The Influence of Leadership on Sense of Community: Examining Authentic, Servant, Transactional, and Transformational Theories in Sport

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Leadership remains a central research topic in sport management, given the related work compiled over the last 40 years. Sport management has commonly borrowed leadership theories from the parent disciplines of business, management, and strategy (Welty Peachey et al., 2015), which have mainly included transformational and transactional leadership theories (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Transactional involves the dimensions of contingent reward and management-by-exception (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), while transformational has five core tenets of idealized attributes, idealized behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). The work in sport management has concentrated on these two theories (see Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Doherty, 1997; Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Kim, Magnusen, Andrew, & Stoll, 2012; Weese, 1995; Wells & Welty Peachey, 2011), however, given the limited organizational applications of transformational and transactional work, there remains the need for expanding these foci to other areas of leadership study.

Two leadership areas, in particular, that have gone understudied sport management are servant leadership and authentic leadership. The need for integration of different leadership theories stems from sport management going through a similar crisis as the business management discipline did in the early 2000's. Here attention turned away from transactional and transformational theories, and to servant (Greenleaf, 1977) and authentic leadership (Henderson & Hoy, 1983). As unethical and questionable leader behaviors became more common (George, 2003) the call from practitioners and scholars to look for different leadership theories led scholars and practitioners to examine servant leadership (see Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Spears, 2002) and authentic leadership (see Avolio & Gardner, 2005; George, 2003) as a way to address the issues. Sport management faces a similar crisis with questionable leader behavior across sport (Maennig, 2005; Mason, Thibault, & Misener, 2006). Similar to the business management discipline, sport management needs to examine these theories as way to curb questionable leader behaviors. When servant and authentic theories are incorporated, business management has since seen positive organizational outcomes associated with each. (Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016; Gardner, et al., 2011; van Dierendonck, 2011). This is an encouraging sign for sport management to engage these theories

First brought to fruition by Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership has several dimensions aimed at creating a better tomorrow through serving organizational followers first (Greenleaf, 1977). Later, van Dierendonck (2011) streamlined servant leadership into the following dimensions: empowerment, stewardship, providing direction, humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance. Servant leadership offers more promise to the study of leadership in sport management since focusing on the follower’s development, instead of focusing on organizational goals, is the central tenant of the idea (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). While holding potential for a more holistic account of leadership styles in sport management, work related to servant leadership has mainly remained conceptual (Burton & Welty Peachey, 2013; Parris & Welty Peachey, 2013a) with qualitative inquiry appearing in the extant literature (Parris & Welty Peachey, 2013b).

The second leadership theory understudied in sport management is authentic. Modern authentic leadership theory can trace its roots back to Henderson and Hoy (1983) who first defined the leadership style, which resulted in the four accepted pillars encapsulating authentic leadership: balanced processing, internal moral compass, relational transparency, and self-awareness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Banks, et al., 2016). These pillars emerged from the definition of an authentic leader “being self-aware, showing openness and clarity regarding who they are, and consistently disclosing and acting in accordance with their personal values, beliefs, motives, and sentiments” (Banks, et al., 2016, p. 635) and formed a scale (Walumbwa, et al., 2008). Despite the ability to measure the theory, the dearth
of authentic leadership research in sport management remains perplexing given the positive organizational outcomes associated with authentic leadership such as job satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Kiersch, et al., 2012; Kiyani, 2013; Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). The lack of usage among those studying leadership in sport and beyond may be due to the muddled lines between transformational and authentic leadership. In their meta-analysis comparing transformational and authentic theories, Banks and colleagues (2016), found studies have showed theoretical redundancy based on high correlations between the two styles. There is evidence, however, that while related, the two theories offer unique distinctions when used in examining multilevel outcomes (Banks, et al., 2016; Gardner, et al., 2011). Authentic leadership has distinguished itself not only as a root construct to leadership, but as more likely to influence group-level outcomes, while transformational is more likely to influence task-oriented and individual-level outcomes (Banks et al., 2016; Gardner et al., 2011). While Banks, et al. (2016) recognized theoretical redundancy; that both leadership theories aid in explaining unique level outcomes merits value. These two theories and their respective influence on multilevel outcomes in sport management deserve empirical attention and thus provide the impetus for this study.

To exam the two theories alongside transactional and transformational is pertinent to decide if sport management leadership will follow a similar pattern as the business management discipline or if different scholarship is need altogether. Sense of community (SOC) is one emerging stream where these theories can be studied. A way for people to feel connected to those around them in a unique setting (McMillan, 1996), SOC has shown value as an organizational function in sport (Chalip, Lin, Green, & Dixon, 2013; Pickett, Goldsmith, Damon, & Walker, 2016; Warner & Dixon, 2013) to where the theory has evolved to Sport SOC (Warner & Dixon, 2013). Existential literature has emphasized felt SOC to allow individuals to express their authentic selves (McMillan, 1996; Peck, 1987) which allows for greater satisfaction and less turnover (Chalip, et al., 2013; Pickett, et al., 2016). Given the outcomes of Sport SOC from members becoming their authentic selves, determining which leadership style is most likely to influence SOC is valuable for sport organizations. The main hypothesis is authentic leadership and its four pillars will be most influential of the four theories on SOC, especially to develop authentic selves in organization members. Exploring the role of mediators in the leadership process remains valuable (Banks, et al., 2016) and determining if SOC can mediate common leadership outcomes (OCB and group performance) will help further understand leadership and SOC in sport alike. Therefore, the following hypotheses guide the study:

H1: Authentic will positively influence SOC more than transactional, transformational, or servant theories.

H2: SOC will mediate the influence of authentic leadership on OCB and group performance.

Data are to be collected through a survey instrument in early spring and will use the MLQ (Bass & Avolio, 1995), ALQ (Walumbwa, et al., 2008), SOC Sport scale (Warner, et al., 2013), OBC scale (Wayne, et al., 1997), and Group Performance items (Jung & Sosik, 2002). Amazon’s MTurk will collect the sample with qualifying questions only capturing participants working in sport to rate their immediate leaders. Data will be analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling to test the hypotheses.

Results will be discussed along with limitations and future directions. Expected results include authentic leadership to influence SOC the most, while servant will influence it third most, transformational second most, and transactional the least. It is expected SOC will mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and OCB and group performance. Last, authentic and transformational are expected to be correlated, however, as Banks, et al. (2016) found, they will differ across group or individual outcomes.