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The Coach as Servant Leader: Ranking 7 Constructs as Student Athlete Motivators

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Abstract

The concept of servant leadership is widely appreciated as an efficient method of governing corporations, faith-based organizations, and educational institutions. Research validates the effectiveness of servant leadership and is replete with instruments to measure the merits of leading in this manner. Many prominent coaches have embraced the tenets of servant leadership and personify its core concepts. While the world of athletics embraces the idea and many coaches emulate the style, very little study exists that links servant leadership to increased player motivation. The motivational effects of servant leadership coaching deserve further research. In a profession where player motivation is often the deciding factor for success, coaching leaders seek a cause-effect relationship between coaching behavior and player behaviors. This study seeks to explore the motivational efficacy of servant leadership as a philosophy for effective coaching. The information included herein presents a body of data from high school girls and boys regarding their perceptions of coaching leadership traits, and how these traits affect their level of motivational effort. These athletes were surveyed in small groups to gain a further understanding of how the dynamics between coach and player improve player fervor. Patterson's seven constructs of servant leadership are the measured traits in the research study (Patterson, 2003). The survey data is presented as a value ranking of Patterson's servant leadership constructs. The resulting data is designed to provide clear understanding by coaching practitioners, and offers a practical pilot for further study.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Coaching, Motivation

High levels of player motivation are the focus of championship sports teams. Coaches are keenly aware of the importance of player motivation in their pursuit of leadership skills that will enhance team performance. Many books and studies chronicle theories that are purported to increase player motivation. In their efforts to be successful, coaches seek the most recent research regarding this topic. To date, though, the popular philosophy of servant leadership has a sparse body of research to validate its effectiveness in the world of athletic coaching. The purpose of this study is to research the effects of servant leadership constructs on high school basketball players.

The study is designed to research the perceptions of high school athletes regarding their thoughts on the influence of leadership traits possessed by coaches. The central element is the potential positive influence that coaches possess. The study offers practical insight for coaches who espouse servant leadership. The results demonstrate how coaches can wield this influence on their team members by the application of virtues that are imbedded in their leadership philosophy. This study utilized a short survey that ranks the perceived value of Patterson's (2003) servant leadership constructs. The researcher's aim is to present a prioritized list of the servant leadership constructs that will enable readers to gain greater insight into the value of servant leadership behaviors that result in increased player motivation of team members.

Coaches wield significant influence on young athletes. The coach possesses a unique standing in society that is often accompanied by respect and popularity. Many coaches seek to make a difference in the lives of young people through the profession of coaching. Many ethical coaches desire to serve as life mentors for their players.

Servant leadership has become a topic of discussion throughout the coaching field and begs research upon the transferability of this leadership style to the profession of athletic coaching. It is reasonable to believe that the body of evidence indicates that servant leadership would be a successful model for leaders in many fields of endeavor. The missing piece to this argument is the need for more viable study that validates the credibility of this leadership style for coaches.

The purpose of this study is to give coaches valuable understanding of the link between servant leadership coaching and increased player motivation.

Defining Servant Leadership

Servant leaders emphasize people above product. Servant leadership differs from traditional forms of leadership because of the value placed upon the people within the organization. Kathleen Patterson describes servant leadership as "follower focus" (Patterson, 2003, p. 2). Robert Greenleaf stresses the "care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (Greenleaf, 2008).

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Established leadership styles place high emphasis upon hierarchal models whereby power flows from the top down. Servant leadership flips the customary leadership model by leading from the bottom-up. This type of leadership is sometimes referred to as inverted leadership. The counter-cultural model is based upon follower input that creates an innovative atmosphere of mutual ownership. Follower input characterizes servant leaders who validate followers by including their ideas in the decision-making process.

Peter Northouse defines servant leadership as a “paradox” that seems to be a contradiction of “common sense” (Northouse, 2013, p. 219). Northouse stresses that servant leadership is exhibited in the leader’s behaviors rather than as a trait of the leadership philosophy (Northouse, 2013, p. 220). Serving and leading simultaneously does defy the conventional logic of leadership. Serving denotes submission while leading suggests authority. The paradoxical linking of two seemingly contradictory terms--serving and leading--is the essence of servant leadership.

