

## Four Keys to Building a Championship Culture

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Winning a national championship is a rare feat; winning five consecutive championships is extraordinary. One such example has recently occurred with the University of Windsor women's basketball team which competes in the Canadian interuniversity sports league. The team's head coach, Chantal Vallée, has a combined regular season and playoff winning percentage greater than 80%, including winning five consecutive Canadian national championships. Even more astounding is that before her appointment the school had only four winning seasons in their 50-year history, and had never hosted a playoff game. The purpose of this paper is to explain the remarkable turnaround of this program. This article will provide both the "what" (Enacting The Vision; Athlete Empowerment; Teaching Life Skills; Lifelong Learning and Personal Reflection) and the "how" (blueprint) of the transformation of the University of Windsor women's basketball into a perennial national contender.

**Keywords:** coaching leadership, coaching knowledge, coaching behaviours, coaching success

Coaching effectiveness is evaluated at all levels of competition and includes the coaches' actions and behaviours both on and off the field of play (Bloom, Falcão, & Caron, 2014). Between 1970 and 2008, 872 articles on coaching science were published, including 113 devoted to coaching effectiveness (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert & Côté, 2013). Among the conclusions, effective coach leadership has been linked to individual and team performance (Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, & Chung, 2002; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Riemer & Harenberg, 2014; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2010), where a coach's job involves mastering a variety of tasks, ranging from developing athletes' mental, physical, technical, and tactical skills and abilities (Bloom et al., 2014), to instilling life skills and personal values (Duchesne, Bloom, & Sabiston, 2011), to preparing athletes for life outside of sport (Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston, & Reid, 2012). While the interest to study coaching effectiveness has increased,

there is very little empirical research on coaches at elite levels of competition who have consistently won multiple national championships (Yukelson & Rose, 2014).

Undoubtedly, successful coaches possess a wide body of knowledge that leads to behaviours that can influence team success. Effective coaches achieve their results through the application of their professional, intrapersonal, and interpersonal knowledge (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Professional knowledge refers to sport-specific knowledge. Interpersonal knowledge involves understanding human interactions and building relationships. Intrapersonal knowledge includes personal reflection and an understanding of oneself. The integration of these categories of knowledge influences how a coach does his or her job, which ultimately impacts the record of their teams (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). In addition, effective coaches must adjust their feedback and teaching styles based on the specific needs and preferences of their athletes to maximize their learning and performance (Côté, Young,

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North, & Duffy, 2007). For example, Côté and colleagues (2007) noted that performance-based intercollegiate athletes preferred different types of coaching compared with participation-based athletes. Given this information, research in high-performance coaching would appear to benefit from examining the professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal sources of knowledge from coaches who have achieved unusual levels of sustained excellence.

Specific to American university sport, coaches like Pat Summitt, John Wooden, Urban Meyer, Anson Dorrance, and Russ Rose have had nonempirical accounts of their coaching careers written about them that have helped broaden our understanding of the knowledge and behaviours used by successful university coaches (e.g., Gavazzi, 2015; Silva, 2006; Summitt & Jenkins, 1998; Wooden, 1988; Yukelson & Rose, 2014). Winner of eight NCAA basketball titles, Coach Summitt emphasized the importance of adopting an athlete-centered coaching style based on respect and honesty, and being a good communicator and listener (Summitt & Jenkins, 1998). Coach Wooden, who won 10 NCAA national championships, was known as a meticulous planner, humanitarian, and effective teacher of both life and basketball skills and strategies (Wooden, 1988). Football coach Urban Meyer who has won three national football titles at two schools over an eight year period developed a three step rewards system that was designed to teach leadership skills that were transferrable from the football field to life off of it (Gavazzi, 2015). Anson Dorrance, soccer coach who has won 22 NCAA championships, encouraged and developed his players' competitive spirit during intense training sessions while also maintaining a positive team atmosphere (Silva, 2006). Penn State volleyball coach Ross Rose has won four consecutive national championships by being organized, by establishing clear goals, by having a vision, and by working well under pressure (Yukelson & Rose, 2014).

