Building a Legacy of Volunteers through Servant Leadership: A Case Study of a Cause-Related Sporting Event

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‘Adversity makes individuals strong’ and ‘sport can change the world’ are two ideological clichés that can be found at the core of many cause-related sporting events (Green, 2008). Hosting a special event that involves some physical activity has become increasingly popular for non-profit organizations (NPOs), “given the multifaceted ability of sport to contribute to health, engage a diverse audience, and promote social inclusion” (Sherry, 2010, p. 61). Cause-related sporting events have become a strategic marketing tool that includes NPOs and “for-profit” businesses cooperating for mutual benefit by linking the company or brand to a relevant social issue (Principle & Thompson, 1999). These events are effective intermediaries that connect with consumers and create social capital (Higgins & Lauzon, 2002). Many cause-related sporting events have explicit goals to generate positive economic impact for the host community and raise revenue for the NPO. While these goals are crucial to the success of the event, at the core of these events is the far-reaching and intangible goal of creating a lasting legacy of positive social change.

The leaders and the people of an organization, rather than the structure (place or situation), are the fundamental determinants of organizational behavior (Schneider, 1987). Building a lasting legacy of volunteers requires more than simply hosting a cause-related sporting event in conjunction with an NPO. Research shows that the strongest motive for volunteers in a special event is due to affiliatory reasons (i.e., the individual’s passion and attachment to the event activity and the attraction of the unique culture (ambience) created by the event) (Monga, 2006). According to Schneider (1987), the key to building a lasting legacy of a cause-related sporting event is the people in the organization, as “the people make the place” (p. 437). Legacies and organizational cultures are created by passing down the founder’s shared values, goals, basic assumptions, attitudes, practices, and behaviors that followers learn over time and then apply to organizational decision-making processes (Schien, 1990). A key to understanding the success of a cause-related sporting event and volunteer motivation, then, is to study the leadership style and behavior of the founder.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the leadership style of the founder of a cause-related sporting event and to investigate the effects of this leadership style on motivating volunteers. This investigation focused on the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) Surf Festival, which has achieved a worldwide audience while simultaneously cultivating community-level engagement. Our guiding research questions framing this study were: (a) what is the founder’s leadership style; and (b) is there anything unique about this leadership style that has contributed to motivating core volunteers for over 25 years?

An exploratory, qualitative case study methodology was used to gather data in order to best analyze the founder’s leadership style and its effects on volunteer motivation. Case studies are an essential form of social science inquiry and are appropriate when investigators are examining broadly defined topics which cover complex multivariate conditions and require collecting data from multiple sources (Yin, 2003). The site selected for this case study was the NKF Surf Festival, which began over 25 years ago as a small event to benefit chronically ill dialysis patients. The event was founded by a young professional surfer whose life was saved by a kidney transplant. As our aim was to elaborate leadership theory, we searched for a context that could serve as an extreme case (Pratt, Rockman, & Kaufman, 2006). We selected the NKF Surf Festival because of the longevity and success of the event. The longevity of the event has been a result of the continued dedication of the founder along with his core volunteers who have been running the event for over 25 years. The NKF Surf Festival is 14 times more financially successful than the average cause-related sporting event hosted by a NPO, as the average amount raised by these events is only between $3,000 and $10,000 (Higgins & Lauzon, 2003). Also, the first author had been involved with the NKF as a volunteer for five years, which built trust between the researchers and the founder. All of these factors contributed to us selecting the NKF Surf Festival as an extreme case for our study.

Open, axial and selective coding was used to analyze the data and to form conceptual codes (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and we stored and integrated the data with NVivo 9. Credibility was established by using triangulation of measures. Data were collected through: a) semi-structured personal interviews; b) document analysis of Surf Festival materials; and c) direct observations before and after the event (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We conducted semi-structured, personal interviews with 19 individuals. These participants included the founder, the CEO of NKF of Florida, administrators, members of the board of directors, employees, sponsors, donors, competitors and volunteers. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their special knowledge and involvement with the NKF Surf Festival in order to ensure that “certain types of individuals or persons displaying certain attributes are included in the study” (Berg, 2001, p. 32). The principal investigator conducted member checks with all participants to further enhance credibility. Transferability was achieved by the principal investigator keeping a
reflective journal that provides a contextual narrative that others can use to examine the degree of similarity to their organization to see if a component or the entire methodology will apply to their situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to improve dependability and confirmability, the second investigator, who was not involved in data collection, served as an auditor and reviewed all codes, analyses and interpretations (Locke et al. 2000).

Results indicate that the founder is a servant leader. In 1970, Robert Greenleaf defined servant leadership as not just a management technique but a way of life which begins with “the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 7). Faced with the adversity of having kidney disease, the founder accepted his fate and found his happiness in dealing with the disease by turning his transplant success into a lifelong career dedicated to helping others combat kidney disease. Five key themes of servant leadership emerged from the data, which influenced volunteer motivation: unconditional love, moral conscience, loyalty to the individual, autonomous follower development, and influence on followers to engage in service themselves. Two noteworthy outcomes are that followers have also become servant leaders, and that the event has had a positive effect on the least privileged in society (Greenleaf, 1970). As a servant leader, the founder has motivated his volunteers to embrace his cause and his love for society to be a better place.

Results will be discussed relative to leadership theory and the extant literature on volunteer motivation. Practical implications for NPOs hosting successful cause-related sporting events will be provided. Future research will be proposed that will further aid advancement of our understanding of servant leadership and cause-related sporting events.