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Leadership: The Act of Serving

Sharon K. Stoll, Jennifer M. Beller, Peter VanMullem,
Kevin Bryant and Marcis R. Fennell

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Abstract

This chapter is directed toward servant leadership as applied to the field of sport and athletic coaching. The purpose of the chapter is to give a brief definition of servant leadership and the application of such in coaching, and then to offer strategies for servant leadership as well as discuss several different research studies in athletic coaching. The conclusion simply states that though little research in coaching servant leadership exists, that which has been accomplished argues for implementation of coaching styles that are servant leadership focused.

Keywords: athletic coaching, servant leadership

1. Introduction

1.1. What is servant leadership?

In 1970, at the age of 66, Robert Greenleaf published *The Servant as Leader*, the first of a dozen essays and books on servant leadership [1]. Greenleaf spent the majority of his organizational life in the field of management, research, development, and education at American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T). His job at AT&T was to study how the best leaders emerged in an organization, and in that role, he studied the best and most successful organizations. After a half century of working with large organizations and teaching at a variety of colleges and universities about business management, Greenleaf distilled his observations in a series of essays and books on the theme of “The servant as leader” and then established a Center dedicated to servant leadership.¹

¹The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership is located in Westfield, Indiana, and can be found at: <http://www.greenleaf.org/>.

At the time, his essays and books were uniquely different from the majority of organizational texts for none spoke of leadership as serving. Rather, organization texts spoke of effective management. No texts ever focused on leadership as service.

In all of these works, Greenleaf described the need for a new kind of leadership model—a model which puts serving others as the number one priority. Unlike other leadership styles, a servant leader focuses on service to others [1]. This sort of thinking uses a holistic approach to the individual and all relevant others which then promotes community and sharing the process of decision making to all interested parties.

1.2. What is a servant leader?

Greenleaf said that the servant leader is always an individual first but the more importantly the leader serves others. This choice to serve others is a conscious choice, a way of being, in which the individual, the leader, takes an active role in serving others through leadership. What is the litmus test to know if one is a servant leader? The answer lies in a simple question: Do those who are being served grow as professionals and as human beings? The served should become healthier, more autonomous, with a greater ability to make wise choices and they should be able to see themselves having autonomy so strong that they are free to make decisions for themselves. An individual who has been served by a servant leader in the most optimal fashion will become a servant leader of others. The net effect then is that everyone involved will benefit and not feel deprived of the benefits of the organization and this in turn will benefit both the organization and therefore society in general [1].

Greenleaf was very clear in his discussion of a servant leader and how he developed the concept of servant leadership. Greenleaf, a prolific reader of leadership and of the literature in general, borrowed from the work of numerous writers who also had a visionary perspective about the role of serving through leadership.

First and probably most importantly, Greenleaf was inspired by the writings of St. Paul in the New Testament. St. Paul described a servant as an under rower or the actual Greek word of *huperetes* (Fourth Chapter of 1 Corinthians)² In St. Paul's period of Roman dominance, galley ships were propelled by galley slaves who were under rowers who kept the galleys moving. St. Paul envisioned a servant leader as one who is "equal" to all of the workers, all of the individuals within the organization. A servant leader is not above the followers but is one of them. A servant in the galley "under" rows for the good of all. A servant leader is one who serves first, rather than wanting power, influence, fame, or wealth [2].

²The actual word used by St. Paul is *huperetes*, which loosely translated in the galley slaves who were under-rowers. The meaning here is derived from the Roman Empire's warships, the galley ships. It derives its meaning from, the war galleys of the Roman. These ships had a low deck just a foot or so above the water, and under that decks were where the rowers, the slaves were chained to their oars. <http://ldolphin.org/underrowers.html>. The translation reads "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," which in the Ancient Greek is: *Outwv hmav logizesqw (5737) anqrwpov wv uphretav Xristou kai oikonomouv musthriwn qeou.* <http://www.search-godsword.org/isb/bible.cgi?query=1co+4:1&translation=nas&ot=bhs&nt=na&sr=1>.

