

Original Research

Called to serve: Exploring servant leadership in the context of sport-for-development

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ABSTRACT

Servant leaders emphasise the ideal of service and focus on the well-being of followers. To determine how, if at all, the founder and regional coordinators of a non-profit, sport-for-development (SFD) organisation exhibited servant leadership behaviours, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The context for this study was Street Soccer USA (SSUSA), an innovative SFD organisation utilising soccer to help youth and adults overcome homelessness in 22 cities across the U.S. Findings revealed that the founder and regional coordinators of SSUSA, to varying degrees, displayed servant leadership behaviours as perceived by their followers, which align with van Dierendonck's¹ six dimensions of servant leadership: authenticity, empowering and developing people, humility, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship. Additionally, to undergird SSUSA, the founder and regional coordinators gave primacy to followers' needs, building and developing relationships with their volunteers and players, demonstrating an attitude of genuine care and concern. Servant leadership might be useful leadership behaviour to implement and guide SFD initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Non-profit, sport-for-development (SFD) organisations use sport in an attempt to achieve positive impacts on society through assisting marginalised populations, improving public health, and creating intercultural exchange, conflict resolution and peace building.² Most research in SFD has examined impacts of such programmes on various stakeholders.^{3,4,5}

What has not been examined, however, is leadership in a SFD context. Originally espoused by Greenleaf⁶ in 1977, a servant leader's primary motive is to serve first as opposed to lead first. Historically, influence has been considered a central component of leadership, but van Dierendonck suggests "servant leadership changes the focus of this influence by emphasising the ideal of service in the leader-follower relationship."¹ Since SFD is fundamentally about serving others, it could be a context where servant leadership is being practiced. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore servant leadership in the context of one SFD organisation called Street Soccer USA (SSUSA). SSUSA is an innovative intervention utilising soccer to help youth and adults overcome homelessness in the United States.

SSUSA initially began in Charlotte, North Carolina and has since expanded to 22 cities, where it collaborates with local social service providers to administer its programming. Soccer is used as the hook to draw individuals to the programme and as trust is built between volunteer coaches and players, players are gradually connected to social service providers for assistance in housing, job attainment, health care, and career and education enhancement. Each city has a regional SSUSA coordinator tasked with developing and administering the SSUSA programme. Volunteer regional coordinators and coaches lead practices and play in matches with the programme's participants, facilitate de-briefing sessions to discuss issues of importance in the lives of participants, and engage in social activities. We used SSUSA as the backdrop for this exploratory study on servant leadership in SFD, and developed two central research questions:

Keywords: servant leadership; sport for development; nonprofit management

1) How, if at all, does the founder of SSUSA exhibit servant leadership behaviours?

2) How, if at all, do the regional coordinators of SSUSA exhibit servant leadership behaviours?

Understanding the manifestation of servant leadership in SFD organisations is important from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Servant leadership could be a leadership paradigm useful for understanding leadership within a SFD context, which would have important implications for organisational effectiveness. Practically, servant leadership may be a leadership style that, when employed, helps SFD organisations best achieve positive outcomes for those they aim to serve. For many SFD organisations, including SSUSA, followers would include staff, volunteers, as well as programme participants. In the current study, we focused the investigation on the SSUSA leaders and immediate followers of the founder and regional coordinators – the volunteer regional coordinators and regional site volunteers respectively – who essentially form the volunteer staff of SSUSA.

Sport-for-Development

The past two decades have seen a proliferation of SFD organisations across the globe and increased academic interest in the field.⁷ SFD initiatives are beginning to demonstrate that if the programmes are designed and managed well, there can be a positive impact on its stakeholders. For instance, research has shown that soccer can help individuals suffering from homelessness increase social capital and reduce social exclusion;^{3,4,5} and that sport can play a vital role in peace-building efforts and help reduce prejudice.^{8,9} The experience of volunteering in SFD can also increase bonding and bridging social capital for volunteers.¹⁰ The structures and processes that can facilitate positive impact have not been investigated yet to any great extent. In this vein, leadership could be an important process component to examine. Scholars have begun to theorise about structural and process components of SFD initiatives, calling for the bottom-up involvement of participants in programme design and an emphasis on relationship-building,² but no studies have investigated leadership in SFD. Leadership could be central in helping to address issues revolving around power, control, and programme implementation as SFD leaders would benefit from being sensitive to global and political forces that shape inequality and how sport contributes to this.¹¹

Servant Leadership

To help frame the investigation, we drew from the servant leadership paradigm, where leaders are motivated primarily by the purpose of serving others.⁶ Servant leadership has been conceptually linked to followers' autonomy, learning, health and personal growth; it is a form of leadership that focuses on fulfilling followers' needs to develop, grow, and prosper.⁶ Specifically, Greenleaf⁶ posits that servant leaders put other individuals' interests and aspirations above their own. The emphasis on authenticity, humility, interpersonal acceptance and unconditional love is unique to servant leadership.

