



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF SPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.

—Harvey Firestone

The characteristics of a new style of leadership, servant-leadership, first described by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977), served as the framework for this study, with the specific focus being to determine the applicability of servant-leadership in the area of sport.

Servant-leadership is an emerging leadership style that has gained momentum in a variety of organizational situations (Greenleaf, 1977). Leading authors on leadership and organizational management have discussed the positive effects of servant-leadership on employee satisfaction and organizational profits—authors such as Kenneth Blanchard, Peter Block, Steven Covey, Max DePree, Peter Drucker, M. Scott Peck, and Peter Senge (Spears, 1998). Successful businesses have increasingly used the principles of servant-leadership effectively to run their organizations; these include The Toro Company, Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries, ServiceMaster, and Townsend & Bottum Family of Companies (Spears, 1998). Servant-leadership is also making an impact in the non-profit business sector, as well as in the field of education. Although not yet examined in sport, servant-leadership is thought to have a wide range of applicability in a variety of organizational settings (Horsman, 2001).



In the initial research stages of sport leadership, researchers applied leadership theories from business and industry. Adaptations and changes were made from these borrowed theories to account for many of the unique characteristics particular to sport. Since that time, additional theories of leadership have gained momentum in the business sector as well as in other organizational settings. In particular, transformational, charismatic, and servant-leadership have gained in popularity and effectiveness. Chelladurai (1993) and Meyer (1996) have suggested that these theories are applicable to the sport setting and offer a strong potential application in the study of sport leadership.

Authors who have written about leadership as well as sport coaching (Bass, 1985; Grace, 1988; Bennis, 1989; Field, 1991; Freeman, 1991; Kouzes & Posner, 1999; Bennett, 2001) have encouraged a new practice of leadership in sport that breaks from the traditional autocratic, fear motivation style. Like employees of a company, athletes desire leaders who seek their input regarding decisions relating to the team, provide positive feedback and recognition, exhibit sincere sensitivity to the needs of the athletes both in and out of sport, and generally demonstrate a people-centered attitude.

Chelladurai (1993), in a review of studies about sport leadership, recognized that there were two distinct trends that emerged from the literature. First, athletes increasingly preferred coaches who were democratic in addition to being autocratic; and second, the most effective coaches, in the athletes' opinions, were the ones who considered the opinions and feelings of athletes as paramount. Scott (1997), in his recommendations to coaches for developing a positive organizational culture, encouraged the following leadership behaviors: Collaborate with athletes to establish visions and goals, involve all team members when determining values for team and individual behaviors, approach conflict with the idea of empowerment and social justice, and utilize a reward system (positive reinforcement) that recognizes individual achievement and effort toward accomplishing organizational goals.



Servant-Leadership

Greenleaf (1977) believed that leaders had the power to build or destroy individuals by the way they led. He believed that leadership impacted the lives of the followers and the members of the institution regardless of whether such an impact was intended, and that the particular direction of influence, either positive or negative, was a purposeful, voluntary decision made by the leader. He believed that the leader must begin with a desire to serve first and that the opportunity to lead would then follow.

As part of the choice to serve first, Greenleaf believed that servant-leaders must change the motivation by which they lead. He called leaders to “make sure that the other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13). Leadership that is bent on satisfying ego, acquiring material possessions, or wielding abusive power would only further suppress the followers and leave them feeling used and unappreciated.

With the theory of servant-leadership in place, Greenleaf provided a test to help leaders identify whether they were practicing the principles of his leadership theory. He believed that leaders would recognize that they were making a positive difference if they answered the following questions in the affirmative:

Do those being served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13-14)

METHODOLOGY

A multiple case study with a heuristic phenomenological slant was the research method chosen for this study. Six coaches, including the researcher, were used for this study, all of whom have been or are currently



head football coaches, and all of whom currently coach college football at the NCAA Division III level. The coaches included in this study were self-reported Christians currently coaching at religiously affiliated colleges. The coaches were contacted by telephone and informed of the purpose of this study, as well as of interview expectations. Permission to tape the participants as well as participation consent forms were obtained, and semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect the participants' experiences as they related to servant-leadership.

