

A REVIEW OF LEADERSHIP IN SPORT: IMPLICATIONS FOR FOOTBALL MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper reviews research on leadership in sport and considers the implications of this work in relation to the complex task of effective football management. Trait, behavioral and interactional models of leadership are discussed and applied to football management. The importance of sport specific models and research is also highlighted. The need for improved training and support services for football managers is discussed, and a theoretical, composite view of an effective football manager is proposed. Since the psychological aspects of football management have received scant attention from researchers, future research that focuses on the psychological requirements and demands of football management is encouraged.

Introduction

In association football as in other high status sports, the position of manager represents a stressful and turbulent occupation where individuals are publicly held responsible for a team's performance. In 2008-2009, more than half of the 92 managers that started the English professional league season had been fired by the end of the season, thus reflecting the precarious nature of the position. The average length of tenure per managerial position during this period averaged at just 2 years , a feature seldom conducive to the successful management of a complex business. However, the goal of an effective and successful manager is arguably the ability to select, retain and develop the best people; this may ultimately be the key to longevity in the role.

The Roles of the Football Manager

The title of 'manager' in British association football is distinct from that of coach and is closer to that of the responsibilities held by a Head Coach or Athletic Director in the United States. The process of managing people whether in sport or business is a complex task and requires a sympathetic appreciation of the multi-dimensional roles required. Traditionally, a coach has a prescribed number of roles, which typically includes a planned, coordinated and integrated program of athlete preparation. In contrast, the modern football manager must acknowledge the importance of his role from a business or financial perspective.

There are at least three reasons why this paper is necessary: First, because appointing the right manager is vital for the future success of professional sports teams. The research evidence strongly supports the notion that there is a direct link between coach / leader behavior and athletes' performances and behaviors. From an applied

perspective, those individuals who are responsible for appointing managers would be well advised to consider the extant literature, theories and research concerning leadership which is the focus of this review. The degree to which a manager offers 'human capital' to a club (the level of previous success and experience) may be crucial in determining which managers are appointed by clubs to new positions, but this might not always be the best selection procedure if managers have a dominant style that is incongruent with players' preferences and situational factors. It appears that effective management behavior necessarily varies across specific contexts as the characteristics of the players and the environment change.

Second, those individuals who are already, or who are aspiring to be in managerial positions within football may be encouraged, via psychological support, to reflect on their own characteristics, behaviors and interactions with other club staff, and where necessary seek to change in order to enable greater productivity. Many professional football managers have emanated to their positions following playing careers. While this undoubtedly provides an applied understanding of how professional football clubs operate, some potential limitations exist such as relying on past traditions and ways of doing things, rather than amalgamating these experiences with updated research knowledge and scientific principles.

Third, from a research perspective, this review aims to encourage the testing and development of theory in the specific domain of the football manager, which has hitherto received scant attention. Given that leading researchers such as Chelladurai have stressed the importance of specific, rather than general theories of leadership, and that association football maintains a high profile in many cultures, it would seem that investigations involving professional football managers are somewhat overdue.

Early Leadership Research

The early research into leadership effectiveness was conducted outside of sports settings (usually business, military or education) and tended to use one of two approaches). The trait approach assumed effective leadership was founded on innate personality dispositions rather than a function of learning and explicitly supposed that great leaders were born and not made. In contrast, the behavioral approach posited effective leadership to be a function of a leader's dominant behaviors. The assumption was that an individual could learn to be an effective leader by adopting behaviors that other successful leaders used (i.e. leaders were made and not born).

Both the trait and behavioral approaches to studying leadership rested upon the premise that a set of universal traits or behaviors could be identified that would reliably discriminate between successful and unsuccessful leaders. Eventually such research began to permeate sports. Two of the main problems with the trait approach to studying leadership is that traits are not necessarily easy to measure, and that over time, an almost

limitless list of positive adjectives have been forwarded as important leadership traits. However, Stogdill summarized the contribution of trait approaches to the study of leadership by listing those traits and skills that have been found more frequently in related research. These traits and skills are not specific to sport and should not be considered as essential pre-requisites, but rather as potentially useful leadership characteristics. It is important to note that the absence of such traits does not necessarily preclude an individual from being a successful leader.

Interactional Approaches to Leadership

The failure of both the trait and behavioral approaches ushered the emergence of various situational based leadership theories such as Fiedler's contingency model. Such theories stressed the importance of interactions between the leader, group members and the situation. On this basis, the particular traits and behaviors of an effective leader are believed to vary in accordance with environmental (situational factors). Fiedler argued that task-oriented leaders (those whose primary focus is on achieving goals, and performance related variables) are likely to be most effective in either very favorable or very unfavorable situations. In this case, a task-oriented football manager who would prioritize performance goals over developing positive interpersonal relations is likely to be a more effective leader than a relationship oriented manager, in the context of a team fighting to avoid relegation.

Contemporary Research: A Multidimensional Model of Leadership

While research and theories from non-sports settings provided useful frameworks for understanding leadership (Horn), specific approaches that reflected the unique demands of sports settings were required. In response, Chelladurai developed the multidimensional model of leadership to provide a conceptual framework that allowed leadership effectiveness to be studied in the sports domain. Chelladurai proposed that effective leadership is dynamic and is based on a complex series of interactions between leader, group members and situational constraints. The model suggests that positive outcomes (performance and satisfaction) will occur when there is congruence between the leaders actual behavior (i.e. either organizing practices or providing positive feedback), the group members preferred leadership behavior (i.e. preference for a highly organized, supportive leader) and the behavior that is required in relation to the situation. In addition, behavior does not occur in a vacuum, and antecedent factors such as leader and member characteristics will influence both the actual behavior of the leader and group preferences for leadership behaviors. The challenge for football managers is to show flexibility in adapting their dominant leadership style to suit specific leadership situations, and with large squads of highly paid players, to keep everyone satisfied.

