

A Servant Leadership Conceptual Framework in Sport: The Role of Relationship Quality

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Leadership is something “we want more of, until we get it, and then we want less of it or at least we want a different kind of leadership” (Anderson, 2005, p.1). Leadership studies have highlighted the thoughts, behavior, and characteristics of effective leaders (Korman, 1966; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Meindl, 1995; Welty Peachey & Burton, 2011, 2012). During the last several decades, leadership studies have generally focused on top-down, hierarchical processes (Ensley, Hmieleski & Pearce, 2006). Recent leadership studies, however, have started emphasizing the influence of shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003). According to Pearce (2004), shared leadership can be defined as “a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team that is characterized by “serial emergence” of official as well as unofficial leaders” (p. 48).

One such shared leadership style is servant leadership. Greenleaf (1977) first described the concept of servant leadership, which can be defined as “leadership that puts the needs of others and the organization first, is characterized by openness, vision and stewardship, and results in building community within organizations” (Reinke, 2004, p.41). However, the existing literature about servant leadership could not explain the relationship between a coach and athlete or the quality of the relationship. The concept of servant leadership is particularly relevant to the field of sport. Since sport is a highly competitive field, evaluating a leader’s influence is important to investigate in this environment. Also, a leader’s effectiveness differs according to the quality of his or her relationships. Thus, it is worth examining the effect of coach’s servant leadership on athletic performance along with considering the quality of relationship between a coach and athletes. Although studies have examined the effects of servant leadership on performance in education, politics, religion and the service industry, much of the resulting literature have not sufficient scientific evidence in terms of causal relationships between antecedents and outcome variables (Russell & Stone, 2002). Therefore, this paper utilizes the trust-commitment theory to suggest a construct that takes into account the effect of a coach’s servant leadership on athletic performance along with the consideration of the relationship quality.

In contrast with theories of leadership that focus on the well-being of organizations, servant leadership theory focuses primarily on the well-being of followers (Graham, 1995). According to servant leadership theory, leaders are intrinsically motivated to serve and help their followers. The positive influence of a leader plays a significant role in the success and health of an organization (Weinstein, 2012). According to Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), there are five main concepts of servant leadership: wisdom, altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship. As Greenleaf (1977) stressed, these characteristics of servant leadership are more effective in organizational outcomes than the negative characteristics associated with dictatorial leadership. Servant leaders build trust with their followers, share their vision with their followers, spend time with their followers and consider their followers’ potential. This, in turn, causes their followers to make a commitment to their leader. Since servant leadership has had positive impacts on followers’ performance, we believe a servant coach will improve athletic performance.

It is necessary to consider the quality of relationship between coaches and athletes in order to understand the effect of servant leadership on athletic performance. In order to explain our integrated model—which consists of athletic performance, the coach’s servant leadership, and the quality of relationships between the coach and the athlete—it is especially important to view the quality of these relationships through the lens of trust-commitment theory. Morgan and Hunt (1994) adapted the trust-commitment theory to relationship marketing in business literature. They emphasized relationship commitment and trust as two key factors in relationships, arguing that these two factors ensure cooperation, enable both parties to resist attractive short-term relationships, and give prudent provisions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

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The concept of relationship commitment is defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman, Zaltman & Deshpande, 1992), and trust has been defined as “a degree of belief and loyalty to leader” (Podsakoff, MacKenzie & Scott, 1996). In the context of sport, relationship commitment and trust could be considered athletes’ commitment to and trust in their coach. As Morgan and Hunt (1994) mentioned in their key mediating variable (KMV) model of relationship marketing, commitment to and trust in the leader could be important mediators affecting a coach’s leadership and an athlete’s performance.

Furthermore, Weinstein (2012) argued that servant leadership leads to greater productivity and innovation. Servant leaders can increase their followers’ performance by fostering high quality relationships. Commitment and trust play mediating roles in the relationship between servant leadership and athletic performance. Jacobs (2006) maintained that followers of a servant leader produce different outcomes according to the level of their commitment to the leader (Becker & Billings, 1993). In addition, an atmosphere in which there is a high level of trust in the leader encourages communication and plays a significant role in followers’ performance (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010). In other words, followers who have a high-quality relationship with a servant leader will perform at a higher level. Therefore, it is arguable that athletes’ performance is directly related to their commitment to and trust in their coach, especially one who practices servant leadership.

In conclusion, the results of our conceptual framework revealed that a coach practicing servant leadership could positively influence athletic performance. To be specific, when a coach has the abilities of altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship, the quality of relationship would be increased. In this relationship, commitment to and trust in the coach were crucial factors affecting athletic performance. After that, based on high quality of relationship between the coach and athlete, the level of athletic performance could be increased. In order to improve athletic performance, it is necessary for coaches to use strategies of servant leadership and to cultivate a high level of commitment and trust in their athletes. For future research, an empirical study is needed to better understand and examine the relationships among the variables in this framework. Specifically, investigating coaches’ servant leadership strategies and improved relationship qualities, could result in higher level of athletic performance.