Win-At-All-Costs? Follower Bottom-line Mentality as a Buffer between Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment

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Servant leadership (SL) emphasizes ethical treatment of followers, is characterized by enduring qualities of genuine caring, humility, and empathy, and has been associated with numerous leader effectiveness outcomes such as follower job satisfaction and commitment (Robinson, Neubert, & Miller, 2018). The purpose of this study answers a call to investigate follower characteristics that allow servant leadership to be more, or less effective (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019). Based on leader-member exchange theory (LMX; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), a relationship-based perspective of leadership focused on the two-way (dyadic) exchange between leaders and followers, this study specifically predicted head coach (HC) bottom-line mentality (i.e. 1-dimensional, win-at-all-costs attitude; Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012) would negatively impact the relationship between athletic director SL and HC commitment.

Data were collected via online survey from a purposive convenience sample of 810 interscholastic head coaches from 47 states in the USA. The sample consisted of 72% male (n = 578) and 28% female (n = 232) with average age 43 years. HCs evaluated athletic director SL by responding to 14 items on the servant leadership scale (Ehrhart, 2004), and measured HC affective organizational commitment (AOC; Meyer & Allen,1997), and bottom-line mentality (BLM; Greenbaum et al., 2012) by responding to five and four items respectively. All measures utilized a 7-point Likert scale. To test whether SL and BLM interacted in their influence on AOC, Structural Equation Modeling with a numerical integration algorithm was conducted using M-plus 6.1.

Fit indices of the initial confirmatory factor analysis met commonly accepted standards \([S-B \chi^2 (df) = 795.80 (206), S-B \chi^2/df = 3.86, p < .001; CFI = .94; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .04]\), and values of average variance extracted for study constructs ranged from .53 to .68. However, two items of AOC were removed due to low factor loadings, and resulting overall fit measures indicated that our model is a plausible representation of the structures underlying the empirical data \([S-B \chi^2 (df) = 799.40 (206), S-B \chi^2/df = 3.80, p < .001; CFI = .94; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .04]\). All three research hypotheses were supported with parameter estimates significant at 1% or less in the expected direction. H1 predicted SL would significantly impact AOC \((\gamma_1 = .45, p < 0.01)\). H2 predicted BLM would negatively impact AOC \((\gamma_2 = -.19, p < 0.01)\). Lastly, H3 predicted the interaction effect of SL and BLM would have a significant negative impact on AOC \((\gamma_3 = -.21, p < 0.01)\).

The novel contribution of this study lies in finding that when follower BLM is win-at-all-costs, the influence of SL will not increase follower commitment. Thus, BLM overrides the positive impact of SL on AOC, and it appears a HC’s win-at-all-cost attitude might not mesh well with a SL athletic director focused more on growth and well-being of staff and student-athletes rather than winning percentage. Further discussion of theoretical and practical applications, as well as directions for future research, close the presentation.