
Original Paper

Sport Leadership: Students' Reflections on their Learning

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Abstract

Successful leaders in sport management must continuously reflect on what they are learning through experiences and applications throughout their careers. Completion of a sport leadership course helps students develop their abilities to reflect more deeply on their values, styles, and actions while making real-world applications. This course incorporates a variety of readings, written assignments, and practical learning activities culminating in a final presentation. Students focus on identifying the vital elements of their leadership philosophy, significant leadership principles and personal applications learned, and anticipated actions they will complete to become more effective leaders.

Keywords: reflections on learning, leadership studies, applications

1. Introduction

Books and definitions of leadership abound because leadership is essential to success in business, government, non-profit agencies, and other aspects of society, including the sports industry. Day (2001) described *leadership development* as relational with commitments, mutual respect, and trust; social awareness with empathy, service orientation, and political awareness; social skills with building bonds, team orientation, change catalyst, and conflict management. That is, leadership development contributed to building and nurturing relationships with followers. Day (2001) also stated that *leader development* emphasized individual personal power, knowledge, and trustworthiness; intrapersonal competence associated with self-awareness, emotional awareness, self-confidence, accurate self-image; self-regulation, self-control, trustworthiness, personal responsibility, and adaptability; self-motivation with initiative, commitment, and optimism. Leadership development and leader development offered by internal and external entities cost companies millions as they seek to ensure their profitability and sustainability. Since many of these characteristics, skills, and abilities can be learned and expanded, one way to achieve greater leadership and leader development has been through reflection (Roberts, 2008).

Johnson (2020) identified knowing oneself, knowing others, and constructive engagements as the key components of reflection as they contribute to leadership development and leader development. She stated, "Reflection serves as an integrator and enables synthesis. Through reflection, we can weave together ideas, make connections among disparate information, discover interrelationships, and assess interdependencies" (p. 23). Knowing oneself and knowing others align closely with Goleman's (1995) conceptualization of emotional intelligence of managing ourselves and our relationships effectively. Johnson (2020) argued that key to facilitating self-awareness is self-reflection, with Goleman (1995) adding the word emotional to self-awareness. Both emphasize the importance of empathy built through reflecting on others' perspectives, motivations, and actions and managing their relationships with them as well as strengthening the interconnectedness with and openness toward engagement with those led.

Business schools in public and private colleges and universities and commercial entities have provided thriving educational programs for students of all ages. Private organizations, such as the Center for Creative Leadership with its myriad programs for leaders, and major corporations like GE with its problem-solving Work-Out process (Ulrich et al., 2002) emphasized lifelong learning and reflection on learning for leadership development and leader development.

Leadership matters because it has become a difference-maker in family life, societal advancement, and even the existence of nations. Leaders solve problems and make decisions, many that are complex and at times ambiguous. Johnson (2020) posited. “Self-reflection also helps leaders assess their own problem-solving and decision-making abilities” (p. 25). Not surprisingly, leadership has increased its essentiality at every level in the multi-billion-dollar sports industry. This practical work describes how the professor in one sport leadership course used a self-reflection paper and associated presentation for students to analyze and apply their learning as they completed a graduate degree in sport management.

2. Course Description

SPMT 5320 Sport Leadership is one of eight required courses in a 30-credit hour Master of Science in Sport Management degree offered at a R1 Carnegie Classification institution. Students in this program learned the knowledge, skills, and abilities that would help them become more successful as they advanced in their careers. Content taught in this course included leadership theories, leadership styles, characteristics of leaders, leadership wisdom, emotional intelligence, communication, motivational theories, organizational culture, leading people, and leading change. Among these topics, based on the interests expressed by students, an emphasis was placed on leadership styles including servant leadership and ethical leadership, including learning how to match leadership style to various situations. Students learned leader development and leadership abilities through reading and analyzing case studies and peer-reviewed articles about leadership and engaging in extensive learning activities, such as debates, a variety of small group discussions with rotating pairing of classmates, and individual in-class reflective writing about what they were learning. Students also completed graded assignments of an oral presentation about a leader of their choice working in the sport industry, a group case study analysis, an analytical profile paper about a sport leader, an analytical paper about a failed leader, and their choice of a book report or a research paper on a topic related to sport leadership.