RESULTS

Six themes emerged from the data analysis that characterized the specific practices of the servant-leader coaches interviewed for this study. These themes were: a different perspective on winning and success, empowerment of athletes through the establishment of ownership in the program, building of team cohesion and relationships among members, motivational techniques, risk-taking and innovation, and the costs of being a servant-leader coach. Excerpts from the interviews were used to illuminate and describe the themes derived from this study.

Perspective on Winning and Success

The servant-leader coaches in this study viewed winning as a by-product of athlete development. They emphasized process over product. Frosty explained it as competition with one's potential rather than competition against an opponent:

I was trying to develop this philosophy for winning that had to do with challenging your best self. The focus of competition then is to close the gap between where you are and where you can be. So from that, we built this philosophy that winning was not beating somebody, but being your best self. I've tried to put this together so that when you play in our style, you're freed up to where you are more concerned with others than yourself. I think that this is a very important thing in trying to establish a



feeling about values. And when you have these values, you help young men start to understand what it is to be unselfish in a selfish world. (p. 3)

James shared his struggles with the definition of success, which were similar to those experienced by other coaches in this study: feeling torn between society's value system and his own.

I firmly believe that true winning comes from not necessarily playing your best, but in giving it your best effort. Now the flip side to that is the reality of the scoreboard and how people deal with that element of sport. Often the questions are, "Did you win? What was the score? What is your record?" If you win they say, "That's great," and if you lose they say, "That's too bad." So you must have a great deal of inner conviction because outside forces will be constantly challenging your philosophy on winning, because it is not the norm. The thing that helps me the most is the issue of accountability. As a leader, I am responsible for providing the best experience possible for my athletes. For me, that means positively impacting the long-term growth and development of the young people I encounter. If I am doing that, then I am successful, and if I am not, then I am responsible to change how I am impacting the athletes. (p. 4)

Empowerment of the Athletes Through Establishment of Ownership

The coaches all seemed to agree that empowerment of athletes through establishment of ownership was vital to developing future leaders among their athletes. In addition to leadership development, the empowerment of the athletes served to enhance the productivity of the team as the athletes shared in the organization's decision-making process. The leadership responsibility of refining and improving organizational policies was shared with the athletes to insure that they were given a voice and helped to insure that coaches served the athletes' needs more effectively.

Brad revealed his thoughts on athlete empowerment:

I really try to get the people around me involved. I like input. I want



people to feel a part of things. If people don't have ownership in something, they lose heart really quickly. (p. 2)

Brad further explained how he empowers his players:

You teach guys how to recognize things, and then give them the tools and then let them make the choices. When you do that, they go into the game much more attentive, and much more attentive in practice too, because you are saying, I've got confidence in you right now to make a decision, I trust you. That is what they are hearing from you, trust. (p. 18)

Team Cohesion and Relationship Building

The servant-leader coaches in this study felt that one of the key ingredients to the success of the servant-leadership style was the building of team cohesion and the establishment of close relationships among team members and coaches. It was important for each coach to establish a close relationship with the athletes in an effort to know the athletes and serve them more effectively.

Motivational Styles and Techniques

Because the servant-leader coaches in this study valued service so highly, they sought motivational methods that supported the concept of service. They found that love was the most effective motivator for both coaches and athletes.

James shared thoughts about his motivational style:

If I have learned anything about dealing with people through coaching, I have learned that motivation through love, sincere love, has the strongest, longest, and most powerful effect on individuals. My college coach used to say, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." The other piece of motivation is that you are trying to develop internal motivation within the athletes so they begin to develop



their own internal desires to do things. This takes longer to develop, but has great longevity. If I can transfer the motivation from myself to the individual, then I am allowing them the ability to function at a high level on their own and then they will no longer need my influence or persuasion to be effective. (p. 11)

Risk-taking and Innovation

The servant-leader coaches took the point of view that in order for significant growth to take place, they had to face the potential of loss. Because they were so greatly motivated by what could be gained, they were willing to take the risk of loss. They viewed “mistakes” as valuable learning opportunities and teaching tools in the development of themselves and their athletes. They thought it was important for athletes to have an environment in which they were free to take risks (risks that had some merit or rationale). They felt this helped to relieve some of the pressures that accompanied athletic performance and helped the athletes avoid the fear of failure that sometimes accompanies more structured or highly pressurized situations.

