Servant Leadership in Intercollegiate Athletics: Follower Perceptions of NCAA Division II Athletic Directors

Harlan Johnson, Southern Nazarene University
Richard Remedios (Advisor), Northcentral University

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Burton and Peachey (2013) reported that the concept of servant leadership has been studied in several different contexts, which include the fields of leadership, education, business, psychology, nursing, management, personnel, sales, ethics, parks and recreation administration, services marketing, and sport. However, research has been limited in the intercollegiate athletic context. The intercollegiate athletic environment is faced with moral and ethical issues on a daily basis (Burton & Peachey, 2014; DeSensi, 2014). The issues involve a number of challenges including, but not limited to, human rights violations, cheating, a lack of individual and corporate social responsibility, respect, and others (DeSensi, 2014). These issues can be attributed to the vast amount of money generated by sport, and to the culture established within individual athletic departments (Burton & Peachey, 2014; Roby, 2014; Staurowsky, 2014). These realities have led to an evaluation of leadership practices within the intercollegiate athletic context (Burton & Peachey, 2013).

Servant leadership was introduced as a theory of leadership in the 1970’s by Robert Greenleaf. Greenleaf (2002) defined the servant leader as one that is interested in serving the needs of followers first and then leading second. Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010) suggested that servant leadership begins as a conviction of the heart that causes a person to lead for the sake of others instead of any personal benefit of leadership. While many scholars have written about servant leadership, Searle and Barbuto (2011) suggested that much of the writing has been anecdotal stories, intuitive in nature, and/or illustrative case studies. The writings of Greenleaf (2002) were based on his work experience at AT&T and not empirical investigation. Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) called for the empirical investigation of servant leadership to advance the literature in this area. In response, many researchers have worked to further define servant leadership, to create a model for understanding servant leadership, and/or to develop a valid and reliable instrument to empirically test the concept (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Ehrhart, 2004; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Page & Wong, 2000; Sendjaya, Sarros, Santora, 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

According to van Dierendonck (2011), servant leadership is focused on the needs of followers first, instead of being focused solely on the objectives of the organization. Burton and Peachey (2013) called for the use of servant leadership within intercollegiate athletics to help address the ethical issues that are being faced. However, such a call needs evidence to support a claim that servant leadership is related to important outcomes. So whilst servant leadership has been investigated within the context of sport (Parris & Peachey, 2012; Rieke, Hammermeister, & Chase, 2008), the relationship between intercollegiate athletic administrators and the organizational outcomes of their employees has not been investigated.

Purpose and Objectives

To date, the study of servant leadership in the sport context has focused on the relationship between the coach and performance outcomes of student-athletes (Rieke, Hammermeister, & Chase, 2008; Westre, 2003). Rieke, Hammermeister, and Chase (2008) found that athletes coached by a perceived servant leader experienced higher levels of intrinsic motivation, higher levels of mental acuity, higher levels of satisfaction with the sport experience, and better individual and team performance than compared to those that were non-servant leaders, but these findings have not been examined between athletic directors and their employees.

The problem to be addressed in this study is to examine whether there is a relationship between employees perceptions of their leaders’ use of servant leadership characteristics and their (the employees’) organizational citizenship behaviors and job satisfaction. The research will be guided by the following research question.

Research Question
What is the relationship between the athletic departments paid staff member's perceptions of servant leadership characteristics of NCAA Division II athletic directors' and the self-reported organizational citizenship behavior and self-reported job satisfaction of the paid staff members?

Method

This study is in progress. Data will be collected, through distribution of paper questionnaire, from a purposeful sample of paid staff members at NCAA Division II athletic departments in the State of Oklahoma. Approximately 70 participants will be asked to complete a 60-item questionnaire which is made up of three instruments. These instruments are as follows.

Perceived servant leadership characteristics will be measured by using the Servant Leadership Scale (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The Servant Leadership Scale is a 30-item scale with eight dimensions, 1) empowerment (7 items, \( \alpha = .94 \)); 2) accountability (3 items, \( \alpha = .93 \)); 3) standing back (3 items, \( \alpha = .92 \)); 4) humility (5 items, \( \alpha = .95 \)); 5) authenticity (4 items, \( \alpha = .76 \)); 6) courage (2 items, \( \alpha = .91 \)); 7) forgiveness (3 items, \( \alpha = .90 \)); 8) stewardship (3 items, \( \alpha = .87 \)). Participants will be asked to respond to these items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

The athletic department employees' self-reported organizational citizenship behaviors will be measured by using the Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). The Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale is a 24-item scale with five dimensions, 1) conscientiousness (6 items, \( \alpha = .82 \)); 2) sportsmanship (4 items, \( \alpha = .85 \)); 3) civic virtue (4 items, \( \alpha = .70 \)); 4) courtesy (5 items \( \alpha = .85 \)); 5) altruism (5 items, \( \alpha = .85 \)). Participants will be asked to respond to these items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

The athletic department employees' self-reported job satisfaction will be measured by using the Job Satisfaction Scale (Messersmith, Patel, & Lepak, 2011). The Job Satisfaction Scale is a 3-item scale, 1) “In general, I like working here,” 2) “In general, I don’t like my job” (Reverse coded), and 3) “All things considered, I feel pretty good about this job.” Participants will be asked to respond to these items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The reported Cronbach’s alpha for the Job Satisfaction Scale is .83 (Messersmith, et al. 2011).

Results

A correlation coefficient will be used to examine whether or not a relationship exists between a) the perceived servant leadership characteristics of the athletic directors and the self-reported organizational citizenship behaviors of the athletic department employees, and b) between the perceived servant leadership characteristics of the athletic directors and the self-reported job satisfaction of the athletic department employees (Cozby & Bates, 2012). More specifically, because there are several sub-con structs within the over-arching larger constructs, linear regression analysis will be used to predict which of the perceived servant leadership characteristics of the athletic directors (Independent variables) potentially predict the athletic department employee’s organizational citizenship behavior and job satisfaction (Dependent variables) (Field, 2009).

Discussion/Applications

The results and analyses will be discussed within the framework of servant leadership. The findings of the study could provide evidence that servant leadership is a viable form of leadership to be used in the intercollegiate athletic context. A review of future research directions will also be provided within the discussion section.