Put Me in Coach, I'm Ready to Serve

The Servant-Leader as High School Coach

—Brian L. Davenport

The term *servant-leadership* was first coined in the seventies by Robert Greenleaf (Spears 2004) to describe a leadership theory that placed the emphasis on the led. Since that time it has slowly gained traction (ibid.). However, it is clear that, as a leadership theory, servant-leadership is not yet mainstream in thought and practice. Western (2008) described servant-leadership as an emerging leadership theory, nearly thirty years after it was introduced by Greenleaf. The idea received only passing reference in other overviews of various leadership theories (Jackson and Parry 2008; Northouse 2007; Rost 1991), until Northouse's (2013) sixth edition of *Leadership Theory and Practice*, in which servant-leadership was given a whole chapter, alongside chapters on trait approaches, situational approaches, leader member exchange theory, team leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. While the ideas of Greenleaf have been around for more than thirty years, it is clear that the concept is still taking hold. Not only is the idea still gaining acceptance, but it is also still being developed. While the theory of servant-leadership has been well explained (Greenleaf 2002; Spears 2004) its application to various fields is ongoing.

In some fields, servant-leadership has been applied extensively. This can be seen most prominently in the business world, as evidenced by the number of companies practicing servant-leadership, including Southwest Airlines, Vanguard, and Starbucks (McGee Cooper, Looper, and Trammell 2007). While this is a positive step in expanding the influence of servant-leadership, there is still much work to be done in applying these ideas. One field in particular where the application of servant-leadership has not been adequately explored is the world of

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athletic coaching (Westre 2008). Few have examined how servant-leadership applies to coaching, and those that have primarily focus on the coaching of the collegiate athlete (Westre 2008; Hammermeister, Burton, Pickering, Chase, Westre, and Baldwin 2008). For this reason, there is ample room to explore a variety of areas of coaching that could benefit from servant-leadership. Additionally, exposing more individuals to servant-leadership at an earlier age is likely to lead to the theory continuing to grow. Finally, as Hammermeister et al. noted, "Athletic coaches are a group of leaders who could benefit greatly from the servant-leader model because of their strong potential to influence the emotional, social, and moral development of young sports performers" (Hammermeister et al. 2008, 186). For these reasons there appears to be ample room for an exploration of how servant-leadership can be applied to the arena of the high school athletic coach.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

When asked about servant-leadership, high school athletes reported that they prefer coaches who exhibit servant-leadership characteristics to those that don't (Rieke et al. 2008). This finding indicates that there is merit to implementing the servant-leader model in the high school coaching arena. The results of this study also show that servant-leader coaches help produce athletes who are more intrinsically motivated, more satisfied, and better performers. Additionally, the athletes feel that they are receiving better training as an athlete (Rieke et al. 2008). If the goal of servant-leadership is to "make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (Greenleaf 2002, 27), then it would appear that the servant-leader coach is able to accomplish just that. With this in mind, it becomes necessary to examine specific coaching practices that can be implemented by a high school coach who seeks to be a servant-leader. While there are a great variety of servant-leadership attributes that can be explored and applied to coaching, the confines of an article demand that the examination be limited to a select few ideas. With this in mind I have chosen to examine six areas of servant-leadership that seem especially relevant for the high school coach who wants to learn more about implementing these ideas. These ideas are derived from a variety of servant-leadership sources, including successful professional and collegiate coaches, and all the ideas examined are integral to the ideas that Greenleaf presented when discussing servant-leadership.

SERVING OTHERS FIRST

When he discussed Greenleaf's idea of servant-leadership, Spears explained, "The great leader is first experienced as a servant to others, and...this simple fact is central to his or her greatness. True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others" (Spears 2003, 15). The servant-leader is someone who places the needs of others above his or her own. As a result, the focus of the servant-leader is constantly on those that he or she is leading. This involves a shift in focus away from the leader and toward the led. This is counterintuitive for many (Jennings and Stahl Wert 2004; Zohar 2002), but a focus on others is a fundamental aspect of servant-leadership (Greenleaf 2002; Spears 2004). This shift involves changing how leaders envision being in charge as well as how their egos are or are not present in their leadership. For the servant-leader, being in charge has more of a motivational component than a commanding component, or, as Batten explained, servant-leaders "generate enthusiasm" (Batten 1998, 39). This is especially important considering that, as Rieke et al. noted, "Great leaders stand out due to their ability to inspire and empower their subordinates to achieve higher order and more productive levels of motivation" (Rieke et al. 2008, 235). This could be why high school athletes who are coached by servant-leaders are more intrinsically motivated. If a coach is seeking to be a servant-leader, it is imperative that he or she focus on motivating athletes as part of the process of putting others first.

