primary difference: effective leaders truly care about their people. The most effective leaders are adept at showing they care by listening, publicly expressing positive emotions along with a deeper understanding and acknowledgement of how others are feeling.

*“They know what to expect from me. They know that what happens on the court does not impact how I feel about them and care about them off the court. There's nothing they can do on the basketball court that can cause me to love them less.”*

Washington, like the effective leaders in the CCL study, understands that caring is best done one on one. This means knowing what each member of your team needs to make her feel valued, appreciated, and unique. Caring is a highly personal thing. It's different for each individual.

*“We challenge the players all the time. I can do this because I know they're goals and dreams. They allow me to challenge them.”*



*“We tell our players that the responsibility of earning playing time is on them. Tell me what you want—where you want to go—and we will help you map out the road to get you there. Then you need to put in the time and effort. You've got to decide if you're willing to put in the work to get where you want to go.”*

People want to work for leaders they admire. At the root of this admiration is showing

people you care about their insights, their thoughts, and their opinions.

*“It’s important that we give the players opportunities to give their opinions and share their thoughts. We ask frequently, if not daily, what they think of things.”*

*“In our team meetings we ask what they think. I try to validate and honor their perspectives, even if I disagree.”*

*“I get feedback when I make decisions for the team, for the program. Some might be minor decisions—others major. I give them the opportunity to find their voice. Not only to speak up, but to listen and negotiate and compromise. These skills are critical to the development of a championship team.”*

Effective leaders create strong cultures by putting people first. They realize that the path to success boils down to deep, close, and trusting relationships creating competitive advantage through people and relationships. This is the key to winning in basketball and in business. And this is Coquese Washington’s playbook for victory.



## **THE NET EFFECT**

**In the words of Julia Trogele 2008-2011**

To many Coquese Washington is known as the Head Coach of Penn State Women’s Basketball and the back-to-back Big Ten Coach of the Year. To me, she is Big Mama. Coach Washington is everything a student-athlete could want in a coach – a former student-athlete and pro, lawyer, pioneer, friend, and most importantly, a wife and mother. Her experiences in all of these areas help her in guiding Lady Lions to succeed on and off the court. Witnessing her juggle these numerous responsibilities makes one realize that you can have it all!

Much of who I am today is because of who she is. Although challenging to please at times, Coach Washington pushes people to their limits and brings out the best in them. Here are some things I learned under her leadership:

- Being five minutes early is on time and being on time is late.
- Respect people even if you do not like them.
- Giving back to the community is essential.
- Saying “I can’t” is not an option.
- No excuses are to be made.

As Coquese Washington’s favorite quote by Aristotle says, “You are what you repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” The statement speaks for itself. We as Lady Lions strive for excellence in everything that we do, with the support of the entire staff and our fans.

Everyone has to start somewhere. As a freshman I was overwhelmed, insecure, and simply trying to fit in. Over my collegiate career, I matured and developed into the person I am today. A graduate from Penn State University, four-year scholar athlete, German National player, 3L in law school, and wife. I am thankful to have had her as a coach and she continues to be a force in my life as a mentor.



## **ABOUT COQUESE WASHINGTON**

Head Women's Basketball Coach at Penn State, Washington came to Happy Valley after eight seasons as an associate head coach and assistant coach under Muffet McGraw at Notre Dame, her alma mater. One of the top recruiters in the country, Washington was instrumental in helping the Irish to secure eight consecutive Top 25 recruiting classes, according to "Blue Star Index," a feat only accomplished by two other programs in the country (Connecticut and Tennessee).

Washington was a four-year starting point guard for Notre Dame under McGraw and was the team captain on Notre Dame's first-ever NCAA Tournament team. She was a two-time All-Midwestern Collegiate Conference (MCC) selection and led Notre Dame to three MCC Tournament titles. Washington led the team in steals in each of her four seasons and was tops on the squad in assists three times. Washington is first on UND's all-time steals per game list (2.7), third in career steals (307), sixth in assists (554).

The epitome of a student-athlete, Washington graduated from Notre Dame in 1992, a full year ahead of schedule, with a bachelor's degree in history. She went on to attain "Double Domer" status in 1997 after earning her Juris Doctorate from the Notre Dame Law School.

Washington juggled finishing her law degree with the start of her professional basketball career. She returned to the hardwood as a professional in 1997-98, playing for the ABL's Portland Power before spending a two-year stint with the WNBA's New York Liberty (1998-99). Washington moved to Houston for the 2000 season, where she played an instrumental role in leading the Comets to the WNBA title. She had a solid season in 2001 with the Comets and Hall of Fame coach Van Chancellor, finishing ninth in the WNBA in assists and fourth in steals as Houston earned its fifth consecutive playoff berth. Washington started the 2002 campaign with Houston before being traded to the Indiana Fever at the midway point of the season. Washington guided the Fever to their first-ever playoff berth and became the first player in WNBA history to

lead three different teams to the postseason. She finished her professional career in 2003 as a member of the Fever.

Utilizing her law degree, Washington was a central figure in helping create the WNBA Players Association (WNBPA), serving as the founding president of the WNBPA from 1999 until 2001. She also served as the Executive Vice President of the WNBPA from 2001 until her retirement in 2003. Washington led negotiations for the association's first collective bargaining agreement as the association's president, and as the executive vice president was a mainstay in the negotiations for the league's second collective bargaining agreement, which brought about the first free agency system in women's professional sports.

Washington is currently serving on the 29-member WBCA Board of Directors, where she is the Vice President/President-Elect of the Executive Committee after a three-year stint as Treasurer. Washington is also a member of the Kay Yow Cancer Fund Board of Directors and the NCAA Women's Basketball Issues Committee.

*\*Source: The Official Penn State Athletics Web Site.*

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