Research Note

The influence of servant leadership on shared leadership development in Sport for Development

Per G. Svensson[1], Gareth J. Jones[2], Seungmin Kang[3]

[1] Louisiana State University, USA
[2] Temple University, USA
[3] North Dakota State University, USA

Corresponding author email: psvensson@lsu.edu

ABSTRACT

Leadership is critical to the success of sport for development (SFD) organizations that operate in environments characterized by limited resources, growing competition, and blurred institutional boundaries. Previous research has primarily explored the efficacy of different leadership styles within SFD contexts and examined how leadership contributes to key dimensions of organizational capacity, performance, and other related concepts. Servant leadership and shared leadership have emerged as two particularly viable frameworks, yet there remains limited knowledge of how these approaches are developed and related in SFD. The current study is based on surveys from 100 employees of SFD organizations and utilized regression analysis to examine the relationship between salient organizational factors, servant leadership, and shared leadership. Results indicate that after controlling for salient organizational factors, servant leadership explains a significant portion of the variance in shared leadership. The discussion focuses on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings and highlights key areas for future research.

THE INFLUENCE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON SHARED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT

Many sport for development (SFD) agencies face significant challenges as they often operate with limited organizational capacity within complex and resource-constrained environments (Svensson et al., 2020). These types of challenges are not new in the SFD context (Kidd, 2008). Researchers continue to report ongoing challenges, which warrant increased attention to the type(s) of leadership styles and behaviors that are best suited for SFD contexts (Schulenkorf, 2017; Svensson et al., 2018; Welty Peachey, 2019). SFD practitioners perceive that leadership is a top priority for advancing the management of SFD agencies (Shin et al., 2020), yet Schulenkorf's (2017) seminal review of the current body of knowledge about managerial aspects of SFD identified leadership as a significant area in need of future research. Specifically, Schulenkorf argued that "SFD research around leadership development, management, and succession planning presents an exciting area for further theoretical and empirical debate" (p. 247).

Researchers have explored the nature of different leadership approaches that may have potential value to better manage SFD organizations (e.g., Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Welty Peachey & Burton, 2017). Servant and shared leadership have been suggested as two viable leadership approaches since the empowering nature of servant leaders as well as the collaborative nature of shared leadership align with the focal missions of SFD organizations. The emphasis in servant leadership of helping others grow and develop could be critical for helping staff build the confidence and skills to actively participate in shared leadership practices. It is therefore worth exploring

Prior literature indicates shared leadership plays a significant role in activating organizational capacities, promoting innovative behavior among employees, and enhancing performance (Svensson et al., 2019). Additionally, shared leadership can also result in improved knowledge sharing, power relations, ethical behavior, and enhanced employee experiences in the SFD workforce (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019). If shared leadership plays such an essential role in the functioning of an SFD organization, then the development of this form of leadership deserves further attention. Specifically, researchers have suggested that servant leadership may represent a potentially important precondition for the development of shared leadership (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of servant leadership on shared leadership in a national set of SFD organizations in the United States. Specifically, this study drew on a subset of data from a larger investigation of leadership in SFD to initiate dialogue on shared leadership development.

Prior Literature on Leadership in SFD

SFD organizations depend more on paid staff than other types of community sport organizations, which often draw on volunteers and membership structures for administrative leadership (Svensson et al., 2017). These paid employees are often expected to serve in leadership roles. Additionally, most job postings in the SFD field are for executive leadership roles (Whitley et al., 2017). Therefore, researchers have increasingly noted the importance of expanding the existing body of knowledge on leadership within SFD domains (Jones et al., 2018; Welty Peachey, 2019). So what do we know about leadership in the context of SFD?

To date, discussions of leadership in prior studies range from close examinations of particular leadership styles (e.g., Jones et al., 2018; Wells & Welty Peachey, 2016) to those that examine leadership as part of larger studies of SFD organizations (e.g., Svensson & Mahoney, 2020; Zipp & Nauright, 2018). The context in which leadership has been mentioned ranges from an emphasis on leadership development among SFD program participants (e.g., Hancock et al., 2013) and peer/youth leadership within SFD programs (e.g., Lindsey et al., 2017), to the role of executive leaders at an organizational level (Jones et al., 2018). Prior research has also highlighted the link between these multiple levels of influence. For example, Zipp and Nauright (2018) suggested that SFD organizations that aspire to develop the leadership of participants must critically reflect on how they address existing barriers for

local stakeholders and if their existing practices reflect the interests of the program beneficiaries. Leadership has also been reported to serve an influential role in developing an organizational climate conducive to innovation within the SFD context (Svensson & Mahoney, 2020), as well as in the form of cross-boundary leadership systems that facilitate creative multi-stakeholder solutions in the SFD domain (Svensson & Loat, 2019). A few prior studies have also focused on network structures of leadership with an emphasis on exploring structures and interactions among members in organizational networks, rather than how specific leadership forms or styles may be developed (Hambrick et al., 2019; Herasimovich & Alzua-Sorzabal, 2021).