If putting others first is a key attribute of a servant-leader, then the other side of the same coin must also be true, that the servant-leader keeps the self, or ego, in check. As Autry pointed out, the servant-leader needs to "recognize that ego is the biggest problem in leadership" (Autry 2011, 136). He continued this line of thinking when he explained that the servant-leader should "be willing to give up "taking credit"...[and] instead, focus on creating the optimum environment for everybody's success" (ibid., 136). By keeping the ego in check the servant-leader is able to focus less on the needs of self, and more on the needs of the led. However, as Schuster explained, this is not an easy task and is not as simple as destroying ego completely. Instead, the servant-leader needs to seek a healthy balance between being driven by an overwhelming ego and being completely egoless, which would result in the servant-leader being ineffective at leading. For Schuster, the key for servant-leaders is to "avoid the extremes of either being driven by an out of control ego that has power and does harm...or creating a blissful self that expresses peace and harmony but is ineffectual in the world" (Schuster 1998, 273).

Keeping the ego in check is difficult, but is essential for putting the needs of others first, and, as a result, for being a servant-leader coach. With this in mind, along with the concept of motivating others, some practical suggestions on how to accomplish both of these tasks are offered below.

It has already been noted that motivating others and keeping the ego in check is a key characteristic of the servant-leader. The question then becomes, How can this be accomplished? Bausch (1998) suggested that creating an environment that treats people with dignity and allows them to engage in meaningful work will lead to self motivation. If this is so, it then becomes necessary for the servant-leader coach to examine how athletes are treated. Is the coach treating players with dignity? Do players understand how each drill or play is meaningful? If a coach is able to do this, then a coach will be able to create a self motivating environment. As for keeping the ego in check, the key is to distribute power (Schuster 1998) and praise. Autry supported this idea when he explained:

> Take the work seriously but don't take yourself so seriously. It is a great temptation for managers to believe that they ARE the business, thus whatever promotes them promotes the business. One of the greatest barriers to personal growth then becomes the desire to live up to your own hype. The danger is that you will become so focused on yourself that your people and your business suffer. (Autry 2011, 134)

The same can be said for a coach. If there comes a point where the coach is more concerned with his or her image over that of the team, then ego has begun to go out of control. In order to keep the ego in check, the servant-leader coach should look for opportunities to share power, an idea that will be explored in more detail later, and seek ways to put athletes in the spotlight. After a game, a head coach is often interviewed by the media. How does the coach use this opportunity? Is the interview a chance to speak about the greatness of the coach or a chance to speak about the greatness of players? If a servant-leader coach wants to keep ego in check, the coach should use every opportunity available, including interviews, to praise as many players as possible as often as possible. Additionally, it would also be beneficial for a coach to change the definition of success. Rather than defining success in terms of wins or losses, the servant-leader coach should seek to define success by the growth of the players, a concept that will be explored in greater detail below. For now, it is important to understand that both these ideas, praising the player and redefining success, get to the core of Greenleaf's own

definition of servant-leadership, of leading in such a way that those around you "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant-leaders" (Greenleaf 2002, 27). By doing this, the servant-leader coach will not have as much time to talk about self, and instead will continue to focus on the needs of others. Additionally, the servant-leader coach will be able to focus on redefining the standard of success.