As one of the final course requirements in this face-to-face course, students completed a Leadership Reflection Paper. Components of this paper included reflecting on their attitudes, beliefs, and values about leadership and developing a leadership philosophy. Students were asked to reflect on over a dozen peer-reviewed articles about leadership and analyze the most vital information learned. They also were encouraged to extra lessons learned about themselves and from classmates through discussions. They were challenged to make personal applications of information and lessons learned about leadership in this course. Based upon what students wrote in their Leadership Reflection Paper, the final course assessment was a final oral presentation made in 5x5 (i.e., maximum of five slides in 5 minutes) format as described below:

- Slide 1 — Title slide listing their name and career aspiration.
- Slide 2 — Five or six components of their leadership philosophy.
- Slide 3 — Six or more important leadership concepts or key information they learned through the course.
- Slide 4 — Three or more personal applications to themselves about what they learned about leadership.
- Slide 5 — Two or more specific actions they planned initiate and complete within the next one to three years to help them become a better leader.

The course organization along with its assessments directly informed the learning of the twenty-two students enrolled in this course. With Institutional Review Board approval, the author sought to analyze more fully students’ learning by answering four research questions. First, what were the key components of their leadership philosophy? Second, what were the major concepts or key information learned about leadership from the assigned readings, class presentations, case analyses, other written assignments, and class discussions and debates? Third, what were the key personal applications they made of their learning about leadership? Fourth, what actions would they personally commit to complete in the next one to three years to become a more effective leader?

3. Results

Students' Career Aspirations

With students mostly in their twenties, their career aspirations varied widely from whatever makes them happy in life to helping underprivileged athletes. Within intercollegiate athletics, students stated they wanted to work in college coaching, sport or business operations, student-athlete development, football recruiting, and sport marketing or become an athletic director. In professional sports, they aspired to have careers in community relations, facilities management in motor sports, a team's front office, tournament management in one of the professional golf tours, marketing, player personnel in the National Football League, scouting and analytics, or as a general manager, head golf professional, sports agent, or director of corporate partnerships. Three students wanted to become an ESPN football fantasy lead analyst or owner/operator of a sport management independent consulting firm, or work in national or international soccer. It is noteworthy that throughout the class, students were asked to make practical applications when responding to questions, and often their responses related to their career interests. That is, they were making connections between content like leadership styles or importance of building relationships with others as it related to their hoped-for positions in the sports industry. It was easy to see how students realized the relevancy of what they were learning and applying.

Students' Choices of the Key Components of their Leadership Philosophy

Twelve students listed integrity as the most important characteristic or quality of a leader. Integrity, as emphasized by the professor, was stated as foundational to leadership with the leader fulfilling their moral obligation to self and others while doing the right thing, even when no one was watching. The next highest number of students, eight, listed caring for, serving, and empowering others. Seven students identified respect and servant or serving as inclusive components of their leadership philosophy. Six students included trust, which George and Sims (2007) emphasized, "To bring out the best in people, leaders must develop trusting relationships based on mutual respect" (p. 174). Trust is integrally connected with the other key components of integrity, serving others, and respect in a leadership philosophy. It also helped nurture relationships that five students chose to affirm important actions of leaders as Sharma (2003) stressed. Four students each added adaptability, communication, empowering, learning, loyalty, and vision, while three students stated accountability, family, and honesty as parts of their leadership philosophy.

The most poignant point about leadership philosophy appeared to be students' understanding about how essential it was for them to take the time to thoughtfully articulate what they believed in and the behavioral standards to which they held themselves. Students grasped the essentiality of becoming a values-based leader, even in the business of sports.

Two students, immediately following completion of their leadership reflection paper, which included their leadership philosophy, participated in job interviews. They proudly shared with the class how well-prepared they felt during their interviews to answer questions about the importance of developing and living by their leadership philosophy. Classmates appeared to agree that the required reflection in developing a personal leadership philosophy, even one that would evolve with them throughout their careers, was vitally important to their future success.

Students' Reflections on their Major Learning Concepts about Leadership

Emotional intelligence was the most frequently mentioned leadership concept for fourteen students, or two-thirds of the students. Students repeatedly commented during class discussions about how important it was for them to develop skills and capabilities to manage their own emotions while being socially aware as they worked to manage their relationships with others. Even though Goleman (1998) identified emotional intelligence as essential to career advancement, for some students this was still a new concept. Similarly, the emphasis on learning through reflection that included an emphasis on self-awareness and relationships with others seemed to surprise and challenge them.

Eleven students identified communication as an essential concept learned in agreement with these two points of emphasis from leadership literature: "Communication is one of the most powerful tools a leader can possess" and "the ability to communicate effectively was the most essential skill a leader

could possess” (The Ken Blanchard Companies, 2018, p. 2). Servant leadership or serving others was listed by seven students who said they valued leading through serving others. As Greenleaf (1977) stated, “The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (pp. 13-14).

