

BERKELEY-HAAS CASE SERIES

# Coach McKeever:

## UNORTHODOX LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE POOL

**Holly A. Schroth**

*The case explores the remarkable rise of Coach Teri McKeever to the top of a sport traditionally dominated by male coaches. Her success is driven by an unorthodox leadership and motivational style that emphasizes a growth mindset of self-improvement. She is an influential innovator, mentor, and trailblazer who challenged long entrenched methods of training and overcame criticisms and setbacks to change the face of swim training today. This case examines McKeever's leadership philosophy and controversial motivational strategies that she uses to develop and sustain high-level performers. McKeever's leadership and motivational strategies can be applied to organizations today and managers can use similar tools to develop high-performing employees in their organizations. (Keywords: Leadership, Women in Business, Strategic Management)*

**T**eri McKeever, women's head swim coach at the University of California, Berkeley, since August 1992 has a reputation as an influential innovator and mentor. She is a trailblazer—the first female swim coach to win an NCAA title; the first woman coach on the U.S. Olympic swimming team (as assistant coach in Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008); the first woman to be named head coach of the national team at a major international meet (the 2006 Pan Pacific meet in British Columbia); and the first female head coach of any USA Olympic swim team (leading the U.S. women's team for the Summer Olympics in London, 2012).

In the swimming world where male coaches have always been the standard, McKeever has received several coaching awards including Pac-10 and Pac-12 Coach of the year, and she has personally coached several Olympic medalists including Natalie Coughlin (12 Olympic medals), Haley Cope, Staciana Stitts, Emily Silver, Sara Isakovic, Jessica Hardy, Dana Vollmer, and Caitlin Leverenz.

McKeever's success isn't driven by following conventional leadership and coaching philosophies. Instead, her success is driven by her unorthodox leadership

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and motivational style. Instead of focusing on winning, she emphasizes a growth mindset of self-improvement for her swimmers and for herself as a coach.

She isn't afraid to go against the grain of traditional swim training methods—opting to focus on technique and dry land fitness activities over yardage. When recruiting swimmers, she places personality-team fit above swim speed. McKeever's leadership style emphasizes constant feedback and total honesty, even if it is inconvenient.

## Swimming Roots

Athletics were a big part of McKeever's family. McKeever's mother was a swimmer and an only child whose dream was to have a large family of athletic kids. Her father was a twin and was a football star at the University of Southern California (USC). During his senior year in college, he had a head injury and was unable to play in the NFL, but his brother did for 13 years.

When McKeever was four, her father was broadsided by a drunk driver. He passed away at age 27 after having lingered in a coma for 22 months. Two years later, her mother married Gary Gannon and they had seven more children making McKeever the oldest of 10 children, 3 McKeevers and 7 Gannons.

McKeever helped her mother care for the other children and learned at an early age the importance of working as a team. "This experience helped me to understand how to get along with different personalities as well as how to organize field trips," recounts McKeever. "I've been 40 since I was probably 12." Her brothers and sisters were all athletic. Two of her brothers played college football, a sister played basketball, another softball, and two sisters were on the national field hockey team.

McKeever started swimming at age 10 and made Nationals at age 12. "I did not have a traditional swim background," explains McKeever. "We had a 25-yard pool at our house and my mom served as my coach. I would never know when my mother could get out there and coach me." Swimming was when she could have uninterrupted time with her mother. However, because time was limited, her mother emphasized form and technique over the traditional endurance and distance aspects of swim training. Her mother also focused on mental preparation and process, explaining the rationale for the different techniques. "We always talked about what we were doing and why we were doing this," explains McKeever. "The swimming pool was the first place that I felt confident about who I was. I would often get up and swim on my own in the morning."

She earned a swimming scholarship to USC and competed all four years. She was a 1980 and 1981 All-American and named Outstanding Student Athlete. "I would make the finals but was never the one exceptional person," shares McKeever. "I was good for a really long time but not ever really great." She thought about leaving USC because she didn't really feel that the coach listened

to what she had to say. “My opinion about swimming didn’t seem to matter,” laments McKeever. “He wanted us to do it all the same way.” She liked being part of a team, but at the same time felt the coach should treat the swimmers as individuals with different needs.

