Role Models, Women's Leadership and Careers of Women in the Management of Professional Baseball

Maki Itoh, Juntendo University
Mary Hums (Advisor), University of Louisville

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Women are still underrepresented in business and in the sport industry. It is significant to investigate the reasons for women’s underrepresentation in leadership positions in the sport industry. The sport industry is considered a male-dominated industry, making it difficult to increase participation by women leaders (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Bower & Hums, 2009; Burton et al., 2009; Burton, Borland, & Mazzerolle, 2012; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; IOC, 2012). The under-representation of women within sports organizations has received considerable attention (Inglin, Danylychuk, & Pastore, 1996, 2000; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Previous studies have identified barriers to women’s career development in the sport industry especially in intercollegiate athletics including (a) old boys network (Bower & Hums, 2009; Hancock, 2012; Schein, 2001; Shaw, 2006), (b) homologous reproduction (Aicher & Sagas, 2009; Whisenant et al., 2002), (c) work-life balance issues (Bruening et al., 2008; Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004), and (d) gender role stereotypes and perceptions of gendered opportunities (Burton et al., 2009; Burton et al., 2011; Grappendorf et al., 2004; Grappendorf, Pent, Burton, & Henderson, 2008). Gender bias and stereotypes prevent women from attaining leadership and decision-making positions (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening 2009; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Grappendorf, Lough, & Griffin, 2004; Schein’s, 2001; Whisenant, 2002).

The concepts of Bandura’s cognitive theory and self-efficacy are keys that help women advance to leadership positions. Bandura (2000) stated, “perceived efficacy plays a key role in human functioning because it affects behavior not only directly, but by its impact on other determinations such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities, and perception of impediments and opportunities in the social environment” (p. 1). Women tend to be less confident compared to men, and women generally have lower self-efficacy (e.g., Hacket & Betz, 1981; Heilman, Simon, & Repper, 1987; Pallier, 2003). Hackett and Betz (1981) found that women fail to recognize and maximize their occupational capabilities and talents because they lack self-efficacy related to career-related behaviors. Cunningham, Doherty, and Gregg (2007) and Hackett and Betz (1981) pointed out that women’s limited access to the four main self-efficacy information sources (i.e., performance accomplishment, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, and emotional arousal) at workplaces may lower self-efficacy beliefs. Moreover, they argued, women’s low self-efficacy beliefs are directly attributed to limited opportunities. Researchers have generally concluded that vicarious learning (modeling) and guided practice on a task can raise self-efficacy, even when participants are initially unsure about their ability to succeed on tasks (Bandura, 1977; Gist, Schworer, & Rosen, 1989). This suggests women would benefit from the opportunity to observe effective leaders. According to Social Cognitive Theory, people learn behaviors and skills by observing others, which is termed as “modeling” (Bandura, 1986). "Learning by imitation" and "learning using a role model" are significant because people can learn appropriate ways to behave without actually experiencing various situations, and build up their skills by observing the role model (Bandura, 1977). Considering sex differences between men and women in career-related self-efficacy, it is important to conduct research on the influence of role models on women’s self-efficacy.

Observing successful role models increases a person’s self-efficacy (DeSantis & Quimby, 2004; Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998; Lirgg, Dibrezzo, & Smith, 1994; Moran-Miller & Flores, 2011). It has been postulated that the level and strength of self-efficacy may be particularly important in understanding women’s career development. A stronger sense of self-efficacy with regard to specific career-relevant behaviors may enable women to consider a wider range of career options. This study examined the hypothesis that role models can function as one of the important factors to increase self-efficacy in women, and how those role models can help women advance to leadership positions in the sport industry. According to Lapchick (2012), few women hold leadership roles in professional sports in North America. Major League Baseball (MLB) ranks lowest among the five major North
American professional sport leagues. The percentage of women holding leadership positions is as low as 18%, giving the impression that professional baseball is an especially male-dominated part of the sport industry. Accordingly, the purpose of the study was to examine the relationship of role models with role model existence, role model quality, gender career barriers, business leader self-efficacy, cognitive leader self-efficacy, and future leadership expectations of women working in management positions in professional baseball organizations. Role model information was measured by asking participants to (a) indicate the existence and gender of role models whom they look up to or want to be like during their career development and (b) complete the Role Models Scale (Moran-Miller & Flores, 2009). Career barriers to women’s career development were measured by using the Career Barriers Scale (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998). This 17-item measure with 2 subcategories which consisted of working hours and perceived discrimination, asked participants to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale the likelihood that certain statements would hinder them from working in the baseball industry. Leader self-efficacy was measured by a leader self-efficacy scale consisting of 20 items with 4 subcategories which consisted of (a) cognitive skills, (b) interpersonal skills, (c) business skills, and (d) strategic skills (Machida, 2012). Future leadership expectations were measured by using future leadership expectations scale that consists of 4 items (Machida, 2012). Participants also answered a series of open-ended question about role models and their influence on the participants’ careers.

The participants included 233 women who worked in administrative positions in professional baseball. Five major findings were (a) the importance of the presence/quality of a role model, (b) participants indicated no gender preference for a role model, (c) women working in minor league baseball who had a female role model scored significantly higher than women working on the MLB level who had a female role model on business leader self-efficacy, (d) future leader expectation had a positive relationship with leader self-efficacy and a negative relationship with career barriers, and (e) women saw themselves as role models wanting to help newcomers in their organizations. Two practical implications of role model influence for professional baseball organizations are that (a) observational learning is beneficial for women to acquire the necessary skills and behaviors to be successful sport managers in professional baseball, and (b) it is important that women (and men) learn from diverse role models. Future research could include replicating this study with women working in other segments of the sport industry and also with men working in the management of professional baseball.