Developing Servant Leaders: Why Reliance on a Community of Practice May be Problematic.

Jules Woolf, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Jon Welty Peachey, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Sport for Development - Other (Youth Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2019-430  
Saturday, June 1, 2019  
Room: Napoleon A3  
4:00 PM

Within sport for development (SFD, servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) is one favored leadership approach (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2013). A servant leader nurtures and empowers followers, such that organizational outcomes are facilitated (van Dierendonck, 2011). Because of the inherent attractiveness of this approach, researchers have sought to examine the characteristics of servant leaders (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Subsequently, features such as wisdom, altruism, and authenticity have been identified. However, these constructs are suggestive of innate qualities, which raises the question whether one can become a servant leader. Thus, while we have insights into what servant leaders ‘do’ and what they ‘look like’, we do not know if, or how someone learns to become a servant leader. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine one SFD organization’s efforts to develop its staff to become servant leaders.

To examine the development of servant leaders we adopted Wenger’s (1998) community of practice framework. This theory asserts that learning is a social process involving interactions with others in a community (Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002). The hallmarks of a community are mutual engagement in a joint enterprise that has a shared repertoire. In a community of practice, learning and meaning are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated, such that new knowledge can be developed and old, redefined. As knowledge becomes reified through participation in the community, identities are similarly constructed. Potentially, as SFD staff work among one another they can learn to become servant leaders. To investigate the extent to which this occurs we partnered with Street Soccer USA (SSUSA) and focused on its after school community programs.

Method

Participant observation (Lofland et al., 2006) was conducted over a 3-month period, using an open-ended, unobtrusive narrative format, which involved informal interactions with individuals (Rossman & Rallis, 1998) to learn how staff developed in their respective roles. Forty site visits were completed totaling nearly 100 hours of contact. Field notes were recorded and developed after each session amounting to 105,000 documented words. Sixteen semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with participants and senior managers supplemented participant observation. Interviews lasted 70 minutes on average and were designed using a narrative life history approach (Taylor, 2013) to learn of participants’ perspectives on their development working for SSUSA. Data are being analyzed using descriptive followed by pattern coding (Saldaña, 2014).

Results

Data are currently being analyzed and will be completed prior to NASSM. Preliminary results revealed that while SSUSA trained staff using a detailed curriculum, once on site many staff members reverted to preconceived notions about the power of sport to transform lives. Curriculum implementation was sporadically and superficially implemented and though staff were trained on SSUSA’s philosophy, these messages were not internalized. Staff interactions often reinforced the great sport myth (Coakley, 2017). These findings highlight that communities of practice can hinder development, and that to develop staff members, managers must continually and diligently reinforce their philosophical approach if staff are to internalize these paradigms and develop as servant leaders.