

Effective Leadership in Athletics on Strategy

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White Paper

### **Abstract**

Leadership has been one of the most common topics of research with little consensus about what constitutes great leadership. This is in part because leadership is personal; it varies depending on the leader, the followers and the environment (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Another challenge is determining what constitutes success. Success is hard to measure without a set of objectives to measure against, and these objectives change on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, leadership has also been studied in the realm of one particular style, when in reality, leadership takes many forms. Leaders change their approach in response to a situation, goals and individual follower which makes it challenging to determine what is effective. This paper seeks to clarify the various theories of leadership and strategy to help sport managers, athletic directors and coaches gain an understanding of effective leadership styles depending on their situation.

**Key words:**

Environment, Organizational Culture, Organization, Management

Part of a leader's job is to create a vision for the organization and set the objectives to achieve that vision (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). A strong leader should be able to motivate employees to adopt the vision for growth and work hard to achieve it. There are, however, numerous factors that can affect the success of the organization and its leader. Successful leaders have the necessary skills to tread the treacherous waters of the organization, align all the stakeholders toward a common goal and elevate the organization to achieve a higher purpose (Gould, et. al, 2013).

The development of the strategy needs to take into account the unique characteristics of the organization; the environment, the size, demographics, staff abilities and structure (Slack & Parent, 2006). A careful analysis needs to be performed to fully understand the current position of the organization. Once this has been determined, the leader can then decide what direction to take the organization and what benchmarks will be set for success. This encompasses the strategic vision of the organization and the steps that are required to attain the objective.

### **Leadership Theories**

Several theories have been developed that try to analyze the influence leadership has on the performance of an organization. Among them is the trait theory, that stipulates that leaders are born, not made (Slack & Parent, 2006). This theory seeks to determine what traits an individual possesses that would make them a leader. The traits analyzed include physical, intellectual and personality. This theory has not been shown to be effective in determining the qualities of a successful leader (Weese, 1994).

Behavior theorists have looked to identify the behaviors that a leader displays (Slack & Parent, 2006). The two common dimensions of the behavioral dimension are task or

organizational orientation and relationship orientation. A leader's behavior falls either toward overseeing and managing the organizational tasks, or seeks to build relationships with the staff members under their supervision. The initial work that was performed on this theory dealt with athletic directors at the Division I level and the results showed that those leaders who were more task oriented in their leadership led more successful institutions. However, this theoretical framework, while addressing leadership behavior, fails to consider other variables, such as the environment, organizational structure or attitudes of the followers.

Other models break leadership down into separate styles in an effort to explain the interaction of the leader with the followers (Pedersen, et. al, 2007). These leadership styles are autocratic, participative, laissez-faire and consultive. The styles are based on the Behavioralist approach to leadership and form a grid of high task orientation, low task orientation, high relationship orientation and low relationship orientation. The leaders who exhibit these particular styles strike a balance best suited to them in their interactions with staff members. Behavioral theorists suggest that leaders may also change styles depending on the situation and the variables they are dealing with. There are four variables that affect the style the leader will choose to adopt in a given situation; time, information, acceptance and capability.

The path goal theory of leadership attempts to link leadership behavior to the satisfaction of the followers (Slack & Parent, 2006). In this theory, the leader would change their interactions with the followers depending on the situation. By adapting to their environment, leaders would be better positioned to influence their followers, improve their satisfaction with work, and increase the effectiveness of the organization.

In an attempt to address the variables inherent with the leadership process, Chelladurai developed a multidimensional model of leadership (pp. 325). The model involves required, preferred and actual behavior to the circumstance. The particular situation determines the required behavior of the leader; the followers have a preferred type of behavior for their leader to display and the actual leader behavior is the outcome. The outcome of this leadership interaction is measured in the performance of the followers.