Risk-taking required an attempt at new and innovative practices. Since servant-leadership was a non-traditional style in the football coaching profession, the servant-leader coaches needed to develop many of their own practices and behaviors.

Costs and Shortcomings

The servant-leader coaches realized that practicing servant-leadership was not without its costs. Personal costs included time, loss of control (in terms of power), job burnout, frustration with athletes who didn’t respond to leadership opportunities, and the emotional hurt one may experience with this type of leadership style.

Professional costs included negative labels from other coaches in the profession who either didn’t agree with or didn’t understand the servant-



leadership style, loss of athletes in the recruiting process because the structure and philosophy of the servant-leadership program was “too different” from their high school football programs, and opposition from administrators (athletic directors) who were impatient with the servant-leadership style if it didn’t produce enough wins.

DISCUSSION

A Different Perspective on Winning

The servant-leader coaches in this study defined winning and success as they related to athlete development rather than to the outscoring of an opponent. Their perception of success was focused more on the process of competing than on the product or outcome of the competition. Although the coaches recognized the reality of the scoreboard as well as the significant societal pressures that define success in terms of wins and losses, they attempted to keep athlete development as their primary goal.

This perspective on winning resonated with Greenleaf’s (1977) basic test of servant-leadership, which asks, “Do those around the servant-leader grow as people? Do they become wiser, freer, more autonomous, healthier, and better able themselves to become servants?” (pp. 13-14). It also was consistent with what Spears (1998) saw as the primary purpose of servant-leadership in business: “to create a positive impact on employees, rather than using profit as the sole motivator” (p. 7). Melrose (1998), a servant-leader in business, expressed the “process over product” concept in this way: “Many of us today recognize that the harvest occurs along the way, not only at the end of the journey” (p. 295).

The coaches in this study, as well as the leadership authors (cited in the previous paragraph), have noted that servant-leadership does not abandon the importance of either scoreboard wins or financial profits. Coaches and leadership authors alike recognized that without scoreboard wins and financial profits, servant-leadership organizations that serve the constituents would not be able to sustain themselves effectively. Proponents of servant-



leadership are not naive about the importance that success plays in an organization; they simply recognize that other forms of success exist besides scoreboard wins and financial profits. Greenleaf (1977) recognized that servant-leadership does not require leaders to ignore profits and productivity, but rather encourages leaders to add growth and development of the constituents to the list of important organizational outcomes. He pointed out that when the constituents are involved in meaningful work, when they are cared for more than the organization and its profits, they produce at a higher level. However, he cautioned that the true servant-leader would not use financial profits as a motivation to practice servant-leadership.

Empowerment of Athletes Through the Establishment of Ownership in the Program

Active participation on the part of athletes in several of the leadership activities helped to insure that the athletes were partners, not simply employees. The coaches not only saw the involvement of the athletes as contributing to the primary goal of athlete development, but also realized the positive contributions (new ideas and insights, dynamic growth, increased sense of purpose, more enjoyable and satisfying experience) that were being made by the athletes to the overall productivity of the team.

The nature and structure of empowerment must be real and sincere. For example, athletes will know if the coach is including them in the decision-making concerning only trivial issues, such as the choosing of uniform colors or t-shirt slogans, as opposed to sincerely desiring their input on significant matters. A marked difference exists between real empowerment and perfunctory delegation of leadership responsibilities. The constituents must have a sense that they are a vital part of the high-level functioning of the organization; they must feel that the leader's efforts to empower them are sincere (Batten, 1998).