The majority of servant leadership studies to date have adopted van Dierendonck's six main dimensions, and we follow suit for this investigation. These dimensions are: authenticity, providing direction, empowering and developing people, humility, interpersonal acceptance and stewardship. Authenticity is expressed when an individual is true to oneself in all facets of life.¹² When servant leaders provide direction to develop and empower people they encourage followers to share, support and coach one another. This then generates a sense of personal power and self-confidence.¹¹ Servant leaders demonstrate humility through their ability to seek contributions of followers. Together these characteristics build interpersonal acceptance and foster followers' trust and potential through time and commitment.⁶ Stewardship refers to a leader's desire to act as a care taker and role model,¹³ and to support the organisation's well-being through development and service.¹⁴ As such, servant leaders exhibit this behaviour by putting followers' needs and interests before their own.^{11,13} Van Dierendonck suggests servant leaders are likely known as role models because the example they set stimulates followers to act in a common interest. Thus, followers of the leader may subsequently display servant behaviours to their followers, which may positively influence the health and success of the organisation.¹⁵ In terms of SSUSA, servant leadership may support and promote the development of regional coordinators and volunteers to serve and achieve organisational objectives.¹⁶

Although servant leadership research in sport has been sparse, it has become an emerging line of inquiry. Most of this work has applied servant leadership in the coaching context. In general, studies have found that athletes coached by servant leaders experienced higher mental acuity, increased motivation, performed better, and were more satisfied with the leader than athletes coached by non-servant leaders.¹⁷ More recently in the non-profit sport context, researchers found volunteers are initially motivated

to volunteer based on their passion for sport,¹⁰ but servant leaders cultivate long-term volunteer motivation.¹⁸ However, servant leadership has not been investigated in the context of SFD.

Contrasting Servant, Transformational, and Transactional Leadership

As servant leadership is an emerging leadership paradigm in academic circles, it may prove useful to differentiate it from Bass¹⁹ transactional and transformational leadership theory. Prior to differentiating the three paradigms of leadership, we will first introduce the main tenants of transformational and transactional leadership. Transformational leadership is the process of influencing change in organisational members' attitudes and assumptions to accomplish organisational objectives.²⁰ Transformational leaders use commitment and optimism to inspire and motivate followers²¹ to solve problems. Four behaviour classifications have been used to describe transformational leaders: (a) idealised influence or charisma, (b) individual consideration, (c) inspirational motivation, and (d) intellectual stimulation.¹⁹ Using these traits, transformational leaders have the ability to connect organisational goals to employee morals.¹⁹

Transactional leadership is the exchange-based process a leader uses to provide valued rewards for accomplished tasks.²² Avolio, Bass, and Jung²³ suggest three behavioural characteristics of transactional leaders: contingent reward, and active and passive management-by-exception. Contingent reward initiatives consist of using instructions and incentives to motivate followers.²¹ While active management-by-exception behaviours attempt to avoid errors with policy enforcement, passive management-by-exception involves only intervening once standards are not being reached.

Where transactional leaders emphasise exchange of rewards for accomplishments, servant and transformational leaders strive to meet the higher order needs of followers.²⁴ Even though Farling, Stone and Winston²⁵ assert servant leaders and transformational leaders similarly raise motivation and morality levels, Sendjaya²⁶ counters servant leaders increase motivation by satisfying followers' needs while transformational leaders increase motivation by supporting followers' self-esteem. Furthermore, Barbuto and Wheeler¹⁴

highlight that servant leaders consider followers' goals, whereas transformational leaders inspire followers and transactional leaders entice followers with rewards to achieve organisational goals.²¹ Although the primary concern of transactional and transformational leadership is on the well-being of the organisation, servant leadership is focused on the well-being of followers within an organisation.^{6,14,27} Another distinguishing factor between servant, transformational, and transactional leadership²⁷ is the use of humility and spirituality to drive servanthood.²⁸ While transformational leaders use individualism and transactional leaders use exchange-based processes to show appreciation and create a sense of pride in the organisation, servant leadership is not merely an act of service; it includes being a servant.²⁹ Consequently, followers support servant leaders because of their reliability and commitment.⁶