McKeever thought that she would be an athletic trainer because she liked the science behind it, but she decided against it after seeing people screaming at the trainers during her brother’s football games. “I am somewhat reserved and not an intimidating presence,” reveals McKeever. “I didn’t want to be treated like a second class citizen or be someone’s punching bag.”

Instead, she decided to be a teacher and earned a math and science teaching credential. She also started coaching volleyball, junior varsity basketball, and swimming. She did not get a full-time teaching job and ended up getting a Masters in athletic administration and subsequently a job as an assistant swim coach at USC. After four years as an assistant, she took a job as head coach at Fresno State. “I was 25-years-old coaching 21-year-olds,” laughs McKeever. “It was not a very good program. After two years, the men’s coach was fired and I ended up coaching both teams for the next three years.” During her five years at Fresno, she managed to rank second all-time in wins (54) and winning percentage (.720).<sup>1</sup>

### Arriving at Berkeley: A Different Coaching Philosophy

In the fall of 1992, she arrived at Berkeley as the head coach of the women’s swimming program. “It was difficult for the first five years,” she says. “I struggled being in Berkeley and stopped trusting my gut. It was a bigger program and I was thinking that I had to be like other coaches. The previous coach was still hanging around and more involved than I had anticipated she would be.”

McKeever’s coaching philosophy was quite different from that of traditional swim programs. She did not make her swimmers train in the pool every day swimming long distances. She would focus on technique, having them do exercises that would help them become attuned to the mechanics of their bodies, implementing unique drills in the pool, and going on retreats with a life coach to help the athletes bond as a team.

The unorthodox techniques were not well received by all of the swimmers. Some would refuse to participate or complain to the old coach. “I finally decided I had to have the program done the way that I felt comfortable and not allow swimmers to complain to the old coach,” says McKeever. “I felt that if I was going to get fired, I wanted to be fired on my own terms.”

Adding to the pressure, McKeever was told that she had been an affirmative action hire because she was a woman. She felt it was her mission to prove herself—that she deserved to be there. Her goal would be to try to get the program into the top 10 and then say “screw you” and leave.

The team remained unranked for her first four years, dropping as low as 28<sup>th</sup> at the NCAA championships. “The swimmers were strong women who had not signed on for me as their coach,” states McKeever. “For the first time, I experienced mutual frustration.”

## Leadership Challenges at Berkeley: Gaining Confidence

She felt her confidence further deteriorate after hiring an assistant coach who she felt would constantly undermine her. At first she thought they made a good team. He was a talker, personable, and local. She was quiet, shy, and self-doubting. She felt she needed his help in recruiting and that they would complement each other.

However, McKeever felt that the assistant coach would often challenge her coaching philosophy, constantly questioning her and pushing the traditional swim techniques, undermining her as a person by frequently cutting her off in conversation. He also recruited swimmers that she felt were not the right fit for the team. "He had a divide-and-conquer strategy," explains McKeever. "He was toxic to the team and wanted to take over."

The team finally broke into the top 10 during her fifth year as head coach and reached the top 5 in her sixth year. McKeever was pressured by her assistant coach to make him a co-head coach, which she did in an effort to appease him. She felt that he had whittled away at her confidence so much that she became doubtful that she could be successful without him.

Suffering from stress and anxiety, McKeever turned to her friend, Kathie Wickstrand, a life coach, to help her regain her self-confidence and get the courage to fire her co-coach. "You can't blame others for your stress and anxiety, you have to work on yourself," says McKeever. "Once you are in a good place in your life, then you can really perform." She now knew that she needed someone who would complement her style but not "walk all over her" and "not be walked over by the girls."

McKeever asked Kristen Cunnane, her graduate assistant coach and administrative assistant for two years, to step up as an assistant coach. Cunnane was a natural athlete. She did well as a high school soccer player and was a walk-on swimmer at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she was named All-American for two consecutive years. Cunnane had seen McKeever leading Cal's women to success when she was swimming at UCLA and sought a coaching position with her while she was enrolled in a master's program at Cal's Graduate School of Education.

McKeever, with her introverted personality, saw that Cunnane would complement her with her extroverted, outgoing personality but at the same time, because she had not swum year-round until late in her swim career and had never coached before, Cunnane would be open to McKeever's unconventional training techniques.

