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Developing Leadership Behaviours in Athletes

Project Summary

This project developed, implemented, and evaluated the effect of a season-long athlete leadership development program. The participants included 66 female varsity athletes who participated in four leadership workshops throughout their competitive sport season, approximately one hour in duration. All of the participants completed inventories measuring leadership behaviours, cohesion, communication, and peer-motivational climate. Overall, the results showed significant differences in regard to leadership behaviours but not for cohesion, peer-motivational climate, and communication from pre- to post-intervention. Further, follow-up focus groups were also conducted to assess the leadership development program. These focus groups revealed important insight into the leadership program's structure and the influence of the program. These findings provide researchers, sport psychology consultants, and coaches with important information regarding the effectiveness of this athlete leadership development program in helping sport teams function more effectively.

Research methods

Multiple research methods including both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in this project. Study 1 included 133 intercollegiate athletes (94 females and 39 males; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.76$, $SD = 1.84$) from 19 different sports. The aim was to determine athletes' perceptions regarding the importance for athletes to display leadership behaviours as operationalized by the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X; Bass & Avolio, 2004), and Differentiated Transformational Leadership Inventory (DTLI; Hardy et al., 2010). Based on the results of Study 1, Study 2 included the development, implementation, and evaluation a season-long athlete leadership development program. Participants were 66 female intercollegiate athletes from two teams over 4 seasons. A pretest-posttest follow-up design using an athlete leadership development intervention was conducted. Given quantitative data were collected prior to the leadership development intervention and following the intervention, a series of within-subjects repeated measures MANOVAs were carried out. Specifically, separate repeated measures MANOVAs were calculated for athlete leadership behaviours and other selected outcomes (i.e., cohesion, peer motivational climate, and communication). These were followed by within-subjects univariate analyses to further explore significant findings. Additionally, qualitative data were collected in the form of follow-up focus group interviews.

Research results

In Study 1, the definitions of 13 dimensions of leadership behaviours derived from the LSS (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), MLQ-5X (Bass & Avolio, 2004), and DTLI (Hardy et al., 2010) were included in the survey. While these inventories measure more than 13 dimensions of leadership behaviour when combined, several behaviours are duplicated (e.g., individual consideration) or are conceptually similar (i.e., idealized influence

and appropriate role model). Therefore, these leadership dimensions were combined in Study 1. The participants from this study believed that it was important for athlete leaders to exhibit 10 of the 13 leadership behaviours. The three leadership behaviours athletes rated as least important were more reactionary and authoritative in nature than those rated more favorably, which would be behaviours that are not critical to being taught. The results also indicated that athletes believe it is important for athlete leaders to display a wide variety of leadership behaviours. This finding is in line with previous research that has shown that athletes fulfill various leadership roles (i.e., task leader, social leader, external leader, and motivational leader; Loughhead et al., 2006; Fransen et al., 2014). In fulfillment of these roles, athlete leaders are required to use a number of leadership behaviours.

Building from Study 1, Study 2 developed, implemented, and evaluated a season-long athlete leadership development program consisting of four leadership workshops spaced throughout the athletes' competitive season, each lasting approximately one hour in duration targeting those 10 leadership behaviours from Study 1. Each workshop was designed using the recommendations by Whetten and Cameron (2011) in that each of the workshop participants were given (1) a presentation of the leadership behaviours to be learned; (2) a demonstration of these leadership behaviours in action; and (3) the opportunity to practice these leadership behaviours. Each participant was given an athlete leadership handbook to support, reinforce, and expand on the material presented within the workshops. The handbook included an introduction to the athlete leadership program, important terms and definitions, and learning activities (Van Manen, 1995). In addition, a take home activity for each workshop was also included to encourage the athletes to further develop of their leadership behaviours.

The results of a repeated measures MANOVA showed significant mean increases from pre-intervention to post-intervention for all 10 of the leadership behaviours. This result indicates that the leadership workshops were successful in enhancing the frequency of the leadership behaviours being displayed. In contrast, the results also showed that none of the group dynamic related constructs (i.e., cohesion, peer motivational climate, and communication) were enhanced from pre-intervention to post-intervention. This finding shows that the leadership workshops did not have the secondary benefit of augmenting these group dynamic related constructs.

At the end of the leadership development program, three focus group interviews were conducted with 10 players aimed at assessing the program. In terms of the program's structure, athletes stressed the importance of including all team members, regardless of leadership status or team tenure, in the leadership program. Athletes discussed how the program influenced their own personal leadership development. This included determining their leadership strengths and weaknesses, having a better awareness of what leadership is, an increased confidence to carry out the different leadership behaviours, and a clearer understanding of how to be a leader. The athletes also discussed how the program positively influenced their team's interpersonal relationships relative to the functioning and leadership processes of their team. This included being on the "same page" in terms of leadership, encouraging teammates to step up and fill leadership roles, putting leadership behaviours into practice at the team level, and having a better understanding of how effective leadership made their team function more efficiently.

Policy implications

It has been suggested that effective leadership is one of the most important factors in the success of teams. While a popular belief of sport is that it develops important life skills such as leadership, merely participating in sport does not guarantee leadership development. The findings of this project are consistent with the growing body of literature highlighting the value of intentionally implementing leadership development programs for athletes. Further, the results underscore the importance of developing leadership capacity in all athletes and not only those in leadership positions (e.g., team captains). Therefore, there is a need for

greater education on the benefits of leadership development programs for all athletes. Coaching education programs at the national, provincial, and local levels would profit from including best practices for athlete leadership development into their curricula. Sport organizations and coaches would benefit from recognizing that leadership is a collaborative and shared process amongst all members of a sport team. Moving towards a shared leadership amongst athletes is supported by this project suggesting that a single appointed leader is unlikely to exhibit all necessary leadership behaviours or have all of the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to carry out all leadership processes.

Next steps

One of the take home points from this project is that for developing effective leadership it is important that these training efforts be made deliberate and purposeful rather than accidental or serendipitous. While we achieved the goal of having a deliberate and purposeful leadership program for athletes, there is a need to deliver this program to a broader and wider group of athletes. The use of an online web-based platform perhaps provides an opportunity to reach more athletes in innovative and creative ways.

Another area that requires future research is viewing leadership development as consisting of three levels: the individual, the relational, and the collective. The current leadership development program primarily focused on the individual (i.e., developing the leadership behaviours of athletes) to the exclusion of the relational and collective levels. Future leadership programs should educate about how the use of leadership behaviours impact their interactions with teammates (i.e., relational level) and how their individual leadership behaviours coupled with positive teammate interactions influences the team as a whole (i.e., the collective level). Therefore, it becomes important to combine the leadership development with also deliberately targeting the development of group dynamic constructs. Similar to the leadership development program, targeting the development of group dynamic constructs should be done deliberately and purposeful rather than viewed as a by-product of the leadership development program.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Coaching Association of Canada
- Canadian Sport Psychology Association
- National, Provincial, and Local sport organizations
- Sport Canada