Although scholars focused on some components of leadership, few researchers have directly explored or conceptualized specific forms of leadership in SFD. For example, drawing on interview data from staff with Street Soccer USA, Wells and Welty Peachey (2016) found servant leadership—an approach where leaders passionately care for the development and support of staff—empowered staff to take initiative and ownership within an SFD organization, which subsequently helped promote the development of more inclusive and locally relevant programming in the SFD context. Servant leadership represents a leadership style whereby leaders are focused on helping and supporting their followers and putting others' needs and interests above their own (van Dierendonck, 2011). "Since SFD is fundamentally about serving others," Wells and Welty Peachey (2016) reason, "it could be a context where servant leadership is being practiced" (p. 12). In a larger follow-up study, Welty Peachey et al. (2018) explored the use of servant leadership in SFD and how it influenced work-related needs satisfaction. Their results indicated active use of servant leadership in SFD, which was also found to significantly influence followers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the workplace. Welty Peachey and Burton (2017) suggested servant leadership could be combined with other leadership styles to fully realize an organization's potential in the SFD field. Specifically, they argued servant leadership "is a style of leadership which can be highly effective in [SFD], providing the care, nurture, and empowerment necessary for these positive changes to occur and organizational outcomes to be realized" (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2017, p. 126).

At the same time, a group of researchers has also explored the applicability of shared leadership in the context of SFD, an approach where leadership is a collective effort involving multiple people. Kang and Svensson (2019), for example, argued shared leadership aligns with the value-

based nature of the SFD space and developed a set of propositions about potential outcomes associated with shared leadership as well as the preconditions necessary for developing collective leadership. Vertical leadership (i.e., behavior by a person designated as a leader) was identified as one of the main antecedents of shared leadership development and the authors suggested that servant or empowering leadership styles may be particularly useful. Likewise, based on their case study of shared leadership in a North American SFD agency, Jones et al. (2018) argued that "servant leadership may provide a useful complement to shared leadership in the [SFD] context" (p. 91). More specifically, Jones et al. concluded that shared leadership "offers a viable approach when integrated with vertical strategies, such as servant leadership. These approaches can collectively empower local champions and develop the structures necessary to capitalize on multiple community voices and assets" (p. 93). Therefore, the research question for this study was to test whether servant leadership significantly influences shared leadership development in SFD.

METHODS

The data analyzed and presented in this research note come from a larger study of shared leadership in SFD. These data have been used for other assessments of shared leadership and organizational capacity (Svensson et al., 2019), but separate fields of data were collected specifically for this study to evaluate the relationship between servant and shared leadership. The methods used to collect and analyze the data are outlined in the following subsections.

Sample

An online survey was distributed to a national sample of employees working for SFD organizations in the United States. A single country location was chosen based on the availability of contact information for staff in non-executive leadership positions and to minimize the potential influence of other factors such as language, geographical location, and culture on the results. Therefore, the decision was made to focus on SFD organizations in the United States to access a sufficient sample of non-executive leader staff to test our research question. In the absence of a centralized directory of SFD employees, the sampling frame for this study was created through a systematic review of existing organizational directories of all known national SFD networks (e.g., Up2Us Sports, Laureus Sport for Good Network, Squash and Education Alliance). The website of each identified organization was then reviewed for contact information about staff members. A total of 215 completed surveys were recorded. For this analysis, however, only the

100 completed surveys recorded from respondents in non-executive leadership roles were used since those participants were provided questions on servant leadership behavior by their designated leader.

Measures

Servant leadership was measured using the SL-7 scale, a psychometrically sound global servant leadership scale developed by Liden et al. (2015). In our study, only those respondents serving in non-executive leadership roles were provided the SL-7 scale since the questions ask respondents to rate the behavior of their organizational leaders. For example, "My leader puts my best interests above his/her own." Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The Cronbach's alpha for the SL-7 scale ($\alpha = .89$) indicated excellent internal reliability with regards to the present study (DeVellis, 2012). Shared leadership was measured through Grille and Kauffeld's (2015) Shared Professional Leadership Inventory for Teams (SPLIT). The 20-items of the SPLIT included four elements of shared leadership orientations: (a) task leadership, the degree of which members clearly assign tasks; (b) relational leadership, the degree of which members support to handle conflict in an organization; (c) change leadership, the degree of which members help each other to learn from the past events; and (d) micropolitical leadership, the degree of which members use the network to support other organizations' work. The value of Cronbach's alpha (ranging from .87 to .91) also indicated shared leadership items were internally consistent. A set of descriptive variables were also collected about the organizations where respondents worked.