Team Cohesion and Relationships Among Members

The implementation of a specific, intentional strategy for nurturing a strong bond between athlete and coach was a primary goal of each of the coaches in this study. The coaches felt that a deeper relationship among teammates contributed to a more significant commitment in serving each other. Also, the willingness to serve one another would more likely be enhanced by the coach's effort to create a strong bond between themselves and the athlete. The coaches felt that it was extremely important to get to know and understand each individual athlete if they wanted to serve their needs effectively.

Motivational Techniques

Each coach felt that love as a motivational technique, based on sincere caring and compassion, would generate the highest commitment from their athletes. The coaches aimed at developing internal motivational systems in the athletes through guided-discovery and dialogue. They encouraged athletes to establish their own remedies to problems by helping them to develop self-correction strategies. The coaches' ultimate goal was for the athletes to develop to the point where they no longer needed the coaches' input and/or motivation to do the things necessary for successful athletic performance.

Cory (1998), a servant-leadership author, pointed to the role that love and caring have in motivation: "We will be brave and find the courage to do the things we need to do when we care enough about someone or something" (p. 212). Batten (1998) referred to the motivational power of love when he described ways in which individuals can prepare themselves for servant-leadership: "Servant-leaders know people can truly live and grow only if they feel real, if they can experience faith, hope, gratitude, and most importantly, love" (p. 39).

Modeling was also used as a motivational style by the servant-leader coaches. They recognized the importance of providing a consistent, visual



picture of the behaviors that they hoped to instill in their athletes. The coaches accepted the responsibility of providing a living example of servant-leadership so as to successfully influence their athletes toward becoming servant-leaders themselves. They believed that what they *did* as servant-leaders had a more significant impact on the athletes than what they *said*.

Risk-taking and Innovation

Risk-taking and innovation were closely related, persistent themes among the servant-leader coaches in this study. The practice of servant-leadership in coaching is itself a risk in that it deviates from the traditional style of authoritarian leadership common to the sport setting. Also, since servant-leadership as a coaching style is relatively uncommon in football, the coaches were required to develop many of their own original leadership practices and behaviors (e.g. pre-season retreats, team-building activities, athlete empowerment, and shared decision-making). Risk-taking was inherent in sharing both the power and control of leadership with their athletes. As a result of their athletes' relative inexperience and young age, the coaches were not guaranteed that their efforts to share leadership responsibilities would be fruitful; as a result, they needed to accept that difficulties and failures were distinct possibilities when leadership opportunities were either shared or given to the athletes. Despite the possibility of difficulties and failures, each of the coaches in this study was willing to accept these risks because s/he believed that the potential gain in productivity of the team, as well as development of the athletes' leadership abilities, would surpass any difficulties or failures they might encounter.

The Cost of Being a Servant-Leader Coach

The life of a servant-leader is often replete with ironic twists of fate: you receive power you neither pursue nor want; you gain access to places that time prohibits you from visiting; and because of the trust people place in



you, the deeper you dig into a project, the more frequent are the distractions that compete for your time.

—Paul Batura

Servant-leadership examines the principles and outcomes of leadership from a unique perspective and value-orientation. As we seek a position of leadership, with all of its power, influence, control, and opportunity, we assume that the path to such a pinnacle is paved with paying dues, bidding time, achievement, climbing on others, strategic planning, and manipulation—a very purposeful and calculated journey. However, servant-leadership takes a somewhat different path: an “unplanned achievement” of acquiring a leadership position is one of its delineating characteristics. Most often a servant-leader assumes the role of leader not through a calculated strategy, but rather by not “acting” like the leader at all. The primary purpose of such people is to serve, and paradoxically, by assuming this humble posture and attitude, they become highly influential and effective.

Lad and Luechauer (1998) were proponents of the servant-leadership style, yet they were also cautious about appearing too idealistic. They offered this advice to potential servant-leaders: “Servant-Leadership is not a panacea and it is all too easy to forget that the path upon which you are embarking is loaded with all the frustration, hostility, and periods of inaction that characterize all approaches to leadership” (p. 66).

