

Natural leadership in sport

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Aim

This research is part of a comprehensive PhD research project that focuses on the existence and development of leadership in sport management practices. The underpinning factors that are associated with successfully leading top teams in sport are often used as an example in regard to being successful in non sport business (Westerbeek & Smith, 2005). This paper aims to identify what are specific qualities of leadership as exhibited by sport team captains making use of leadership profiles derived from the evolutionary theory by Van Vugt and Ahuja (2011). The following research question was designed for this research: What kind of leadership characteristics do sport team captains show in the age group of fifteen years and older?

Theoretical Background

A theory of leadership called natural leadership has its origins in evolutionary theory and takes the unique human phenomenon of complex cooperation as response to the need for collective action (Van Vugt, 2008). Natural leadership starts with individuals taking initiative and providing guidance while others agree to follow. Human beings include in their leadership expression specialised mental mechanisms for planning, communication, group decision-making, competence recognition, social learning and conflict management. Although such traits are generally associated with higher reasoning, cognitive pre-adaptations for leadership probably evolved long before modern humans ever appeared on the scene (Van Vugt and Ahuja, 2011). Human leadership can also be explained by dominance through hierarchy. Simply stated, the alpha male is at the top of the tree. This example does not completely apply to human beings as human followers (can choose to democratically) decide who can be the boss and who can stay the boss (Wildschut, 2009). The so called 'big men' are able to have influence by making use of their personal qualities and not because of divine or inherited right to rule. To lead, they have to show that they are of additional value and not of restriction to the group (Greenleaf, 2002).

It is a misunderstanding that a real leader is able to lead in all circumstances. According to the evolutionary theory leadership is determined by situation. Different leadership is required in peace compared to war or less extreme circumstances. Depending on the situation, human beings

focus automatically, by instinct, on a certain type of leader. Van Vugt and Ahuja (2011) typify the following cognitive ancestral leader prototypes that will be used in this paper to analyze leadership as shown by youth sport team captains. The distinguish between the warrior (necessary when the team is in danger and necessity of defence exists), the diplomat (maintenance of alliances), the peace founder (re-establishment and guard of harmony), the scout (specialized in creating new opportunities and finding new resources), the controller (in case of challenges of planning and coordination) and the teacher (when development is necessary for success).

Methodology

Next to conceptualizing the phenomenon of leadership through literature review, empirical data has been collected to explore the concept of natural leadership in sports. Central starting point is the theory of natural leadership with its evolutionary underpinnings as explained by Van Vugt and Ahuja (2011). Respondents in this research were the members of eight male youth soccer teams, eight female youth soccer teams and eight mixed gender youth korfbal teams and their coaches and team captains. Respondents were in the age of fifteen years and older. The data is used to provide an insight into which leadership profile is dominantly used by youth sport team captains and to compare the dominant leadership profiles of male, female and mixed gender teams. The data has been statistically analysed making use of SPSS. First of all the standard error is determined. Further Cronbach's Alpha (homogeneity) and Chi square test (significant difference) is measured. Level of the competition in which the teams participate or ranking were not taken into account for this research.

Results

As data collecting took place in March and April of this year results were not yet available at the time of abstract submission. Meanwhile all data is collected. First results will be presented at the conference. Implications of the study can have major influence how leadership in sport can be identified and developed.

References

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