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Rieke, Micah; Hammermeister, Jon; and Chase, Matthew, "Servant Leadership In Sport: A New Paradigm For Effective Coach Behavior" (2008). *Physical Education, Health and Recreation Faculty Publications*. Paper 3.
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Servant Leadership in Sport: A New Paradigm for Effective Coach Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Coaches are searching for contemporary leadership models which resonate with the modern-day athlete. Many elements of the Servant Leadership model, such as trust, inclusion, humility and service, are well suited to enhanced coach behaviors with this cohort. The purpose of this study was to examine how coaches who were perceived by their athletes to possess "servant leader" characteristics were associated with their athletes' use of mental skills, motivation, satisfaction and performance. Participants were 195 high-school basketball athletes from the Pacific Northwest in the USA. It was found that athletes who perceived their coach to possess servant leader qualities also displayed higher intrinsic motivation, were more task oriented, were more satisfied, were "mentally tougher," and performed better than were athletes coached by non-servant leaders. Furthermore, results showed that high-school basketball athletes preferred the servant-leader coaching style to more traditional styles. Results suggest that coaches who use the methods advocated by the servant-leader model produce athletes with a healthier psychological profile for sport who also perform well.

Key words: Basketball, Coach Behavior, Intrinsic Motivation, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

While working as an AT&T executive, Robert Greenleaf [1] developed and introduced the concept of servant leadership into the management and organizational context. As we enter the 21st century, organizations are beginning to see that traditional, autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership are yielding to newer models. The servant-leader model advocated by Greenleaf [1] is one based on teamwork and community, one that seeks to involve others in decision making, one strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, and one that is attempting to enhance the personal growth of subordinates while improving the caring and quality of our many institutions [2]. According to McGee-Cooper and Trammell [3], servant leadership is one model that can help turn traditional notions of leadership and organizational structure "upside-down."

Sport leadership research has a long tradition of borrowing models from industrial and organizational psychology, adapting them, and examining their potential applicability to athletics [4]. Early researchers of sport leadership applied these theories from the areas of

business and industry, because sport teams were thought to possess many of the same characteristics as those found in corporate settings [5]. For example, business and sport organizations share similarities such as (a) an exact roster of members occupying particular positions, (b) a planned program of activity, and (c) a division of labor designed to achieve specific goals. Although some differences have been noted [5], the abundance of similarities between sport and business suggests many crossover connections between the two disciplines. Thus, there is some wisdom, as well as empirical support, to Martens' [6] contention that coaches require not only expansive technical knowledge of their sport, but also the administrative leadership of a business executive.

Surprisingly, given the reciprocal nature of the leadership literature between business and athletics, there is a paucity of evidence showing the usefulness of the servant leader model in sport settings. Therefore, the aim of this investigation was to address this gap in the literature by examining the viability of the servant leader model in a sport environment.

WHAT IS A SERVANT LEADER?

According to Greenleaf [1], servant leaders place other people's needs, aspirations and interests above their own. The servant leader's chief motive, paradoxically, is to serve first as opposed to lead. This notion, as McGee-Cooper and Trammel [3] pointed out, is an "upside down" or inverted model of leadership. Traditional models of leadership place the leader on the top of the "pyramid" and demand that subordinates follow their directives. The servant leader turns the pyramid upside down and places themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy. In a servant leader environment, the subordinates are given clear job descriptions, or roles, and the job of the leader is to "serve" or to help the subordinate execute those roles. This structure does not imply that standards become lax or that the "inmates run the asylum." Quite the opposite. Subordinates, with the help of the servant leader, are responsible for executing their roles effectively, and if they cannot do so sanctions will be imposed. The end result, theoretically, is a work environment where relationships are cultivated, everyone is valued, standards are upheld, and productivity enhanced [1].

DIMENSIONS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Numerous authors, notable among them Larry Spears, CEO of The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, have carefully reflected on Greenleaf's original writings and determined from them a set of ten behaviors essential for effective servant leadership [7, 8]. These behaviors include: building community, stewardship, awareness, foresight, listening, conceptualization, healing, empathy, persuasion, and commitment to the growth of people.