REDEFINING SUCCESS

The successful servant-leader coach seeks to redefine success. Former Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy explained that "leadership is all about helping others become the best they can be, it is built on a foundation of teaching, helping, and guiding" (Dungy and Whitaker 2010, 171). Spears echoed this idea when he explained:

> Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her institution [or team]. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees. (Spears 2003, 19)

If this is the purpose of leadership, then success is not something that is measured by the record of a team, instead, success must be redefined for each individual on a team in terms that he or she can meet. The successful servant-leader knows that "perhaps the finest gift you can give another person is the gift of a stretching expectation based on a never ending search for that person's strengths" (Batten 1998, 50). In this case, success is defined by each individual's ability to meet his or her strengths. As a servant-leader coach, setting this as the expectation for success allows for each athlete to continually be pushed to grow. This is how the servant-leader coach views success. Perhaps the best definition of how to measure success comes from an article by Westre. In interviewing servant-leader coaches, one expressed to Westre how his team measures success. This coach explained:

> 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. (Westre 2008, 126)

John Wooden, whom the *Sporting News* ranks as the number one coach of all time (Goodrich 2003), echoes this definition of success. Wooden defined success, explaining that "success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming" (Wooden 2004, 87). It is important to note, however, that redefining success in terms of each person performing up to what he or she is capable of does not mean accepting mediocrity. As Greenleaf explained, "The servant as leader always empathizes, always accepted the person but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person's effort or performance as good enough" (Greenleaf 2002, 34). So while accepting the person, and serving their needs, the effective servant-leader does not necessarily need to accept less than the best a person has to offer. As Kouzes and Posner pointed out, "High expectations matter...everyone benefits when leaders hold the belief that people can change and people can develop new skills and abilities" (Kouzes and Posner 2007, 292). So, the effective servant-leader coach seeks to reframe success in terms that are not about winning or losing, but are about seeking to find and develop each player's strengths. Doing this will go a long way toward creating a climate of servant-leadership within a team.

REMOVING OBSTACLES

When talking about the success of his people, Blanchard explained that the job of a servant-leader is "rolling your sleeves up and doing whatever it takes to help your people win. In that situation, they don't work for you—you work for them" (Blanchard 1998, 28). One of the key things that a servant-leader can do for the led to help them win, is to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of success. It is when servant-leader coaches are removing obstacles that they are truly working for the led. Blanchard shared a story from former NFL coach Don Shula, explaining:

> He made it clear that as a coach he couldn't throw one pass, he couldn't make one tackle, he couldn't throw a single block; therefore, his goal accomplishment as a coach depended on his effectiveness in helping his people to be their very best. (ibid., 28)

Coaches cannot win games because they are unable to score the winning goal or make the big stop. Instead, what a coach can do is to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of their athletes succeeding on and off the

field. According to Greenleaf (1998), one of the keys to overcoming obstacles is to first clearly identify and to understand the ramifications of them. It is only after servant-leaders have done this that they will be able to fully work on removing the obstacles.

But what kinds of obstacles will athletes face? There are the obvious obstacles of sport such as opponents, physical limitations, officials, etc. But what about other obstacles? As a high school coach, it is important to understand the other obstacles that students might encounter. It is entirely possible that students will encounter obstacles at home (Riley 1993) and in the classroom (Dolan and McCaslin 2008) as they try to balance time, commitments, and the reality of maturing from adolescents to adults. As a servant-leader coach, a large part of removing obstacles involves helping the athlete understand how these obstacles might impact him or her both on and off the field and how he or she might work to overcome these obstacles.

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

As discussed earlier, part of being a successful servant-leader coach is defining success for an athlete as being the best self he or she can be. A key part of this is shifting the focus from overcoming weaknesses to improving on strengths. According to Jennings and Stahl Wert (2004), focusing on a strength will help overcome a weakness, and this is part of the job of a servant-leader. DePree echoed this sentiment when he explained that "competent leaders discover, unleash, and polish diverse gifts. Every person comes to our organizations, our institutions, and our families with unique gifts" (DePree 2002, 94). Batten took this concept even farther when he explained that the only thing we can focus on is strengths. He noted:

> We cannot "understand" a weakness, because a weakness is only an absence, a fault, a zero, a vacuum, a nothing. We can understand and acquire only strengths. Once this is fully perceived and understood, once we realize that the only tools we posses are our present and potential strengths, we can begin to focus on what is rather than what isn't. (Batten 1998, 41)

To understand this will allow the servant-leader coach to change how he or she approaches each and every player on a team.