METHOD

Qualitative methods are well-suited to exploratory studies,³⁰ and as such were appropriate for the present study. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method in order to gather rich data and allow for both the researchers and study participants to interact in a conversational, nonthreatening format.¹⁶

Participants

The fourteen ($N = 14$) interview subjects (see Table 1) were the SSUSA founder, regional SSUSA coordinators and volunteer assistants from five cities (two East Coast cities, two Midwest cities, and one West Coast city). Ranging from the first established programme with male and female adult teams (East Coast) to one of the newest programmes with a youth team (Midwest), the SSUSA teams in these cities were purposively selected as they provided a representative sample of the diversity in the SSUSA programme.¹⁶ Once these leaders and coordinators agreed to participate, other followers (e.g., volunteers) reporting to them were sent an invitation to participate. Overall, eight men and six women participated in phone or in-person, semi-structured interviews. Their length of involvement with SSUSA ranged from six months to eight years. Outside of the founder, Lawrence Cann, all other participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Table 1: Interview participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Name	Gender	Ethnicity/Race	Role	Experience	Region
	Carter	Male	Caucasian	Volunteer	7 years	West Coast
	Nina	Female	Caucasian	Volunteer*	1 year	West Coast
	Erin	Female	Caucasian	Volunteer*	6 months	East Coast
	Jason	Male	Caucasian	Volunteer	4 years	East Coast
	Patrick	Male	Caucasian	Regional Coordinator	4 years	East Coast
	Heather	Female	Caucasian	Volunteer	1 year	East Coast
	Val	Female	Caucasian	Volunteer	2 years	East Coast
	Oscar	Male	Hispanic	Regional Coordinator	2 years	Midwest
	Martin	Male	Caucasian	Volunteer	6 months	Midwest
	Samantha	Female	Caucasian	Regional Coordinator	6 years	Midwest
	Ron	Male	Caucasian	Regional Coordinator	8 years	West Coast
	Cann+	Male	Caucasian	Founder	8 years	East Coast
	Justin	Male	Caucasian	Volunteer	6 years	Midwest
	Lisa	Female	Caucasian	Volunteer	6 years	Midwest

Notes: *Supported through a fellowship or grant.
+Not a pseudonym

Procedures

Beginning in 2010, the second author became engaged in a partnership with SSUSA. Thus, this study was part of a multi-phased long-term collaboration with SSUSA, so trust between the researchers and SSUSA leaders had been built over time. Having built personal relationships with the SSUSA leaders may have assisted with the mitigation of social desirability bias³⁰ from the participants. Seven in-person interviews were conducted at the 2013 SSUSA National Cup in New York City (a tournament for SSUSA teams from around the U.S.), while the remaining seven interviews were conducted by phone with participants from teams that did not attend the SSUSA National Cup. Interviews ranged from 25 to 55 minutes in length. The interview protocol included primary questions derived from the leadership and servant leadership literature. For example, questions included “how do you describe [the founder’s] approach to cultivating relationships,” and, “how has [the founder] motivated you to facilitate goal achievement?” In addition, probing questions were asked to gain insight into SSUSA leaders’ experiences. For example, “can you expand on [the founder’s] approach to tasks and

rewards?” Followers (volunteers at the regional sites) were asked questions pertaining to the leadership style of the founder or regional coordinators, and the founder and regional coordinators were probed about their own leadership style.

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded into a priori themes and patterns¹⁶ based on van Dierendonck’s six dimensions. However, the researchers also acknowledged that other themes could be arrived at through a more inductive process allowing for the experiences or processes that became evident in the raw data to inform the analysis.³¹ As a result, an open coding process³² was also performed by the authors.

Data were coded independently by the second author. Following, the first and second authors met three times to review the coding and organise the codes into axial themes.¹⁸ For example, the stewardship theme was formed with the collapsing of the following three codes: example, modelling and offering (see Table 2 for a depiction of the

coding scheme). The open codes generated through the inductive coding process were particularly salient in constructing the additional axial theme of building relationships and caring for followers. This analysis tactic served to increase credibility and dependability as the themes were affirmed, challenged and then confirmed.³³ To ensure theoretical saturation or information redundancy,¹⁹ the authors confirmed interpretations through an audit of the raw data and made notes while the data were gathered and analysed.¹⁹ Data saturation occurred when themes drawn from the personal interviews began to reinforce each other and no new themes emerged.³⁴ Then, selective coding was conducted where the authors identified quotations that best represented the themes.¹⁸ Member checks¹⁶ were utilised where participants reviewed their transcripts and the authors' interpretations; in general, the participants agreed with the interpretations.