Page and Wong [9], in a further attempt to conceptualize servant leadership, developed the Servant Leader Profile (SLP), which was subsequently modified and refined with the Revised Servant Leader Profile (RSLP). The RSLP [10] is comprised of seven factors that are similar to the characteristics described by Spears and include: power and pride (although the inverse, humility and authenticity, are the hallmarks of a servant leader), serving others, empowering and developing others, participatory leadership, courageous leadership, inspiring leadership, and visionary leadership.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND SPORT

As an alternative form of the organizational environment, sport offers another good potential setting to test the applicability of servant-leadership. Many of the dimensions of servant-leadership, such as inspiring leadership, are concepts well suited to athletic coaches, physical educators, and other practitioners of sport and exercise psychology.

To date, only one study exists which has investigated the servant-leadership model in sport settings. Hammermeister's [11] study assessed the impact that coaching behavior can have on the intrinsic motivation, mental skills, and sport satisfaction of 251 collegiate athletes. He showed that college athletes who perceived their coach to be a "servant" leader also displayed higher intrinsic motivation, were more "mentally tough," and were more satisfied with their sport experience than athletes who were coached by "non-servant" leaders. This data suggests that the servant-leadership model may be viable for use in sport settings and certainly warrants follow-up research.

Given the need for further examination of the servant-leader model in sport, the purpose of this investigation was three-fold. First, in order to shed light on the viability of the servant leader coaching style with athletes of different ages, this study replicated Hammermeister's [11] important findings with college athletes by studying a younger (i.e., high school) group of athletes. Specifically, this paper examined the hypothesis that athletes, who perceive their coach to be a servant leader, would demonstrate more satisfaction with their sport experience, have better use and understanding of mental skills, and display more intrinsically motivated behavior than their peers who are not coached by servant leaders. Second, this study examined how servant leader coach behaviors influenced the performance of high-school basketball athletes by examining athletes' performance expectations and team won / lost record. Finally, this study examined the utility of the servant-leader style in an ecologically valid sport setting by looking at athletes' preference for servant coaching behavior.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Following institutional review board approval, 195 male high-school varsity basketball players were recruited for this study from 20 separate teams who participated in a summer sport camp at a mid-size university in the Pacific Northwest in the USA. Ages ranged from 15-19 years. The participating athletes in this investigation were taken from five different high-school classification levels (based on student enrollment) from two states in the Pacific Northwest.

INSTRUMENTS

Revised Servant Leadership Profile for Sport (RSLP-S). The RSLP-S [11], developed by Hammermeister and colleagues, is a more mathematically robust version of the RSLP [10]. The RSLP-S represents three servant-leader constructs, which have been labeled (a) trust/inclusion, (b) humility, and (c) service (see Table 1). The RSLP-S consists of both a perceived leader behavior profile and preferred leader behavior profile. The perceived coaching profile segment consists of 22 items measured on a 7-point-Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (e.g., "In the last year my head coach was willing to accept other's ideas, whenever they were better than his/her own."). The preferred coaching leadership section also consists of 22 items measured on a 7-point-Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (e.g., "I would prefer that my head coach be willing to accept other's ideas, whenever they are better than his/her own."). For this study, the RSLP-S displayed good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha [12] reliability coefficients ranging from 0.79 to 0.92

Intrinsic Motivation Inventory. Ryan [13] developed the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) to assess five dimensions of intrinsic motivation. For this study, the interest and enjoyment (7 items), perceived choice (6 items), effort and importance (5 items), and

pressure and tension (5 items) subscales were utilized. Participants indicated the degree to which the statements were true on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all true” to “extremely true.” McAuley and colleagues [14] have provided strong evidence for the validity and reliability of the IMI when applied to sport and exercise settings. For the present investigation, the IMI yielded acceptable internal consistency scores, with Cronbach’s alpha [12] coefficients ranging from 0.78 – 0.85.

Table 1. Revised Measurement Model for the RSLP [11]