Robert Greenleaf is one of the most prolific authors presenting the virtues of servant leading. Greenleaf’s basic premise teaches that the “servant-leader is a servant first.” Greenleaf values serving above power, giving rather than receiving (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27). Greenleaf’s ten characteristics of servant leadership are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010). Greenleaf is credited with creating the term “servant-leadership” in 1970. Greenleaf’s teachings represented a shift from the hierarchical models of authoritative leadership. The ten basic characteristics that he espoused provide the framework of this philosophy. Greenleaf believes that including others in decision-making demonstrates an inherent worth in their input. Authentic, empathetic listening followed by reflection validates the importance of other people (Spears, 2009).

Kathleen Patterson posits that the leader leads “with a heart to serve” and by “truly loving your followers...doing the right things for people...” (Patterson, 2003, p. 23). Greenleaf believes the “difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant--first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 7). Kristen Galek, states that servant leadership “starts on the inside. An individual acts on his/her heart--their core vision and values drive their motivation and intentions as a servant-leader” (Galek, 2015, p. 4).

Significant Studies of Servant Leadership in Coaching

The body of research regarding servant leadership coaching contains few studies. When linked to player motivation, servant leadership coaching theory is an area with scant empirical data. Only a few glimpses about the effectiveness of servant leadership coaching and how it affects player motivation can be found in the body of academic research.

One unique research study illustrates the value of servant leadership in high school sports (Hammermeister & Chase, 2008). Hammermeister and Chase claim to be the authors of the only study that “has investigated the servant-leadership model in sport settings” (Hammermeister & Chase 2008, p. 229). This research probes the effectiveness of servant leadership coach behaviors as they affect player motivation among high school basketball players. Subjects were administered the *Revised Servant Leadership for Sport* (RSLP-S) that measured motivational effects of three coach constructs: (1) trust/inclusion, (2) humility, and (3) service (Hammermeister & Chase, 2008). The subjects also responded to the *Intrinsic Motivation Inventory* (IMI) that provided data for five motivational factors: (1) choice, (2) importance, (3) effort, (4) enjoyment, and (5) tension (Hammermeister & Chase, 2008). Their results “suggest that servant-leader coaches produce athletes who are more intrinsically motivated than their non-servant leader peers” (Hammermeister & Chase, 2008, p. 235). Based upon this research, servant leadership constructs demonstrated by high school coaches produce a higher degree of effort and intrinsic motivation (Hammermeister & Chase, 2008).

Doganer, Toros, & Turksoy (2013) offer evidence that the accumulation of coaching experience seems to inject a degree of patience that translates to a higher degree of motivational transfer to players. This aforementioned study posits that coaches who have ten or more years of coaching experience are more adept at social support and express less autocratic leadership styles (Doganer, Toros, & Turksoy, 2013)

Simon Jenkins (2014) compared the coaching methods of John Wooden to the servant leadership theories of author Stephen Covey (1989). Jenkins studied the methods of both men to seek similarity between Wooden’s *Pyramid of Success* and Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Jenkins cited the existence of a paternalistic relationship between Wooden, his assistant coaches, and his players. Wooden exercised a virtuous example and concern for those under his care. Jenkins concluded that Wooden’s authority was not based upon title, but originated from his exemplary standards of conduct. Jenkins concluded that Wooden gravitated away from the authoritarian approach earlier in his career to a servant leadership style in later years (Jenkins, 2014). Brian Virtue intimates that Wooden became a great coach only after he began his journey toward servant leadership (Virtue, 2010).

Patterson’s Constructs of Servant Leadership

Kathleen Patterson authored a paper entitled *Servant-Leadership: A Theoretical Model* to define the theoretical basis of Servant Leadership (Patterson, 2003). Debate exists regarding the idea that servant leadership is merely a subset of transformational leadership and not a separate, viable theory (Patterson, 2003). Kuhn suggests that the concept of transformational leadership subjugates the idea of servant leadership by stating, “in the development of any science, the first received paradigm is usually felt to account quite successfully for most of the observations...” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 64). Thus Kuhn argues that servant leadership is merely an appendage of the distinctive premise of servant

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leadership which postulates that motivation to lead begins with serving. The focus of the servant leader is on others, while transformational leadership revolves around the leader. Patterson demonstrates that the paradox of “serving first” engenders a unique notion of leading that justifies the moniker of servant leadership. “Somewhat paradoxical to the typical view of leadership, where the purpose is leading, servant-leaders seek to serve first as the primary means of leading” (Patterson, 2003, p. 2).