Effective leaders have qualities that empower subordinates in the achievement process (Soucie, 1994). Transformational leaders positively influence their followers by instilling a desire to achieve a goal that is higher than their personal selves. These leaders meld their task and relationship behaviors as the situation demands in a concerted effort to motivate their staff. Leaders that are able to adequately understand the forces that motivate their employees, and set lofty visions of success are more able to get staff buy in and experience success.

Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is typified by a relationship between the leader and follower that involves a transaction (Slack & Parent, 2006). This approach has the leader rewarding the follower for some type of behavior, or task, that the leader approves of. This style of leadership does not create an empowering relationship between the leader and follower and fails to inspire the follower to a greater purpose. This type of transactional approach does have its place in leadership, however. It can be effective when tasks are routine and activities need to be done quickly. It can also be used for those followers who seek to enhance their career through greater prestige or financial gain.

A servant approach to leadership has also been proposed that hinges on the needs of the followers and emphasizes the ideal of service in the relationship between the leader and follower

(Burton & Peachey, 2013). The servant approach is theorized to provide a supportive organizational climate that leads to safe and strong relationships within the organization. The potential effects of this form of leadership are increased motivation, higher mental acuity, and followers that are more satisfied with their leader and perform better than those led by a non-servant leader.

### **Leadership and Strategy**

In order to achieve the organization's strategy, leaders have to fulfill key tasks within the organization. Those tasks include developing a shared vision of all the stakeholders, mobilizing a commitment for the vision, enabling change to occur within individuals and subunits, institutionalizing that change through the formalization of policies, procedures and rules, and monitoring the implementation of the strategic plan and making any adjustments along the way (Amis, et. al, 2004). These authors identified these tasks as being essential to the development and achievement of the organizational vision and the subsequent change that it requires.

Other authors have identified separate, but related roles that a leader must fulfill. Appelbaum and Pease suggest that leaders must possess nine roles in their pursuit of a strategy: navigator, strategist, entrepreneur, mobilizer, talent advocate, captivator, global thinker, change driver and enterprise guardian (ND). They conclude that leaders do not need to perform all these roles simultaneously, but that they need to understand the objectives of each and use them as the situation demands. In other words, leadership's effect on strategy boils down to a set of behaviors that create a vision and then create the change necessary to achieve that vision (Azhar, et. al, ND).

In the creation of the strategy and the direction of the organization, leaders are tasked with the prospect of aligning the organization with the external environment (Chellaudrai, 2009). Leaders must evaluate the organization, the environment and take notice of the resources that are available. Once the evaluation has taken place, the leader can then develop the specific vision for the organization, identify the purpose and direction of the proposed growth and articulate the context for the success of the organization (Azhar, et. al, ND). Leaders then communicate the organization's vision to the respective followers (Pedersen, et. al, 2007). Leaders are, in effect, the bridge between the strategic management process and the organizational vision (Azhar, et. al, ND).

The ability to communicate with the followers is a key determinate of success (de Vries, et. al, 2010). Leaders need to possess the ability to be precise in their interactions with followers and ensure that they are being understood. Leaders also evaluate how their followers are behaving in response to their conversations to ensure that the appropriate changes are occurring. Being supportive of their followers is seen as the most critical communication style. Ensuring that followers have the resources they need to be successful is an important factor in leadership support (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

While crafting a vision and supporting strategy seems obvious, the achievement is anything but a guarantee. Researchers estimate that 4 in 10 senior leaders fail to achieve their vision and change the organization they are tasked with leading within 18 months (Appelbaum & Pease, ND). This may be attributed to the fact that the leader is not effective in identifying the proper avenues for growth (Chelladurai, 2009). Trying to mobilize the organization in the wrong direction will not effectively reach identified goals.

Another potential problem is the alignment of the leader's style with the desires of the employees. If the leader is task oriented, employees may perceive his actions and decisions to be domineering (Chelladurai, 2009). Conversely, if the leader is employee oriented, employees may feel that the leader is attempting to manipulate them. Part of the solution is to align the behavior of the leader with the needs of the follower. Followers that demonstrate a high need for affiliation prefer their leader to be supportive, while those that need achievement require an achievement oriented leader. Indeed, the follower is the most important variable of appropriate leader behavior (Graeff, 1983).

