A National Study of Leader Effectiveness and Political Skill in Interscholastic Sport Leadership

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Though leadership is one of the most fundamental and established topics in sport management literature (Branch, 1990; Soucie, 1994), effective leadership remains a phenomenon that leadership scholars strive to more comprehensively understand. Most definitions of leadership tend to be based in the assumption that leadership involves a process of intentional influence being exerted over others (Gardner, 1990; House et al., 1999). Effective leaders impact efficient organizational performance by way of goal accomplishment through the coordinated efforts of those who are led, and it is widely agreed upon that, in addition to providing structure, facilitating activities, and developing relationships in groups or organizations, effective leaders also influence the attitudes, motivation, and satisfaction of subordinates among other outcomes. Influence is the apotheosis of effective leadership in part because achievement in life and work stem mostly from effective social exchanges (Ferris, Perrewé, & Douglas, 2002).

Social influence literature encompasses a broad variety of constructs thought to influence behaviors. Collectively, these constructs fall under the nomenclature of social effectiveness which is a broad concept that describes an individual’s ability to self-monitor, read social situations, and adapt to specific requirements of the environment. Social effectiveness constructs include terms such as emotional intelligence, self-regulation, self-monitoring, and political skill among others. Though the term political skill conjures ideas of governmental process or public institutions, political skill is defined as the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objective (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005). Political skill is comprised of four dimensions of social astuteness, interpersonal influence, apparent sincerity, and networking ability, and has shown evidence of being a contributing factor to leader effectiveness (Douglas and Ammeter, 2004; Sunindijo, 2012; Broer et al. 2013; Kim et al., 2016).

Undergirded by Social Influence Theory, which posits that individuals use social influence to achieve desired social outcomes (Levy, Collins, & Nail, 1989), the purpose of this national study of interscholastic athletic directors and head coaches is to examine the extent to which the social effectiveness construct of political skill affects leader effectiveness in a population of sport administrators. Namely, politically skilled athletic directors may be more effective leaders than those less politically skilled. Furthermore, the study analyzes each dimension of political skill independently in relation to leader effectiveness to determine the more impactful dimensions of which sport administrators should be aware.

The specific hypotheses of the study are as follows: H1 – Athletic directors who are politically skilled will be more effective leaders than athletic directors who are not politically skilled. H2 – Athletic directors who practice social astuteness will be more effective leaders than athletic directors who do not practice social astuteness. H3 – Athletic directors who are apparently sincere will be more effective leaders than athletic directors who do not appear sincere. H4 – Athletic directors who possess the ability to use interpersonal influence will be more effective leaders than athletic directors who are not able to influence others. H5 – Athletic directors who have strong networking ability will be more effective leaders than athletic directors do not possess networking ability.

To explore political skill and leader effectiveness, data were collected from 250 interscholastic athletic directors (ADs) and corresponding subsets of head coaches (HCs) ranging from 1 to 14. The sample of respondents consisted of secondary schools covering 47 states in the United States of America. The sample of ADs (n = 250) comprised of 83% male (n = 209) and 17% female (n = 41) with an average age of 48 years. The sample of HC’s (n = 806) comprised of 71% male (n = 577) and 29% female (n = 229) with an average age of 43 years. Data collection consisted of two phases. Survey instruments utilized a 7-point Likert scale. ADs completed the Political Skill...
Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005) utilizing a Qualtrics online survey. The 18-item scale ($\alpha = .90$) measures participants’ perceived levels of political skill and presents questions under the dimensions of social astuteness ($\alpha = .82$), interpersonal influence ($\alpha = .74$), apparent sincerity ($\alpha = .71$), and networking ability ($\alpha = .76$). Head coach respondents measured the leader effectiveness of athletic directors by responding to six items on Douglas and Ammeter’s (2004) leader effectiveness scale ($\alpha = .90$) which measures leader effectiveness as team-unit and leader-unit performance.

Prior to testing hypotheses, aggregation statistics were completed to ensure appropriate aggregation of the dependent variable leader effectiveness. First, rwg(j) was calculated using a uniform distribution. The measure rwg(j) is useful for calculating within-group agreement and reliability. The measure for leader effectiveness (rwg(j) = .75) exceeded the strong interrater agreement threshold of .70 which supports aggregating leader effectiveness to the unit-level. For testing the hypotheses, linear regression was conducted using R statistical software package to predict leader effectiveness based on political skill and its dimensions. Five research hypotheses were proposed. H1 and H4 were supported at $p < .05$. H1 predicted that political skill would significantly affect the leader effectiveness of ADs ($\beta = .22$, $t(248) = 2.07$, $p < .05$), and H4 predicted that interpersonal influence would significantly affect the leader effectiveness of ADs ($\beta = .18$, $t(248) = 1.99$, $p < .05$). H2 predicted that social astuteness would significantly affect the leader effectiveness of ADs. H2 was not significant at $p < .05$, but was supported at a more liberal $p < .10$ ($\beta = .14$, $t(248) = 1.82$, $p < .10$). H3 and H5 were positive but not significant. H3 predicted that apparent sincerity would significantly affect leader effectiveness ($\beta = .14$, $t(248) = 1.28$, $p = .20$), and H5 predicted that networking ability would be significant ($\beta = .10$, $t(248) = 1.20$, $p = .23$).

The current study provides support that political skill is a social effectiveness construct of which sport administrators should be aware and practice. In an interscholastic sport setting, results reveal the most influential dimension of political skill on leader effectiveness is interpersonal influence. These findings are consistent with definitions of leadership that involve influence as a key component. Also, although some independent dimensions of political skill were not found to be significant, the cumulative measure consisting of all dimensions of political skill reveals the strongest relationship with leader effectiveness. This suggests a dynamic interaction of political skill dimensions that work together synergistically to positively impact a leader’s effectiveness. Furthermore, this study supports developing political skill curriculum and addressing political skill in sport management classrooms as a means for developing more effective sport leaders.