Servant Leadership in the Sport Fitness Industries: A Relational Model to Increase Member Retention

HoYeol Yu, University of Houston
Matt Robinson, Schreiner University
Don Lee (Advisor), University of Houston
Michael Cottingham (Advisor), University of Houston

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Accumulating evidence reveals that participation in sport fitness facilities is prevailing for people in the United States as millions have engaged in exercise at public or private sports clubs (Statista, 2018). However, despite large numbers of participants, organizations such as these have experienced a continued problem with member retention (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Indeed, the lack of ability to retain membership leads to a more critical negative outcome, financial loss. Given these issues, investigating potential reasons why consumers of sport fitness facilities are likely to cease attending is critical. Surprisingly, little research on the discontinuous behavior of sport/fitness facility consumers and their perceptions has been conducted.

Leadership in Sport Fitness Facilities

According to Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, and Roberts (2009), “leadership is being seen as a central force in creating a positive culture for frontline employees, leading to greater retention and more positive downstream impact on customers” (p. 358). In a similar vein, recent research shows that interaction between exercise facility employees (e.g., instructors of personal training and yoga) and consumers plays a significant role in influencing perceived service quality of instructors (Kim & Byon, 2018). Therefore, this presentation reviews, organizes, and synthesizes the extant literature on leadership and sport/fitness club management to provide an original conceptual framework.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, a style grounded in altruistic calling and characterized by enduring qualities of genuine caring, humility, and empathy (Robinson, Neubert, & Miller, 2018), has received increased focus from leadership scholars and organizations around the world (Liden et al., 2014). Servant leaders can be described as “leaders who focus least on satisfying their own personal needs but have a priority to fulfill the needs of followers” (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014, p. 1434) suggesting that truly effective and legitimate leaders place service to others ahead of personal power and control (Greenleaf, 1977). Research findings from sport team settings convey that servant leadership positively affects follower satisfaction (Azadfada, 2014), but research regarding the impact of servant leadership in the context of sport fitness facilities has not been conducted. Considering that servant leader behaviors have not been well-acknowledged as an effective style for leading sport/fitness facilities, the purpose of this presentation is to provide a theoretical framework that explains how servant leadership style of employees may influence sport/fitness organization consumers’ perceptions of service quality, satisfaction, and turnover intention.

Model

Grounded in Social Influence theory, which posits that individuals use social influence, be it intentional or unintentional, to achieve desired social outcomes (Levy, Collins, & Nail, 1989), the conceptual model presented herein suggests the benefit of servant leadership lies in the ability of servant leaders to form strong relationships with consumers, positively influencing their perceived service quality and satisfaction, and thus decreasing turnover intention. In conclusion, the presentation offers suggestions for developing and implementing servant leadership in sport fitness facilities.