Servant Leadership and Athletic Performance: The Mediating Effects of Leader Trust and Leader Commitment

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As leadership or leader styles influence the organizational effectiveness for any given organization (Andreeescu & Vito, 2010; Bass, 1977), efforts to find well-fitted leadership styles have been made by many scholars and practitioners. In sport organizations, especially sport teams, coaches’ leadership is critical in both athletic performance and well-being throughout the ever-changing and competitive sports environment (Soucie, 1994). Consequently, various leadership concepts and models have been presented such as transactional-transformational leadership, super-self leadership, authentic leadership, and servant leadership (Chen, Kirkma, Kanfer, Allen & Resen, 2007). Among those leadership concepts, the concept of servant leadership was proposed by Greenleaf in 1970. The introduction of servant leadership to sports has important implications because servant leadership changed a view on the relationship between coaches and athletes from hierarchical structures (or authoritative leadership style) to horizontal relationships. Servant leadership emphasized the role of the leader as a supporter to achieve the organizational goals by utilizing characteristics of servant leadership such as altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping and organizational stewardship. As a result, in many organizations, servant leadership is preferred as the appropriate leadership style to enhance organizational performance over other styles. Also, in the sports context, servant leadership is considered an effective leadership style to improve the motivation for practice and eventually athletes’ performance. To date, servant leadership theories in sports have concentrated on team sports rather than individual sports. Also, individual sports require constant interaction, in-game communication, between athletes and coaches. Therefore, the examination of the relationship between servant leadership and athletic performance in Taekwondo, which is an individual sport, would be meaningful.

Servant leadership has positive effects on leader trust and leader commitment. According to the model of servant leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002), trust to leaders is one of the functional attribute. Also, Lee (2011) stressed that Taekwondo coach’s servant leadership in the universities plays an important role in building leader trust. In addition, Jacobs (2006) suggested that followers who are led by servant leader might have higher degree of leader commitment than followers who are led by leader without servant spirit. In the relationship between leaders and followers, trust in leader is a significant factor because empowerment and communication are based on the trust (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010). Similar to other fields, leader trust positively influences athletic performance in sports (Dirks, 2000). In addition to leader trust, commitment to leader plays an important role in yielding the outcomes such as willingness on the tasks (Becker, Billings, Eveleth & Gilbert, 1996). In fact, commitment to leader has different levels, and the degree of performance depends on commitment to leader in the business (Becker & Billings, 1993). For these reasons, investing the roles that leader trust and leader commitment play in the relation between a coach and athletes would help to understand how two factors influence athletic performance. Therefore, this study aimed to examine, using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach, (a) the effects of Taekwondo coach’s servant leadership on athletic performance and (b) the mediation effects of leader trust and leader commitment on the relationship between servant leadership and athletic performance in Taekwondo.

For the current study, data were collected from professional Taekwondo athletes in Korea Industry Taekwondo Federation (KITF). A complete enumeration method was employed to collect data because the sample population of this study included only 190 athletes. The final data included responses from 183 athletes. Respondents completed the questionnaire that was composed with questions of servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), leader trust (Podsakoff et al., 1990), leader commitment (Zhang, 2004), and athletic performance (Fiedle & Gillo, 1973). The Cronbach’s alpha of the scales ranged from .71 to .88. Results from SEM analysis indicated that the proposed model fit the data adequately (TLI = .933, CFI = .943, RMSEA = .067, SRMR = .047) were .933 and .943 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The direct paths of servant leadership on leader trust ($\gamma = .89$, S.E. = .10, $p<.001$) and on leader commitment ($\gamma = .90$, S.E. = .13, $p<.001$), leader trust on athletic performance ($\gamma = .55$, S.E. = .18, $p<.01$) were significant at the alpha level of .05. However, the direct paths of servant leadership on athletic performance ($\gamma = .23$, S.E. = .310) and that of leader
commitment on athletic performance ($\gamma = .04, S.E. = .19$) were not significant at the alpha level of .05. To test mediating effects, the bootstrapping method was used. The results of mediating effect show that leader trust was mediated in the relationship between servant leadership and athletic performance, and the effect was positive at the significance level of .05 (p<.01) (direct effect: $\gamma = .23, S.E. = .49$; indirect effect: $\gamma = .45, S.E. = .41$). In other words, if coaches adopt servant leadership to bestow trust on athletes, athletic performance can be improved. On the other hand, because there was no effect of leader commitment on athletic performance, the significance of the indirect effect of leader commitment was not statistically verified in the relationship between servant leadership and athletic performance.

The results are as follows. First, whereas servant leadership had no effect on athletic performance, servant leadership had positive effects on leader trust and leader commitment. The reason for the former is the presence of the mediating variable, leader trust. Further, coaches should apply the servant philosophy not only during training hours but also non-training hours to gain athletes' trust and thus improve athletic performance. Second, leader trust had a positive effect on athletic performance, but leader commitment did not. Therefore, coaches should find various ways to improve athletes’ leader trust in order to enhance athletic performance. Especially, Taekwondo is an individual sport, so the coach should show great trust on his or her athletes. As a result, athletes can trust their leader even in very competitive situations, such as important competitions and difficult rounds. The reason of no relationship between leader commitment and athletic performance might be conducting investigation to different targets compared to previous research and measuring perceived athletic performance rather than actual data like the number of medals. Third, leader trust fully mediated the relationship between servant leadership and athletic performance. Lastly, leader commitment did not mediate the relationship between servant leadership and athletic performance. According to the results of this study, coaches’ servant leadership indirectly affects athletic performance. Particularly, leader trust is a critical mediating variable between servant leadership and athletic performance. Therefore, for improving athletic performance, professional Taekwondo coaches should show servant leadership, and they always should consider how to improve athletes’ leader trust.

For follow-up studies, the following limitations and recommendations are presented. First, objective information related to athletic performance like recent number of medals won should be obtained. That is because the questionnaire consists of perceived performance and training, which can get only subjective answers. Second, the research model did not consider the period of training with the present coach. To be specific, if the training time with present coach was very short, leader's influence could be marginal.