How A Cause-Related Sporting Event Inspires Participants to Become Servant Leaders

Denise Parris, Florida Southern College
Jon Welty Peachey (Advisor), Texas A&M University

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To date, most research on sporting events has focused on their economic or social impact and has not evaluated their social leverage (i.e., influence to create change) or provided an understanding of why outcomes occur (Chalip, 2006). Although sport may be utilized to accomplish social goals by numerous and diverse organizations, this presentation focuses on how not-for-profit organizations (NPOs) can create lasting social change by hosting cause-related sporting events. Since NPOs' financial resources do not come "directly from those who receive the benefits which the organization produces" (Lewis, 1998, p. 436), it is essential for NPOs to inspire participation from individuals and organizations with no previous association with the NPO in order to develop both financial and human capital (Taylor & Shank, 2008). The celebratory nature of these events creates a 'liminoid' space—a felt energy—engendering a sense of community (communitas), which can create social change by building social capital (Chalip, 2006). Thus, event organizers need to "enable, optimize, and then use liminality" (Chalip, 2006, p. 112) to nurture participants' commitment to serve and inspire individuals to make the conscious choice to serve by adopting the mission of the NPO and championing it.

Inspiring participants' altruistic motivations to help others aligns with the philosophy of servant leadership, which has as its core a focus on making life better for others (Keith, 2008; Prosser, 2010). Servant leadership recognizes that human beings need each other, can accomplish more working together, and are the best resource to build a good society. As Robert Greenleaf, the founder of servant leadership, said, "caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built" (Greenleaf, 1977, p.62). Therefore, servant leadership could be a critical success factor helping NPOs hosting cause-related sporting events achieve their missions. However, there is currently a lack of research on servant leadership in the context of sport.

Given these gaps in the extant literature, the purpose of this study was to investigate the development of servant leadership in participants of a cause-related sporting event, and to determine how the event facilitated this development. The investigation focused on the National Kidney Foundation's (NKF) U.S. Transplant Games, a cause-related sporting event. The research questions for this endeavor were: (a) Does the Transplant Games help to inspire participants to serve others and to become servant leaders? If so, (b) How does the Transplant Games inspire them to achieve this?

We selected the 2010 NKF U.S Transplant Games as the context of our investigation because unlike other cause-related sporting events that focus on raising money and awareness for one NPO's cause (i.e., kidney disease), it involves the entire transplant community in a collaborative effort for the benefit of organ donation. This case study specifically examined the participation of Team Florida, because the first author, by virtue of being a family donor and Florida resident, was able to be a team member, which allowed her to attend events and establish a personal connection with participants, increasing trust and access. Since this study investigated change, a longitudinal approach was utilized including multiple data collection points beginning at the event and ending one year after the Games (Burnett, 2006; Welty Peachey, 2009). This study was conducted from July 2010 to July 2011, to best incorporate the impact of time in change research (George & Jones, 2000).

We used an exploratory qualitative case study methodology to explore the mechanisms, development, and dynamics of servant leadership generated through individuals and their collective involvement in the NKF U.S. Transplant Games. Exploratory data analysis can be used to uncover multi-dimensional impacts and consequently gain new insights in understanding natural phenomena (Berg, 2009). Credibility was established by using triangulation of measures. Several data-gathering techniques were utilized: focus groups pre-event and post-event; b) open-ended qualitative questionnaires pre- and post-event; c) direct observations before, during, and after the event; d) document analysis; and e) semi-structured interviews six to nine months after the event. Purposive sampling was used to select 40 Florida team members as study participants, who represented transplant recipients, living donors,
donor families, professionals, supporters, and caregivers. Consistent with Creswell (1998) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), open, axial and selective coding were used to analyze the data and to form conceptual codes. The principal investigator conducted member checks with all participants to further enhance credibility. Transferability was achieved by the first author keeping a reflective journal that provided a contextual narrative that others can use to examine the degree of similarity to their organization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to improve dependability and confirmability, the second author, who was not involved in data collection, served as an auditor and reviewed all codes, analyses, and interpretations (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

In synthesizing the findings, a model was developed to describe a cause-related sporting event’s ability to inspire participants to become servant leaders. The model starts with the mechanisms of the Games designed to generate a specific community-level outcome, which helped to inspire participants to serve others and to build a community of servant leaders. Three mechanisms were identified that led to community-level outcomes: a) creating event-related social events and producing ancillary events to build a community, b) encouraging themes and hosting ceremonies to foster an atmosphere of celebration, and c) facilitating formal and informal gathering places to create a culture of storytelling and safe spaces. These mechanisms and their outcomes then generated individual-level impacts on participants, which helped them develop servant leadership by: a) developing broader identities; b) nurturing participants’ abilities to see they can make a difference; and c) strengthening participants’ awareness of the healing power of service. The model demonstrates that event participants made the conscious choice to serve others, as evident in their self-constructions (who they are) and their actions (what they do). One year after the Games, the participants of this study were still a community of servant leaders seeking to make a difference by serving others and championing the cause. Thus, empirical evidence is provided of how a cause-related sporting event can be designed to foster the development of servant leadership in event participants. If NPOs hosting a cause-related sporting event can foster the development of servant leadership in participants, as the findings suggest, event participants as servant leaders can help NPOs achieve their mission(s) by carrying the ‘torch’ of the event through their communities, and continuing to spread the message of the cause long after these events are over.

During the presentation, our contribution to the understanding of servant leadership will be illuminated, and practical implications for NPOs hosting successful cause-related sporting events will be discussed. Future research will be proposed that will further aid in advancing the practice and development of servant leadership and illustrate how sporting events can be a catalyst for creating social change by building a community of servant leaders.