POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AS THE CONDUIT FOR THE ENACTMENT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article postulates the positive psychological capacities of hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy can serve as conduits for the enactment of Servant Leadership in a professional sports framework. Furthermore, the leader who demonstrates these positive psychological capacities increases a follower's openness and propensity to emulate and enact servant leadership ethos in their own locus of control, thereby creating a culture of shared servant leadership for the entire organization. By identifying non-traditional organizational frameworks that exhibit positive psychological capacities with the goal of achieving optimal performance, this inquiry continues a thread of research rooted in the nascent construct of positive psychology. Previous studies focusing upon follower preferences for leadership, suggest the presence of both positive leadership capacities and servant leadership behaviors leads to heightened performance and greater organizational productivity. Furthermore, the literature suggests that followers who witness leaders engaging in instances of positive leadership are more likely to emulate these leadership behaviors going forward. For this reason, this article suggests that a leader/coach who exhibits positive psychological capacities may be able to influence the presence and enactment of servant leadership in an organizational framework.

BACKGROUND

Sport is a microcosm of society, and it is able to transcend economic, cultural, and racial boundaries. This assertion is made manifest at the domestic and international levels as athletics continue to grow in both notoriety and popularity (Stephen G. Miller, 2004; Perrottet, 2004; K. E. Peterson, 2000; Swaddling, 1980; Touny, 1984). Due to this popularity, a greater understanding of the formal and social realities of leadership can be informed through sports research. For these reasons, leadership research in sport continues to gain momentum while receiving further inquiry (Challadurai, 1980; P Chelladurai, 1981; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Kenow & Williams, 1999). The fundamental constructs of leadership theory—influence, integrity, morality, and honor—are no longer relegated to the boardroom; they spill onto athletic playing fields from pop-warner (i.e., youth football) to high-revenue professional teams. Due to this expansion, a greater proclivity for studying emergent themes of leadership in the highly crystallized behavior patterns of sport are needed (Armstrong, 2001; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Marx, 2003).

Positive Psychology

The nascent construct of positive psychology has begun to receive greater inquiry in the last decade. This inquiry is built upon an interest in what is good about humans, their lives and optimal human functioning

(Pearsall, 2003; Seligman, 1998, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A review of the positive psychology literature suggests a growing trend toward embracing the capacity for good in an individual and his or her respective situations (Linley & Joseph, 2004a, 2004b; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007; Maddux, Snyder, & Lopez, 2004; Pearsall, 2003; Sivanathan, Arnold, Turner, & Barling, 2004; Thompson, 1995). In direct contrast, the nomological net surrounding the historical perspective of psychology embraced a negative illness ideology that was predicated upon the presence of a disease model and was devoid of hope without medical intervention (Klenke-Hamel & Janda, 1982; O'Donohue & Kitchener, 1996; Storr, 1983). This fascination with an illness ideology focused upon revealing the dark side of humanity with a recent literature review revealing 200,000 articles on mental illness, compared with 1,200 dealing with positive capacities in people (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Luthans, et al., 2007). I posit that embracing an illness ideology rejects the potential of hope and the presence of what is good, thereby ratifying a self-fulfilling prophecy of diminished self-efficacy and a situation bereft of an optimistic outcome.

This assertion is further strengthened by research that has suggested the presence of unmitigated stress and its resultant consequences negatively affects an individual's capacity to perform cognitive processes and achieve optimal functioning, which also diminishes hope (Isen, Shalker, Clark, & Karp, 1978; Kobasa & Maddi, 1984; Linley & Joseph, 2004a; Luthans, et al., 2007; C. Peterson, 2000; C R. Snyder, 1995). Described widely as the father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman (personal communication, April 1, 2008) shared that hope greatly moderates the relationship between leader and follower, especially in player/coach relationships. In a sports context, the leadership style embraced by the coach can have far-reaching implications for the player—both negative and positive (P. Chelladurai & Quatman, 2005; P Chelladurai & Riemer, 1997; Seligman, S., Thornton, & Thornton, 1990).