Servant leadership is built upon certain pillars of virtue that are central to the leader’s behaviors. Patterson identifies seven virtuous constructs that she lists as: (1) altruism, (2) empowerment, (3) humility, (4) agapao love, (5) service, (6) trust, and (7) vision (Patterson, 2003).

Altruism is recognized as a kindly benevolence, denoting a sense of selflessness. Altruism contains an element of sacrificial service that originates in the need to treat others as we wish to be treated. Altruism is synonymous with the Biblical admonition, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...” (Matthew 7:12) Recognizing the need of others and then helping them is the embodiment of altruism. Servant leaders who seek to serve first are evidence of this construct. “Servant-leaders look for an attitude of humility and modesty along with selflessness and altruism--an approach which seeks what is best for others rather than the leader himself “ (Patterson, 2003, p. 4).

Empowerment is akin to developing people. The servant leader coach believes empowerment is the crux of coaching. The coach who empowers others in this process actually transfers a portion of power that is often reserved for the top rung of traditional leadership. Robert Greenleaf is referred to “as the father of the empowerment movement” (Russell & Stone, 2002). In one of his last writings, Robert Greenleaf asked the questions: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 215)?" Greenleaf’s theory purported that the central element of leading flows from a mutual sense of trust. Bill Manning described a “resonant trust between the leader and the follower, which can only be achieved reciprocally through individual empowerment...” (Manning, 2004, pp. 5-6). The development progression that occurs between player and coach is essentially the mentoring process. The very essence of coaching is an exchange of knowledge between the mentor and the mentee. Russell describes the process as enabling others by “not hoarding the power they have but by giving it away” (Russell, 2001, p. 80). Empowerment is the heart of this knowledge exchange as the coach enables the player to act independently. One desired outcome of servant leader coaching is that players will become coaches themselves. The empowering process is analogous to an apprenticeship. In this relationship, the teacher allows an increasing freedom to the apprentice as he/she learns the profession. As the apprenticeship continues, the pupil is given the freedom to make more decisions until he/she becomes capable of acting autonomously.

Humility is focusing on others rather than oneself. Humility is antithetical to a dictatorial style of leadership. Servant leadership is free of arrogance or bombastic attributes. Patterson notes that humility “counteracts” self-interest (Patterson, 2003, p. 4). The servant leader coach practices an authentic interest in others and demonstrates a focus on the accomplishments of the team over himself. Bear Bryant emulated this sense of humility as he gave praise to others after wins but took the blame himself for losses (Reed, 1994). Humility is a rare form of courage possessed by servant leader coaches who seek to stand at the end of the line rather than in the forefront. John Wooden referred to the trait of “selflessness” in his *Pyramid of Success*. Wooden believed in an eagerness (as opposed to a willingness) to “sacrifice personal glory or gain...” (Wooden & Jamison, 2005, p. 47). “If you only remember one thing from this book, the following point is perhaps it. The star of every successful team is the team. Individuals don’t win games, teams do” (Wooden & Jamison, 2005, p. 48).

Agapao love as defined by Patterson is “the cornerstone of servant-leadership” (Patterson, 2003, p. 3). Agapao love is rooted in the Greek language and describes the deep affection connecting two people. Winston defines agapao love as “doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason” (Winston, 2015, p. 1). Servant leadership is a leadership style based upon a moral code guiding servant leaders to do what is morally right and virtuous. Servant leadership coaches seek a higher standard of moral influence. Winston teaches that love is a noun, but agapao love is a verb (Winston, 2015). Love is a concept while agapao love is the practice of this concept. Agapao is action-oriented and love is conceptual. Winston conjectures that agapao embodies a paternalistic or maternal obligation, theorizing that players who view their coach as a substitute parent retain more respect for the coach (Winston, 2015). Winston writes that the resultant effect of agapao love practiced by the servant leader coach produces “higher performance by the follower towards achieving the leader’s goals” (Winston, 2015, p. 3).