Factor Name	Items
Trust/Inclusion	The Head Coach:
	1. inspires team spirit by communicating enthusiasm and confidence
	2. listens actively and receptively to others
	3. practices plain talking (means what he says and says what he means)
	4. always keeps his promises and commitments to others
	5. grants all players a fair amount of responsibility
	6. willing to accept other’s ideas whenever they are better than his own
	7. promotes tolerance, kindness, and honesty
	8. creates a climate of trust and openness to facilitate participation in decision making
	9. wants to build trust through honesty and empathy
	10. devotes a lot of energy to promoting trust, mutual understanding, and team spirit
11. has the courage to assume full responsibility for his mistakes	
Humility	The Head Coach:
	1. believes the leader should not be front and center
	2. is not primarily concerned with always having full authority
	3. doesn’t have to have his name attached to every initiative
	4. doesn’t look at his position as one of power
	5. allows his subordinates to have some control
6. doesn’t have to be seen as superior to subordinates in everything	
Service	The Head Coach:
	1. serves others and does not expect anything in return
	2. is willing to make personal sacrifices in serving others
	3. finds enjoyment in serving others in whatever role or capacity
	4. has a heart to serve others
5. takes great satisfaction in bringing out the best in others	

Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire. The Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (ASQ) [15] is a multidimensional scale consisting of 56 items and 15 subscales. The purpose of the questionnaire is to measure an athlete’s satisfaction with their sport experience. Incorporated in this particular investigation were 5 of the 15 subscales including: individual performance

satisfaction (3 items), team performance satisfaction (3 items), personal dedication satisfaction (4 items), personal treatment satisfaction (5 items), and training and instruction satisfaction (3 items). The first three subscales evaluated satisfaction with outcomes associated with the process of leadership, while the latter two focused on satisfaction with the process of coaching behavior. Riemer and Chelladurai's [15] validation work with university athletes confirmed the construct validity of the scale. Correlations between the ASQ's subscales and scales of commitment and negative affectivity provided evidence of criterion-related validity. Cronbach's alpha [12] coefficients for the ASQ in the present study ranged from 0.81 to 0.96.

Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire. Developed by Duda and Nicholls [16], the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ) evaluated individuals' goal orientations. TEOSQ is a 13-item questionnaire measuring task orientation (7 questions) and ego orientation (6 questions). Six items reflected ego goal orientation (i.e., I feel most successful in sport when I can do better than my friends) and seven items reflect task goal orientation (i.e., I feel most successful in sport when I do my very best). The answers were indicated on a 5-point scale where 1 equaled "strongly agree" and 5 equaled "strongly disagree". In the physical domain, the TEOSQ had been found to be reliable and valid [16]. For this study, the TEOSQ displayed solid internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha [12] coefficients ranging from 0.86 to 0.96.

Ottawa Mental Skills Assessment Tool-3. Durand-Bush and colleagues [17] developed the Ottawa Mental Skills Assessment Tool-3 (OMSAT-3) to measure a broad range of mental skills important for sport performance. It included 48 items and 12 mental skill scales grouped under three broader conceptual components: (a) foundation skills (goal setting, self-confidence, commitment), (b) psychosomatic skills (stress reactions, fear control, relaxation, activation), and (c) cognitive skills (imagery, mental practice, focusing, refocusing, and competition planning). Each item in the OMSAT-3 was answered on a "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" 7-point Likert scale (i.e., I am determined to never give up in my sport). Within the present study, the OMSAT-3's psychometric properties were found to be internally consistent with the scales yielding Cronbach's alpha [12] coefficients ranging from 0.77 – 0.87.

Basketball Athletic Performance Questionnaire. The Basketball Athletic Performance Questionnaire (BAPQ) was designed to measure an athlete's performance based upon their perceptions of their actual performance compared to their expected performance in a season. For each question in the BAPQ (i.e., "Based on your last season, how did your actual individual statistics in scoring (points per game) compare to your expected individual statistics in scoring?"), the participants were to check only one of three statements that best described their athletic performance. The BAPQ had a total of 9 questions and each participant had to choose from one of these three selections: (1) the actual performance did not meet my expectations, (2) the actual performance met my expectations, or (3) the actual performance exceeded my expectations. In addition, the questionnaire concluded by asking the participants to fill in their basketball team's win/loss record from their last season.

PROCEDURE

Permission was obtained from the head coach of each high-school team to administer the ASQ, IMI, RSLP, TEOSQ, OMSAT-3, and BAPQ during a summer team camp. The athletes were then asked to complete the questionnaires during the meeting and return them to the researcher when completed. The questionnaires took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

DATA ANALYSIS

Three separate statistical methods were utilized to examine the relationship between servant leader coach behaviors and the different sport variables of interest (i.e. intrinsic motivation, athlete satisfaction, mental skills, and performance). These methods included: (a) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to investigate how the servant and non-servant leader groups differed on the subscales of the IMI, ASQ, TEOSQ, and OMSAT-3, (b) the Pearson Correlation technique to determine the relationships between RSLP-S subscales and BAPQ variables, and (c) the t-test technique to examine differences between the perceived versus the preferred versions of the RSLP-S.

