

Servant Leadership for Multidimensional Sport Employee Well-being: Relationships, Health, and Happiness

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1. Aim and Research Questions

Leadership in sport has been a popular topic of inquiry for decades, and one that covers many dimensions; but the study of servant leadership in sport is a relatively new trend (Welty Peachey, Zhou, Damon, & Burton, 2015). Servant leaders are those who are selfless, authentic, and act out of humility in the interest of others, and therefore often influence important outcomes in organizations. A premise of the current study is that employee well-being should be at the forefront of these outcomes to enable human flourishing and organizational performance (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007), and servant leadership could play a pivotal role. In sport, scholars have begun to explore the effect of servant leadership in limited segments, but there is a need to broaden the scope to others. Thus, our central purposes herein are (1) to investigate the role of servant leadership within the professional sports environment, and (2) to explore how servant leadership contributes to the overall well-being of employees. To this end, we test a model that incorporates life satisfaction, physical health, and cooperation as outcomes of servant leadership in a sample of 490 employees from professional sports organizations.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The emerging theory of servant leadership distinguishes itself from more traditional perspectives due to its primary focus on follower development rather than organizational objectives (Welty Peachy et al., 2015). The consideration of servant leadership in the sport context has lagged behind significantly in comparison to the mainstream management and leadership literatures. This concept was established by Greenleaf (1977), where leaders have a steadfast commitment to follower growth and development. Personal well-being is considered a complex construct relating to optimal experience and functioning. A foundational definition of well-being is the global assessment of an individual's quality of life according to his or her own chosen criteria (Shin & Johnson, 1978). A large body of research has focused on subjective well-being, a form of psychological well-being. However, when considering well-being in a holistic manner, scholars across multiple disciplines often include the following three dimensions: psychological (happiness), social (relationships), and physical (health) (Grant et al., 2007). Servant leadership focuses on follower development in a broad range of areas such as personal and career development, community and supportive relationships, and other individual priorities relating to general health. We therefore argue that servant leadership is strongly positioned as an approach capable of developing sport employees holistically and having a positive effect on their psychological, social, and physical well-being.

3. Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

The participants were employees from professional sports organizations ($N = 490$) who are members of Major League Baseball (MLB), Major League Soccer (MLS), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Hockey League (NHL). The data were collected using an online survey emailed to a random sample of business operations employees working in these sports leagues. This survey used items previously shown to be valid and reliable in the literature to collect the data, and analyses were conducted to address the potential for nonresponse and common method biases. The main analysis utilized structural equation modeling techniques, with the final phase assessing the significance of the relationships between the focal constructs in the hypothesized research model.

4. Results/Findings and Discussion

Results from confirmatory factor analysis indicated sound convergent and discriminant validity for all of the latent constructs and good overall fit with the data. The structural equation modeling results indicated that all the relationships in the hypothesized research model were positive and significant, providing support for all the stated hypotheses. Specifically, servant leadership was found to be positively associated with employee life satisfaction, cooperation, and physical health. These findings support previous work in the positive organizational behavior literature which focuses on identifying and developing positive aspects of the sport workplace that can lead to exceptional performance. For example, with the harmonious nature (e.g., Papadimitriou, Winand, & Anagnostopoulos, 2017) of the servant leadership approach, future research should consider its potential as a facilitator of positive organizational behaviors in sport more generally.

5. Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

The results provide support for servant leadership as a facilitator of multidimensional well-being for employees in the professional sports environment. This research specifically builds on the work of Welty Peachey et al. (2015) who outlined the need to consider servant leadership's potential impact beyond the intercollegiate sport context. Additionally, it contributes to other recent investigations seeking to identify factors which enhance employee well-being in the sports environment (e.g., Kim, Perrewé, Kim, & Kim, 2017). By considering the leadership for sport employee well-being approach, future studies are able to build on this framework in relation to additional leadership styles and follower outcomes.

6. References

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