

ENTREPRENEUR SPOTLIGHT

A professional portrait of Keith Washington, a middle-aged Black man with a grey beard, wearing a white dress shirt and an orange tie. He is standing outdoors with his arms crossed, leaning against a white pillar. The background is a blurred green landscape.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY RED ANGLE PHOTOGRAPHY

What's your background?

My name is Keith Washington, and I am the husband to my amazing wife of almost 30 years. We are proud parents to two wonderful daughters. They all have been incredibly supportive of my career, especially my wife. She has tirelessly stood by my side through all of my international travels, multiple relocations, and a 20-month assignment, where I was splitting time between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

I am also a former student-athlete who was fortunate to have played football at the high school and the collegiate levels. My athletic experiences have had a profoundly positive influence on my professional development and achievements. Upon graduating with a degree in business economics from Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, I immediately started my professional career in manufacturing management within the packaging industry.

I spent my first year of employment shadowing a very prolific engineer from Osaka, Japan, who was an expert in the Toyota Production System. Within two years of graduation, I found myself in a supervisory position leading a team of 30 people implementing the lean principles I had learned. As one who constantly seeks and accepts challenges, I eventually made a career change from manufacturing management to supply chain management. What I learned about myself with this career change is that I am truly a strategist at heart. I enjoy embracing challenges and finding the most effective solution while identifying opportunities for continuous improvement. I quickly discovered that success in supply chain requires an ability to anticipate economic shifts and trends, strong relationships, strategic thinking and planning, and a relentless commitment to execution.

I then had the opportunity to make the transition from the packaging industry to the telecommunications industry as a supply chain professional. Shortly thereafter, I made the move to the power distribution industry. It was this transition that changed my view of, and appreciation for, leadership. Having the opportunity to coach, develop, and lead a team of direct reports where the stakes were even greater than previously experienced afforded me an incredible opportunity for exposure and growth. While it was a small team, what I learned about leadership was priceless. I was then promoted to a divisional supply chain leadership role with the responsibility of leading the supply chain function of 30 manufacturing operations worldwide. This included leading a supply chain and logistics team of over 500 supply chain professionals.

Finally, my most recent corporate position was spent in the hospitality industry as vice president of supply chain. In this role, I also had the privilege of leading an international supply chain organization with an annual spend under management of \$2.0B. After 30 years of enjoying the corporate experience, the time was right to parlay all of my athletic experiences and corporate learning to pursue my life-long dream of establishing my own firm.

What is Next Level Professional Development, LLC?

Leveraging the skills and experiences acquired throughout my career, Next Level Professional Development, LLC was founded in 2017. Next Level Professional Development LLC is a professional leadership and career coaching firm with the motto, "Helping others become what they know they can be." I believe everyone has a gift and an ability to make a difference. Sometimes we simply need someone to help us identify our talents, while others may need support nurturing

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“...everyone has a gift and an ability to make a difference”

and developing their abilities. That is the value proposition that Next Level Professional Development meticulously provides.

What was the inspiration for your business?

You know, the inspiration behind my business is two-fold. First, I was disheartened by what I observed throughout my career as a hiring manager and leader. Unfortunately, I bore witness to many aspiring professionals losing their motivation and promotional momentum due to the lack of skills, such as communication, leadership, problem solving, and the like. Frankly, these critical skills are not adequately developed in college.

Many of these aspiring professionals did not understand the nuances of the corporate environment and the importance of possessing these skills. Inevitably, they would be described as someone who is not assimilating into the company culture, or they are not a good cultural fit. Consequently, they realized minimal advancement opportunities, while others appeared to excel. I wanted to change that dynamic whenever and wherever possible. Secondly, after much consideration, I grew confident that professional coaching and mentoring was the platform from which I could make a meaningful difference in the corporate world in general, and in the lives of my clients, in particular.

How long have you been in business?

I have been a highly active mentor and coach to aspiring professionals at the corporate level for the past 20 years. However, this was not the beginning of my coaching experience. I began mentoring and coaching teammates in high school, college, and even my daughters' basketball and soccer teams when they were much younger.