For example, an athlete who receives harsh criticism from his or her coach may become more susceptible to negative affect and experience lower self-worth based upon feedback from someone he or she holds in such high regard (Kenow & Williams, 1999; K. G. Smith, 2001; R. E. Smith & Smoll, 1978, 1990). The subsequent lower evaluation of self-worth gives way to a stilted perception of his or her weaknesses and suggests the potential for long-term cognitive dissonance leading to task avoidance due to fear of failure, setting unrealistic goals, and not trying too hard on difficult tasks (R. E. Smith & Smoll, 1978, 1990).

Psychological Capacities

The following section provides an overview of the four positive psychological constructs examined in connection with, Servant Leadership, and the platform of athletics. The constructs of (a) hope, (b) optimism, (c) resilience, and (d) self-efficacy provide the framework for positive psychology (Isen, 2002; Luthans, et al., 2007; Maddux, et al., 2004; Seligman, 2005). These constructs were selected because they are the primary capacities for leadership within the positive psychology field and are well grounded in research and theory. Furthermore, the utilization of positive psychology in a sports context offers a welcomed alternative to the "win at all costs" mentality that permeates sports ecology (Steven G. Miller, 2004; Valavanis, 2004; Woff, 1999). As greater credence is given to building positive psychological capacities in coaches and engaging what is right and good in the arena of sports, positive psychology serves as a linchpin to a greater understanding of heightened follower performance (Diane L. Gill, 2000; R. E. Smith & Smoll, 1990).

Hope

The positive psychological construct of hope has been defined as a processable endeavor to "think about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward and the ways to achieve these goals" (Snyder et

al., 1995, p. 35). Thus, an overall process that requires two components of goal-directed thought emerges: "agency and pathway" (Lopez & Snyder, 2005, p.257). In a sports context, these components are revealed as planning the necessary steps for victory through a game plan (agency) and then implementing the required number of practices (pathway component of theory), which culminates in a game-type situation that allows the opportunity for ratifying the initial professed hope. Moreover, the extant literature also supports hope as a strong predictor of optimal athletic performance.

For example, while two athletes may have similar natural ability and talent, the more hopeful one is likely to be more successful, especially in moments of stress in a game-time situation (Challadurai, 1980; P. Chelladurai, 1981; Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Curry & Snyder, 2000). In a study of field and track athletes, hope predicted performance beyond natural ability and that it also correlated to superior academic achievement among those athletes (Curry, Snyder, Cook, Ruby, & Rehm, 1997). In an organizational framework, hopeful thoughts reflect the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways, which impacts the well-being and emotions of people (Lopez & Snyder, 2005). While initial research in clinical psychology did not focus on hope and leadership together, the last decade of research has identified hope as a positive psychological capacity that can be developed in leaders and followers (Luthans, et al., 2007; C.R. Snyder, 2000).

Optimism

While some leading theorists have defined optimism as generalized cross-situational positive outcome expectancy, positive psychology suggests the construct is a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future (Maddi & Hightower, 1999; C. Peterson, 2000; Scheier, et al., 1989; Schneider, 2001). For example, when organizational situations seem at their deepest point of darkness, the leader or follower able to harness a level of optimism can influence those around him or her with a positive sense of expectation concerning the outcome. "Optimism can be acquired by modeling; vicariously contributing to optimism is social learning" (K. E. Peterson, 2000, p. 51). In the leadership literature, there is a number of research studies connected with optimism. Optimistic leaders were found to be more effective in implementing change in organizations when followers emulated their optimistic leadership practices (Wunderly, Reddy, & Dember, 1998). In a study of European sales associates, transformational leadership directly elevated levels of optimism and increased the followers' subsequent performance (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002).

Continuing with the discussion of relevant research, optimism relates to achievement, success, and positive outcomes in many areas of life. For example, cancer patients have been shown to handle stressful chemotherapy better by being optimistic and engaging active coping mechanisms rather than engaging in pessimism (Luthans, et al., 2007; Seligman, 1998; J. W. Yates, Chalmer, St.James, Follansbee, & McKegney, 1981). Optimism has also been shown to yield desirable outcomes in workplace performance, education, and on the playing field (Chemers, et al., 2000; Norem & Illingworth, 1993; Schneider, 2001).