Greenleaf was also highly influenced by the writings of Max Dupree and Abraham Heschel. Max DuPree [3] wrote two important works from his experience as the ECO/Chairman of Herman Miller Corporation, a Fortune 500 company. In “Leadership is an Art” and “Leadership Jazz”, DuPree set forth his leadership style simply and directly. Leadership is an intimate activity of work and in relationship with your people, i.e., the followers. He said that true leaders define reality. They thank their people often and they know they are indebted to them and they serve them [3].

Greenleaf also mentioned throughout his work the writings of Abraham Herschel, probably one of the twentieth century’s great theologians. Greenleaf was drawn to Herschel’s work, “*Who is man*” [4] in which Herschel clearly outlines how a true servant sees another person, “Our way of seeing a person is different from our way of seeing a thing. A thing we perceive; a person we meet.” *Who is man* is learned, lucid, and drew Greenleaf into the knowledge that the authentic life should be authentically lived as a leader and as a follower.

One singular work that influenced Greenleaf’s thinking was the novel by Hermann Hesse, *Journey to the East*, which is an example of Hesse’s typical Eastern mysticism at its finest [5]. The story is about a group of people who are traveling to a new land. Leo, their servant, sings songs and takes care of their needs. Somewhere on their trip Leo disappears and the group cannot function without him and they are forced to disband. Much later, the group through their narrator discovered that Leo (the servant) was actually the leader and therefore they realized the importance of his role—Without a leader who would be servant, the group could not function. Inspired by Leo’s character, Greenleaf realized that the key to leadership is to serve first. The combination of this inspiration and his own 40 years of experience with AT&T helped him create his most famous essay, “The Servant as Leader” [1]. The basic characteristics of a servant leader according to Greenleaf lie in specific competencies. We have selected but a few to share.

- (1) Building Community—Servant leadership evolves from our basic involvement with community. It is our desire to improve community that prompts us as individuals to serve institutions (i.e., business, education, worship, and government.) Greenleaf was a devout Christian, and the sense of community for him was imperative to the success of any leadership role.
- (2) Stewardship—As a leader in an institution, we can be a (1) inside leader who handles the daily activities or (2) trustee who oversees the organization and insures that goals are met.
- (3) Commitment to the growth of people—Practicing servant leadership includes helping others become good servant leaders.
- (4) Healing—Servant leaders are continuously searching for ways to bring ‘wholeness’ to our life.
- (5) Empathy—We must not only identify with others, but accept what others contribute. Servant leadership requires a tolerance of imperfection.
- (6) Listening—The natural servant leader responds to a problem by listening first. True listening will build strength in others.

2. Servant leadership in coaching

After reading Greenleaf [1], Dupree [3], and Heschel [4], as well as other writers mentioned by Heschel including Nouwen [6], Hauerwas [7], and Crossin [8], we began to wonder if the principles of servant leadership could be applied to coaching in athletics. Very little is written on the concept of servant leadership as applied to coaching and less has been studied about the effect of a servant leadership philosophy on coaching. A few studies have examined servant leadership from the perspective of how coaches were perceived by their athletes to possess “servant leader” characteristics. One study in particular focused on the quality of perceived servant leadership which was associated with their athletes’ use of mental skills, motivation, satisfaction, and performance [9]. Little research, however, exists on educating and helping coaches reflect about the role of servant leadership.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss and apply the principles of servant leadership to the art and practice of coaching in athletics and to offer direction and helpful hints as to how this can be accomplished.

2.1. Application

Because athletic coaching education is inadequate in the application of servant leadership education for coaches, we as a research group, the Center for ETHICS*³ [10] decided to begin a journey to develop face to face and online educational programs to help develop a servant leadership heart in coaches. We had won a contract with a nonprofit organization, Winning with Character,⁴ specifically to develop a new model for coaching education. Could we develop a philosophic model that could capture the strength of Greenleaf’s original thesis and place it into a curriculum that would inspire coaches to want to be servant leaders?