In addition, I volunteered with nonprofit organizations such as Big Brothers & Big Sisters, Junior Achievement, and NFTE (e.g., Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship). It was as a NFTE volunteer that I was privileged to see the powerful impact mentoring and coaching could have on an individual. After coaching my mentee, he went on to place first in the state of Florida for his business creation and presentation. A week later, he then went on to place within the Top 5 in the nation. There is something extremely motivating about seeing others do something they did not think they could do. As far back as I can recall, I have always had a passion for helping others realize their potential.

Who is your target clientele?

Frankly, my targeted audience or clientele is ANYONE who desires to become the best version of themselves. This could include student-athletes, coaches, corporate

professionals, nonprofits, and any individual or organization with an interest in reaching the "next level."

What marketing methods do you use, and which have been most effective?

I have found face-to-face networking to be the most effective means of marketing. I have had good success by simply meeting people as I travel around the city, and even while on vacation. I have also found that for the services I provide, good chemistry is critically important. It is intriguing to see the number of people seeking this type of support.

While social media is a great tool for marketing purposes, I am not an enthusiastic fan of mass marketing through social media for the services I provide. I am very intentional in taking great care in keeping my focus on the quality of the service I provide rather than the quantity of clients I serve. My goal is to minimize my advertising costs by providing exceptional service that inspires my clients to promote my firm and the services it provides.

How do you stand out from other business coaches?

There are many life coaches and career coaches all around us who do impressive work and they are truly making a positive impact on the lives of their clients. Next Level Professional Development LLC aims to be no different in that regard. However, what distinguishes my firm from all other coaching firms is the diverse industry and corporate experiences that come with the coaching Next Level Professional Development LLC provides. In addition to this point of distinction, no program is effective without exceptional customer service, personal relatability, and sustainable tools and empowering solutions. This is what makes the Next Level Professional Development program different from all other career and leadership development service providers. All provided tools, solutions, and development training have been proven over 30 years across four distinct industries among more than 500 professionals. It was these elements of distinction that made the formation of a service partnership with the Pro Football Hall Fame Behavioral Health possible.

What challenges have you faced as a Black entrepreneur?

As a minority-owned business, the challenges faced are remarkably similar to other minority-led businesses - access to capital and meaningful exposure. However, these challenges are not at all insurmountable, and efforts are underway to mitigate them. These efforts include vigorous cost control measures along with effective networking and

creative marketing. One additional challenge is accepting the reality that entrepreneurship is more like a marathon than a sprint.

What areas of business do you struggle with the most?

The areas of the business that are the most challenging are hiring the right people, building a robust brand, and expanding my customer base. In terms of hiring the right people, the passion to support and promote the successes of others really matters in this business. This is a quality you either possess or you do not. You have to be truly motivated by the daily practice of contributing to the success of others. This is critically important because in every interaction with every client, you are creating a brand and a reputation for yourself and your business that must reiterate that intrinsic motivation. At the same time, you must find a balance in managing your growth ambitions while providing a consistent level of high-quality service that remains unmatched. These challenges motivate and inspire me each day to ensure that I treat my 100th client with the same level of attention and high-quality service as I did my very first client.

What do you enjoy most about what you do?

The greatest reward associated with what I do is knowing that I am helping others fulfill their professional ambitions while providing meaningful tools for career growth and professional development. I have seen how this service can lead to professional longevity and the creation of generational progress.

Did COVID-19 affect your business, and how did you adapt?

Fortunately, my business was not affected by Covid-19 because it was after the pandemic that I decided to make Next Level Professional Development, LLC a full-time venture. However, the work-from-home trend exacerbated by Covid-19 has highlighted the need for greater professional development and career management coaching.

What knowledge do you have now that you wish you had when you first started?

The knowledge I now have that I wish I had when I first started my business is to enjoy the daily journey rather than focusing on the ultimate destination! I genuinely enjoy meeting people and hearing their unique stories and professional ambitions. The people I have met on this journey have been simply incredible. I am looking forward to continuing to meet more wonderful people and hearing their career goals while helping to make them a reality. **TE**