

Leading In Multiple Contexts: Investigating The Meaning Of Leadership For Sport Officials

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Aim

Sport officials (e.g., referees) are an essential element of sporting competition, with the role of facilitating structure and fair play, the quality of spectator experience, and an environment conducive to optimal athlete performance (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2014; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). With the exception of research on self-perceptions and career ending factors of football referees (Rullang, Emrich, & Pierdzioch, 2017), sports officials have received very little attention in the field of sport management in comparison to athletes and coaches. Moreover, with such explicit positions of influence in the sporting environment, it is surprising that sport management research has yet to address the notion of leadership as it relates to officiating. The aim of the current research is to address this gap in the literature and gain initial insight on the meaning of leadership in the context of sport officials. Our investigation was framed around two main research questions: what characteristics are representative of an ideal leader in officiating?; and, what is the meaning of leadership in the context of officiating? This process in turn provided the foundation for a conceptual framework, which is developed and discussed in relation to the officiating context and other environments.

Theoretical background

The literature defines leadership in a multitude of ways, with the concept traditionally considered in relation to aspects such as leader traits, skills, behaviors, and the occupation of an administrative position. From these perspectives, a leader-follower relationship has generally been specified with implied boundary conditions (e.g., an organization or team) which provide for structure and context when defining leadership as a construct. However, the independent nature of a sport official provides for a more sophisticated approach to understanding leadership by considering multiple perspectives of influence in relation to relevant follower groups (e.g., players, coaches, spectators, and other officials). As varying contexts can alter how leadership is perceived and what attributes are considered most relevant (Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2014), the case of sport officials offers fertile ground for understanding leadership of multiple entities. These related yet distinct groups can be considered from the perspective of organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which in turn provides for a more complex and malleable view of leadership and optimal leader attributes. With the nature of sport incorporating immediate decision-making and transparency, an accentuated tension appears to exist between managing appearance and relationships with key participants in the leadership process.

Methodology, research design, and data analysis

A qualitative approach was selected to gain insight on the meaning of leadership for sport officials with two different groups of basketball referees. The first group consisted of top tier officials from Great Britain (N = 34) who officiate at both the international and national levels. The second group consisted of FIBA Europe referees (N = 32) placed on an elite performance program based on their high potential as officials. All international participants demonstrated good communication skills, as FIBA regulations require their officials to obtain an English language proficiency qualification. A two-part written questionnaire was completed by each participant. In the first section, participants were asked to list five characteristics/attributes which are representative of an ideal leader in officiating. The second section asked participants to explain what the term leadership means to them in their own words. Responses were recorded anonymously to maintain confidentiality and the privacy of the respondents. Following initial coding of all the transcripts, more in-depth thematic analysis was then conducted by the researchers to identify the main themes from the participant responses.

Results, discussion, and implications

Initial findings suggest that leadership is viewed in a slightly different manner in the context of sport officiating when compared to other mainstream studies. While attributes such as expertise, communication, and confidence rate highly and are consistent with other investigations, the context of officiating appears to place a greater importance on leader characteristics relating to respect and decision-making. Key themes for the meaning of leadership included maximizing the officiating crew's teamwork and performance, being trusted by the players and coaches, and having the courage to manage difficult situations. Leading multiple interrelated groups accentuates the need for an adaptive leadership approach where multiple

meanings of leadership can co-exist, and differing sets of leadership skills can be developed and utilized in relevant sub-contexts. Implications are that leadership in officiating is a multi-faceted concept where consideration of specific follower groups is necessary to enable targeted development.

References

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