### **Transformational Leadership and Strategy**

One of the ways that leaders have tried to align their interaction with their employees or athletes is by engaging with them individually and adopting a transformational style (Weese, 1994). Followers want to follow someone who inspires them to achieve a higher purpose and challenges them accordingly. Leaders can achieve this by paying attention to their follower's individual development, stimulating them to improve the organization, and engaging with them to improve their relationship. This serves to inspire followers, making them feel valued, appreciated and critical to the achievement of the organizational strategy. This type of individualized consideration has been shown to increase follower satisfaction, not only with the leader, but the organization as a whole (Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996).

A strong, transformational leader is a key component of change (Amis, et. al, 2004). When Canadian National Sport Organizations were forced to change their strategy some succeeded and others did not. Some of the factors that affected success, aside from the emergence of a transformational leader, were the interest of sub units, distribution of power and

capacity for change. Subunits that were afraid of a loss of power were resistant to the necessary changes and required the leader to try and accommodate the different interests within the organization. The ability of the leader to connect with the group and get them to understand the need for change and accept their role in the success of the organization was instrumental in the ability of the organization to adapt and achieve their strategic goals (Ireland & Hill, 2005).

In addition to possessing a transformational style of leadership, leaders of fitness and sport organizations are also expected to have functional skills and knowledge of the specific sport they are working with (Swanson & Kent, 2014). Leaders that lack the required knowledge are not as effective in achieving organizational success, possibly due to the staff not placing their trust in the leader. When leaders possess similar backgrounds to their staff they are perceived to understand their needs and will be more successful in their strategic implementation. Followers of these organizations need their leaders to understand the environment in which they work in order to make effective strategic decisions.

### **Leadership and Strategy in Coaching**

Aligning the leadership behavior with the requirements of athletes helps to achieve the team strategy. Athletes that have more experience with athletics prefer an authoritarian coach (Chelladurai, 1984). It is also observed that athletes have a greater preference for social support with increasing experience. During the course of his research Chelladurai noticed that an athlete's satisfaction increased as the coach emphasized training and instruction, leading to the conclusion that athletics are closed tasked and would, therefore, respond to an authoritarian, directive leadership style.

This is not the case globally, however. Individual sports do not respond to supportive coaching and instruction, since their scores already reflect their achievement (Chelladurai, 1984). Individual sports prefer a more democratic approach to leadership that allows shared communication about the strategies needed to succeed. An athlete's preference for autocratic behavior was preferred when that leadership style equaled their preference. This presents quite the dilemma for a coach; any deviation on the perception of autocratic behavior led to dissatisfaction among the athletes. It is not an easy task for a coach to walk the line of being task oriented versus relationship oriented, thus a coach may reserve that style for those situations when there is a very clear way of performing the task or objective.

One such situation occurs on the football field (Riemer & Chelladurai, 1995). Riemer and Chelladurai realized that the offensive side of the football is very similar to a closed task environment and that those athletes preferred an autocratic leadership style. Meanwhile, the members of the defensive squad were more of an open task environment and preferred a democratic leadership style with social support. Since the offense executes set plays, they are required to rehearse those plays continually to increase effectiveness, so a task oriented leader is very effective at relaying information and explaining the requirements to the group. The defense, on the other hand, has to respond to what the offense does. In order to do this effectively, they need to communicate what they are seeing and respond to changes in their environment. Therefore, effective football coaches will change their leadership style depending on the situation.

Sports based on closed tasks will likely benefit from a directive style, while those that are open will utilize a democratic approach (Riemer & Chelladurai, 1995). Coaches may also choose a transformational style starting with communicating a clear vision that stimulates the athletes to

succeed, then providing technical instruction and feedback and listening to the athletes and caring about them as individuals (Stenling & Tafvelin, 2014). Coaches that provide a positive role model and uphold strong ethics also increase athlete dedication to the team. Coaches that were perceived as being higher in training and instruction, democratic behavior and social support and low in autocratic behavior demonstrated stronger team cohesiveness (Gardner, et. al, 1996).

