Servant Leadership in Sport

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The influence of leadership in sport is undeniable whether it is at the C-level of professional organizations or in coaching at the youth level or anywhere in between. For example, there are more than 400,000 student-athletes in the NCAA coached by thousands of coaches. These coaches lead these athletes to successful seasons (or not); their leadership generates satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the athletes both with their sport experience and in life.

As Aoyagi, Cox, and McGuire (2008) note, Chelladurai’s (1978) Multidimensional Model of Leadership (MML) and the associated Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS) “is the most widely accepted and heavily researched theory of leadership in sport” (p. 27). However, as multiple sources report, the LSS has some psychometric property issues mainly focused on the Autocratic Behavior scale. Furthermore, Elliot (2011) in a somewhat uniformed opinion claims that “discussion about leadership coaching is disconnected from the scientific literature about leadership” (p. 46). Although a lack of research on Elliot’s part informed his opinion, he is correct to some extent in that within sport, we have fallen behind our counterparts in business specific to some advances in leadership research.

Specifically, researchers in business have rediscovered servant leadership, initially proposed in the 1970’s by Greenleaf (1970, 1977), and now reflected by a plethora of recent publications and proposed measurement scales. Within sport, there has only been one research article that has examined and measured servant leadership (Rieke, Hammermeister, & Chase, 2008). Thus the objective of this research was to create a servant leadership questionnaire specific to sport and examine the relationship of servant leadership to the existing LSS dimensions.

Chelladurai’s (1978) Multidimensional Model of Leadership and the associated LSS are based on House’s (1971) path-goal theory of leadership. The path-goal theory of leadership suggests that leadership is based upon the needs and desires of the subordinates. Specific to athletics, coaches provide necessary guidance and social support if it is lacking. The LSS is a five-dimensional measure that consists of one direct task (Training and Instruction) factor, two decision-style factors (Democratic and Autocratic) and two motivational factors (Social Support & Positive Feedback). As noted above, the Autocratic Behavior subscale has had internal consistency issues. Furthermore, although Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) claim that the LSS has conceptually distinct categories of coaching behavior, which it typically does, there may be additional leadership aspects or behaviors that could supplement the LSS.

Hu and Liden (2011) suggested that servant leadership is generally based on Greenleaf’s (1970, 1977) ideas and is focused on “leadership behaviors in which leaders persevere to be ‘servant first’ rather than ‘leader first’” (p. 851). Reed, Vidaver-Cohen, and Colwell (2011) echo that statement by noting that servant leaders subordinate “personal interests to those of organizational stakeholders and who see leadership as an opportunity for service to individuals, organization, and community rather than as a vehicle to attain personal power and prestige” (p. 416). Many authors suggest that there is an ethical or personal integrity focus in servant leadership that may not necessarily be present in other forms of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007; Ehrhart, 2004). Hu and Liden (2011) and Reed et al. concur, suggesting that this is the quality that distinguishes it from transformational leadership especially. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) suggested that it is more people-centered and morality-centered, compared to transformational leadership, based on the research of Graham (1991) and Patterson (2003). Thus, servant leaders are more focused on people within the organization rather than the organizational objectives.

There have been multiple models proposed that depict the multidimensionality of servant leadership. For example, Laub (1999) suggested six dimensions: personal development, valuing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, sharing leadership. Russell and Stone (2002) proposed 20 total characteristics and Patterson (2003) suggested seven (altruism, empowerment, humility, love, service, trust, and vision). Some of these early attempts have been criticized by those that followed (e.g., van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Liden,
Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008) proposed seven dimensions: behaving ethically, emotional healing, putting subordinates first, helping subordinates grow and succeed, empowering, creating value for the community, and conceptual skills. However, in research by Hu and Liden (2011) using those dimensions, there was a lack of discriminant validity. Working concurrently, Reed et al. (2011) identified 5 factors: interpersonal support, building community, altruism, egalitarianism, moral integrity. However, there is quite likely a discriminant validity problem there as well. Sendjaya and Cooper (2011) noted that the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale’s (SLBS) six dimensions (Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality, and Transforming Influence) proposed by Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008) did not have discriminant validity and thus proposed that this indicated a second order factor. This was supported in the 2011 data, but the second order factor loadings were still very high. Finally, after noting the failings of the previous research, van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011) proposed and tested eight dimensions: Empowerment, Accountability, Standing back, Humility, Authenticity, Courage, Forgiveness, and Stewardship. However, construct reliability was low on some of the dimensions, and several other their analyses might be questioned due to combining multiple data sets with different measures.

The only study in the sport field that has measured servant leadership that we are aware of used the Revised Servant Leadership Profile for Sport (RSLP-S). This instrument attempted to improve on the Revised Servant Leadership Profile (RSLP), which in itself was an attempted improvement on the Servant Leadership Profile (SLP) by Page and Wong (2000). The RSLP-S has only 3 dimensions (Trust/Inclusion, Humility, and Service) measured by 22 items. No psychometric values were reported except for Cronbach’s alphas that ranged from .79 to .92. Based on the above research, we proposed a model of servant leadership comprised of three levels with multiple dimensions in each level. The Beliefs and Values level contained two dimensions: High Expectations (HE), and Growth & Values (GV). The Beliefs and Values level led to the Abilities level, which was comprised of Conceptualization & Foresight (CF), Listening & Awareness (LA), and Motivational Ability (MA). This level in turn led to the Behavior level of Community Building (CB) and Communication (CM). We also proposed that these beliefs, values, abilities, and behaviors were precursors or predictors of the type of leadership behaviors represented in the LSS.

The research subjects were comprised of 526 collegiate-aged female athletes competing at NCAA division I, II and III levels in varied sports. The subjects were coached by both male and female coaches. Athletes are represented from both individual and team-oriented sports. Internet-based survey information and an email asking for participation were sent to the coaches of the surveyed athletes. Links to the survey were then voluntarily sent to athletes. Athletes completed a Modified LSS (MLSS). The LSS was modified to attempt to reduce the number of items and solve some of the issues with the AB scale. The MLSS had 25 items across the original 5 dimensions. The athletes also completed the newly created Servant Leadership for Sport Questionnaire SLSQ. The SLSQ had 28 items across the 7 dimensions.

The Cronbach’s alpha values for the MLSS ranged from .687 for AB to .928 for PF. The AVE values ranged from .313 for AB to .719 for PF. The alphas ranged from .804 for HE to .876 for CB. AVE values ranged from .584 for MA to .681 for CF. The CFA on the MLSS indicated good fit (RMSEA = .057) and the CFA on the SLSQ indicated adequate fit (RMSEA = .076). The SEM testing the proposed model of relationships in the SLSQ fit adequately (RMSEA = .080). We also found that HE and GV predicted 69.2% of CF, 81.7% of LA, and 87.0% of MA. In addition, those five dimensions predicted 90.1% of CM and 94% of CB. Furthermore we found that The SLSQ dimensions predicted 72% of PF from the LSS, 80% of DB, 80% of TI, 94% of SS and 42% of AB.

We found support for our seven proposed dimensions of servant leadership and found that they were related to the five dimensions of the LSS. Unfortunately, we were unable to improve on the AB scale in the LSS. Further findings and suggestions for further research will be discussed.