FINDINGS

Findings reveal that the founder and regional coordinators,

to varying degrees, exhibited servant leadership behaviours although certainly not in all cases.. An additional theme that emerged was that the founder and regional coordinators laid the foundation for servant leadership by focusing concerted effort on building relationships with followers. While the findings are very positive on the whole, we offer a discussion on why this may be the case later in the paper.

Empowering and Developing People

The founder and regional coordinators empowered and developed their volunteers and players and all interviewees were deemed by their followers to excel at doing so. In regards to the founder, all study participants spoke about how they perceived him to empower followers. For example, Justin, a volunteer with a Midwest team, shared insight into Cann's philosophy in developing players: "The whole concept of organising a league around a philosophy of improving folks . . . He wants them to learn they can be effective, have control, and have success." In addition to players, Cann also empowered volunteers. Erin, a volunteer

Table 2: Coding scheme

Example First Order and Open Codes	Axial Theme
Empowerment Develops personal power Develops decision making Encourages personal development	Empowering and Developing People
Seeks followers' contributions Followers' interests first Stays in background	Humility
Honesty Genuineness Fulfills commitments	Authenticity
Safe environment Accepting all Seeks to understand others	Interpersonal Acceptance
Sets expectations Communicates vision Sets goals	Providing Direction
Example Modelling Offering	Stewardship
Care Support Nurture Builds relationships	Building Relationships and Caring for Others

with an East Coast programme, mentioned how Cann worked with SSUSA regional coordinators in developing their teams: “He put the responsibilities on individuals to plant the organisations in the communities, then bring it to life . . . so empowering them in a lot of different ways.” When speaking about his leadership approach, Cann stressed that “I think we do a really good job of helping people stay involved, giving ownership, and not micromanaging. . . There is a lot of empowerment.”

Not only was Cann perceived as empowering and developing people, but the regional coordinators were perceived to do the same by their followers. For instance, Justin spoke about how he perceived his regional coordinator, Samantha, to be focused on developing and empowering players: “She creates opportunities for them to choose and then go on to experience themselves and others in different ways. . . She wants to expand their horizons.” Lisa, a co-worker of Justin’s and a volunteer with the SSUSA team, also commented on how Samantha encouraged and supported players: “She is just very encouraging and consistent with that encouragement to help them develop as people.” Nina, a volunteer with a West Coast team, discussed how her regional coordinator, Ron, empowered her to make decisions: “He tells me what he’d like me to do, but he lets me form my own ideas and we discuss it a lot.” Oscar, a coordinator for a Midwest team, talked about his approach to helping to develop his players: “. . . just trying to be more involved with them like mentoring them and focusing on them. . . I try to empower them to set up the fields for games and give them jobs to do, see how that works.” Martin, who worked for Oscar, spoke about the encouragement Oscar provided to players:

He never puts anyone down. That’s why I think players always return . . . he is always encouraging them to do better. A lot of these kids have never played before, so he compliments them. And I think that is the reason why everyone returns and feels excited and encouraged to play.

With regards to volunteers, Patrick, an East Coast team regional coordinator, discussed his approach to empowerment, “I try to give them freedom to have their own input . . . I like it when people take the initiative, and it is just making sure I am there for support.” Patrick’s approach resonated with Erin, who worked for him: Knowing [Patrick] believes I can do it and gives me the autonomy to have creativity to do it, has been great.” Jason agreed with Erin: “When [Patrick] believes in you it’s empowering and he is empowering in what he says . . . make it happen and if you want to do it, then do it.”

Humility

Study participants spoke about how they perceived Cann to be humble in founding SSUSA and in working with volunteers and players, valuing feedback from others as well as expressing gratitude for everyone’s contributions. Lisa commented on Cann’s receptivity to feedback: “He is constantly open to feedback and ideas and learning from his coaches who did a great thing. . . . He respects everybody’s input and is open to other people having ideas of doing things differently or doing things better.” Others expressed how much gratitude Cann displayed to his volunteer staff, which was a factor in keeping them involved with the programme. Carter, a volunteer with a West Coast team, commented: “He is so thankful for all of the volunteers . . . that sense of gratitude will continue to get volunteers back.” Heather, a SSUSA volunteer with an East Coast team, agreed: “He has the ability to make you feel his passion . . . you just feel his compassion and gratitude for others.”

Interestingly, only one regional coordinator, Samantha, was perceived by her followers as displaying humility. Study participants did not comment on the humility aspect of the three other regional coordinators, who were all men. Lisa described Samantha this way: “She is not loud or boisterous. Just kind of laid back and soft, and she has that quiet charisma. People like her easily and feel comfortable with her.” Justin provided a similar description of Samantha: “She’s very quietly involved with the directing and the coaching . . . she does it in a manner where everyone gets a chance and no one is spotlighted.” Samantha reinforced these comments by saying “I don’t see myself as a big leader. I just give people direction to help themselves out.”

