The Role of Servant Leadership in Developing an Ethical Climate in Intercollegiate Athletics

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Abstract 2013-303
Saturday, June 1, 2013
4:05 PM

In light of many recent ethical scandals, educators and officials both within and outside of sport management have called for reform of university governance of athletic programs (see Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010) and reform of enforcement processes at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). We call attention to the need for evaluation of leadership as a necessary component to reform of intercollegiate athletics. Leadership could be critical to fostering a more ethical climate within intercollegiate athletics (Schminke, Ambrose, & Neubaum, 2005). Current leadership research is moving away from the more traditional studies of transformational and transactional leadership toward a stronger emphasis on a shared and relational perspective with a focus on the interaction between leader and follower (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership is different than other approaches to leadership as the emphasis of leadership is explicitly on the needs of followers, and also because this approach emphasizes the ideal of service in the relationship between leader and follower (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership is an alternative approach to leadership, one without a focus on organizational outcomes that should be explored within the context of intercollegiate athletics administration due to its ethical component and people-centered approach. In fact, ethics is at the core of servant leadership, with its emphasis on integrity and trustworthiness (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Servant leadership focuses on the interaction between leader and follower and emphasizes how leaders can be attentive to the needs of followers, show concern for their followers, and nurture them. Servant leaders place the interests, needs, and aspirations of others before their own (Greenleaf, 1977). Though there appear to be similarities between the behaviors of transformational leaders and servant leaders, the primary distinction between these leadership styles is that the objective of a servant leader is to serve followers first. Servant leadership focuses on humility, interpersonal acceptance, and authenticity; these are not elements explicit in transformational leadership (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; van Dierendonck, 2011). A transformational leader’s primary allegiance is to the organization, and leaders will view the personal growth of followers within the context of what is best for the organization (Graham, 1991). Within transformational leadership there is the risk of manipulation of followers in order to achieve organizational goals or to meet the leader’s personal goals (van Dierendonck, 2011). In contrast, the moral grounding of servant leadership that is not included in understandings of transformational leadership (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008) could help to foster an ethical climate within the organization. Limited scholarship, however, has examined the relationship between leadership and ethical climate, particularly in the intercollegiate context, which as noted earlier, is in need of reform. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess the influence of both transformational and servant leadership on development of an ethical climate within intercollegiate athletic departments.

There is a developing body of research examining organizational outcomes associated with servant leadership that have an ethical component to them. For instance, organizations led by a servant leader are positively associated with procedural justice (Chung, Jung, Kyle, & Petrick, 2010; Ehrhart, 2004; Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010). In addition, servant leadership fosters trust in the servant leader and the organization (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Sendjaya & Perketi, 2010). Other studies have demonstrated that servant leadership positively influences followers’ well-being by creating a positive work climate (Black, 2010; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008) and that servant leadership has a positive influence on organizational commitment (Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009). Based on the research findings presented, we hypothesize the following:

H1 Servant leadership behavior, when compared to transformational leadership, will be more positively associated with formation of a positive ethical climate in intercollegiate athletic departments.
Perceptions of servant leadership are positively correlated to leadership trust (Joseph & Winston, 2005). Additionally, a conceptual framework for servant leadership has indicated that trust in the leader could mediate the relationship between servant leadership and organizational outcomes (van Dierendonck, 2011). Trust created by a servant leader facilitates an open climate, builds a helping culture, and is associated with organizational citizenship behaviors (Ebener & O’Connell, 2010; Hu & Liden, 2011). As such, we posit the following:

H2 The positive relationship between servant leadership and ethical climate will be mediated by the follower’s level of trust in the leader.

Given the influence of stakeholders within the context of intercollegiate athletics (Schroeder, 2010; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011), specifically powerful external stakeholders (e.g., athletic boosters and donors), this influence must be taken into account when examining a leader’s ability to develop a positive ethical climate. Therefore, we put forward the final hypothesis:

H3 The relationship between servant leadership and ethical climate will be moderated by the level of stakeholder influence perceived by the follower.

This study is in progress. Data will be collected, through use of an online survey, from a random sample of senior level intercollegiate athletic administrators working within NCAA Division I athletic departments. Participants will be asked to evaluate their athletic director on servant leadership (SLS, van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) and transformational leadership (MLQ, Bass & Avolio, 2000), and to assess the current ethical climate within their athletic department (ECQ, Victor & Cullen, 1988). Participants will also assess their level of trust (OTI, Cummings & Bromiley, 1996) in their athletic director. Finally, participants will identify and rate the influence of stakeholder groups within and outside of the athletic department.

Research hypotheses will be evaluated using structural equation modeling, and analysis of moderated mediation as detailed by (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). It is expected that all hypotheses will be supported, and results of the analyses will be discussed within the frameworks of servant leadership and transformational leadership. Based on these findings, it could be conjectured that servant leadership will be important to the reform of intercollegiate athletics by helping to establish a more ethical climate within athletic departments. Practically, this might require athletic directors to shift focus from organizational objectives to nurturing followers and fostering leadership behaviors which support positive ethical climates. A review of future research directions, such as replicating this study within other Divisions of intercollegiate athletics, will also be provided.