Chantal Vallée is another university coach with an impressive coaching resume that also includes guiding her team to numerous championships. More precisely, Vallée is the head coach of the University of Windsor women's basketball team that competes in the Canadian university sport league (CIS). Through the first 10 years of her coaching career, Vallée has compiled a regular season and playoff winning percentage of 80.8%, including winning five consecutive Canadian national championships (2011–2015). Even more impressive is that before her appointment at Windsor, the school had only four winning seasons in its 50-year history, and had never hosted a playoff game. What distinguishes Vallée from the other coaches mentioned in this article is that she based her coaching philosophy and approach on published coaching research, including her own master's thesis (cf. Vallée & Bloom, 2005). In the present article we provide both the "what" (4 keys) and the "how" (blueprint) of the transformation of the University of Windsor women's basketball team into a perennial national championship contender, making it one of the few theory to practice examples in coaching science research.

## The Case

Chantal Vallée entered the McGill University sport psychology graduate program with one simple goal in mind—to become a successful basketball coach. Vallée teamed up with Dr. Gordon Bloom to study some of the best team sport coaches in Canada. While studying at McGill, Vallée was also the assistant coach of the University basketball team as well as head coach with the Quebec provincial team. After graduating from the sport psychology program, Vallée was offered a college (the level below University in Canada) head coaching position. In her three years at the helm, the team immediately improved, including winning their only national title two years after she left the program. As a result of her success, people in University sport began to take notice of her accomplishments. Vallée was soon offered the head coaching position at the University of Windsor, a school with no reputation or success in women's basketball. She accepted the job and was anxious to turnaround this moribund program. The team had losing seasons in her first two years on the job. However, this was followed by eight consecutive years with a winning record (see Table 1 for Vallée's coaching statistics). Vallée attributes a large part of her success to the implementation of the knowledge and leadership behaviours that emerged from her master's thesis. In the remainder of this article we provide examples of the four keys she has implemented into her coaching practice: Enacting The Vision; Athlete Empowerment; Teaching Life Skills; Lifelong Learning and Personal Reflection.

### The 1st Key: Enacting The Vision

In our research (Vallée & Bloom, 2005) we found that the successful coaches all had a very clear desire to build a successful program once they were hired. Vision was the coaches' full perspective of the program, which encompassed their long-term goals and direction, as well as the selling of their coaching philosophy to their athletes. Setting high standards was a common characteristic of the coaches that began immediately after they were hired. A standard of excellence, and nothing less, was their primary target and changes were immediately implemented in all phases of the program from the time they were hired to lead it.

Shortly upon my hiring at the University of Windsor, I (Coach Vallée from here onwards) realized that I needed to develop and articulate a clear vision. Nonempirical support was provided in the form of a book called, *Taking the Purple to Pasadena* (Barnett & Gregorian, 1996), which tells the story of Gary Barnett, former Head Coach of the NCAA Division I Northwestern Football team. More specifically, at his first press conference Coach Barnett announced that he was going to lead the Northwestern Football team to the Rose Bowl within three years. The crowd was speechless because the team was in the abyss of the league. I was inspired and influenced by Coach Barnett's vision and I felt that if this man was able to take

**Table 1 Coaching Career of Chantal Vallée**

	Regular season	Postseason	National Championship	Overall
2005–06	9–13	0–1	-	11–16
2006–07	6–16	-	-	7–21
2007–08	14–8	2–1	-	22–9
2008–09	21–1	3–0	1–2	33–4
2009–10	21–1	3–0	2–1	32–5
2010–11*	20–2	3–0	3–0	35–2
2011–12*	20–2	4–1	3–0	35–4
2012–13*	21–0	3–0	3–0	34–2
2013–14*	21–1	3–0	3–0	36–1
2014–15*	19–1	3–0	3–0	30–1
TOTALS	172–45	24–3	18–3	275–65
	.792	.888	.857	.808

Note. Asterisks indicate the seasons the team won a national championship. Overall column includes preseason games.

an unsuccessful football program from the bottom of his league and transform them into a national contender, that I would be able to do the same with my basketball team. Thus, at my first meeting with players, university officials, and alumni in attendance, I confidently announced that I would win the national championship in five years (I was almost correct—it took six!).

