A Study of the Relationship Between Servant Leadership, Political Skill, and Leader Effectiveness among Interscholastic Sport Administrators

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Grounded in altruistic calling and characterized by enduring qualities of genuine caring, humility, and empathy, servant leadership (SL) suggests truly effective and legitimate leaders prioritize service to others ahead of personal power and control (Greenleaf, 1977). The first purpose of this study was to examine interscholastic athletic director-head coach relationships by examining the association of servant leadership behaviors with follower-perceived leader effectiveness (LE) and attitudes. The second purpose addresses a need to investigate factors that allow servant leadership to have its greatest possible influence (Neubert, et al., 2016). Social Influence Theory posits individuals use influence, intentionally or unintentionally, to achieve desired social outcomes (Levy, Collins, & Nail, 1989), and political skill (PS) is a construct defined as the ability to effectively understand and influence others at work in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objective (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005).

Six hypotheses were tested. H1, H2, H3, predicted SL would increase positive outcomes. H4, H5, H6, predicted increased levels of PS would positively moderate the effects of SL. Data were collected via online surveys from interscholastic athletic directors (ADs) and corresponding subsets of head coaches (HCs). ADs completed the 18-item Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005; α = .90). Head coaches responded to 14 items on the Servant Leadership Scale (Ehrhart, 2004; α = .97), six items on Douglas and Ammeter’s (2004) leader effectiveness scale (α = .90), five items on Affective Organizational Commitment (AOC; Meyer & Allen, 1997; α = .79), and four items on Job Satisfaction (JS; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, and Lynch, 1997; α = .90). Sample 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.

Linear regression was utilized to evaluate H2 and H3 at the individual-level. SL was significantly associated with both AOC (β = .37, p < .00) and JS (β = .34, p < .00) in the predicted direction supporting H2 and H3. Step two involved regression analysis at the school-level to test H1 and H4. School-level SL was positively associated with LE (β = .81, p < 0.000) supporting H1. However, a significant antagonistic interaction between SL and PS (β = -.15, p < .10) suggests that PS detracts from LE in those who are perceived as SLs. Thus, H4 is rejected. Finally, H5 and H6 were rejected because multilevel regression models revealed political skill did not positively enhance servant leadership’s association with AOC and JS. Results suggest that SL exhibited by interscholastic athletic directors does lead to increased head coach perceptions of leader effectiveness and positive attitudes, but SLs who rated themselves as having more political skill, were perceived by head coaches as less-effective leaders.