Do I have to be a Man to Lead in High School Athletic Administration?

Nicole Philen, Washington State University

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Title IX has been recognized for promoting equal opportunity for participation in sport regardless of sex and its effort to decrease inequity faced by women in the educational setting; most notably, women working and participating in athletics. Under Title IX, the opportunity for girls to participate in high school sport has expanded ten fold (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012) but the same cannot be said for the amount of women who hold the role of high school athletic director. Women only hold 15% of all athletic director positions across the nation (White, 2012). The underrepresntation of women as high school athletic directors may be attributed to discrimination in hiring practices involving job announcements (Whisenant, Pedersen & Clavio, 2010), job descriptions (Whisenant, 2005; Miller, Whisenant & Pedersen, 2007) and the practice of homologous reproduction (Stangl & Kane, 1991; Lovett & Lowery, 1994; Whisenant, 2008). Research at the high school setting has not focused on leadership style as a possible barrier to women’s entry into athletic administration. Literature supports the notion that men and women’s leadership styles are very similar, with less than significant differences (van Engen & Willemsen; Duehr & Bono, 2006; Chapman, 1975). However, in the sport context, leadership has been stereotyped as masculine, especially in regards to the athletic director position (Burton, Barr, Fink & Brueing, 2009; Burton, Barr & Fink, 2009; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine what leadership style female high school athletic directors utilize to secure or maintain their leadership role in high school athletic administration. In order to investigate the chosen leadership style, the researcher will place the study within the theoretical framework of patriarchy, social role, and role congruity theory.

In order to fully understand women and leadership style, it is necessary to examine the social ideologies that have suppressed women’s advancement in the hierarchy of society. Social role theory is an ideology that argues the beliefs people hold about men and women are derived from observations of the role performances of each sex and thus reflect the sexual division of labor and gender hierarchy of society (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 1991). From the division of labor and responsibility in family and groups, cultural stereotypes about gender emerged. Role congruity expands upon social role theory to propose that a group of people will be positively evaluated when their gender traits are recognized as aligning with the group’s typical social roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women in sport are seen as holding a social role that is incongruent with their gender role. Furthermore, women in society are living in a patriarchic society. A patriarchic society is defined as a society that is male centered, male dominant and male identified (Johnson, 2005). In other words, what is considered normal in leadership is what men value. Men value aggression, ambitions, dominance, force, independence, self-sufficiency, and confidence; thus men set the standard for what is masculine (Eagly, 2002). Women on the other hand are seen as feminine and lacking characteristics necessary to be leaders. Unfortunately, the incongruity people perceive between the characteristics of women and the necessities of leadership influence discrimination against women (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

This study will use a qualitative approach focusing on the self-perceived leadership style of a select few female high school athletic directors. The researcher aims to test the following hypothesis: female athletic directors will utilize a masculine leadership style to secure or maintain their leadership in a male dominant career. The proposed research emerges from the concept of social role, role congruity, and patriarchy; which help to understand perceptions of gender and leadership style as they pertain to athletic administration. In the proposed study, qualitative methods will focus on the collection and summarization of data from the use of observation, and interviews. Qualitative data seeks to understand perceptions by analyzing patterns and themes (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The use of qualitative methods will provide an information rich approach to determine the leadership style of female high school athletic directors. The participants of the study will be selected through a stratified purposeful sampling process, where the researcher selects participants from within the Washington Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) directory (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Upon receiving consent from the participants the researcher will discuss the purpose and objectives, data collection and analysis procedures, and participant rights before collecting any data. Semi-structured audio-recorded interviews will be arranged with five current athletic directors from various public or private high schools in Washington State; this will provide a wide and diverse sample.
The semi-structured interview process will be used to elaborate on the current athletic directors' self-perception of their leadership characteristics, temperaments, and attitudes. The semi-structured interview guide will be designed to allow for the exploration of the participants' experiences within interscholastic sport leadership. Participants will be asked a series of questions related to: what they perceive the characteristics of leaders are; what leadership attributes they utilize and why; what influenced their choice of leadership attributes; if gender plays a role in the leadership attributes they choose to use; and what stereotypes participants faced while in the athletic director position, if any? From the aforementioned questions, participant feelings regarding a masculine approach to leadership style can emerge. The audio-recorded interview data will be transcribed verbatim. Audio-recorded data will allow the researcher to play back initial dialogue for a more accurate interpretation (Stake, 2010). The interview data will be analyzed using both a priori and open coding method. Qualitative methodology allows for exploration, discovery, and inductive logic (Patton, 2002), therefore the themes that emerge within the data collection process will be analyzed carefully in order to represent the voice of the aforementioned participants.

The findings of the purposed study will highlight a select few women’s self-perception of the leadership style utilized to secure or maintain their leadership role in high school athletic administration. Women are underrepresented in athletic administration, which is problematic because gender equity and discrimination is still an issue women face. This is potentially limiting to the workforce because women may have a different leadership style compared to men that has proven to be more effective (Eagly, 2007). The primary concern associated with this study is the limited role women play in high school athletic administration and the assumption men are better suited for leadership when it comes to the sport domain. The findings of the purposed study will provide a foundation for understanding women’s leadership in sport as well as expand recruitment of women due to this new understanding of gender and leadership. The implications for women in sport will be presented along with recommendations for future research.