Nielson (1998) also acknowledged the cost and difficulties in practicing servant-leadership. In particular, he identified the difficulty a leader has in implementing servant-leadership in a situation that had previously operated under an authoritarian leadership style which had been perceived as successful by the administration. This was the case with one of the servant-leader coaches from this study who had been pressured by the administration to abandon his servant-leadership style for a more authoritarian style, primarily because of lack of scoreboard success.

McGee-Cooper (1995), in her essay “Servant-Leadership: Is There Really Time for It?” acknowledged that servant-leadership may require more time than other leadership styles. Time is required to seek the input of



others, to dialogue with affected constituents before a decision to act is reached, and to truly listen to the viewpoints and perspectives of others. She recognized that the ethical way to lead was not always the most time-efficient. She also stated that in certain instances, when sufficient time to solicit input from others was not available, a decision had to be made immediately. However, she was quick to point out that, for the servant-leader, this should be the exception rather than the rule. She went on to explain that although the servant-leadership style was time-intensive up front, this time investment was compensated for by better decisions being made, an increased sense of ownership for those included in the decision-making process, and an increased motivation “for people to support what they have helped to create” (p. 116). Finally, she asserted that by taking the time to listen to and involve others in decision-making, the servant-leader sends the message that people are more important than time. Frick (1998) concluded that servant-leadership was “rewarding, challenging, risky growth that is often uncomfortable and seldom neat. Servant-leadership is not easy. Most meaningful things seldom are” (p. 358).

The costs of being a servant-leader can have significant effects on family members and friends closest to the servant-leader. Because servant-leadership requires a great deal of time and emotional energy, it can be difficult for the servant-leader to sustain effective personal relationships outside of the workplace if their energy is constantly being given at work. Servant-leaders must either pace themselves or find ways to restore themselves if they are to be equally effective in their personal lives as in the workplace. Each of the servant-leader coaches from this study experienced this reality at some level.

Despite the potential risks, costs, and possibilities of failure, servant-leadership offers significant potential for great reward. By stepping away from more traditional leadership styles and entering into the leadership dynamic as *primus inter pares*, first among equals, the leader gains access to a real and meaningful relationship with his or her constituents. This may be a relationship with an intimacy and connection that not only promises to



increase the productivity of the group, but also simultaneously increases the satisfaction of all involved and increases the likelihood of the constituents' becoming servant-leaders themselves.

The relationships that develop with the constituents are where the fruits of impact truly lie. Words can't describe the incredible joy and satisfaction that come when former student athletes return to visit or maintain frequent communication with the servant-leader coaches. To hear them convey the ideas and strategies they are practicing in their own leadership positions and the exciting growth and development that is taking place with their own constituency can make all those challenges and costs seem worthwhile.

Life is a place of service. Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.

—Leo Tolstoy

CONCLUSION

Servant-leadership is a complex, personal, often paradoxical and difficult to describe leadership style. It is a leadership style full of possibilities, and never more so than in the sport setting. Servant-leader coaches in this study identified their influences and motivation for choosing the servant-leadership style as well as their passion for its continued pursuit; they also shared how they specifically integrated servant-leadership into their coaching. It was discovered that servant-leadership was not without its costs, challenges, and difficulties, and that much is yet to be learned about servant-leadership in sport.

Servant-leadership begins first with the attitude of wanting to serve. It often requires a belief on the part of the leader that his or her needs are secondary to those of the constituents. Once the attitude to serve has been established, the behaviors, practices, and implementation of the servant-



leadership style are often very personal and specific responses to individual situations in which servant-leadership is taking place. That servant-leadership does not offer a specific manual or operation paradigm doesn't limit its effectiveness, but rather opens up possibilities. This study found some significant possibilities for the implementation of servant-leadership in sport, and will hopefully serve as an aid to future research endeavors in sport leadership as well as in other leadership arenas.

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