Cunnane was supportive of McKeever's program philosophy and the focus of coaching being on personal development. Cunnane was also well liked by the team and was instrumental in recruiting swimmers who would fit well with McKeever's team culture. Although McKeever loved coaching, she found recruiting to be a strain for her, so having Cunnane take the lead on recruiting helped McKeever to continue her focus on training techniques. Four years after being hired as an assistant coach, Cunnane was named assistant coach of the year and was promoted by McKeever to associate head coach.

## Selection and Recruitment: Finding the Right Fit

When recruiting and selecting swimmers, McKeever and Cunnane spend a lot of time trying to understand who the swimmer is, her family, and background. “We have to be a protector of the program and pick a swimmer who is the right fit,” states McKeever. “I would rather pick a slower swimmer who is a good fit for our culture than a faster swimmer who has the wrong personality or low growth potential,” says McKeever.

To determine fit, they focus on how the swimmers interact with their parents, how much direction the athlete needs, and whether they are on time. “A red flag for us can be the swimmer constantly texting while on a home visit (not genuinely interested in the team) or the parent filling out all of the information on a form (not self-sufficient),” says Cunnane.

They want the athletes to be their own problem solvers and figure things out rather than panicking or relying on their parents. They don’t want a swimmer who requires more parenting and they don’t want to spend a lot of time communicating with parents. “If they have been coddled by their parents, then they think the rules don’t apply to them,” explains McKeever. “The athletes need to understand there are certain parameters that are non-negotiable such as when to go home during school breaks.”

McKeever and Cunnane ask the recruits difficult questions to determine their fit, such as what they will bring to the program, what they think their current coach would miss about them most when they leave for college, and their greatest strength and weakness. They look for independent, smart, and hardworking athletes who have good self-insight, want to learn, and are willing to grow as people.

“They need to have some understanding of what they can do to improve,” says McKeever. They tell the swimmers about the challenges of the program and are very clear about their expectations for them as a student athlete, such as having great grades, making positive choices about what to eat and when to go to bed, and acting in a way that reflects positively on the team and university. They take the recruits to all of the places they would need to know, and don’t hide limiting factors such as the facilities and the challenges surrounding an urban environment.

McKeever also does not make any promises to the swimmers regarding their role on the team. “They will not guarantee a relay spot or to swim at the Pac 12 conference,” states Caitlin Leverenz, Senior Co-Captain and 2012 Olympian. “They will not tell you that you will make an Olympic team, but won’t ever tell you that you can’t. Those who need to hear that they will make the Olympics won’t be coming here. They will only guarantee to push you in the right direction.”

McKeever and Cunnane only sell the school once the recruits make it through the “hurdles” of team fit. “Our reputation attracts a particular type of person,” says McKeever. “We want to make sure that the school environment will bring out the best in them. Cal is unique in that most programs have men and women working out together. Having a women-only team can factor into a recruit’s decision to join Cal. Some women are afraid that there will be too much drama with women only.”

McKeever is also not afraid to remove swimmers from the program if it becomes apparent that they are not a good fit. McKeever has suspended some swimmers and taken away scholarships from others. Last year she had 10 in her freshman class and now she has only 7 going into their sophomore year. “They thought they were really good and didn’t respond well to upperclassmen trying to help them,” says McKeever. “Some of the girls had known each other before and they were not allowing each other to reinvent themselves.” The parents also contributed to the problem by supporting the swimmers’ behaviors.

“Adjusting to the program from a club team can be a real challenge,” explains Leverenz. “Coming into the team, I thought I was a lot better than I was. A lot of kids feel that way. On their club team, they were a star and the coach did everything for them. Here there are no stars and no one person is the center of attention that the program revolves around. This can be difficult for some. It took me about a year to fully adjust.” At times, McKeever has hired a life coach to help some of the swimmer’s adjust to the program.