Several students on the first night of class wrote they wanted to learn about leadership styles with five mentioning this in general as key to what they learned in the course. Five students specified either ethical or values-based leadership and decision-making and or transformational leadership; three others listed situational leadership. The interconnectedness among emotional intelligence with effective communication and use of a variety of leadership styles provided evidence of the strength of students’ reflections on what they learned. Four students indicated vision, motivation, and relationships as key concepts about leadership. Adaptability, culture, empowerment, executive or leadership wisdom, growth mindset, power, and self-awareness each resonate with three students. Comments by students and their active engagement in weekly class discussions of content including examining the characteristics of leaders, leadership wisdom, and organizational culture, along with discussion about peer-reviewed articles on every topic, provided additional evidence of students’ learning. One anonymous and quoted comment from the students’ end-of-course evaluations described the impact of learning about leadership on them:

This course has stretched me in ways I never could have imagined. Along the way, I discovered new insights about myself and reaffirmed the kind of leader I aspire to be and am still becoming. I’m truly better for having taken this journey.

Students’ Personal Applications of Leadership Learning

Students in this sport leadership course consistently emphasized the importance of making practical applications, so they identified and explained three personal applications of what they had learned. Six students wanted to practice servant leadership by seeking what was best for others, not themselves (Hall, 2009). Practicing listening more actively was cited as especially important to six students, as endorsed by the Center for Creative Leadership (2024). Five students sought to develop their adaptability skills with the understanding that as they began their careers they needed to learn from on-the-job training and varied experiences. This aligned with the importance of emotional intelligence five students identified as an area of practical leadership learning. That is, they wanted to practice personal competence by managing their own emotions and social competence in managing relationships (Goleman, 1995). Four students each mentioned integrity, leadership style, self-awareness, and communication as values and skills they sought to apply as young professionals. Relationships or connections and empowerment were areas to focus on for three students each. What seems noteworthy about each of these areas of developing practical skills and abilities was the emphasis on others. Students’ grasp of the importance of relationships was a noteworthy outcome of the course from the perspective of the professor/author, in alignment with what Heifetz and Linsky (2002) emphasized,

One of the distinguishing qualities of successful people who lead in any field is the emphasis they place on personal relationships....in everyday personal and professional life, the nature and quality of the connections human beings have with each other is more important than almost any other factor in determining results. (p. 75)

Students’ Commitment to Take these Actions in the next One to Three Years to Become a Better Leader

Building on their commitment to learning to make personal applications, eight students commented they would seek mentors and engage in mentorship as they prioritized their leadership-related actions within the next one to three years. In addition to reading leadership books that four students stated they planned do, one or two students each listed participating in leadership training, seeking out additional leadership training such as conferences, seminars, or other professional experiences, keeping a leadership journal, or seeking a leadership role. Four students are committed to improving their communication skills and public speaking abilities. Three students wanted to become better listeners, three committed to developing their emotional intelligence, and three desired to grow or strengthen

their network. Students' planned actions reflected congruency with what they stated about values in their leadership philosophies, were the key concepts they learned, and were determined to practically apply and prioritize immediately. No student "push back" on this request to make an actionable commitment, hopefully, because they accepted the maxim that being an effective leader necessitates being a lifelong learner.

4. Conclusion

Anecdotal feedback and course ratings from students in this course confirmed they appreciated and valued studying leadership principles and styles and making real-world applications of what they were learning. Related to the first research question, students personalized the importance of integrity for leaders, what they believed in and what would shape their leadership philosophy and actions. They also emphasized other values, such as caring about and serving others, and trust, they believed would be the foundation upon which they would build their careers. As they reflected on their learning as the second point of reflection, emotional intelligence resonated with students as they sought to make it an essential and key component in helping them become more effective leaders. They also wanted to be adaptable. Students developed a kinship to servant leadership in combination with active listening stating they planned to build and nurture relationships with others and put others' well-being foremost. Students embraced the necessity of leadership learning as an ongoing process as they listed specific actions, such as seeking mentors, reading leadership books, and engaging in professional development and growth opportunities, as their planned actions.

In conclusion, I would like to share a few other comments from students' end-of-course evaluations. Related to making practical applications, students wrote in the category of "most effective learning aspect of course,"

- "How she made every lesson attach to real life;"
- "Understanding different styles and how to use them in the real world;"
- "The real-life examples and application, they helped me relate the concepts to life;" and
- "The real-life applications that we always talk about."

One additional comment sums up achievement of the overall student learning outcome for SPMT 5320 Sport Leadership, "Overall this class made me realize how to be a leader and how to lead properly. I look forward to utilizing these methods."

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