Because I knew that my vision was bold, I realized I had to be convincing in the verbalizations of my vision from the first day I was introduced at Windsor. I knew that I had to sell this vision to both current and future players. The vision served as the backdrop for our cultural transformation. We established high standards athletically and academically, made new team rules, and carried ourselves with a successful mindset. Another equally important priority was the recruiting of new and better players. I became very passionate about selling this vision to everyone I met, even if it sounded outlandish. I would say things like, “I know we are last in our league, and this year we didn’t make playoffs, but if you come play for me, by the time you graduate, you will be a national champion”. The results of verbalizing such a vision to parents, players, and coaches was mixed, but I believed that verbalizing the same discourse for years helped make us successful and also initially convinced recruits to commit to Windsor before we achieved success.

At first, most people ignored or laughed at me. A few told me I was crazy and walked away. I even remember one father spitting on the floor beside me and saying his daughter would never play for a team like Windsor. I also remember the transformation of one very influential local coach. For many years, he worked against our program and did everything in his power to send players elsewhere. My first discussion with him ended with him saying with a smirk, “You won’t stay here long, and if you do I’ll believe it when I see it”. To him, there was no point in helping us because there was no hope for the

Windsor Lancers. Six seasons later he became a key ally for our program.

While my vision of winning a National Championship had been established from day one, it wasn’t until after our first season that I wrote the blueprint for the team success which was entitled, “*From Windsor to Nationals: Business Plan 2005-2010*”. After verbalizing the vision and passionately selling it, I felt I needed a clear written plan accompanying those words. I wrote this after Year One for two reasons. First, I was a late hire at the University of Windsor which meant that by the time I arrived I barely had time to get familiar with the team, the community and the alumni, let alone to recruit a few last minute players, move from Montreal to Windsor, and learn to work in a new language I had not yet mastered. After a full season, I had learned much more about the town, the university, the culture, and the current program. I had a clearer idea of our needs, the league strengths and weaknesses, and how to recruit the right people. I had made connections with local coaches and was more proficient in English. While the vision was the “what” Windsor was going to do, the plan became the blueprint, the “how” to transform the Lancers into national champions. The document included the history and current state of the program, strengths and weaknesses, recruiting challenges, financial issues, university reputation, city quality of life, and how the team was going to improve. It included graphs, dollar figures, goals, names of prospective recruits, and motivational themes. There was also a plan for each season that went as follows: **(1) 2005–06, Year of Foundation; (2) 2006–07, Year of Transformation; (3) 2007–08, Year of Solidification; (4) 2008–09, Year of Realization; (5) 2009–10, Year of Celebration**. At the time I wrote the blueprint, the University of Windsor Lancers Women’s basketball team was last in the conference and ranked 41 out of 43 programs in the country. It had won only four games in the last two seasons combined. In a span of nearly 50 years, the most

games a team had won in a season was 9. The program had had only four winning seasons in history, and it had never hosted a single playoff game. I was also the third head coach appointed in three years, and the media had named the team “the doormat of Canada”.

There were more challenges. Academically, the school’s reputation was one of the worst in the country. They were not offering any athletic scholarships. Geographically, it was a removed location often described by others as a less than ideal place to live. Almost no one ever drove to Windsor unless it was to cross to the American border city of Detroit. Furthermore, 2005 was the start of the decline of the Big 3 auto manufacturing companies: Ford, Chrysler, and GM. The city was soon to plunge into its toughest economic times, as most of its citizens were blue-collar workers linked to the automotive industry. Windsor was quickly becoming the city with the highest unemployment rate in the country. Where everyone else saw failure and pessimism, I saw opportunity. The key was not to focus on Windsor’s past, or reputation, or its location. The key was the vision, and the perception with which I decided to look into this new endeavour. And, I chose to believe I was going to become successful and that the Windsor Lancers would be crowned national champions within five years.