## Leadership Philosophy: Growth Mindset

“It is not about winning but being a better version of yourself. What happens at the end is a celebratory by-product of the work we do.”—Coach McKeever

McKeever believes in leading by example and is always looking for her own personal best. She wants to help swimmers learn how to find their personal best. To do this, she has them focus only on themselves rather than comparing themselves to others. “I want to promote personal accountability and excellence,” explains McKeever. “It is not about comparing yourself to the woman next to you but to have each woman swim to the best of her ability. I have different expectations for each swimmer. I give equal attention to all swimmers, those who will be going to the NCAA’s and those who will not.”

McKeever also promotes openness and new ideas when it comes to the actual swim training. She has been called unorthodox in her coaching because she has eschewed the longtime swimming tradition of volume and instead focused more on high-intensity training, which involves training at race speed but shorter distances. In addition, she has also added dry land activities such as Pilates, spinning, hip-hop dance, and cross-training.

“She is different than other coaches,” states Caroline Piehl, Sophomore Co-Captain. “At some point, a swimmer hits a plateau where yardage won’t help any more. She teaches the swimmers to have a relationship with the water and extract energy from the water. It is a totally different concept for many. Some swimmers might not embrace the ‘weirdness’. It is really about openness. She wants you to be open to new ideas and embrace them . . . try things out and explore. Eventually something will click.”

Although McKeever is at the top of her field, she still pays attention to what other coaches are doing to grow herself. “She is willing to learn from other coaches, even lesser named coaches,” explains Leverenz. “Personal growth is a continuous

thing. She has changed my life and how I approach things . . . I am the woman that I am today because of Teri."

McKeever states, "It's my job to create an environment where the athletes feel comfortable, supported, listened to, and get what they need to be at their best. Leadership is not being a watchdog." The swimmers are expected to reflect on themselves to better understand how they can improve. To help the swimmers reflect upon their personal growth, McKeever has each swimmer keep a swim journal. "The journal helps build the swimmer's confidence and make connections with their training and success," explains McKeever. "It helps them to understand the foundation of what we are doing and why we are doing it."

To further their development, everyone on the team is required to take a behavioral style inventory. McKeever believes that this analysis will help the swimmers learn about themselves, get them to know each other better, and assist them in learning how to interact more effectively with each other. She says, "I want them to swim well; but through athletics and swimming, they should get to know who they are, their strengths and weaknesses, which will ultimately help them to become an even better version of themselves. It is a process that is continual growth. It is a great way to learn life skills because it is an environment where people have your back. If the swimmers' actions aren't leading toward their goals, I will sit down and talk to them about it. There is a safety net so if they do dumb things, I can make it a learning situation."

To further the swimmers personal development, McKeever uses a leadership assessment where each swimmer evaluates herself and the other team members on their leadership skills. She will talk with the swimmers about their leadership evaluations and help each swimmer to develop her personal best. Every swimmer except the freshmen has a job on the team. Freshmen have a "big sister" to help guide them. For example, they let them know there is a "pecking" order to towel hooks, they show them where their classes are located, and they teach them what is appropriate and inappropriate for Facebook. The more senior swimmers are held responsible for the freshman swimmers. "There has to be leadership in each athlete," says Cunnane. "Leadership has to be found in many places besides just the captains. There are leadership moments every day; giving feedback on turns, pushing others to run and not walk . . . there is a constant emphasis on taking accountability and responsibility."

McKeever relies on captains to help teach the swimmers lessons of accountability. In selecting captains, each team member is to rate other team members on a scale that includes questions such as "makes the right decisions" and "helps to resolve conflict." She will take the top four or five people, then present to the team why the person should be captain.

The team ultimately decides by vote and the coaches don't have any say on who is elected. Piehl, only a sophomore, believes she was voted as Co-Captain because the younger swimmers thought she would represent them well. "Freshmen can have a difficult time adjusting," says Piehl. "Other teams just swim, but she [McKeever] wants you to change all aspects of your life, not just swimming. It can be a struggle. Captains need to step up all of the time."

## Team Culture: Honesty, Respect, and Personal Accountability

“Be honest and tell the truth. That comes above everything, even if it is inconvenient.”—Coach McKeever

“The culture of the women’s swim team is one of toughness,” states McKeever. “The pool is not perfect, Berkeley is a challenging environment, the swimmers have to earn their place on the team, and there is not a lot of money for extras.” McKeever gives her swimmers the tools to be resilient and believes that these tools help the swimmers bond and have confidence. A key tool that McKeever emphasizes is honesty.