Given the nature of high school sports as well as the frequent presence of both varsity and junior varsity squads, it is appropriate to assume that there are a variety of skill levels on any given team. This reality makes it

easy to think of players in terms of the level of skill or strength they bring to a team. This type of thinking creates a hierarchy in the mind of the coach, and it is easy to focus only on the most talented. The servant-leader coach, however, approaches players differently. He or she understands that every player on the team has strengths and that it is the job of the coach to focus on these strengths in an effort to build them. To do so will actually improve all aspects of a team.

If focusing on the strength of a team is one of the keys to a servant-leader coach building a team, appreciative inquiry can be used as a starting point. According to Cooperrider and Whitney, appreciative inquiry "offers a positive, strength based approach to organization development and change management" (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, 1). Hammond agreed with this idea when she succinctly explained appreciative inquiry, writing, "Appreciative inquiry suggests that we look for what works in an organization" (Hammond 1996, 7). The focus of appreciative inquiry is to start the organizational change process by looking first at what the organization is doing well and then applying those same strengths to areas that need improvement. Similar to the servant-leadership idea of building on strengths, appreciative inquiry focuses on what is being done well in an effort to continue improving. Appreciative inquiry takes this concept one step farther, though, by firmly placing the emphasis on the positive. Cooperrider and Whitney explained this when they wrote:

> Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated. The single most important action a group can take to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is to make the positive core the common and explicit property of all. (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, 9)

Appreciative inquiry is an excellent starting point for the servant-leader coach who wants to begin effectively changing his or her team and who wants to continue building on the strengths of the team.

SERVING A DREAM

Finally, at the core of the servant-leader coach is the desire to seek a greater purpose in coaching. For the servant-leader coach it is essential that what is being done is about more than just athletics. Greenleaf echoed this

idea when he spoke of the need for a dream within institutions. The dream became more important than any individual. He explained:

> Regardless of the stress of circumstances, institutions function better when the idea, the dream, is to the fore, and the person, the leader, is seen as servant of the idea. It is not "I," the ultimate leader, that is moving this institution to greatness; it is the dream, the great idea. (Greenleaf 1998, 87)

This is what separates the servant-leader coaches from other coaches: they have a higher purpose or dream to what they do, and they are able to inspire their followers to seek after the same dream. Fraker agreed with this concept. She explained that "fulfilling a sense of purpose is very serious—one must have contact with 'ultimate purpose' if one is to be trusted" (Fraker 1995, 44). For Greenleaf (2002), this greater purpose started with a desire to serve and grew from there. He firmly believed that servant-leadership is crucial to solving the world's problems and that the world will be led to a better place by servant-leaders. Adding to this idea, Specht and Broholm (2004) explained that the purpose aspect of an organization is outward looking and involves how the organization interacts with the world around it. Is it possible to use sport to improve the world around you? The coach as servant-leader not only believes that it is, but also believes this is the most important aspect of coaching.

In explaining this idea of purpose, Greenleaf offered a simple, yet powerful question that would be useful for the servant-leader coach to keep in mind and share with his or her athletes. He noted, "Without being obsessive about it, the most penetrating and disturbing of all questions [is], 'What am I trying to do?'...[O]ne never loses sight of this question" (Greenleaf 1998, 74). It is easy to get distracted when coaching, but as Greenleaf noted, it is important for the servant-leader coach to continually ask what he or she is trying to do. Additionally, it is important for this question to be shared with the athletes as well, allowing everyone to think about the higher purpose of sport. Doing this ensures that no one loses sight of the dream that has been created.

The key to seeking after a greater purpose or dream comes from more than just explaining why the servant-leader coach is doing what he or she is doing. It comes through action. As Bennis explained:

> To communicate a vision, you need more than words, speeches, memos, and laminated plaques. You need to live a vision, day in, day out, embodying it and empowering every other person to execute that vision in everything he or she does; anchoring it in reality, so that it becomes a template for decision making. Actions speak louder than words. (Bennis 2002, 105)

The servant-leader coach creates a purpose or vision for what is being done, then he or she lives it each and every day that is spent with athletes. He or she makes it clear that this is the higher reason for what is being done and uses this purpose or vision as the basis for every decision that is made. This is the foundation of the servant-leader coach.