RESULTS

MANOVA RESULTS

Since it is well established that coach behaviors can be strongly related to athlete motivation, satisfaction, mental skills, and performance [18, 19], a multivariate technique, the MANOVA procedure, was used to determine differences between servant leader groups on the subscales of the IMI, ASQ, TEOSQ, OMSAT-3, and BAPQ. The servant leader groups were formed based on tertile splits of the RSLP-S. MANOVA analyses revealed a strong significant main effect for servant leader coach behavior on the IMI, ASQ, TEOSQ, and OMSAT-3 (Wilks' Lambda = 0.494, $F(25, 109) = 4.46$; $p < 0.0001$).

POST-HOC DISCRIMINANT ANALYSIS AND LEAST SQUARES MEANS RESULTS COMPARING SERVANT LEADER AND NON-SERVANT LEADER COACH BEHAVIORS

ASQ Subscales

Follow-up univariate least squares means analysis were conducted to shed light on how the coach behavior groups differed. Post-hoc univariate results revealed that individual performance, team performance, personal treatment, training and instruction, and personal dedication differed significantly between high and low servant leader groups (see Table 2). A post-hoc discriminant analysis was then conducted which also revealed that all five of the ASQ subscales (individual performance, team performance, personal treatment, training and instruction, and personal dedication) discriminated between servant leadership coaching groups (see Table 2). It should be noted that to interpret the discriminate function coefficients, guidelines suggested by Tatsuoka [20] were employed.

Table 2. Servant Leader Coach Behaviors on Five Athlete Satisfaction Variables

Variables	Servant Leader Coaches (n=67)		Non-Servant Leader Coaches (n=66)		F	p	DSC
	M	SD	M	SD			
Athlete Satisfaction							
Individual Performance	25.39	3.85	23.64	5.26	4.90	.03	.27
Team Performance	23.02	7.55	17.90	8.10	14.39	.0002	.44
Personal Treatment	31.22	3.43	23.58	6.61	71.92	.0001	.83
Training and Instruction	29.40	3.42	22.95	6.58	44.93	.0001	.71
Personal Dedication	30.53	2.77	28.33	3.97	13.95	.0003	.43

IMI Subscales

Post-hoc univariate analysis results revealed that three of the six motivational variables (interest and enjoyment, perceived choice, effort and importance) differed between servant leadership coaching groups (see Table 3). A post-hoc discriminant analysis was then conducted which also confirmed that interest and enjoyment, perceived choice, and effort and importance were the most meaningful discriminators between the servant leader coaching groups (see Table 3).

Table 3. Servant Leader Coach Behaviors on Six Motivation Related Variables

Variables	Servant Leader Coaches (n=67)		Non-Servant Leader Coaches (n=66)		F	p	DSC
	M	SD	M	SD			
<i>Intrinsic Motivation</i>							
Interest and Enjoyment	42.34	3.03	40.36	5.41	6.97	.009	.31
Perceived Choice	38.24	5.25	36.09	6.72	4.31	.04	.25
Effort and Importance	44.50	5.42	41.13	6.74	10.27	.0017	.38
Pressure and Tension	24.03	7.31	26.22	7.17	3.08	.08	-.21
<i>Goal Orientations</i>							
Task Oriented	22.39	7.38	22.17	6.21	0.04	.85	.02
Ego Oriented	16.67	9.41	18.94	7.92	2.29	.13	-.18

OMSAT-3 Subscales

Post-hoc univariate analysis of variance indicated that eight of the twelve OMSAT-3 subscales (goal-setting, self-confidence, commitment, relaxation, activation, imagery, mental practice, and competition planning) differed significantly between the groups (see Table 4). A follow-up discriminant analysis confirmed six of the OMSAT-3 subscales (goal-setting, self-confidence, commitment, relaxation, activation, and imagery) to be important discriminators between the coaching groups.