“We are a process-driven culture,” shares McKeever. “The girls must be honest with each other. They don’t have to be friends, but they need to respect each other. Respect is a key value of the team. We want the girls to recognize that everyone is different and to appreciate what they bring. We don’t expect them to necessarily all like each other, but they must always show respect.” The athletes are expected to have personal accountability, understand and embrace their role on the team, help others around them to be better than themselves, and have team members notice when they are not there.

“Teri teaches us how to have hard conversations and not be confronting, but address something uncomfortable and learn from it and move on,” explains Leverenz. Adds Piehl, “We all have the same belief of being open to each other and honest with each other . . . there is no backstabbing or talking behind backs.” With a lot of mentoring on her part, McKeever is able to help the women form a tight support net, but the coaches must constantly reinforce when the swimmers need to push each other and when to give each other a hug. They see it as a fine balance. They want the swimmers to realize that conflict is inevitable and not necessarily a bad thing. It is important, however, to develop the skills to manage conflict.

McKeever is very open and honest about her personal challenges in front of her team because she believes it helps her to be more accessible and relatable to her swimmers. “I have team events and activities where I share the good, the bad, and the ugly of who I am,” says McKeever. “If they know my struggles and understand me at a deeper level, then they can search deeper into themselves.” She will share life events such as the difficulty of being married and the pressure she feels being the first woman to coach a winning swim team. “I can then ask where they are at and get an honest response,” says McKeever. “If I say I’m tired and they still see me put in the energy to do a good job, then they know that they can do the same.”

A typical activity to help the team bond is to have the swimmers list 10 things they are grateful for and everyone will pick 2 of the 10 to share—coaches do the same. They will also tell others what they appreciate about them. The goal is to bond at a deeper level that has nothing to do with swimming. Leverenz was surprised how well this activity helped to bond the team together. Likewise, she was surprised that McKeever could take this same technique with the Olympic team and achieve similarly positive results.

Maintaining the team culture is an all-encompassing job. “Team culture is every day and every minute,” says McKeever. “We will always have teaching moments and will address the issue immediately in order to fix the culture, even



if it is at our most important event, the NCAA's. There is selfishness in not being willing to be uncomfortable for a few minutes in order to resolve the issue. I will address the issue privately unless I have already addressed the issue with that person and the behavior has not changed or it is a good group learning experience. Sometimes people need to be called out on their behavior."

McKeever will sometimes call herself out when she makes an error. She wants the athletes to know that mistakes are inevitable but everyone can learn from them and it is important to fix them. The culture of growth helps the swimmers to accept even the most difficult feedback.

A strong culture elevates the team. "The team is not the fastest on paper, but the way they approach things together, everyone is able to swim faster than they could before," says Piehl. "When you know your teammates are working hard and counting on you and every point you score goes to the team, you have got to perform for others and not let them down. The tough stuff seems doable knowing we are in it together." New members to the team can change the team dynamics, but the culture stays the same. The challenge according to Piehl is to "get the new team gelled as much as the year before." She sees that McKeever continues the same principles each year but may use a new approach to bond the team together. "The swimmers understand that you either help the environment or you can bring it down," explains Leverenz. "You don't have to score points on the team to bring it up. It can be getting good grades, having a positive attitude, or a hard work ethic . . . you find out how to make the team better in your own way."

## High Performance Expectations

"I consistently demand excellence from myself and from them. I don't ever let them off the hook."—Coach McKeever

McKeever views sport as a teaching tool for life and will hold her swimmers accountable to high standards. She will not watch a poor swim and pretend that it is okay. She will not say "good job" if it is not. She will only give positive acknowledgement when it is warranted. She wants to push the athlete to do a better job.

McKeever views herself as a parent in some ways. She does not blur the line between coach and friend, and does not spend time with the team members outside of swimming. She is seen by the swimmers as an authority figure and not anyone's best friend. She is "motherly in a tough love way," says Leverenz. McKeever states, "My job is to coach them, not be their friend, but to make them better . . . It can be exhausting."