Service is the natural outcome of being a servant leader. Service is a resultant core behavior of the servant leadership philosophy. Patterson believes “service... is the primary function of a type of leadership that is not based on one’s own interests...” (Patterson, 2003, p. 6). Service is the act of choosing others first. Serving is the behavior of generosity. “Service is the heart of servant-leadership theory” (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999, p. 51). The act of serving is when the leader forfeits authority or privilege for the sake of followers (Matteson & Irving, 2015). Greenleaf’s seminal statement appropriately describes the act of service that is central to the theory of servant leadership. “The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27).

Trust is a strong element of the servant leadership philosophy. Trust is essential for human relationships to flourish. The ultimate goal of the servant leader is to demonstrate genuine compassion for others by the establishment and maintenance of a trust relationship. Cho and Ringquist (2010) present trust as an outcome and not a process. Trust is the result

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of three input behaviors that leaders demonstrate: competence, benevolence, and integrity. Trusted leaders are perceived to possess these three precursors establishing *trustworthiness*. Leaders who consistently possess *trustworthiness* have the ability to gain the trust of followers (Cho & Ringquist, 2010). Research by Boies, Finegan, Harjinder, & McNally, (2005) supports the theory of antecedent behaviors that help to create trust. Predispositions of the trustee including perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity are the factors that create an “intention to trust” in the disposition of the trustor (Boies, Finegan, Harjinder & McNally, 2005, pp. 287-288). Positive work attitudes are linked to a trust relationship between the leader and followers. Mayer and Salovey (1997) explains the relationship between “trustor (individual trusting) and trustee (individual being trusted)” as a “willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 712)

Vision is the ability of the leader to see inherent worth and value in others. Vision looks forward to the ultimate destination. Servant leaders look forward to the innate potential of individual people within the organization and seek to “assist each one in reaching that state” (Patterson, 2003, p. 5). Vision for servant leaders requires an eye upon the future potential of each person under their care.

A study performed by Berson (2001) links higher levels of confidence and optimism to leaders who cast concise vision statements. Looking forward to dream of what possibilities exist for others is an act of vesting purpose and trust in followers. The exchange between mentor and mentee in this relationship is an act of demonstrating confidence in the follower that provides a sense of direction. Perhaps Margaret Wheatley says it best by stating, “The real fuel in leadership is believing in other people. I define a real leader as someone who has great faith in people's ability and who uses every opportunity to create means for them to offer their creativity to the organization” (Schieffer, 2003, p. 69).

METHOD

Based upon the seven constructs developed by Patterson (2003), the researcher devised a study to test the value of these servant leadership components. The selected subjects that formed the survey group consisted of high school basketball players, both male and female, aged 13 to 18 years old.

The researcher utilized a simple survey to gather information from the basketball players. The researcher surveyed the players in groups of less than twenty students. The survey was taken during camp breakout sessions in an adjacent classroom that provided a comfortable setting with reduced noise levels, yet near the gymnasium. The survey assessment took approximately ten minutes for each group to complete.

The researcher developed the short survey that was used. The purpose of the survey was to gain an understanding of the relative motivational value that each virtue provided. The seven constructs were presented on a separate document accompanied with a brief explanation of each. The respondents ranked each construct as a motivating factor (from most important to least important). The constructs were listed alphabetically to prevent bias in their importance. The constructs, as presented to the participants are:

- Altruism - Giving to others with no motive to gain something in return; kindness.
- Empowering others - Developing/mentoring others; teaching you how to play the game of basketball.
- Humility - Focusing on other people rather than oneself; meekness.
- Love - Placing unconditional value upon the individual as a person and not what he/she offers to enable the coach to win more games; genuine affection.
- Service - Consistently willing to assist others; helping.
- Trust - Demonstrating a confidence in others to succeed; keeping promises.
- Vision for the followers - Helping team members to imagine their potential to succeed; helping others establish goals. (Patterson, 2003).