Data Analysis

A two-stage linear regression approach model was utilized to identify the unique variance in shared leadership explained by servant leadership while accounting for a set of control variables. The first linear regression model was conducted with only a set of controls as predictor variables. Specifically, several organizational-level variables were accounted for, which could influence the level of shared leadership within an organization including: (a) the number of full-time staff, (b) budget size, (c) organizational tenure, and (d) proportion of public funding. A second linear regression model was then tested with servant leadership added as a predictor variable.

RESULTS

The first regression model was statistically significant ($F =$

2.943, p < .05, Adjusted R2 = .037), indicating that approximately 3.7% of the variance in shared leadership was explained by the four control variables. However, an examination of the regression coefficients indicated that only budget size (ß = -.191, p<.05) had a significant influence on shared leadership. The second regression model was also statistically significant (F = 18.206, p < .001, Adjusted R2 = .473), with the control variables and servant leadership variable explaining approximately 47.3% of the variance in shared leadership. The inclusion of the servant leadership variable led to a significant increase in model fit indices (ΔF = 15.263, ΔAdjusted R2 = .436), indicating servant leadership explained approximately 43.6% of the variance in shared leadership after accounting for control variables. Examination of the regression coefficients for the second model indicated that aside from the servant leadership variable (ß = .658, p < .001), no other control variables had a statistically significant influence on shared leadership (p > .05).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide empirical support for the significance of servant leadership as a means for facilitating shared leadership. To date, such a relationship had been hypothesized (e.g., Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2020), but never substantiated through empirical data. This relationship has significant practical implications for SFD leaders since more inclusive leadership and decision-making processes are critical if desired social change outcomes are to be realized (Whitley et al., 2019). While this study was limited to testing perceived shared leadership among staff, Jones et al. (2018, p. 93) also argue that:

In the SFD context, vertical leadership strategies, such as servant leadership, can assist in both clarifying the purpose of an organization and providing stability in the face of environmental challenges. Once momentum and resources have been developed through this process, [shared leadership] structures can bring voice to the community and use environmental knowledge to optimize practices.

Thus, future studies are warranted on how community perspectives can be developed through shared leadership. Our analysis contributes to the emerging body of SFD scholarship surrounding servant leadership behavior (Jones et al., 2018; Wells & Welty Peachey, 2016; Welty Peachey & Burton, 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2018) by indicating the instrumental role of a servant leadership style for stimulating shared leadership.

The rapid growth of the SFD field has created a significant need for leadership and leadership development to help marshal the resources necessary to achieve desired social change outcomes and missions (Welty Peachey et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2017). In his reflections on the current state of the field, Welty Peachey (2019) argued "[SFD] practitioners often lack the leadership and entrepreneurial training … necessary to optimize their organization's potential" (p. 249) The results of the present study provide among the first empirical evidence on factors associated with leadership development in SFD and may serve as a starting point for those seeking to cultivate shared leadership. This study contributes to SFD literature by investigating a particular vertical leadership style (i.e., servant leadership) as an antecedent of shared leadership.

An emerging set of studies in the SFD literature have begun to indicate the importance of leadership for the operation and sustainability of SFD organizations. Raw et al. (2019, 2021), for example, reported the critical role of leadership abilities for finding creative ways to manage the paradoxes and internal tensions prevalent within today's SFD environment. Leaders are also increasingly involved in collective monitoring and evaluation efforts as the field responds to external questions about the viability and effectiveness of using sport for good, which requires leaders to work with a diverse set of internal and external stakeholders (Whitley et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative for SFD leaders to develop meaningful solutions with the support of relevant stakeholders (Jones et al., 2019). Here, servant leadership behavior enables SFD leaders to meet the needs of the SFD workforce while shared leadership provides a useful way for developing more inclusive and collective forms of leadership to support the missions of SFD organizations.

As an example, former youth participants who are re-engaged in new roles as staff members can play important leadership roles "in taking the organization forward by unfreezing deeply held attitudes and beliefs" (Hoekman et al., 2019, p. 620). Having shared leadership processes in place would enable their voices to have a platform to contribute to the future direction of the organization. The idea of engaging local voices is far from new. In their study of SFD programs in divided communities, Schulenkorf and Sugden (2011) discovered that local stakeholders place a significant value on the importance of engaging local actors in leadership roles and as role models for others. Early and frequent engagement of participants and other internal stakeholders in decision-making processes related to the design, implementation, and evaluation of SFD programs is vital for cultural and locally relevant solutions (Meir, 2017; Wegner et al., 2020). For these reasons, we extend the argument that shared leadership presents a viable form of leadership for the SFD field (Jones et al., 2018; Kang &

Svensson, 2019; Svensson et al., 2019).

