Called to Serve: Exploring Servant Leadership in the Context of Sport-For-Development

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Abstract 2014-295  Saturday, May 31, 2014  4:05 PM  20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Conference Center B)

For over five decades the evolution of leadership paradigms has been a focus of research (Higgs, 2003; Strang, 2005). While classical transactional and transformational leadership paradigms have garnered immense attention among business and sport management scholars (Burton & Peachey, 2009; Doherty & Schwy, 2003), servant leadership may be a prevalent leadership behavior exhibited by SFD leaders because of its emphasis on serving others. While most SFD research has examined potential outcomes (see Burnett, 2006; Sherry, 2010; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012; Sugden, 2008; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008; Spaaij, 2009; Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2013), leadership in a SFD context has yet to be addressed. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore servant leadership in the context of one SFD organization using soccer as an outreach to the homeless in the U.S. The study is taking place with Street Soccer USA (SSUSA), which operates in 22 cities and has a mission to use soccer to help homeless individuals make positive changes in their lives. Two research questions were developed to guide the study: (a) How, if at all, does the founder of SSUSA exhibit servant leadership behaviors; and (b) How, if at all, do the regional coordinators of SSUSA exhibit servant leadership behaviors.

Since servant leadership is an emerging leadership paradigm, it may be useful to differentiate it from Bass' (1985) transactional and transformational leadership theory. Where transactional leaders emphasize exchange of rewards for accomplishments, servant and transformational leaders strive to meet followers' higher order needs (Burton & Peachey, 2009; Yusof & Shah, 2008). Although Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) assert servant leaders and transformational leaders similarly raise motivation and morality levels, Sendjava (2005) counters transformational leaders increase motivation through empowerment of followers' self-esteem, whereas servant leaders increase motivation by satisfying followers’ needs. Servant leaders also consider followers’ goals (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), whereas transformational leaders inspire followers and transactional leaders entice followers with rewards (Duehr & Bono, 2006). Overall, servant leaders focus on the well-being of the followers of an organization, while transactional and transformational leaders concentrate on the well-being of an organization (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977; Senjaya et al., 2008).

To determine if the founder and regional coordinators of SSUSA exhibited servant leadership behaviors, fifteen (N = 15) in-person and phone, semi-structured interviews are being used to collect data. The SSUSA founder, regional SSUSA coordinators, and assistants from five diverse cities (Ann Arbor, Charlotte, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco) are participating in the study. Each interview is being audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded into themes and patterns based on van Dierendonck’s (2011) six dimensions of servant leadership: (a) authenticity, (b) empowering and developing people, (c) humility, (d) interpersonal acceptance, (e) providing direction, and (f) stewardship. Dependability and credibility are being enhanced by having two researchers independently code the data while meeting periodically to establish intercoder reliability through cross-checking codes and themes (Creswell, 2012), and by conducting member checks with study participants.
This study is in progress and will be fully completed before NASSM. Our main focus is to determine how the founder and regional coordinators of SSUSA exhibit servant leadership behaviors. The preliminary findings are revealing that both the founder and regional coordinators, to varying degrees, can be classified as servant leaders following van Dierendonck’s (2011) six dimensions of servant leadership. Every study participant has spoken, numerous times, about how the founder, Lawrence Cann, puts followers first; he is excellent at building relationships and genuinely caring for, supporting, and nurturing players, volunteers, and staff. For example, Patrick, the regional coordinator for an East Coast program, shared about Cann’s strength in building relationships and his care for others: “His concept was to build relationships, so the players have a place, community to call their own. . . . He’s made it personal and it really feels like a family.” Carter, a volunteer with a West Coast team, agreed, and also mentioned how Cann supports people: “I think he really takes time to get to know individuals . . . and it makes me want to stay involved and help more and more people . . . I’ve seen him go to bat for people.” While it does appear that the founder is a very strong servant leader, the regional coordinators display servant leadership behaviors to varying degrees, although all are exhibiting servant leadership behaviors. Interestingly, the one female regional coordinator exhibits much more humility than the other male regional coordinators and the founder, which could be a product of the gendered nature of sport and socialization processes (Sibson, 2010).

The important gap this study addresses is examining leadership in the context of SFD – this has not been an area of focus in the SFD literature (Burton & Welty Peachey, 2013). While preliminary findings show that servant leadership behaviors are being practiced by leaders within SSUSA, we do not know the effects of this leadership. That is, we do not know if servant leadership is effective in achieving various organizational and individual outcomes. This is an area for future research within the SFD context. Similar studies should be undertaken with other SFD organizations working in a variety of contexts and with different missions and foci to determine both the prevalence and effectiveness of servant leadership.