Table 4. Servant Leader Coach Behaviors on Twelve Mental Skills Variables

Mental Skills	Servant Leader Coaches (n=67)		Non-Servant Leader Coaches (n=66)		F	p	DSC
	M	SD	M	SD			
Goal-Setting	21.67	4.47	18.39	3.86	20.65	.0001	.52
Self-Confidence	22.87	4.01	19.59	3.85	23.42	.0001	.54
Commitment	21.98	4.14	19.20	4.64	13.56	.0003	.43
Stress Reactions	18.31	6.21	16.63	4.48	3.24	.07	.22
Fear Control	15.79	6.27	15.28	4.28	0.31	.58	.07
Relaxation	20.78	4.59	18.97	3.82	6.15	.014	.30
Activation	20.80	4.59	18.43	3.93	10.36	.002	.38
Imagery	20.91	5.31	18.68	3.09	8.83	.004	.35
Mental Practice	20.04	5.58	18.41	3.73	3.93	.05	.24
Focusing	16.93	6.47	15.72	4.80	1.52	.22	.15
Refocusing	15.75	6.59	14.55	3.90	1.63	.20	.15
Competition Planning	19.01	5.99	17.04	4.59	4.57	.03	.26

CORRELATIONS OF RSLP-S SUBSCALES AND SELECTED BAPQ ITEMS

Pearson's correlation results revealed significant relationships between two RSLP subscales (trust/inclusion and service) with three BAPQ items: perceived team performance expectations, wins, and losses. Non-significant results ($p > .05$) were found for the humility subscale and all other performance variables (See Table 5).

Table 5. Pearson's Correlation Results between RSLP Subscales and Selected BAPQ Items

	Trust/Inclusion	Humility	Service
Perceived Team	$r = .24$	$r = -.13$	$r = .16$
Performance Expectations	$p = .0008$	$p = .08$	$p = .03$
Wins	$r = .16$ $p = .02$	$r = .12$ $p = .10$	$r = .15$ $p = .03$
Losses	$r = -.20$ $p = .005$	$r = .12$ $p = .10$	$r = -.18$ $p = .01$

SUBSCALES OF RSLP-S-PREFERRED VS. RSLP-S-PERCEIVED

T-test results revealed that high-school basketball players prefer their coaches to display more servant leader characteristics on two of the three RSLP-preferred subscales compared to the RSLP-S-perceived subscales (See Table 5). Results indicated a significant finding for the preferred trust/inclusion subscale ($M = 64.83$, $SD = 10.68$) compared with the perceived trust/inclusion subscale ($M = 59.46$, $SD = 11.28$), $t = -5.74$, $p < .0001$. A significant result was also found for the preferred service subscale ($M = 64.58$, $SD = 11.79$) compared with the perceived service subscale ($M = 58.59$, $SD = 12.82$), $t = -5.66$, $p < .0001$. Finally, non-significant main effects ($p > .05$) were found for the preferred and perceived humility subscale (see Table 6).

Table 6. Summary of Differences between the Preferred Servant Leadership Subscales and the Perceived Servant Leadership Subscales

Variables	Perceived (n=194)		Preferred (n=194)		t	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Servant Leadership						
Trust / Inclusion	59.46	11.28	64.83	10.68	-5.74	.0001
Pride	33.17	10.84	32.42	15.26	0.75	.45
Service	58.59	12.82	64.58	11.79	-5.66	.0001

DISCUSSION

This study was the first to examine the utility of the servant leadership model in a high-school sport setting. Given the importance of identifying new and more effective leadership frameworks, the purpose of this investigation was to examine how "servant leader" coaching behaviors impacted a variety of different variables important for sport performance. First, this paper expanded on Hammermeister's [11] research by examining how servant leader coach behaviors influence high-school varsity basketball athlete's sport satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and mental skills. Second, this study examined the association between servant leader coach behaviors and team performance. Finally, this investigation examined whether high-school basketball athletes display a preference for servant leader, as opposed to non-servant leader, coach behaviors.

SERVANT LEADER COACHES' INFLUENCE ON ATHLETE SATISFACTION

Post-hoc discriminant and least squares means analysis revealed that all five of the ASQ subscales (individual performance, team performance, personal treatment, training and instruction, and personal dedication) discriminated between servant leadership coaching groups (see Table 2). These findings suggest that the servant leaders in this investigation (e.g., those leaders who emphasize trust/inclusion, humility, and being service-oriented) do an excellent job of enhancing the sport satisfaction of their high-school basketball athletes.

