Examining the Practice of Servant Leadership and its Impacts on Job Satisfaction and Ethical Decision-Making in NCAA Division III Athletics

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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether athletic directors who lead National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III athletic departments demonstrate the characteristics of servant leadership and the impact of their leadership styles on employees’ job satisfaction and ethical decision-making.

Review of Literature

Robert Greenleaf (1977) coined the term servant leadership as a group-oriented approach to strengthening institutions with the primary purpose to focus on employees and the community and not the profit of institutions. Greenleaf (1977) stated, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first…The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (p. 13). Servant leadership differs from many other leadership styles because of a primary focus on followers and not the well-being of the organization (Greenleaf, 1977; Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2004). Burton and Welty-Peachey (2013) suggested servant leadership was a better approach in athletics in an educational environment that espouses values and benefits student-athletes. An increase in the number of servant leaders who follow Greenleaf’s (1977) original definition of placing the interests, needs, and aspirations of others before their own could potentially change the culture within an athletic department to ensure athletic department personnel remain dedicated to the overall educational experience of student-athletes.

Our study examines perceptions about the existence of servant leadership in intercollegiate athletics at the NCAA Division III level where a balance between education and athletics, it is believed, has remained the primary focus for student-athletes. The Division III philosophy statement reads, "Colleges and universities in Division III place the highest priority on the overall academic quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students’ academic programs" (NCAA, 2015). This philosophy articulates the importance placed on student-athletes’ overall educational experiences in college. These ideals parallel the actions of servant leaders who, according to Finely (2011), help others grow and live through a new dynamic role, one with risk and responsibility through modeling and teaching.

Method

This cross-sectional study uses self-report survey data to investigate servant leadership in NCAA Division III athletic departments. The names and e-mail addresses of all NCAA Division III athletic directors and members of his or her athletic department staff will be collected from the staff directory listed on institutional athletic department webpages. After receiving Human Subjects Committee approval, an e-mail message sent to the participants includes an invitation to respond, informed consent form, demographic questions, description of the study with instructions, and a link to an electronic questionnaire accessed through Qualtrics. One follow-up e-mail message sent to participants thanks those who have already participated and requests participation from those not having completed the questionnaire.

The electronic questionnaire sent to participants includes questions from the Servant Leadership Survey (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), Ethics Behaviors Scale (Newstrom & Ruch, 1975) and Job Satisfaction Scale (Seashore, Lawler, Mirvis & Cammann, 1983). The Servant Leadership Survey measures the eight dimensions of servant leadership (empowerment; accountability; standing back; humility; authenticity; courage; interpersonal acceptance; and stewardship) through a 30-item survey using a seven-point Likert-like scale. The Ethics Behavior
Scale is a 17-item scale measured on a seven-point Likert-like scale, and the job satisfaction scale includes three items measured on a five-point Likert-like scale.

Confirmatory factor analysis in Mplus examines the psychometric properties of the measures and generates descriptive statistics of the data collected. We use t-tests to examine the differences between populations on the servant leadership scale as well as the individual subscales. Finally, structural equation modeling examines relationships between servant leadership and the two outcome variables of job satisfaction and ethical decision-making.

Implications for Practitioners

Athletic directors in NCAA Division III are a seldom-investigated group of leaders. An alleged congruency between Division III institutional values and servant leadership characteristics suggest leaders in Division III intercollegiate athletics should be utilizing this leadership style to create a positive, ethical, and serving work culture. Additionally, findings advance servant leadership theory within sport management. The findings for the existence of servant leadership or lack thereof could both have important implications for practitioners. If Division III athletic directors are not seen as demonstrating the characteristics of servant leaders, additional on-the-job training may be needed to encourage use of this leadership style. Additionally, undergraduate and graduate sport management faculty may need to teach servant leadership so students can learn how to align behaviors with leadership styles and make better decisions about career pursuits based on which leadership styles suits him or her best.

References


