Authentic Leadership Theory in Sport Management and its Influence on Sense of Community: An Exploratory Qualitative Study

Zack Damon, Texas A&M University
Matthew Walker (Advisor), Texas A&M University

Management/leadership Saturday, June 4, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Forum West 2)

Abstract 2016-278 1:30 PM

Recent attention has been paid to leadership in the sport context due to the ongoing leadership issues seen in transgressions across multiple levels of sport. Incidents in North America include: scandals in the National Football League (NFL), intercollegiate athletic departments, the Performance Enhancing Drug (PEDs) issues of Major League Baseball (MLB), and have also included global sport organizations such as the unethical conduct of the Federation International of Futbol Association (FIFA), as well as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (Maennig, 2005; Mason, Thibault, & Misener, 2006). While much of the attention has focused on these negative outcomes and those in charge of the organizations, positive outcomes in sport organizations do exist. Sport-for-development initiatives have garnered attention for their ability to bring people together and decrease prejudice between two different groups (Welty Peachey, Lyras, Cunningham, Cohen, & Bruening, 2015). As well, sense of community (SOC) can create and enhance bonds between individuals (Warner, Dixon, 2013; Warner, Kerwin, Walker, 2013). Analogous to these areas, various leadership theories have been applied across sport contexts to study sport organization dynamics (Welty Peachey, Damon, Zhou, & Burton, 2015). Theories such as transactional, transformational, and servant (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977) have been studied extensively. However, the idea of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) has yet to be examined in the Sport Management discipline. Similarly, the type of leadership influencing the fostering of a SOC has yet to be explored. A gap exists here in the literature that has not been addressed by the study of the previously mentioned leadership theories in sport. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to begin to look at authentic leadership in sport organizations and how it may lead to SOC and then other appropriate organizational and individual outcomes.

Where other leadership theories influence followers through performance-reward dichotomy (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) or through idealized attributes, behaviors, motivation (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), authentic leadership dictates the leader be defined first (Lawton & Paez, 2015; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Over time the definition of authentic leadership has evolved with the first attempt seen by Henderson and Hoy (1983). Their definition revolved around three parts including acceptance of actions, “non-manipulation of subordinates” (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011, p. 1123), and staying true to the self. From this definition authentic leadership is acknowledged to possesses four pillars: (1) balanced processing, (2) internal moral responsibility, (3) transparency in leader-follower relations, and (4) knowing themselves (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; George, 2003). Contrary to other leadership theories where the focus is on the leader-follower dichotomy, authentic leadership focuses on who the leader is as a person first (Lawton & Paez, 2015). As an understudied aspect of leadership in sport, this theory offers potential for creating SOC by leaders surrounding themselves with others who possess strengths that they themselves do not have. Moreover, the four pillars and internal focus on the leader, should enable an authentic leadership to foster higher levels of SOC. Once a SOC has been created, the literature has shown that increases in identification and personal investment in the organization can manifest (Kerwin, Warner, Walker, & Stevens, 2015; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As an outcome of leadership, SOC can then lead follower motivation for those with high organizational identification (OI) (van Dick et al., 2006). Through SOC other organizational outcomes need to be explored such as group performance, group leadership development, as well as individual outcomes corresponding to organization citizenship behavior and organization justice.

Before exploring these outcomes, we must first determine if authentic leadership is evident in sport organizations. Also of interest, and proffered by Welty Peachey, Damon, Zhou, and Burton (2015), was determining sport-specific leadership antecedents. Based on the potential synthesis between authentic leadership and SOC with the aforementioned outcomes, several research questions have emerged and will guide this study:

R1: Do leaders of sport organizations embody authentic leadership and who are they as a person and a leader?
R2: What, if any, sport specific leadership antecedents do they possess in conjunction with the pillars of authentic leadership?

R3: How do these leaders aim to foster and maintain a SOC within their organizations?

R4: How do these leaders reconcile balancing their own interests with interests of the firm, stakeholders, and followers?

In order to answer these questions, an exploratory qualitative study will be undertaken. Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews with identified leaders (e.g., executives, managers, and owners) of sport organizations as well as followers of said leaders. This multilevel approach should allow for rich data to emerge and guard against the possibility of leader’s positively biased opinions of their efforts. Sport organizations will consist of intercollegiate athletic programs, various American professional sport organizations (e.g., MLB, NFL, National Basketball Association, etc.) and other professional sport firms. Data are to going to be collected starting in November 2015, and continue until data saturation has been reached. Once data are collected they will then go through the coding process onto a conceptual model in order to allow for themes to emerge (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994). Triangulation of the data will also occur to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994).

Once data have been collected and analyzed, results will be disseminated and a model of authentic leadership in sport will be constructed (based upon what the data says). Following this, future research directions such as quantitative methods to verify the theory and theoretical synthesis are recommended. Limitations of the study will also be discussed. It is expected that authentic leadership will be evident in sport leaders, and the unique sport antecedents will also emerge from the data. In the event that authentic leadership is not present in the sport context, this too will be discussed with its implications. SOC as an outcome or perhaps as an antecedent to obtaining a leadership position will also be explored.