Authenticity

All study participants emphasised how Cann was perceived to be authentic and honest in his leadership and interactions with players and volunteers. Heather thought Cann provided leadership by “just being himself. Taking that time to hear our story, the players’ story, it makes you feel like you matter and it keeps you involved and engaged.” Lisa concurred, explaining Cann’s genuineness: “You can see that he genuinely respects [the players affected by homelessness]. . . The ability to be genuine . . . has made him successful.” Additionally, Cann emphasised the importance of commitment, another aspect of authenticity: “We’re trying to commit through our commitments . . . people have to trust us and believe we will go the extra mile when needed.” Other SSUSA regional coordinators were perceived as also being authentic. Lisa

commented on the genuineness she perceived that helped Samantha be effective as a leader: “She’s very natural and genuinely likes people . . . They just sense her genuineness, sense themselves as being an equal. . . . She really lives that philosophy in the way she works with people.” Additionally, Carter thought that his regional coordinator, Ron, “was a soldier, with his feet on the ground. He would be at every practice and he was really involved with all of the players and he knew them personally.” Ron also shared that “what feedback I have gotten is that I come across as very genuine . . . I am really authentic and genuine, and I’ve taken that as a compliment.”

Interpersonal Acceptance

Study participants perceived Cann to be very strong in interpersonal acceptance. Lisa explained how Cann addressed the players at the National Cup, and his acceptance of them as athletes rather than calling them homeless:

Cann says, ‘You guys are here as athletes, and we’re going to treat you as athletes, as this tournament is about you’. . . . They’re homeless, but he just makes it very clear that he respects and accepts them and that we’re all in this together.

Patrick also perceived Cann as someone who attempts to “provide a safe atmosphere where [the players] feel safe, welcomed, accepted, and comfortable . . . so they can work towards their goals.” Cann reflected that when he first began SSUSA, he was “less interested in band aids and materials things, and more interested in [the persons affected by homelessness] stories and understanding and accepting them without trying to look at them as problems.”

All of the regional coordinators were also perceived as demonstrating high interpersonal acceptance. Martin, who worked for Oscar, talked about how Oscar “shows unconditional love and acceptance to the players. . . . He’ll take them out and do this and that. He makes them feel good.” To reiterate this point, Oscar reflected that “I will walk with them to practice, talk with them for these three blocks one at a time, show acceptance, so they learn to know me and I learn to know them.” Erin thought that Patrick was “able to empathise with them, their situations. You have to have the right heart and build from there.” For his part, Patrick mentioned that “when someone makes a mistake, it’s not about getting bogged down with that. It’s about accepting them and using those great moments and being able to focus on those.”

Providing Direction

All study participants perceived that Cann provided direction for SSUSA and the regional coordinators. The regional coordinators and volunteers emphasised that Cann was extraordinary at setting, maintaining, and communicating a vision for SSUSA, as typified by Oscar: “He just really helped and opened up a lot of people’s lives to Street Soccer, and I think everyone sees the same vision as he does, changing peoples’ lives.” All participants agreed that Cann was a “big idea person” (Val) and also that he was very creative and challenging in his ideas, expecting others to be the same, as explained by Ron: “So you realise the wheels are always turning and pushing the envelope forward, so that’s part of staying on your toes and thinking what should be next.”

Cann agreed about being creative and constantly coming up with new ideas, saying that “we have an entrepreneurial, candid spirit and we always try to one up the last year, and keep it exciting.” While the regional coordinators were appreciative of the direction, support, and new ideas Cann provided, Samantha did raise one issue about follow through, which was concerning to her:

He always has an idea about what goals he wants, but then things change the next year. . . . I always like a lot of his ideas, but then follow through on what the ideas are, that is one thing he struggles with.

The regional coordinators were also perceived as providing direction, goals, and support for their respective teams, although to a much lesser extent than Cann. Study participants still shared about the coordinators providing direction, but most of the comments about this servant leadership dimension were directed towards Cann. Ron spoke about how he would adapt programmes and strategies based on the individuals with whom he was working to provide customised direction:

But employing different strategies and techniques to motivate them is knowing that it is not an employer/employee relationship. It is more of a partnership and working with people and trying to push them and respect their personal time and capacity.