Another key contribution from our analysis is the strong empirical support for the relationship between servant and shared leadership. There is encouraging evidence in prior literature that servant leadership is practiced across a variety of SFD organizations (Welty Peachey et al., 2018). For example, Svensson and Seifried (2017) found evidence of servant leadership among leaders of SFD hybrids particularly with a focus on investing time and resources in people and taking the necessary actions to cultivate an authentic and inclusive workplace. But what about other practitioners who want to learn and develop new leadership skills to better serve their constituents? Unfortunately, professional development opportunities remain scarce despite the significant demand for work-related training in the SFD space (Shin et al., 2020; Welty Peachey et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2019). SFD funders, network organizations, universities, and other support agencies can help address these issues by developing more targeted capacity-building efforts for SFD leaders, including servant and shared leadership practices. It is, therefore, encouraging that some funders are pushing for a move toward bottom-up, collaborative, and learning-oriented efforts to help build the capacity among recipients to "effectively and sustainably manage their interventions" (Whitley et al., 2020, p. 29).

To stimulate shared leadership development, SFD leaders should embrace a growth mindset while showing a committment to employee growth and promoting a culture of responsibility and autonomy (Pearce et al., 2008). These actions should include empowering staff members to take ownership and encouraging staff to learn from their own mistakes. Previous research suggests vertical leadership styles, such as servant leadership, which provide employees autonomy related to decision-making can help facilitate the development of shared leadership (Carson et al., 2007; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2013). Although direct interactions with leaders play an important role in this process, it is important to remember that shared leadership is also driven by a strong organizational culture that reinforces values of respect and empowerment (Fausing et al., 2015). From this perspective, empowering employees should not only be viewed as an important aspect of servant leadership, but also critical to building a foundation for shared leadership.

CONCLUSION

The importance of leadership within SFD organizations is recognized within both research and practice (Shin et al., 2020). The extant SFD literature is characterized by close examinations of specific leadership styles and broader analyses of how leadership facilitates key organizational processes (i.e., organizational capacity, innovation). Although the results have collectively highlighted the efficacy of different leadership styles in the SFD context, there remains a pressing need to understand leadership development (Schulenkorf, 2017). The findings of this study provide empirical support for the association between servant and shared leadership, which represent two promising approaches highlighted in prior literature. Though the association has received conceptual and theoretical support in prior studies, this study is the first to empirically test (and find evidence for) this link in SFD.

Mainstream leadership scholars have suggested that vertical leadership styles play an important role in building an internal environment conducive to shared leadership (e.g., Fausing et al., 2015). Our results have important theoretical implications for leadership in SFD by positioning servant leadership as a viable approach for implementing vertical leadership in a way that establishes a vision of altruism, humility, love, acceptance, stewardship, and emotional connections enabling an environment conducive to shared leadership development. The growing body of literature on servant leadership has found significant relationships with a wide range of employee outcomes including improved health, growth, learning, autonomy, sense of purpose, and engagement (Hunter et al., 2013; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). The ability of leaders to inspire and empower others is particularly important in community-based organizations given the value-based motives of their internal stakeholders (do Nascimento et al., 2018). Taken together, the empowering nature of servant leadership can therefore facilitate the development of shared leadership through an improved sense of responsibility and collective decision-making (Carson et al., 2007; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2013). Additional conceptual work is necessary to further theorize the role of servant leadership in shared leadership development.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The results of the current study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the unique focus of this study meant that only 100 of the 215 completed surveys could be utilized for analysis, which represents a relatively small convenience sample of SFD organizations currently in operation. A larger and more representative sample of SFD organizations would allow for more robust analysis of contextual and organizational variations in the relationship between servant and shared leadership. Second, while cross-sectional surveys provide appropriate data to assess this relationship, the growing emphasis on innovative and participant-driven thinking in SFD practice (e.g., Joachim et

al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020) warrants diverse methodological approaches that capture how and when different forms of leadership stimulate and support behavior. Future studies should consider case study and ethnographic methods based on extended fieldwork to provide rich, longitudinal insight into how servant and shared leadership dynamics manifest in SFD contexts. Additionally, though prior research suggests servant and shared leadership represent two of the most viable leadership styles within SFD organizations, there are other approaches that warrant ongoing inquiry, particularly as the field continues to evolve. As Welty Peachey (2019) stated, it is imperative that the SFD community continues "pushing forward conversations about what effective leadership could or should look like in [SFD]" (p. 248). Future researchers are also encouraged to explore leadership across SFD organizations in different geographical contexts and should explore local perspectives on the most meaningful leadership approaches. Our research note contributes to this scholarly dialogue by providing empirical support for the link between servant and shared leadership in SFD, which we hope stimulates additional studies on other leadership styles such as authentic, empowering, and transformational leadership, as well as non-Western leadership styles, and their potential role in the development of shared leadership.

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