Two findings on the ASQ are especially worth noting. First, the personal treatment subscale was found to be the most powerful discriminator between the coaching groups, which emphasizes the importance of this construct for athletic coaches. It is likely that the servant leaders' trusting and inclusive environment, humble attitude, and care and concern in serving their athletes contributed to this enhanced sense of being treated well. Second, it should be noted that athletes who were coached by servant leaders felt they were getting better training and instruction than athletes of non-servant leader coaches. This is an interesting phenomenon, especially considering the strong probability that many of the "non-servant leader" coaches in this study undoubtedly were good trainers and instructors of high-school basketball.

SERVANT LEADER COACH BEHAVIOR AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Post-hoc discriminant structure analysis results revealed the IMI subscales of interest and enjoyment, perceived choice, and effort and importance were significant discriminators between the servant leader groups (See Table 3). These results suggest that servant leader coaches produce athletes who are more intrinsically motivated than their non-servant leader peers. These findings seem congruent with the work of Bass [21] who identified the need for modern-day leaders to go beyond merely satisfying the basic needs of the subordinate. Bass suggested that truly great leaders stand out due to their ability to inspire and empower their subordinates to achieve higher ordered and more productive levels of motivation.

The results of this investigation are also similar to the findings of Black and Weiss [22], who assessed the relationship between perceived coaching behaviors, perceptions of ability, and motivation in competitive age-group swimmers. Their results revealed that coaches who were identified as engaging in more frequent bouts of encouragement, plus providing constructive feedback following undesirable performances (i.e., important components of developing trust and inclusion), were associated with swimmers who believed they were successful and competent, preferred optimally challenging activities, demonstrated great effort, and greatly enjoyed their sport experiences.

SERVANT LEADER COACH BEHAVIORS AND MENTAL SKILLS

Post-hoc discriminant structure analysis indicated that six of the twelve OMSAT-3 mental skills variables differed significantly between the servant leader groups, with goal-setting, self-confidence, and commitment differing to the greatest degree (see Table 4). These results seem incongruent with the sentiment that the servant leader model might produce athletes who are "soft." Many coaches believe that an autocratic coaching style is a necessity in order to instill mental toughness and promote the growth of mental skill in their athletes. The results of this study seem to suggest that the "keys" to promoting mental toughness do not lie in this autocratic, authoritarian, or oppressive style. It appears to lie, paradoxically, with the coach's ability to produce an environment, which emphasizes trust and inclusion, humility, and service. This paradoxical approach to developing toughness may well serve as

a foundational skill for coaches of the future as older fear-based models of coaching go by the wayside.

In addition, these results are congruent with Hammermeister's [11] findings in which servant leader coaches produced athletes who scored more highly on the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory [23] than their non-servant leader peers. Specifically, Hammermeister [11] showed that college athletes who identified their coach as having a servant leadership style were more confident, were better able to cope with adversity, were more coachable, concentrated better, handled pressure better, and were freer from worry than athletes with non-servant leader style coaches. This previous finding, in combination with the confirmatory results of the present investigation, clearly shows that the servant leader model can positively impact the development and use of mental skills important for sport performers.

SERVANT LEADER COACH BEHAVIOR AND BASKETBALL PERFORMANCE

Pearson's correlation results offered four interesting findings regarding servant leadership coach behavior and basketball performance. First, results from this study revealed a significant positive correlation between the trust/inclusion subscale of the RSLP-S and the athletes' perceived team performance expectations. Second, a significant positive correlation between the trust/inclusion subscale of the RSLP-S and number of seasonal wins was found. Third, a significant positive correlation was revealed between the service subscale of the RSLP-S and the athletes' perceived team performance expectations and number of wins. Finally, there was a significant negative correlation between the trust/inclusion subscale of the RSLP-S and number of losses as well as a significant negative correlation between the service subscale and number of losses (See Table 5). These results show, quite simply, that servant leader coaches win more than their non-servant leader counterparts. These findings may seem intuitive, considering the servant leader coaches in this sample possessed many superior coaching skills relative to their non-servant peers; however, these findings are the first peer-reviewed statistical confirmation of this effect.