While a vision is important to have, the best coaches who have sustainable excellence not only have the vision, but they *enact* the vision, which happens as a result of effective organizational and recruiting skills. The vision was used to recruit the athletes. I always presented my recruits with a booklet that not only stipulated that we wanted to win, but how we were going to do it. I knew that I had to be more than a visionary—I needed to display exceptional organizational skills as a way to recruit, retain, motivate, and continue to set the tone and direction of the program. Creating a winning program and developing the whole person required a strong, organized leader. I often describe myself either as a single mom with 12 kids or as the CEO of a big corporation—or both. In all facets of my job I am promoting and enacting the vision toward getting the best athletes, students, and basketball players to choose Windsor as their school. Recruiting in person, home visits, phone calls, follow-ups, monitoring the players’ academic progress, responding to media, engaging in public appearances and speaking engagements and community involvement, teaching at clinics, and planning and working at fundraising events were all done with the vision in mind.

## The 2nd Key: Athlete Empowerment

Our research also found that the coaches were determined to develop each athlete athletically, equipping each athlete with skills, strategies, and values that would build the athlete into a champion on the court (Vallée & Bloom, 2005). In addition, the coaches also used the University platform to build highly self-confident individuals who would succeed off the court. One way to help their athletes reach their goals was through personal empowerment.

My desire to foster my players’ individual growth through empowerment fueled my decision to let go of control. Not only did I have to learn to delegate and trust in the abilities of other staff members, but I had to do the same thing with myself. This meant ensuring that my players could play the game without me, a model of coaching leadership I was not used to. Initially, I felt that the coach made all the decisions, without any athlete input. I felt athletes should submit to or obey the coach’s decisions.

I reflected on the results of our research (Vallée & Bloom, 2005), which found that successful leaders were transformational (Bass, 1990). I knew that leaders had to be motivational, inspiring, and many possessed what most of us described as a charismatic touch. But this was not what the literature talked about. On the contrary, while transformational leaders did possess these qualities, just being charismatic in itself posed problems because sometimes charismatic leaders look to people for the sole purpose of being admired. Transformational leaders genuinely care about the well-being of the people they are leading and agree to engage in a process that will equally change them along the way. I believe that while the coach is still the leader (he or she is not being overpowered by the athletes), there are genuine exchanges between both parties where both coaches and athletes can grow professionally and personally.

I purposely became a transformational leader only after accepting that my players could be successful without me. Instead of creating a program where the athletes always depended on me, I created a culture where the team could win without me if something happened to me for a game or a period of time. To create this environment, I started to listen to my athlete leaders on the court, and sometimes asked them what they saw or how they felt or what they thought the team should do. I also praised those who were trying to find solutions to problems and congratulated them if they did (as opposed to feeling threatened if their ideas were better than mine).

Toward the end of each season, I could tell if my team had become self-sufficient and no longer depended solely on me for direction. The game plans were clear and they made adjustments and decisions on the court as long as they kept me informed. For example, they would yell, “Coach, we cannot stay on our player properly on those screens. Can we switch?” And as the game would go on, I would give them the thumbs up and the adjustment would take place. Sometimes, I would call a specific play but my point guard would give me the sign that she wanted something else. This was a far cry from every preseason where the player would always look to me for every single play-call. As each season progressed, I would teach them how to make decisions. I would allow them to make some decisions until they became confident and eventually led the team. Having said that, I would almost never let my first and second year athletes participate in the decision-making process. But by their 5th year, if they had not become almost as smart and tactically savvy as I was, then I felt I had not

done a good job teaching them the game and empowering them. By the same token, I remained in control of the team, yet I allowed the players room to participate in team decisions. We truly operated as a collective group. For these reasons, I never felt threatened by my athletes nor did the athletes ever lack respect by thinking they knew more than me. It was a positive relationship and as I learned to delegate power and release control, while maintaining authority and the respect of my athletes, I transformed myself into a better coach.

