Personal Development and Personal Growth: The Importance of Servant Leadership in SDP Organizations

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There has seen an increased interest in the field of sport for development and peace (SDP) within policy circles, in academia, and in practice over the past 20 years (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). The majority of research within SDP has examined the efficacy of interventions on achieving a variety of outcomes, such as facilitating social inclusion of marginalized individuals (Sherry, 2010; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012; Welty Peachey, Lyras, Borland, & Cohen, 2013); building social capital (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008; Spaaij, 2012); and contributing to cross-cultural understanding and peacebuilding efforts (Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schlenker, 2011; Sugden, 2008; Welty Peachey, Cunningham, Lyras, Cohen, & Bruening, 2015). Recently, some SDP research has extended into examining the nature of leadership. Wells and Welty Peachey’s (2016) inaugural investigation of a US-based SDP organization revealed the founder and regional leaders exhibited servant leadership behaviors, as perceived by their followers. However, the investigation of SDP leadership is still in its infancy, and is a critical area of inquiry needed within SDP research. Therefore, in this research we sought to explore how both leaders and employees in SDP organizations understand and utilize leadership in this context, and how leadership met work-based psychological needs of employees (Schulenkorf, 2017).

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
As previously noted, SDP leaders may exhibit and benefit from using servant leadership and may also exhibit servant leadership behaviors (Wells & Welty Peachey, 2016; Welty Peachey & Burton, 2016); therefore, we grounded our research in servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977). Van Dierendonck (2011) advanced six characteristics of servant leadership: empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship. Servant leaders believe in the intrinsic value possessed by each follower, recognizing and acknowledging each person’s abilities and what the person can learn (Greenleaf, 1998). Servant leadership theory emphasizes a concern for the needs of followers more than other leadership theories (Mayer, 2010) and has a focus on follower care and development (Ehrhart, 2004; van Dierendonck, 2011). Importantly, this style of leadership can be highly effective in SDP, as providing care, nurture, and empowerment are necessary for the positive change sought and organizational outcomes to be realized in the SDP setting (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2016). Also, as leadership is integral to and a central aspect of followers’ organizational context, it therefore “should play a significant role in providing the necessary conditions to support satisfaction of basic psychological needs at work” (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016, p. 127). To this end, we adopted Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a way to understand how servant leadership influences employees’ performance within organizations (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Chiniara & Bentein, 2016). SDT asserts meeting individuals’ basic needs is critical to their growth and psychological development (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Work by van Dierendonck et al. (2014) found servant leadership, through satisfaction of employees’ basic needs, had an indirect influence on employee work engagement and commitments.

Method
In order to explore how leaders and employees understand and utilize leadership, and the relationship between servant leadership and followers’ need satisfaction in the SDP field, we employed qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership behaviors being enacted by leaders in SDP organizations, and how these behaviors were being manifested. Thus, the following research question was used to guide this inquiry: What are the leadership behaviors SDP leaders are demonstrating, and how are they doing so?
Fourteen individuals (N = 14) were purposively selected (Creswell, 2012) from a pool of survey participants from a
concurrent study who had indicated that they would be willing to engage in a personal interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with founders, executive directors, and practitioners from smaller (5-25 employees) SDP organizations with diverse missions and foci from around the world. The criteria for selection were to maximize diversity in job roles (leaders and followers), organizational missions, foci, and geographic regions, to hear a variety of perspectives on leadership behaviors. Interviewees were invited to share about their perspectives on the leadership style of either themselves as top leader or of the top leader in their organization, and on how this style contributed to followers’ needs satisfaction. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded by two of the authors. Intercoder reliability was established through each author independently coding two transcripts, then discussing interpretations and coding (Creswell, 2012). The data analysis process began by employing a priori or thematic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). A priori categories were drawn from the servant leadership literature (Greenleaf, 1977, van Dierendonck, 2011, and from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). Next, an open coding process was followed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), so that additional themes could be captured. All of these initial codes were then folded into key themes (Creswell, 2012). Dependability and credibility were enhanced by having two of the authors code the transcripts and confer on their interpretations through numerous conversations. The interviewees also reviewed their transcripts for accuracy and the themes and interpretations drawn forth from the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings & Discussion

Overall, our findings revealed that top leaders in SDP organizations were practicing servant leadership behaviors, and that they were doing so by establishing vision and aligning the organization with that vision; by empowering followers towards autonomy; by fostering a growth mindset for the organization and for employees to satisfy competency needs; and by satisfying needs for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). Both SDP leaders and followers emphasized leadership that was driven by the values and missions of their respective organizations. Leadership based on support of the organization’s mission is not unique to SDP, however, SDP organizations share missions that are based on empowerment, shared responsibility, personal development, and community sustainability. In addition, participants described how servant leadership influenced the experiences of followers that aligned with empowerment as supported by the tenets of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011) and satisfaction of the need for autonomy as described by SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants spoke directly of their leaders helping meet their needs for engaging in meaningful work and having the freedom to make work-related decisions that are in alignment with their own interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Leaders of SDP organizations also talked about the importance of having a growth mindset in order to foster an effective organization over the long-term and the importance of developing competence in relatively young staff. A growth mindset can also contribute to the need for competence by supporting followers’ desires to feel effective in their interactions within the SDP organization and be provided opportunities to practice and master one’s capabilities (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). Participants who were leaders of their SDP organizations described the importance of fostering a connection to and caring for their followers and developing a sense of belonging for those followers. This aligns with aspects of servant leadership including empathy and humility (van Dierendonck, 2011) as they connect with their followers while also providing the space for followers to make meaningful connections with others in the organization and in the service of participants in SDP programs.