Data Analysis

This study is a blended study featuring action research techniques. Action research follows a systematic process of observation and data collection. During the assessment, the moderator is considered a privileged, active observer inside a contextual setting that can be effectively replicated. The researcher determines that qualitative research has proven to be effective when used to explain the dynamics of human behaviors and quantitative research allows the data to be logically classified. Deductions were made from the data that lead to further analysis and practical conclusions. The numerical values were calculated with the SPSS Statistical program. The seven variables, (constructs) were compared via *t testing* and *Levene's test for quality of variance*. Alpha level is set at $< .05$.

RESULTS

As Figure 1 illustrates, the construct of trust is reported as the most significant motivator by the athletes surveyed. Love, empowering and vision occupy the second tier of motivation for these young athletes. Altruism, humility and service have the least motivational influence.

Figure 1

Combined Survey Results

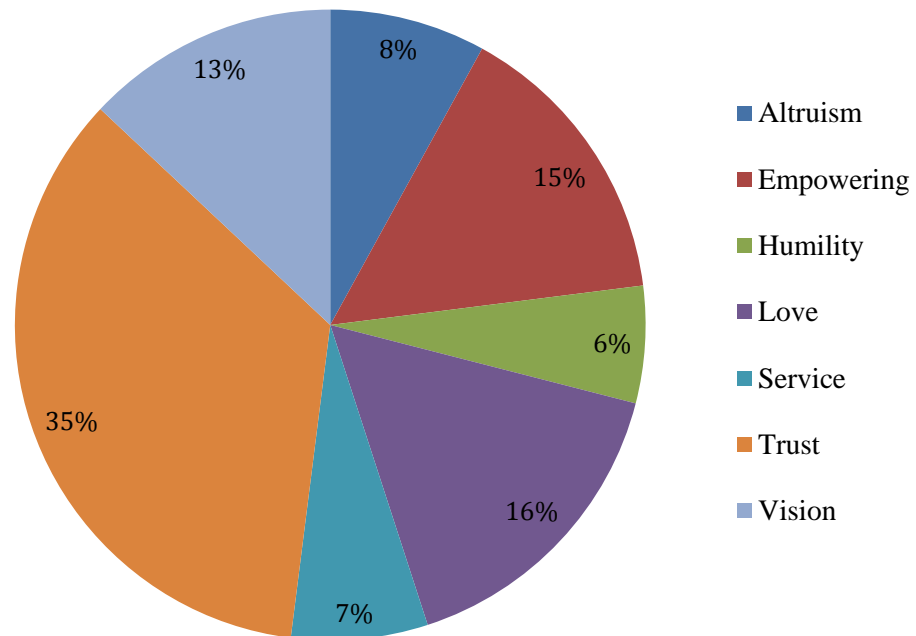


Figure 2

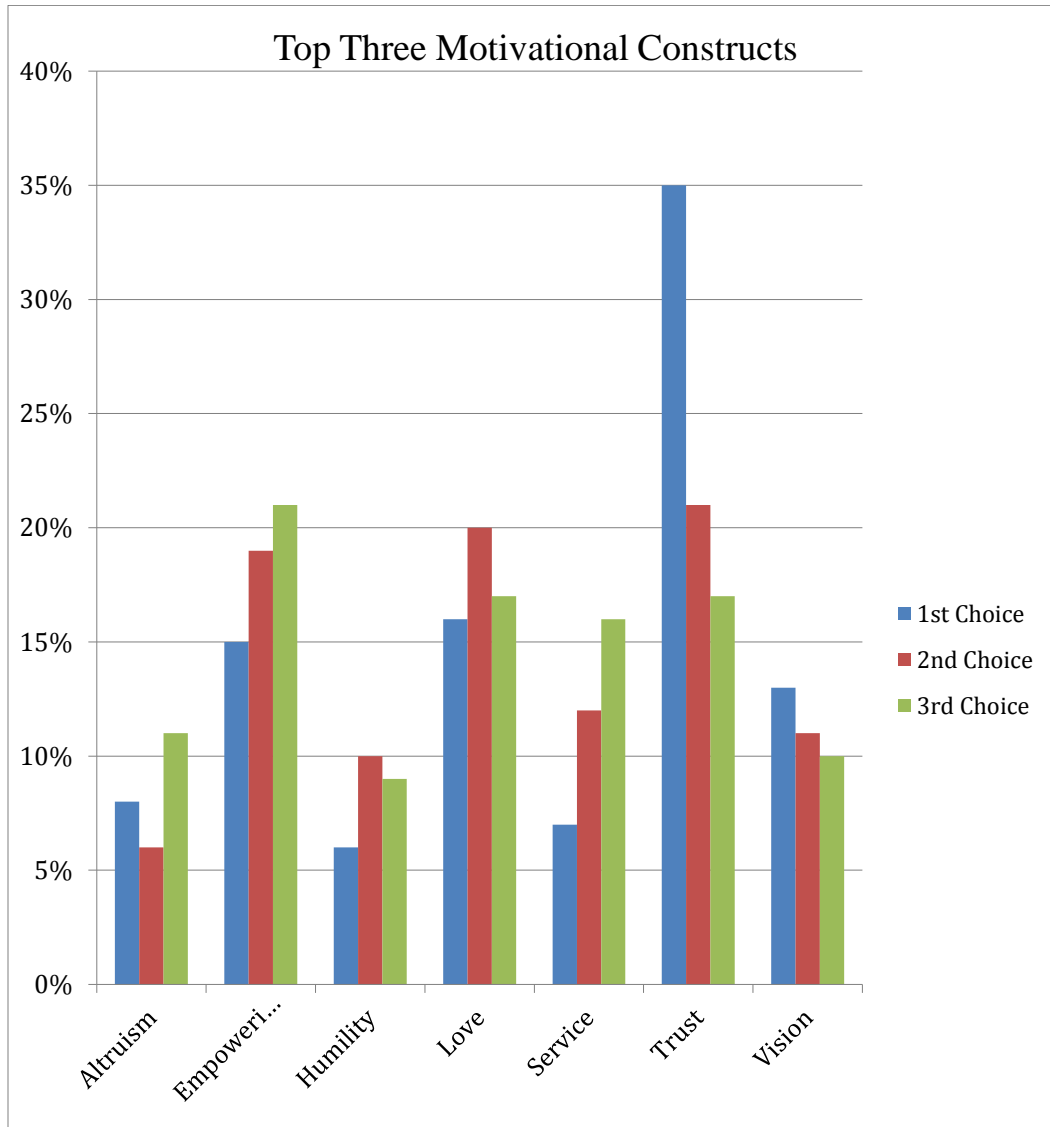


Figure 2 demonstrates the weight of relative motivational value for each construct. The bars indicate the first, second and third preference of the combined groups. Trust occupies the tallest bar. Respondents indicate that the second choice of trust is higher than first choices of other constructs.

CONCLUSION

The concept of servant leadership coaching can have a positive effect on the motivational levels of high school basketball players. The servant leadership concept of trustworthiness involving: (1) competence, (2) integrity, and (3) benevolence has the most significant positive effect on player motivation. Of the seven constructs, players value trust above other