### **The 3rd Key: Teaching Life Skills**

In our research (Vallée & Bloom, 2005) we found that coaches accomplished their goals by combining athlete empowerment with life skills development. Aside from the personal life skills that most coaches espouse (i.e., leadership, confidence, team work, etc.), I focused on teaching my athletes the important life skill of learning how to win with integrity. I value winning, but I will not let it override my personal values or the team culture. As a result, I do not carry a winning at all cost mentality, but I value human growth and life skills taught through winning. When a decision has to be made that would directly affect winning, I always base my decision on the principle that developing a team winning culture was more important than winning a single game, and that no one player was bigger than the team.

On our way to winning our fourth national championship, we got invited to compete against the Argentina Senior Women's National Team. This was part of the training camp the Argentinians were holding to prepare for the World Championship qualifier. We were flown to the location and our meals and accommodations were paid for. The team had a terrific training camp and I felt we had a chance of beating the Argentinians. The night before we were to leave, I received notice of possible rule violations with my players. I was livid and immediately called in my two captains and asked them if it was true. They said yes. I told them to gather the guilty players to my office. While we were waiting for our players, I debated with my staff what to do. Do we bring them and not allow them to play? Do we make them play because we have a contract to play Argentina and suspend them later? Do we wait to see who the culprits are and then make our decision based on that? Winning could be a breakthrough not only for our team, but equally for some players who were trying to get on our Olympic team. In the end, I decided to hold to the team values and I did not bring the guilty players on the trip. This became difficult when it was revealed that five players had broken the team rules, including three of my five starters. I met with the rest of the team and explained the situation and the adjustments we would make for that game. The final score was 90–40 in favour of Argentina. I was frustrated about the loss and even apologized to the Argentinian federation, who were very sympathetic and impressed by my decision to suspend those players. When the team returned to Windsor, the suspended players apologized and worked even harder, and helped lead

our team to our fourth consecutive national championship. I never had to address such issues with them again. Although the players may have lost an incredible personal opportunity to display their talent and they let their team down, I feel they learned an incredible life lesson about commitment and integrity.

Teaching my athletes to win with integrity is not the only life skill that I teach. Some of the other life skills are hard work, accountability, resilience, grit, team-work, role acceptance, and respect for authority. In our third year as a team, we were headed to play one of the best teams in our conference. The night before, my starting center, a very athletic 6'2" woman, and our leading rebounder showed a lack of respect toward one of my assistant coaches. I was troubled because we obviously needed her to win the next game. After a night of rest, I asked the athlete to meet with me. I told her she was not coming on the trip. I told her that I knew we were probably not going to win without her, but we had to leave her behind because she broke the team value of respect. She was very unhappy. I went on the bus and did not say anything to the team until we arrived at the gym, at which time the players had figured out we were going to play without her. I explained my decision to them and the reason for it. We went out and won the game. I was shocked! This is one example of how teaching a player a life skill of respect is more important than winning, but along the way it also taught my team how to win with integrity. I cannot over state how powerful such decisions are in the personal growth of each player and in the setting of a winning culture. This is also essential to achieve the overall goal of the holistic development of our athletes.

### **The 4th Key: Lifelong Learning and Personal Reflection**

The coaches in our research (Vallée & Bloom, 2005) indicated their personal make-up and leadership style were exhibited by a relentless driving force to achieve excellence in all parts of their program. More specifically, we found that these coaches had a constant desire to acquire knowledge. They read as much as possible and developed relationships with many individuals to further their knowledge. Interestingly, I did not initially adhere to this model. Although I was constantly reading books, watching film, and trying to acquire knowledge, I was reluctant to ask for assistance or information for fear of losing respect in the eyes of the people I was talking to. At the time, it seemed counter-productive to acknowledge that I needed to learn more, even though that was the case.