THE LEAST PRIVILEGED IN SPORT

So far, five aspects of the servant-leader coach have been explored. And while there are more than just five characteristics of servant-leadership (Spears 2004), the scope of this article limits the exploration to examining a limited number of ideas. However, one further key aspect of the servant-leader coach needs to be examined, an aspect of servant-leadership that was important to Greenleaf and could impact how the servant-leader coach serves his or her players. It is the impact of servant-leadership on the least privileged. In his often quoted definition of servant-leadership Greenleaf called on servant-leaders to ask, "And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf 2002, 27). The servant-leader coach must consider the impact of his or her actions on the least privileged, but who is the least privileged in sports? The servant-leader coach needs to examine the impact of his or her actions, as well as the team's actions, on the players at the end of the bench, the junior varsity squad, and the youngest players on the team. A story that Dan Rather told to Greene illustrates who the least privileged are on an athletic team and the impact that coaches can have on these players. Greene explained:

> Dan Rather, fifty two, is an anchor of the CBS *Evening News*. "When I was thirteen, I had rheumatic fever," he said. "I became extremely skinny and extremely weak, but I still went out for the seventh grade baseball team....The school was small enough that there was no cut as such; you were supposed to figure out that you weren't good enough, and quit. Game after game I sat the bench, hoping that maybe this was the time I would get in. The coach never even looked at me; I might as well have been invisible....[I]f we were way ahead I'd keep hoping that this was the game when the coach would put me in. He never did. When you're that age, you're looking for someone to tell you you're okay. Your sense of self esteem is just being formed. And what that experience that baseball season did was make me this that perhaps I wasn't okay. In the last game of the season something terrible happened. It was the last of the ninth inning, there were two outs, and there were two strikes on the batter.

> And the coach turned to me and told me to go out to right field. It was a totally humiliating thing for him to do....Looking back on it, it was an extremely unkind thing for him to have done." (Greene 1991, 494)

This is not what coaching should be about. In this story, Rather was clearly the least privileged. A servant-leader coach needs to think about how his or her actions will impact the least privileged on their team. A personal story will help illustrate a team whose attitude did not consider the least privileged and the possible impact that could have on the future.

While an assistant soccer coach, the team I was a part of had a policy that freshman were essentially grunt laborers. If a senior kicked a ball wide of the goal, instead of getting it themself, they would call a freshman over to go get the ball. This is not how a servant-leader allows power to be used (Nielson 1998; Cory 1998; Bogle 2002; Greenleaf 2002). As Smith and Farnsworth (2002) explained, the servant-leader should seek to have power *with*, rather than power *over*, others. What is most disturbing about the reality and abuse of power on the team I coached is that it is likely to perpetuate itself. As Freire commented, "The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors" (Freire 1993, 45). Someday those freshmen will be seniors. If what Freire said is true, they are more likely themselves to oppress the new freshmen instead of seeking to liberate and serve them. If the servant-leader coach cares about the least privileged on the team, he or she must ensure that this does not happen. Lopez made this very point when explaining the ethical use of power. For Lopez, the servant-leader sought to "assure that no one is harmed by the actions of the team" (Lopez 1995, 158). While I failed to change this particular practice, my hope is that by reflecting upon and sharing my experience all of us can begin to recognize and change practices that don't value the least privileged on a team.

CONCLUSION

Servant-leadership has the power to transform society by transforming the people and institutions within that society (Greenleaf 2002). As a result, it is worthwhile to seek to move servant-leadership into as many spheres of influence as possible. Student athletes develop a great deal of life skills as a result of their participation in sport (Rosewater 2009). If coaches were to embrace the servant-leadership model of coaching that has been introduced

here and discussed by others (Westre 2008; Reike, Hammermeister, and Chase 2008; Hammermeister et al. 2008), it is possible that the concept of servant-leadership can continue to spread through the lives of student athletes and therefore expand the positive impact that servant-leadership has on the world, including on the least privileged in society, as well as have a significant impact on the lives of athletes themselves. While being a servant-leader coach is not necessarily easy, research suggests that it is a more effective method for coaching at the high school level (Reike, Hammermeister, and Chase 2008), and, in the end, these concepts will make the lives of student athletes better.

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