Resilence

In the last decade, due to a shrinking economy, loss of jobs, the higher cost of fuel, increased conflict in the Middle East, and the war on terror, resilience has become a much-needed coping mechanism that is both relevant and important. Resilience can be defined as "the process of, capacity for, or outcomes of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (T. M. Yates & Masten, 2004, p. 522). Furthermore, it is suggested that "resilience is predicated on exposure to significant threat or adversity, and the attainment of good outcomes despite this exposure" (Yates & Masten, p. 522). Studies focusing on individuals who have experienced trauma and have emerged unscathed are part of the

resiliency literature (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Luthans & Jensen, 2005; Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Luthans, et al., 2007; A. Masten & Reed, 2005; Pearsall, 2003; Richardson, 2002). The previous three decades of resiliency research had focused on at-risk children, problem adolescents, and dysfunctional families. The nascent positive psychology literature now touts "the resilience framework for its potential to inform efforts to foster positive developmental outcomes among disadvantaged children, families, and communities" (T. M. Yates & Masten, 2004 p. 521). It is through a closer inspection of life-span development that adverse circumstances are revealed as the catalyst for demonstrating a greater proclivity for the increase of resilient patterns of behavior (A. S. Masten, 2001; Reivich & Shatte, 2002; Richardson, 2002; Wilkes, 2002).

Based on the findings suggested in the literature, repeated exposure to adversity allows followers to develop a level of "resilience recovery" (Pearsall, 2003), which suggests the one experiencing adversity is able to bounce back all the way to a pre-adversity state and resume normal functioning. In a sports context, this bouncing back concept of resilience and its relationship to leadership praxis may be the missing component for optimal performance. I make this assertion because when the last play must be forgotten and preparation for the next play has already begun, elite athletes do not have the luxury to succumb to negative affect or sadness (Mummery, Schofield, & Perry, 2004; R. J. Schinke & Jerome, 2002; R. J. T. Schinke, Joy 2001).

In a leadership and organizational context, the literature also suggests resiliency is crucial to overcoming stress and burnout associated with upper-echelon leadership (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Kobasa & Maddi, 1984; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982).

Self-Efficacy

In athletic competition, a player must be psychologically confident that they have the skill to carry out their given assignment; if they do not perceive they can win against their opponent, the battle may already be lost. "In contests between highly skilled athletes, a brief lapse in attention, effort, or accuracy can spell the difference between triumph and defeat" (Albert Bandura, 1997, p. 369). Bandura's (1977a) salient theoretical framework for self-efficacy captures this very premise as he conveyed, "it is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and to execute the course of action required to produce given attainments" (1977, p. 2). Moreover, the literature suggests that the attainment of goals Bandura (1977a, 1982) mentioned is contingent upon the value placed on the outcome. The twin tension of this assertion is captured in the haunting quote, "Original sin is that thing about man which makes him capable of conceiving of his own perfection and incapable of achieving it" (Niebuhr, 1940). Niebuhr's quote captures the struggle that resides in men to harness self-efficacy while understanding they may fall short in their task.

The ability to master this realization of inadequacy is the crucible that allows the individual to experience what Bandura (2000) described as moments of self-mastery. In other words, rather than remaining at a point of inadequacy, athletes or followers in an organization reinforce their self-efficacy through multiple occurrences of mastery. "Mastery expectations influence performance and are, in turn, altered by the cumulative effect of one's efforts (Bandura, 1977a, p. 194). These moments of self-mastery buoy followers to a level of resilience, so when they approach the next task they have a point of reference that enables them to draw confidence and beliefs from prior experiences. According to Bandura (1977a), beliefs are better predictors of behaviors than consequences; the premise is that people will avoid situations when they know they will fail. Therefore, beliefs about efficacy cause individuals to strive toward goals, persist in goal-directed behavior, and experience ultimate success in achieving goals (A Bandura, 1986).