coach behaviors. Love, empowerment, and vision possess similar value in the perceptions of high school basketball players. From these results, it may be concluded that young people desire leaders who are trustworthy, who love them, who have the ability to develop them as people and athletes, and who see innate potential in them. Even though these principles are suggested by the research, it precedes logically that people follow trustworthy leaders who care about their welfare. Coaches occupy a prominent platform with the potential to be life changing transformational influences for young people. Coaches who choose to make a positive difference may be wise to study the effects of servant leadership coaching.

Further research is needed to begin the creation of a body of data to measure the worth of this set of coaching virtues. Maybe this initial study lead to further research that can enrich the influence of the coaching profession and create meaningful change in sport culture. This study serves as a seminal investigation into the potential application of servant leadership to athletic coaching. The coaching profession needs measurement instruments to gauge the value of coaching behaviors and distinguish their individual worth as teaching methods. Athletes from other sports need to be included in similar studies to gauge the significance of servant leadership for various sports. Gender perceptions, ethnic differences, and geographic areas need to be considered in future studies.

The need for teaching this concept to coaches deserves consideration. Many educational institutions have established programs regarding servant leadership, but few include the concept of athletic leadership in their teaching. The idea of servant leadership coaching is a largely untapped notion in institutions who promote the idea of servant leadership.

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