Hardiness and Mental Toughness

In light of the high levels of stress that are associated with football management, it is interesting that a number of the traits listed by Stogdill (1974) (see table 2) appear to be associated with the concepts of hardiness and mental toughness (i.e. achievement oriented, persistence, self-confidence, stress tolerance etc.). For example, the work of existential psychologists (Kobasa, Kobasa, Maddi, & Khan) led to greater understanding of the stress-illness relationship, and the cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to function efficiently and tolerate highly stressful situations without becoming ill. Kobasa found that executives who were exposed to highly stressful environments but remained healthy (as opposed to those who became ill) were characterized by a set of distinct cognitive attributes which has been described as the hardy personality. The three dimensions of hardiness as highlighted by Kobasa reflect: Commitment (as opposed to alienation which reflects an individual's ability to feel deeply involved or committed to the activities in their lives); Control (as opposed to powerlessness involves decisional control, or the ability to autonomously choose between various coping strategies in order to deal with stress; and cognitive control, the ability to appraise stressful events as being part of an on going life plan, thus deactivating their jarring effects); and *Challenge* (as opposed to security is the anticipation of change rather than stability as the norm, and the interpretation of change as a challenge or chance to grow, rather than as a threat). These three dimensions appear to act as a buffer to stress.

The Coach-Athlete Relationship

Although no scientific studies have examined the relationship between association football managers and players, recent research has developed a clearer understanding of important features of successful coach-athlete relationships. Jowett and colleagues have explored the reciprocal nature of such relationships, giving particular emphasis to affective, behavioral and cognitive factors. This research has focused on how coaches and athletes influence each other and the interdependency that is evident. Initially, Jowett and others highlighted the importance of the three C's of closeness, commitment and complementarity to coach-athlete relations.

Future Research Directions

Riemer and Chelladurai referred to the 'considerable gap' that existed between the importance attached to leadership in sport and the efforts of researchers to understand it. While this article has strived to evaluate what makes an effective football manager by drawing upon research related to leadership and coaching perspectives, this contribution alone is not sufficient in terms of expanding the knowledge domain. While conducting research that uses professional sports managers as participants is likely to be difficult (given the demands of professional sport), it is necessary to further understand effective

football management. It is evident that few studies have attempted to test theory or to evaluate models with specific regard to association football, and more specifically in football management. The lack of research evidence in regard to football management means there is scope for researchers to address any number of potentially important areas.

In football, the ability of the manager and other members of the coaching staff, to cultivate a shared mental model amongst players will likely be an important factor in influencing team coordination and performance. A more formal attempt to investigate the effectiveness of such a leadership approach is clearly necessary in order to evaluate its utility in football settings. Certainly, effective football managers are likely to value the unique abilities of their team members and learn how to integrate them into a coordinated and efficient scheme. In effect, the organization can become less dependent on one single person, the manager, and leadership becomes plural as important players can 'think' for the manager on the field of play. The manager may have the official authority, at least in the eyes of the media, but his effectiveness is a function of the cumulative effect of all those participating within the organization. This approach also appears to be similar to recent developments in business management research and ideas concerning dispersed leadership.

Conclusion

From trait approaches, there seems to be evidence of certain traits and skills that are not so much pre-requisites for success, but rather potentially useful characteristics. These appear to include traits such as adaptability, self-confidence, and persistence; as well as skills such as intelligence, creativity and knowledge of the group. Although forwarding mental toughness and courage as two important components might be regarded as premature given limited research attention, it is likely that the ability to tolerate stress, rebound from adversity and to seek out new practices rather than remaining 'rooted in the past' will be important factors. From the behavioral perspective, it is evident that consideration (including communication and building rapport) and initiating structure (processes, and goals) are important parts of what leaders do. Sports specific research suggests that providing clear instructions and contingent positive reinforcement are also key behaviors.

From the interactional approaches, the importance of flexibility is clearly enforced: a football manager cannot expect to rely solely on one dominant style of leadership, but must be adaptable enough, and perceptive enough, to vary his leadership approach based upon situational and group variables. It is important for the manager to be aware of the interaction preferences of his/her players in order to provide satisfactory experiences and optimize player performance. Despite a focus upon theory and research, it is clear that variables outside of the managers direct control such as finance, injury, and refereeing

decisions will inevitably impact upon the degree of success an individual experiences. Also, it is recognized that there will be some football managers (by way of traits, behaviors or interactions) who do not conform to the proposed composite view but who are effective. There will be instances where the unique skills and / or knowledge of a manager, will allow him to function in ways that appear contrary to research evidence, but still be successful. The view that is present in this paper is a theoretical one.

The utilization of sports science techniques and practices within professional football is evidently growing in recognition. The majority of professional clubs and national associations now employ sports scientists in their quest to gain a 'competitive edge'. Indeed, the FA has created a 'Psychology Football Strategy' to increase awareness within professional clubs. However this development evidently fails to address the psychological needs of the manager.

New innovative and reflective manager training courses are clearly required to allow individuals to manage their responsibilities as effectively as possible and facilitate critical interventions.

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