Self-efficacy research over the last three decades indicates both organizations and individuals benefit from a better understanding of the construct (A Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1986; Albert Bandura, 1997; A Bandura, 2000; Gist, 1987; Luthans & Peterson, 2002; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998).

The literature also suggests that self-efficacy is a better predictor of performance than job satisfaction, level of education, skill level, goal setting, and feedback interventions (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Studies indicate that overall performance increases when coupled with micro-interventions that help to develop self-efficacy through:

> opportunities to experience mastery/success, vicarious learning/modeling, social persuasion and positive feedback, and psychological and physiological arousal and well-being. (Youssef, Luthans, & Avolio, 2007, p. 43)

These interventions can also be implemented by coaches on the athletic field to help develop a player's self-efficacy (Albert Bandura, 1997; Richardson, 2002). For example, when coaches place players in a position to succeed in an athletic contest, they have an opportunity to build efficacy, while the players have the opportunity to experience positive affect from their coach's praise and empathy (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1998; P Chelladurai & Riemer, 1997; Diane L. Gill, Williams, Dowd, Beaudoin, & Martin, 1996; Kenow & Williams, 1999; Shields, Gardner, Bredemeier, & Bostro, 1997). It is important to remember the development of this capacity in players must be intentional by the coach to insure the gradual integration into their broader, more complex whole, with opportunities for practice and mastery at each step of the way (Youssef, et al., 2007).

Servant Leadership

While Greenleaf's seminal work on servant leadership occurred over four decades ago, the construct of servant leadership continues to receive inquiry. Greenleaf's (1977) initial work in relation to the construct of servant leadership produced a definition of servant leadership that is predicated on the care and value of the follower being placed above the leader's goals and ambitions through the adoption of a "servant first" ethos. Through the leader's aspiration to place the highest priority on serving others and developing a holistic approach to work, the adoption of spirit in the workplace emerges with precedence (Greenleaf, 1998). Patterson (2003) would explore and develop the theory further by identifying seven variables in relation to the leader's attitudes, values and behaviors, (a) Agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service. These variables enhanced the understanding of Servant leadership and served as a foundation for further threads of inquiry. In a sports context, Patterson's variable of Agapao love is demonstrated through the actions of the coaches who place the follower's well-being above their own while giving up the legitimate privileges accorded to them by their position as coach. Winston (2003) would extend Patterson's theory by postulating and identifying the impact that these seven variables would have upon a mature and socially aware follower. Through Winston's extension of Patterson's model, we begin to see the pivotal role a leader's espoused and enacted leadership style has upon followers and subsequent outcomes. For example, Winston's extended model revealed the interplay between a leader's behavior and a follower's self-efficacy, whereby the leader can and does impact the follower's perception of their ability to carry out and successfully complete goals. However, it did not stop there, the follower's adoption of the leader's enactment of service created a progression based upon the moderating variable of maturity that served as a catalyst for the follower to continue to grow and develop. In a sports context this happens repeatedly as a coach who engages in both positive psychological capacities and servant leadership attributes motivates a player to exceed performance expectations and increase overall organizational productivity or output on the field (Carthen, 2005; P. Chelladurai & Carron, 1983; Patterson, 2003; Winston, 2003).

Need for Empirical Research

While the leadership literature reveals the influence that leader behaviors have upon followers in an organizational context, the linkages between a leader's demonstration of the positive psychological capacities of hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy, as the conduits for the enactment of servant leadership is not clearly represented in the literature. For this reason, further inquiry is necessary to explore the possible conceptual linkages between positive psychological capacities and the enactment of servant leadership theory. Through these future methods of inquiry, leaders will have a better understanding of behaviors, and attitudes that effectively mediate optimal performance from their followers. Furthermore, these types of inquiries will seek to answer what Greenleaf posed so long ago to those that are making indelible impressions upon followers entrusted to them, "Do those served grow as person's? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (Greenleaf, 1977, p.13).

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