For us, at the Center for ETHICS*, servant leadership could only exist if certain moral character traits were also developed and supported in the coaching model. Thus, we believed to truly understand the role of servant leadership, we had to choose descriptors of a servant to match what we believe are the necessary and sufficient qualities to be leaders of character. Such an individual is focused on the good for everyone, not just the good of the self. An “under rower” would have specific traits of character that stand as the measure of a mission—what is the leader’s purpose? First, a servant leader as coach would live an honorable life. The coach would know what is right and what is wrong. This coach would have a mission that explicitly states their servant role. This servant leader coach would assist, give, share, and help others. The servant leader coach would be an inspiration for others to make choices that were honorable, right, and to develop and lead a mission driven life of honor. This servant leader coach

³The Center for ETHICS* at the University of Idaho offers study, intervention, outreach, consultation, and leadership in developing and advancing the theory, knowledge, and understanding of character education including moral and ethical reasoning, moral development, ethical leadership, and ethical application. The Center’s mission is in believing and teaching the tradition of competitive integrity to inspire leaders of character.

⁴Winningwithcharacter.org. The organization is now defunct, however, the research and curriculum development continues on through the Center for ETHICS*.

would have a clear action plan, which was honorable and easily understood. Such a servant leader coach would have to be courageous to stand for the right and to do the right.

We believed that the servant leader coaching model should follow the same simple ideal but profound vision of Robert Greenleaf, who said that a servant leader wants to serve first and foremost. They aspire to lead, and their followers grow as human beings to the point where they are called to be servant leaders themselves [1].

Servant leadership encourages a balance of leading and serving. For individuals in leadership positions, the primary responsibility is serving others but at times the leader is also a follower. The end result of this moving back and forth between leading and following is to enhance lives as individuals and raise the possibilities of our many institutions.

Our first project in 2002–2003 [10] was to examine the possibilities of affecting change toward servant leadership by developing first a curriculum focused on the qualities of servant leadership. Second, we developed an assessment tool that measured qualities necessary to be a servant leader. At the time, we were working with a large United States university football team. The coach had asked us to write curriculum focused on servant leadership that their coaches could teach. We wanted to assess the effectiveness of our curriculum. We developed a 4-year curriculum for the university team in which we worked to educate the players about the importance of character in relation to servant leadership. The curriculum begins with examination of self, self as a follower, self as an emerging leader, and finally self as a servant leader. The university team found the curriculum to be effective, but we wanted to know if the curriculum did affect change in leadership ability. To do so, meant some sort of measurement to capture the essence of servant leadership. After deliberation and study of the current tools available at that time, we decided to develop our own instrument: the SBB Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory⁵ [10].

The SBB Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory (SBB Servant) was developed, using a theoretical construct based on Greenleaf [1] and St. Paul's usage of the word, *huperetes*, to examine individual's perceptions of others in relationship to servant leadership qualities [10]. The SBB Servant was designed to assess individual and peer evaluated moral values associated with character driven servant leadership. Participants read and answered 50 statements about: honorable nature, serving others, inspiration to others, a plan of action, and courage. Their answers were evaluated based on a five point Likert Scale from Most Like Me to Not Like Me. The Inventory has two different sections, (1) The SBB SELF Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory and (2) The SBB Peer Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory. The total curriculum and inventory aided young people in their journey to become servant leaders. Each athlete took the SELF inventory and then each in the group was to rate each other using the PEER inventory. Results from the self-inventory were then compared with the peer group evaluation. The goal was for the athletic servant coach to use this information to educate athletes about their values and how these values might beneficially or negatively affect their servant growth. The overall goal was to help athletes develop into functional servant leaders. Initial pilot studies were conducted on male and female athletes prior to the measuring the

⁵SBB was shortened for the last names of the primary authors, Stoll, Breitbach, and Beller.

University football team, with Cronbach alphas ranging on each subscale from 0.78 to 0.84 [11]. While theoretically an individual cannot consider him or herself a servant leader, it was of interest to examine how an individual perceived themselves relative to these servant leader qualities and then compare those views to how others viewed them. From this process, an individual can then learn how others perceive them and thus potentially grow in their servant leader qualities.