While Patrick provided “goals, leadership, and vision for the programme” (Jason), Patrick learned to make adaptations and tailor his leadership approach to the needs of his followers: “Everyone learns through a different style. So, I adapt to the players, so I can meet them on their level, so it’s a lot of experimenting.” Oscar also provided some direction

for his team, according to Martin: “He is serious about what he is going to do with the team, why he is doing it, where it is going.”

Stewardship

Cann and the regional coordinators were perceived to provide the stewardship and role modelling that inspired and motivated various followers. Cann in particular was perceived as going above and beyond for the organisation, giving much time, energy and dedication to SSUSA as Heather pointed out: “he would give everything to make this organisation successful. . . Lawrence still attacks everything with his heart and compassion for this organisation.” Val agreed, saying that “he gives everything to this organisation and anyone wanting to be a part of it. . . He motivates me by his relentless compassion for the cause.”

Others believed Cann was an excellent role model and led by example to inspire individuals to buy into the SSUSA mission and common cause. Oscar related, “[Cann’s] leadership is through his example of what he’s doing each and every day, through what he did already.” Cann also spoke to the role modelling he tries to provide for players and his volunteers and coordinators: “Whether it is sitting with someone all day at work, or modelling for them how to deal with a jerk on the other side of the window, I have done that for them.”

All of the regional coordinators were also perceived to act as stewards of their respective teams, leading through their passion, energy, dedication and role modelling. For instance, Oscar commented that “I lead by example. . . I feel like a lot of [players] don’t have mentors . . . so we give them that person.” Martin characterised Oscar as “someone who is always offering. He is always like giving, giving, and giving.” Lisa mentioned that Samantha “is very passionate about soccer and very passionate about helping the homeless . . . and she blended those two passions.” Lisa also shared that her Midwest programme was going through some financial difficulty, but that Samantha was loyal to the programme, “determined to regroup and figure out how to best go forward so that we can keep the programme alive.” Additionally, Erin thought that Patrick “is just such a giving individual. His passion for others just radiates in everything that he does. . . . He gives his support and entire heart to what he is doing.” When describing why he remained involved with SSUA, Patrick explained: “I’ve really enjoyed helping people. This is what I am meant to do. For over seven years, you just kind of know it is your calling.”

Building Relationships and Caring for Others

In addition to exhibiting behaviours aligned with the six dimensions of servant leadership to undergird SSUSA, the founder and regional coordinators were also perceived as giving primacy to followers’ needs, building and developing relationships with their volunteers and players. Every study participant perceived Cann to put followers first; followers believed him to be excellent at building relationships and genuinely caring for, supporting, and nurturing players and volunteers. Patrick shared that “his concept was to build relationships, so the players have a place, community to call their own. . . . He’s made it personal and it really feels like a family.” Carter agreed and also mentioned how Cann supports people: “I think he really takes time to get to know individuals . . . and it makes me want to stay involved and help more and more people.” Cann described his approach to forming SSUSA: “I wanted to engage [the players affected by homelessness] and putting relationships first was the sports model I started this with. Building a relationship first outside of contact through social services leads to better engagement.”

This care for others and focus on relationship building with the players and volunteers was perceived as integral to the approach of each of the regional coordinators. Oscar talked about his mentoring role: “I think they would describe me as like a big brother to them. . . . If there’s anything bad happening, I’m always there just to talk.” Martin was able to comment more on Oscar’s approach with the players in building relationships: “He is just there for anybody. He’ll take them out and do this or that . . . and at the same time ask how they are doing.” When asked about his focus with his programme, Patrick shared that “it’s all about relationships. That is the most important thing.” Erin reiterated this: “For [Patrick], he is always most concerned with the relationship he has with his players.” Jason also commented that “[Patrick] does really well building relationships with the players.” Out on the West Coast, Ron was described as someone who “really wants to help the next person” (Carter), while in the Midwest, Justin described Samantha as someone who “connects with them, how are you doing with this, how are you doing with that?” Justin also mentioned that social outings were important to Samantha:

We started getting tickets to the semi pro games on Friday nights, taking players who wanted to go to this soccer facility in [a nearby city] to watch a soccer game, have hot dogs and pop, and do what people do on a Friday night..

Thus, for all of the regional coordinators, as well as the founder, building relationships and caring and nurturing their followers were perceived as central to their leadership.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore servant leadership in the context of one SFD organisation using soccer as an outreach to persons affected by homelessness in the U.S. By shedding light on leadership in SFD organisations, our inaugural investigation critically extends and integrates SFD and servant leadership literatures, and provides important implications for both theory and practice.