Over time, I recalled that the coaches I interviewed (as part of my master's thesis) all stressed the importance of lifelong learning and they would always take advice, even from younger or high school coaches. Thus, I made changes in year two. I asked the track and field coach at my institution for advice on recruiting and he gave me a template that I still use to this day. When fans or parents provided knowledge or advice, I would listen

and evaluate and not be afraid to implement the good ones. For example, I remember the father of one of my players e-mailing me and making suggestions to help his daughter, which of course included more playing time. I responded briefly that I could not discuss matters pertaining to his daughter without her present, which ended that conversation, however the father had raised a few points that I liked. It would have been easy for me to disregard the e-mail and see him as helicopter parent who was trying to get his daughter more playing time. While it may or may not have been the case, I focused on one suggestion that I felt would help the athlete play better. After implementing it, I saw a significant improvement in the performance of that player.

I also learned through observing successful leaders, reading their books, listening to them at conferences, and watching their coaching clinics. I attended the NCAA Final Four clinics, and bought championship DVDs to improve my tactical knowledge. I attended conferences on leadership and personal development, including one by Dr. Kathleen DeBoer on the difference between males and females in competition. I read more books on self-improvement, leadership, and extended my readings to marketing, branding, and selling, which I hoped would make me a better leader, fundraiser, and recruiter. The results were phenomenal. Unbeknownst to me, the job of a coach through the decades had become much like the one of a CEO; recruiting, retaining, hiring, firing, leading, motivating, goal-setting, producing results, fundraising, public speaking, etc. I realized that the more I learned about leadership in general, the better coach I became. The more I learned about X's and O's the better tactician I became. And I came to a place where not only did I listen very carefully to my players' evaluation, but I started to ask for anonymous feedback at times throughout the season.

Our research also found that the coaches we studied were passionate, caring, open-minded, composed, and interested in their athletes' as people (Vallée & Bloom, 2005). Moreover, these successful leaders possessed a very broad range of personal characteristics that allowed them to display excellent "individual flair". Individual flair is a term used in the transformational leadership literature (cf. Bass, 1990) described as the ability of one leader to react exactly as needed for a particular situation: at times caring, at times tough, and anywhere in between.

I adopted a similar leadership style that ranged from tough to caring, depending on the situation. Over the years, I have changed a lot as a leader and have become a lot more mature, clear, and confident. I lose my temper less, overpower less and empower more, control less and lead better. This required a lot of introspection, accepting criticism (even from 19 years olds) and committing to a personal transformational process. Choosing to engage myself in a process of transformation was one of the most difficult things I have ever done. I firmly believe that going through this process in a genuine way has made me a more successful leader and coach. All these years I researched the keys to transforming a program and a

culture. But after much personal reflection, I realized that what I needed most was to transform myself.

As I acquired knowledge and the team got better, I felt that my lack of coaching knowledge and experience was hindering team success. As a result, in the summer of 2009 I called the performance manager at Canada Basketball and asked for a mentor. I was put in touch with Don McCrae, a former university National Champion coach and arguably Canada's most successful Olympic Team women's basketball coach. He was 75 years old when he accepted to work with me and shortly thereafter we lost in the March 2010 national final. After that year, Coach McCrae became an integral part of our staff, and we went on to win five national championships in a row.

The key is that I let him coach me—I wanted to learn and to be coached. I took everything he said and worked on it. Soon, he moved from coaching me to adding his comments about the team. One day I decided to introduce him to the team by asking him to teach something I felt I was not very good at. I feel this was a turning-point in my career because it was the first time I was able to admit in front of my team that I did not have all the answers—and that I had to look elsewhere to get better. I also added another mentor to assist me with my strategic leadership direction for my team. Unlike Coach McCrae, this person had never coached a team and had never played basketball. Yet I found him to be insightful for making leadership decisions and for analyzing statistics. With time, he became an ally to make tactical decisions and ultimately helped me become a better coach and leader.