Next, we studied 27 of the male Division I football players. Each athlete gave informed consent and then completed the SBB Servant. Over a period of a week, each athlete then completed the SBB Peer Servant on the other 26 athletes. To examine how athletes perceived themselves in relation to how others viewed them a series of correlations analyses were run. Additionally, a coach was asked to evaluate the athletes relative to the servant leader qualities. Interestingly, the athletes whom a coach viewed as servant leaders were found to score high on the SBB Peer Servant qualities by their peers. These athletes also appeared to have a strong sense of who they were relative to these servant leader qualities. However, those athletes whom the coach felt did not demonstrate strong servant leader qualities were also viewed by their peers as having lower servant leader qualities. Interestingly, these particular athletes perceived themselves as having high levels of servant leader qualities. Thus, in a preliminary study, the instrument appeared to have the ability to help differentiate athlete's perceptions of themselves relative to how others view them in their servant leader qualities [10].

This preliminary study with the university team pushed us forward to affect change in the servant leadership literature and to also take the next giant step, to actually work with coaches on developing servant leadership traits. Our initial studies with athletes and servant leadership education told us that our curriculum appeared to work, and our instruments appeared to also work in measuring peer perception of leadership.

In 2015–2016, we studied over 200 high school athletic directors. A high school athletic director is the main leader of all coaches in a high school environment [12].

2.2. What are the results of a servant leadership education program for coaches?

Because most coaches are not available to take classes at a university or college, we were challenged to develop education that could be delivered online. We had experience working with athletes, and we had experience in developing curriculum and instruments, we now needed to actually develop an educational program that could be accessed by many coaches.

In 2007, we first developed a 10 lesson online coaching education program to help inspire and improve a coach's thinking about servant leadership. One of our student-colleagues gave us some thoughtful direction on the content of our lessons [13]. He argued for ten specific lessons: (1) What is leadership? (2) What are the styles of leadership in coaching? (3) What is your Mission as a Coach? (4) Love, (5) Commitment, (6) Responsibility, (7) Respect, (8) Humility, (9) Patience, and (10) Empathy, Compassion and Leadership. In 2008, another colleague added an additional lesson, number 11, Integrity and Sportsmanship [14]. We anticipated that completion of the educational online program would take approximately 30 h of clock time. In each lesson, a participant reads a variety of information on the lesson topic, views video

through *YouTube*, answers five multiple choice questions, and does a reflective assessment of their reasoning about servant leadership and the values posted in the lesson.

The multiple choice questions are unique, for if a participant chooses an answer that is not correct or not the best choice, the reader is linked back to start again, read more information, do more reflection, before choosing an answer again. Thus, the multiple choice questions inspire and force reflection about their choices. The assessment tool asks a series of questions about the lesson and the coaches' responses including a reflective piece on each lesson.

The 2007 preliminary study appeared successful and a good foundation to increase the size and scope of the project [13]. In 2008, we conducted an additional preliminary study of this program on collegiate coaches [14].

What is so important about the Servant Leadership Online Education Program is that usually education and social science researchers are often limited to a sample of self-selected volunteers and/or intact groups. Thus, major limitations in research design exist and the ability to generalize those results to the greater population occurs. Because of these limitations, many argue that educational or social science research is limited in its ability to draw causation from the independent to dependent variable to the extent that studies in the hard sciences can accomplish.

However, our 2008 study is an exception to much of the typical design flaws of social science and educational research. We first sent out a general solicitation to coaches to participate in the study. From this call, we received responses from 37 individuals who were interested in participating, many of whom were currently coaching in their seasons. Once these individuals were identified, we sorted them by sport affiliation (in order to ensure equivalency across sports in each group) and then assigned numbers to each. They were then randomly assigned to either intervention or controls groups. All participants were active coaches and participants in a coaching character education program within their governing organization [13, 14].

The online intervention was then administered to the treatment group. Thus, there existed a modified pretest, posttest, randomized groups design. To ensure that randomization truly occurred, an independent t-test was run on initial Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory (HBVCI) scores—a valid and reliable instrument to measure moral reasoning (Cronbach Alpha at 0.88)—and Core Values Recognition Test (CVTRT)—a recognition test developed to measure the governing organization's character education program—finding no significant differences between groups at the study initiation. The intervention had a strong theoretical construct based in cognitive moral development as well as the philosophical theories underlying servant. The control group received only the governing organization's character education program. All participants were pretested and posttested with the HBVCI (moral reasoning) and the CVTRT (NAIA – National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics recognition test). It was hypothesized that the sport governing character education program would have limited impact on participant's ability to recognize values of respect, responsibility, and integrity, as their program had little to no theoretical construct and did not follow best practices related to the pedagogical practices of cognitive moral reasoning [14].