These findings should act as a reassurance for coaches to continue to "do the right thing." Coaches often are pressured into producing winning teams, sometimes at the expense of their own ethical behavior and moral development of the athletes. As a result numerous sport coaches have been found guilty of rule infractions, illegal recruitment of athletes, falsification of transcripts, and abusive behavior toward players, referees, and officials [24]. Stoll and Beller [25] offer caution to this growing trend:

We must reconsider how the win-at-all costs attitude that permeates virtually every aspect of our athletic programs affects the moral character and development of participants. While teaching the will to win does not have to be eliminated, coaches, athletic administrators, and others in sport leadership positions must re-evaluate their philosophy regarding the importance of winning as it relates to character development, particularly when the participants are children and young adults. [25, p. 27]

The servant leader coaches in the present investigation were also the most successful, suggesting that "winning-at-all cost" coach behaviors are not necessary, nor desirable, for winning outcomes. Coaches in this sample who stressed "paradoxical" goals, like the emphasis of trust/inclusion, humility, and service over more obvious coaching goals like "win now" are adding to the likelihood that their teams will do just that (i.e., "win now").

Perhaps the results of this study will lessen some of the pressure coaches feel when making difficult decisions that may either compromise their integrity or compromise their ability to win. For example, the dilemma of whether to play a “star” athlete in the next game after the star has been caught violating a team rule has baffled coaches for ages as they feel they cannot “win” whatever the decision. The results of our study suggest that the resolution to this dilemma should be based on whether or not the decision enhances team-wide trust, inclusion, service, or humility and not on how the decision impacts the win/loss ledger. In other words, the coaches in our sample who principally sought to “win” the character game were also able to “win” the result game. Winning games within the game has long been a useful tool for coaches to keep their athletes focused on short-term achievement. The results of our study show that perhaps the most important game within the game for coaches to win is the “character” one.

HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES’ PREFERENCES FOR COACHING BEHAVIORS

T-test results revealed that high school basketball players prefer their coaches to display more servant leader characteristics on two of the three RSLP-preferred subscales to the RSLP-perceived subscales (See Table 6). Specifically, the results from this study indicated a significant finding for the preferred trust/inclusion subscale compared with the perceived trust/inclusion subscale and for the preferred service subscale compared with the perceived service subscale (see Table 6).

These t-test results strongly support the notion that coaches should foster an environment of trust, inclusion, and service. These results also appear to be congruent with the thoughts of Westre [4], who suggests that modern day athletes are no longer satisfied with exclusively autocratic leadership and top-down hierarchical structures. According to Westre [4], the modern-day athlete appears to desire coaches who seek their input regarding decisions related to the team, provide positive feedback and recognition, exhibit sincere sensitivity to the needs of the athletes both in as well as out of the sport, and generally demonstrate a people-centered attitude.

Furthermore, the results of our study also appear to be congruent with Stewart’s [26] investigation, which asked former athletes what characteristics defined their favorite and least favorite coaches. Stewart’s study showed that “favorite” coaches displayed characteristics such as (a) honesty, (b) approachability, (c) interest in the athletes beyond the sport, (d) welcoming and using athlete’s input, and (e) making each team member feel valued and important. Conversely, the characteristics of “least favorite” coaches were (a) stressing winning at any cost, (b) lying, (c) being impersonal, and (d) using fear and degradation as motivators. Stewart’s [26] identification of favored characteristics such as honesty, approachability, making each team member feel valued, and welcoming and using athlete’s input, seem quite compatible with the servant leader variables examined in our study.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Several limitations to this study are worth noting. First, due to the timing of the study (summer), many of the teams involved were outside of their competitive seasons and the recall technique utilized for completing the questionnaires may have impacted the athlete’s thoughts relating to their previous season’s performance. Additionally, the total number of subjects and teams consisted of a limited number of participants from high schools in the Pacific Northwest. A larger and more representative sample may have produced more revealing results. Finally, due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, the directionality of the relationships found in this study cannot be shown.

CONCLUSION

This study was the first to examine servant leadership's potential application to sport. Our results suggest that high-school athletes who perceive their coach to be a "servant leader" also display higher intrinsic motivation, are more satisfied with their sport experience, are mentally tougher, and seem to perform better as a team and individually when compared with athletes coached by non-servant leaders. Furthermore, high-school athletes seem to prefer coaches who display servant leader characteristics to those who do not. Thus, while various popular leadership writers such as Greenleaf [1], Spears [2], and others have espoused the idea of servant leadership as a valid, modern theory of organizational leadership in the fields of business, education and churches, the results of this study suggest the servant leader style may also be effective in the sport setting.

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