

# Frances HESSELBEIN Leadership FORUM

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews BERNADETTE MCGLADE



One of the most well-respected and experienced leaders in Division I athletics, Bernadette V. McGlade is the [Atlantic 10](#) Commissioner. Her progressive guidance has created unprecedented new opportunities for the more than 5,200 student-athletes. As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina she was inducted into the prestigious Order of the Valkyries, the highest honor for a female undergrad, recognizing excellence in scholarship, dynamic leadership, and innovative service.

## Q&A

**Jason Womack:** Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?

**Bernadette McGlade:** Commit to learning. Stick to your vision. Leaders know enough to know they don't know it all. This is a mindset I adopted early on. In college, I had a clear vision of where I wanted to go: athletic administration. I knew individuals working in this field, and made a point to observe them and learn from their experiences and the examples they set.

To this day, I chip away at clarifying the very specific vision of where I want to be, and then seek out ways to learn more about how to get there. Seek out and work with individuals with whom you respect. Find leaders who have qualities you admire. Smart, empathetic, extremely engaged in whatever they are doing. Leaders who lead from a place of confident humility.

**JW:** What was your Defining Moment as a leader?

**BM:** I think we're constantly defining ourselves. One experience that shaped who I am and what I believe took place in 1981. After just completing my playing career at the University of North Carolina, and course work for my Masters degree, I was offered, at 23 years old, a Division I head women's basketball coaching job at an Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) school, Georgia Tech.

A good friend of mine said: "You are a fool to take this job, because you are too young...and you are a fool to turn down this job, because it's a tremendous opportunity." The choice was mine and I accepted the job, to be responsible, and lead my first team of great student-athletes!

Continued

## Q&A with Bernadette McGlade

In our interview, Bernadette shares her secrets to successfully "learn on the job," and emphasizes the importance of vision-focused leaders who lead "from a place of confident humility."

Bernadette continues to promote excellence and integrity both on the playing field and in the classroom.

**Continued**

**JW:** What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?

**BM:** Leadership is not something we bestow on ourselves. It's important to understand the expectations of the work we're expected to do. Effective leaders have to look outside themselves, and over time they are presented with opportunities to take control and broaden their knowledge base. One of the most important aspects of succeeding, I have found, is failing. I am worried about the athletic environment younger generations might be experiencing: an environment with an abundance of positive attention, unequivocal pats on the back... in some cases, young athletes have a false sense of confidence.

As leaders, we have to be prepared to fail; I'm not saying plan to fail, but it is important that we give ourselves the opportunity to reengage and reinvest in our vision if we fail, because it is very possible, when changing, growing, experimenting, innovating, that we will fail. Be resilient! I love that word. Every day, every week, every month, every year, and every cycle, we have to be able to come back and reengage fully, to stay objective and return to a vision of success.

**JW:** What do you think are the most important questions effective leaders need to ask of themselves?

**BM:** I have two: "Am I true to myself or conflicted?" and "Who am I spending time with; who is influencing me?"

Over time, leaders are able to develop a strong intuition when it comes to making decisions...how to move forward with an action plan. I have learned to trust my intuition. If I think about something for too long, I run the risk of going to battle with myself.

That's dangerous. Leaders have to know what to do, but they also have to do what they know...believe it is right, and trust themselves.

When it comes to growing as a contributing leader – it's important to be selective in who we spend our time with. Personally and professionally, I try to surround myself with strong, talented, ethical people. You're only as strong as your weakest link.

**JW:** What are some of your own habits or routines as an effective leader?

**BM:** There are multiple ways of answering this question. You have to be good at what you do, have healthy living habits and balance; personally, professionally, spiritually and civically. And you need to be sure to listen and consistently make good decisions.

On a practical level, I'm getting more and more reflective as I grow as a leader. I believe leaders must be open; I believe leaders must hone in on their strongest traits and skills and positively affect others around them. The more time leaders build process into their day – thinking, talking about, defining the initiatives we are working toward, the more effectively we all perform.

**JW:** How would you define yourself in just one sentence?

**BM:** Focused, motivated, positive while trying to give back and be better every day.

•