## Summary and Recommendations

This article demonstrates how Coach Vallée displayed all three types of coaching knowledge (*professional*, *interpersonal*, and *intrapersonal*; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert & Côté, 2013) in her coaching practice. For example, she was aware of the physical, technical, tactical, and mental skills that were taught to her athletes (i.e., professional knowledge), she built trusting relationships and regularly communicated with her athletes (i.e., interpersonal knowledge), and she valued self-reflection as a way to improve her coaching skillset (i.e., intrapersonal knowledge). She also fulfilled the requirement of an effective coach by adapting to her environment, which in this case was the university context (e.g., Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Côté et al., 2007). Taken together the behaviours, strategies, and characteristics of Coach Vallée that were presented in this paper, are similar to previous empirical (e.g., Becker, 2009; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Bloom & Salmela, 2000; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Côté et al., 2007; Duchesne et al., 2011; Mallett, 2005; Schroeder, 2010; Tharp & Gallimore, 1976) and nonempirical (e.g., Gavazzi, 2015; Silva, 2006; Summitt & Jenkins, 1998; Voight & Carroll, 2006; Wooden, 1988; Yukelson & Rose, 2014) accounts of effective coaching. Aside from identifying four keys areas of coaching effectiveness, Coach Vallée also adopted her coaching principles based on her own empirical research (Vallée

& Bloom, 2005). Rarely, has the coaching psychology literature seen such a vivid example of theory to practice.

The personal examples shared by Coach Vallée provide a rare and insightful behind the scenes look into both the “what” (4 keys) and the “how” (blueprint) of the transformation of the University of Windsor women’s basketball program into a perennial powerhouse. The current results also shed insight on the empirical coaching literature. For example, while Vallée and Bloom (2005) spoke about the importance of having a vision to become a successful intercollegiate coach, the present article provides a detailed account of what the vision was (“*From Windsor to Nationals: Business Plan 2005-2010*”) and the value and importance of writing it down and sticking to the plan, as difficult and impossible as it may initially seem. With respect to athlete empowerment, the literature has some examples of the value and importance of a transformational leadership coaching style (i.e., Charbonneau, Barling, & Kelloway, 2001; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2013). However, the present article is a rare empirical account in sport that describes the adoption of a transformational leadership approach as a way to allow athletes to personally develop their leadership skills by depending less on their coach’s directives. While there are numerous accounts of the value and importance of teaching life skills to university athletes (i.e., Bloom & Salmela, 2000; Duchesne, Bloom, & Sabiston, 2011), this is one of the few occurrences where a coach has identified teaching athletes how to win with integrity as an integral life skill. Finally, while coach reflective learning (Côté & Gilbert, 2009) and coach mentoring (Bloom et al., 1998) have been individually purported as effective learning tools, this is one of the first accounts to link the two concepts together to show the powerful relationship that exists between them when they are combined.

In sum, teams and schools are always looking to hire the most effective coaches. Given this reality, along with the increased amount of empirical research in coaching science over the last 30–40 years, it is somewhat surprising that scholars have provided few examples of the *how* of effective coaching. Drawing on the definition of coaching effectiveness forwarded by Côté and Gilbert (2009), the present article provides some specific coaching examples for individuals who are looking to work in high-performance sport environments. Some of the key take away points include:

### Enacting The Vision:

- Before establishing rules and a winning culture, a clear vision of where the program is headed is required.
- A vision without actions remains only a dream. However, a continuous amount of action without a vision is hard work for nothing.
- Do not undersell yourself when establishing a vision for your program and do not be afraid to dream big.

### Athlete Empowerment:

- The ability to let go of control is a key for a leader in any field.
- Transformational leadership style is more effective than a charismatic one. A transformational coach believes in a two-way learning stream and sees player dependency as a failure of leadership.
- Do not feel threatened when your athletes can excel without your leadership.

### Teaching Life Skills:

- Coaches should create a “winning culture” rather than focusing on just “winning”.
- Ironically, decisions that focus on short-term winning will negatively affect the long-term development of a winning culture. However, sacrificing short-term wins for the sake of developing a culture brings championship.

### Life-Long Learning:

- Never stop asking for advice and feedback, whether it is from peers, supervisors, or subordinates.
- Surround yourself with mentors. Bring in people who are not directly linked to the team and are not afraid to tell the truth about areas of weakness.

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