

Innovative Cultures in Professional Sports: The Role of Servant Leadership in Fostering Employee Cooperation, Creativity, and Satisfaction

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Aim

As sport organisations continually strive for advantages over their competitors, an emphasis on innovation and creativity has materialised as a mechanism for increased performance on and off the playing field. Other than a few studies which have considered leadership as an enabler of technological innovation (e.g., Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012), little attention has been given to the role of leadership in the innovation process within the field of sport management. The current research addresses this need, while also answering a call for additional investigation in the emerging area of servant leadership within the sport environment (Welty Peachy, Zhou, Damon, & Burton, 2015). The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of servant leadership on the development of innovative cultures in professional sport organisations, as some leadership styles may be more effective than others depending upon the context and desired outcomes. The second aim of the study was to assess the role of innovative culture in the promotion of important workplace attitudes, such as perceived cooperation, creativity, and employee satisfaction.

Theoretical background and literature review

Previous research indicates that the culture of an organisation is heavily influenced by leadership, where leaders shape the culture through various behaviours such as role modeling, reward allocation, and reaction to crises (e.g., Schein, 2010). The current study focuses on a specific type of organisational culture, where innovation is at the core of the workplace environment. Innovative culture refers to an organisation's general openness and orientation to new ideas and change, where originality and creativity are valued and accepted as normal behaviour throughout the organisation (Wang & Miao, 2015). With the appreciation that innovation can stem from any member of work groups, this research proposes that servant leadership is uniquely positioned to cultivate an innovative culture within sport organisations. Servant leadership refers to a style in which leaders are primarily concerned with serving their followers and forfeit their own self-interests in favour of bolstering the personal growth and success of their followers (Greenleaf, 1977). This type of approach to leadership has been shown to be positively related to a number of organisational outcomes, including employee commitment, team effectiveness, and organisational citizenship. In turn, the current research proposes that an innovative culture stimulated by a servant leadership style will lead to attitudinal outcomes which provide a foundation for innovation in the workplace.

Research design, methodology and data analysis

The participants for this study were employees (n = 412) from the following professional sports leagues: 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 employees working in business operations departments within their organisations (e.g., marketing, accounting, etc). Construct items were selected from tested instruments which have previously been shown to be valid and reliable in the literature. Construct reliability and discriminant validity assessments for the latent constructs were conducted through confirmatory factor analysis techniques widely accepted in the literature (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To test the hypothesised research model, the final phase of the analysis utilised structural equation modeling to assess the significance of the relationships between the focal constructs. Alternative models were also considered in relation to additional perspectives from the literature.

Results and discussion

The results from the structural equation analysis confirmed a positive relationship between servant leadership and innovative culture, which in turn had a significant effect on employee levels of cooperation, creativity, and job satisfaction. All fit indices indicated good fit with the data for both the measurement and structural models. The current findings suggest that managers in professional sports organisations should consider a servant leadership approach when the goal is to create a more innovative environment. While innovative culture is positively associated with important workplace outcomes such as employee creativity, cooperation, and job satisfaction, it may also produce a nexus of attitudes strategically positioned to enable a competitive advantage at the organisational level.

Conclusion, contribution and implications

The findings from this study support the proposition that a servant leadership style can be a significant enabler of innovative cultures in professional sport organisations; an environment which is often referred to but seldom researched. Culture of this type also predicts key workplace attitudes which are inherently positive and may serve as building blocks for meaningful innovations. This research provides a theoretical connection between servant leadership and innovative culture, and the hypothesised research model reveals a pathway for sport managers to foster an innovative and healthy workplace environment. The findings also encourage further exploration into a high potential area for augmenting organisational performance.

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