"These kids aren't being parented like they were 25 years ago," says McKeever. "They don't have challenges and struggles that help them to learn coping skills and how to overcome set-backs. They have been coddled so much that they don't know how to cope. This is an environment of challenge and I will purposely yell or challenge them so that they can learn how to handle situations and work through obstacles."

Swimmers are expected to fail, but they are also expected to learn how to pick themselves up again. "You need to fail and know what it is like," says Piehl.

“At Cal swimming, you learn how to fail successfully . . . and if you are given praise, you really value it.”

“Teri is bold,” states Leverenz. “She will tell you things that you don’t want to hear. She was the first person who told me that I wasn’t as good as I thought I was. It can be very hard to accept. She has a very high expectation and a level of excellence that she holds you accountable to both in and out of the pool.”

Although she hasn’t received negative feedback from the swimmers, McKeever sometimes questions whether she may be too hard on them. “I tell them that they are not good enough all day. . . . Am I showing respect or being too demanding?” reflects McKeever. “I am not sure if I am too hard about standards. I get impatient about having them meet expectations. I believe in having them conduct themselves like they are in the real world and I am trying to teach them to be good citizens.”

### **Communication and Influence Style: Explaining the “Why”**

“Don’t let an army die for a cause they don’t know.”—Coach McKeever

“Actions have to match words,” states McKeever. “I always follow through if I say I will do something. If I switch the swim schedule, I will communicate why. Explaining the why will get people to follow you. For example, I have a rule of closed in shoes when traveling. Many of the girls resist at first until I explain if they hurt their feet then they can’t swim.”

The team captains are important for helping McKeever get information out to the team as well as keep her informed about issues within the team. Although McKeever makes herself available, she does set one boundary; she is not to be called at her home.

Cunnane believes that McKeever’s openness and good relationships with the swimmers strongly influences them. Leverenz credits McKeever’s positive influence over the team as being a combination of passion, enthusiasm and leading by example.

McKeever feels that she is respected by others in the swim community because she listens well and will say things that others are thinking but are afraid to say. She is very open with the university athletic administration about her needs and feels that she has strong relationships with them. She does get frustrated when there are policies for all departments which don’t make sense for hers. She believes that if she stays within budget, she should have some flexibility and that certain policies should lie with the coach, because not every coach faces the same challenges. “I know when to fight and when to bite my tongue,” says McKeever. Her style is to explain why the policy doesn’t make sense and won’t work, using logic and reasoning first and emotional appeals if needed.

### **Keeping the Passion of Swimming Alive**

The swimmers only have praise for McKeever and her passion for swimming. Swimmers are notorious for getting burned out swimming lap after lap, hour after

hour, every single day. In McKeever's program, the swimmers continue to love the sport or regain their love of the sport.

Leverenz cites how McKeever was instrumental in helping Olympic Swimmer Anthony Ervin regain his love for the sport after being absent from it for several years. "She shows them (the swimmers) how they can find that playfulness and enjoyment of swimming again," explains Leverenz. "Teri allows us to enjoy trips and meets—she says that it is more important than the results of the meets. You won't remember the time you swam, but you remember having a good time, painting faces, making jokes, and dancing on the pool deck. Those are the memories we are creating. In the big scheme of things, is winning the dual meet most important? No, it is to learn and grow as people. The by-product of that is winning."

## Postscript

Five-time Olympic medalist Missy Franklin, the top swimming recruit in the United States for 2012, chose to swim for the California Golden Bears under Coach McKeever. "I instantly felt at home there," Franklin told Nine News. "The team dynamic is incredible."

Franklin looks forward to swimming for McKeever, a coach she already knows well from the Olympics. "She had such a way to motivate us and bring the team together," Franklin said of her Olympic experience. "She encouraged the veterans to share their experiences with us. It helped us so much and made our Olympic team so close." Franklin turned down a long list of professional endorsements to swim in college. "The friends I swim with in college will be the bridesmaids at my wedding," says Franklin. "You can't put a price on friendship. You can't put a price on being part of a team."<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. Fresno State Swimming and Diving Website, <[www.gobulldogs.com/sports/w-swim/spec-rel/073012aaa.html](http://www.gobulldogs.com/sports/w-swim/spec-rel/073012aaa.html)>.
2. Cheryl Preheim, *USA Today Sports*, October 21, 2012.