With an emphasis on serving others and developing followers,^{1,6,35} servant leadership behaviours were found to be a natural fit in this SFD sphere. Since SSUSA works in tandem with local social service agencies in communities with a population who “suffer disproportionately as a result,”^{10,36} servant leadership behaviours could help address the issues revolving around power, control and programme implementation common in SFD.^{10,22} Addressing the power relations in SFD from a leadership perspective, the presence of servant leadership, whose follower-centred focus generates a sense of personal power and self-confidence,¹¹ empowered individuals within SSUSA to take control of the programme initiatives. By empowering followers in local communities to take ownership of the SSUSA programme, the presence of interpersonal acceptance could create sensitivity to global and political forces that shape inequality.¹⁰ In a broader sense, servant leadership could be important in the SFD context as it may encourage inclusive and culturally-sensitive programme design and implementation. This culturally-sensitive and inclusive programme design and implementation is critical to the long-term sustainability of SFD organisations and initiatives because it addresses the prominent criticisms of how SFDs organisations may employ neo-colonial approaches to implement programmes with little attention to involving local stakeholders.³⁷ Thus, servant leadership may provide the focus on acceptance and inclusivity necessary to effectively involve local stakeholders and create programmes that are culturally-sensitive and sustainable.

SSUSA was also undergirded by the importance leaders place on building and developing relationships. This genuine care and concern is a fundamental aspect of servant leadership⁶ and is possibly vital for non-profit organisational success, as researchers have shown that the strength or quality of relationships between leaders and followers is a critical driver of organisational performance.³⁸ Indeed, the participants spoke about how

this care and emphasis on strong relationships exhibited by Cann, in particular, motivated them to stay involved with SSUSA and give sustained effort towards achieving its mission.

While servant leadership does seem important to SSUSA and a natural fit with its mission, some of its dimensions were found in varying degrees among its regional coordinators. For instance, only the founder and one regional coordinator, a female, were perceived as displaying traits of humility. Through socialisation processes and ideologies, perceptions of humility differ by gender. For example, men compared to women learn to value dominance and individualism³⁹ as well as behave more arrogantly.⁴⁰ If this is the case, male regional coordinators, even though committed to the mission of SSUSA and to helping the participants change their lives, may approach their role through this socialisation lens and embrace parts of the male ego and dominant personalities often found in sports.²⁴ Given that most if not all of the regional coordinators and volunteers in SSUSA have a sport background in soccer and other sports, the possibility that they have been socialised to display certain male dominant, gendered characteristics is strong. These notions were supported in the descriptions of the regional coordinator, Samantha. While our results support the belief that humility traits differ by gender at the regional coordinator level, we did reveal Cann exhibited humility, which could stem from his endless devotion and passion for the organisation alongside his personal background, where his family lost many possessions including their home due to a fire and had to rely on the good will of others for a span of time. However, as we do not know in any great depth the personal background of the regional coordinators, we cannot claim that Cann's tragedy earlier in life is the sole factor enabling humility to develop in him more so than in the regional coordinators. It could be a salient reason for his humility, but not the differentiating factor. Further work is necessary to tease out this phenomenon.

Cann was perceived as being adept at providing direction for SSUSA as an entity, however, volunteers at the regional sites did not discuss this servant leadership dimension as much with regards to the regional coordinators. While some regional coordinators were mentioned as providing solid direction, most of the conversation revolving around this dimension centred upon Cann. This could be because Cann is the founder of the organisation and is still very hands-on as a manager and leader, traveling to the regional sites and working closely with not only coordinators but also their volunteers. Site volunteers may then view Cann as the leader of the organisation and see him as more important

than regional coordinators for setting direction. The regional coordinators may also not be inclined to offer strong direction, if they feel this may go against Cann's wishes or somehow alienate their regional affiliate from the national office.

Participants also perceived a lack of follow-through on goals and planning on the part of SSUSA leaders. The lack of follow through on performance goals may be due to an overwhelming emphasis on service to others rather than on organisational performance.⁴¹ In short, working with and caring for such a unique population may take precedent over achieving other organisational goals. This lack of follow-through may also be indicative of the short life span of many SFD organisations. For instance, it has been noted that a fair number of SFD organisations are not in existence for any great length of time, which could be due to funding challenges, but also leaders who may have passion and a great vision but lack management skills to run the day-to-day operations.^{2,37} Given this, servant leadership may need to be augmented by other leadership styles at various stages of SFD programme design and implementation for these interventions to be most effective and sustainable, following situational leadership theory.⁴² Transformational and transactional leadership in particular could also be of benefit to SFD organisations at various stages of the organisational life cycle.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