As one would expect, the intervention group significantly increased in their cognitive moral reasoning (HBVCI) from pretest to posttest with the control group decreasing in their scores. With the CVTRT, the intervention group had identical scores from pretest to posttest, while the control group decreased. Servant leadership has at its core values of respect, responsibility, and fairness, values that the governing organization program claims to teach and profess. One would think that the intervention group, because they spent much time in critical thinking about these values relative to personal and professional practice (Servant Leadership) and had gone through the governing organization character program as well, that their scores on the CVTRT would also increase. They did not which supported the premise that a strong theoretically based educational pedagogy is necessary in order for individuals to improve their critical moral reasoning about the relevant moral issues they face.

In 2015–2016, yet another doctoral student [12] studied the moral reasoning and social reasoning of athletic directors in the state of Oregon. In the United States, high school athletics is argued to be an important facet of developing character [15–17]. Athletics, though not a part of the general school curriculum, is highly valued as a part of the “extra-curricular” activities of high school experiences. If this is true, which most research [18–20] does argue for the social interaction of sport participation but not necessarily the moral attributes, one would believe that those who coach and those who administer would have a developed moral sense and social values.

Athletic directors are the administrators of the high school who oversee the work of coaches and related staff involved in athletic programs. These individuals are responsible for the hiring, firing, and education and character of the coaches as directed toward athletics. Bryant et al. [12] inventoried 208 athletic directors, 187 men and 21 women using the Rudd, Stoll, Beller, Hahm Values Choice Inventory, which measures moral reasoning and social reasoning in sport [21]. Thus far, the social character index has a Cronbach alpha of 0.72–0.74, and the moral character index has a Cronbach alpha of 0.77–0.88. The RSBHVI – Rudd, Stoll Beller and Hahm Value Choice Inventory [22] has two separate measures. The first 10 questions evaluates social reasoning, and the second 10 measures moral reasoning. The social questions evaluates teamwork, loyalty, sacrifice, and dedication – all important values of sport but not moral values. For example, one could be a hardworking, dedicated, loyal, sacrificial bully. The social side answers are based on a five-point Likert Scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

Like the social side of the inventory, the moral questions are directed toward real world competitive experiences. Unlike the social side, the questions lie within the actual competitive action of sport. The moral side also uses a five-point Likert Scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. In analyzing data, correlations, multivariate and univariate statistical analyses are used to evaluate difference by group on both the social side of the inventory and then the moral side [22]. The range of scores for the RSBHVI is 10–50.

In the Bryant, Stoll, and Beller, 2016 study [11], the Oregon athletic director men scored a mean of 30.90 ± 0.45 , and the women a score of 34.14 ± 1.3 . Neither mean scores show an elevated sense of moral knowing, though there was a significant difference between the mean of men and women $F(1200) = 5.0, p < 0.02$. There was no significant difference in social reasoning between men and women. Men scored a 42.42 ± 0.28 and the women scored 43.46 ± 0.86 .

Athletic directors appear more guided by social values compared to moral values. What we can say is that athletic directors in Oregon probably need a better educational model and intervention to improve their moral reasoning.

3. Conclusion

Interpretation of the statistical findings of these diverse studies gives us hope that an intervention servant leadership education for coaches can be a powerful force in helping coaches be servant leaders. We also can state that without intervention, moral reasoning scores in administrators and coaches are not what they should be and that intervention is necessary. Our goal is that our involvement in sport servant leadership will continue the tradition of Robert Greenleaf and that athletes coached by servant leader coaches and hopefully athletic directors meet the Greenleaf test: “do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” [1].

Author details

Sharon K. Stoll*¹, Jennifer M. Beller², Peter VanMullem³, Kevin Bryant¹ and Marcis R. Fennell¹

*Address all correspondence to: [sstoll@uidaho.edu](mailto:ssoll@uidaho.edu)

1 University of Idaho, Moscow, ID, USA

2 Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA

3 Lewis-Clark State College, Lewiston, ID, USA

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