While we cannot claim that all leaders in SSUSA exhibit servant leadership behaviours, it is apparent that servant leadership behaviour is important in this context. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics,⁴³ in 2012 the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in the U.S. recognised more than 1.4 million not-for-profit organisations, of which, historically, 16% go out of business. Considering SFD organisations, as well as a majority of not-for-profit organisations, rely on volunteers for organisational stability, this study helps illuminate the role of servant leaders in cultivating volunteer sustainability in SFD organisations. While researchers have found SFD volunteers are initially motivated to volunteer based on their passion for sport,¹⁰ servant leaders cultivate long-term volunteer motivation.¹⁸ As such, an important implication of servant leadership for SFD is the significance of building relationships that empower followers and contribute to long-term follower motivation,²¹ engagement, and organisational citizenship.¹² Although there are numerous advantages of empowering employees with decision-making power,⁴⁴ servant leaders must still be actively involved in the process and support followers. When followers are involved in the

decision-making process, servant leaders can humbly engage in moral debates with followers²⁷ and move the organisation forward. This relationship-building could be central to theorising about effective leadership in SFD, and might be even more important in this context than in others, due to the nature, mission and populations served by SFD organisations where nurture and care are vital.

The present study only focused on servant leadership in the SFD context, as this was deemed appropriate due to its natural alignment with the goals and foci of many SFD organisations discussed earlier. Identifying the prevalence of servant leadership within an SFD organisation is in itself an important contribution. However, as mentioned above and based on situational leadership theory,⁴² servant leadership might need to be augmented by other leadership styles, such as transformational and transactional, at various stages of intervention design and implementation for these interventions to be most effective. For instance, the transformational leadership style is associated with a strong vision, charisma and astutely navigating the organisational change process.¹⁹ A SFD leader may need to employ this style in the early stages of programme initiation and development in order to marshal support for the project and guide requisite structural changes that may be necessary to effectively carry out the programme. Further, transactional leadership, where a leader focuses on providing rewards for effort and employs a task focus,¹⁹ may be helpful for providing the follow through on goals and tasks that may not be the strongest suit for servant leaders, as demonstrated in the present study. A key take-away is that although resources may be limited in SFD organisations, leadership training is needed in order to sustain organisations and to assist in leaders' development. Consistent with current needs in our society, leadership training particularly in servant leadership, may foster organisations dedicated to serving the needs of employees and other stakeholders.⁴⁵

This study is not without its limitations, which also present opportunities for future research. The results of this research are overwhelmingly positive, but this may not be telling the entire story. Despite our attempt to mitigate social desirability bias as outlined above (e.g., through the use of pseudonyms and disguising the SSUSA affiliate with which participants are associated, and through building trust with participants through a multi-phased, long-term research project), social desirability bias may still have impacted the findings.¹⁷ Study participants may have just portrayed themselves and others as servant leaders because this is what they expected the researchers wanted to hear. In addition, they may have been cautious about being critical of Cann or regional coordinators for fear that there might be

some negative reprisal if critical comments somehow came to light. While all of the regional coordinators and staff at the regional sites do volunteer their time with SSUSA (only the staff at the national office are paid), they may have been hesitant about sharing more critically due to the perception they could be replaced or removed from their roles. Additionally, study participants are obviously very committed to SSUSA and are likely derive some identity and sense of belonging through the organisation. Thus, they may not wish to portray the organisation negatively in any way. All of this point to the need for future leadership research across SFD organisational contexts and through varied methodologies to address this limitation of the present study.

In terms of additional limitations, the SFD organisation explored here was a single-source, not-for-profit organisation. The evidence, prevalence and relevance of servant leadership may be different in other SFD organisations with different missions and foci. Second, the presence of the humility dimension was limited in this study, which calls for further investigation into the perceived and exhibited characteristics of humility by gender and occupation. Finally, the focus of this study was limited to exploring the presence of servant leadership behaviours in the SFD context. Certainly, a natural progression is to investigate the long-term effectiveness of servant leadership with various SFD initiatives. Specifically, empirical research investigating the effects of servant leadership on various dyad relationships with followers (e.g., staff, volunteers, and programme participants) is warranted. The relationship between servant leadership and participant outcomes such as social capital development, inclusion, job attainment, sustainable housing, and other outcome variables specific to the focal point and mission of a SFD organisation should be examined. In addition, the relationship between servant leadership and outcome variables related to staff and volunteers in the SFD context should be explored, such as affective commitment, effort, satisfaction and turnover intentions. The investigation of leadership in SFD is in its infancy, and as such, there is ample opportunity for scholars to contribute to this endeavour.

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