### **Leadership and Strategy for Athletic Directors**

Athletic directors that apply a transformational leadership style with their coaching staffs and institution have more satisfied coaches (Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996). However, in their research of organizational effectiveness, athletic directors that were more task oriented were more effective (Branch, 1990). If coaches are satisfied with a certain style, but the institution is effective with another, then the solution may be to compromise: combine a task oriented leadership style with nurturing relationships of coaches and followers.

The trait of the transformation leadership style that is the most effective with coaches is individual consideration, or the ability of the athletic director to communicate one on one with followers to learn about them, their goals and visions and develop a supportive atmosphere for those coaches to achieve those goals (Doherty, 1997). Instead of an athletic director adopting one leadership style in a vacuum, they should instead get to know their staff, and develop relationships to support them while still creating systems and policies that accomplish institutional goals.

### **Leadership and Strategy for Professionals**

Leading a group of professionals involves a leadership style that emphasizes autonomy (Raelin, 1989). This leader has to discuss the organizational strategy with the professional followers and allow them to define their own roles and goals within the confines of this strategy. Professionals require the ability to dictate their own strengths and choose tasks that are intellectually stimulating and lead to organizational growth. When these tasks veer off track, fall behind schedule, or move in a direction that is not supportive of the strategy, the leader needs to be able to intervene and either correct the course, or stop the project.

Leading professionals demands a different style depending on the organizational situation (Faraci, et. al, 2013). When faced with a new task, or when working with a new team, utilizing a directive, task oriented style is more effective at achieving the objective. When the tasks are well known by the staff it is useful to employ a delegative strategy that transfers leadership to those directly overseeing the task. This allows the professionals working on the task to develop commitment toward the objective and the leader will have period meetings to discuss progression and steps to take in the event that tasks are not progressing as planned.

### **Leadership and Culture**

Leaders can achieve success by creating a culture that supports the achievement of the strategy (Wallace, & Weese, 1995). If the culture is such that it is inhibiting a change in strategy, then the strategy has to make a change. Organizations that have effective leaders are able to develop a strong organizational culture that is in line with their strategy. Transformational leaders set a clear image of what they want to achieve and outline the steps required to attain it. They then go about coordinating teamwork within the different sub groups to achieve the results. Researchers propose that leaders who possess transformational leadership are adept at

understanding these relationships, while other leaders are not. Those leaders who display laissez-faire leadership styles actually negatively impact the performance of the organization and the satisfaction of the employees.

Leaders may have a direct, or indirect, impact on the organization that they are leading (Weese, 1996). Those that work for larger organizations, or are separated by a large geographical area may have difficulty directly impacting the followers of the organization. They can still have a profound effect on the culture, however, by instituting policies that instill the values of the leader and the organization at large. Policies and procedures directly affect decisions and create a sense of consistency within the organization. They may also exert their influence by training members of the sub groups, who then in turn set the example and train and influence others in those areas.

Setting the standards for success and the stepping stones for the achievement of the overall strategic goal allows leaders to maintain contact with the various groups across the organization (Slack & Parent, 2006). Since leaders are in charge of the direction of the organization, they have a direct impact on the types of goals that are being set, the way that staff are rewarded for their achievements and the type of individuals that are hired to work within the organization. By hiring and training those who fit the mold the leader wishes to establish in the pursuit of the strategy, the organizational culture begins to change.

Some researchers suggest that leaders, and their style, are one of the most influential factors on the establishment and development of team culture (Martens, 2012). Others believe that the role of the leader has been overemphasized (Slack & Parent, 2006). It is clear that the leader has the ability to influence others and set the direction for the organization through the

development of the goals and strategy identified to achieve those goals. The leader's success in creating a culture that can support those objectives will in large part determine their effectiveness.

### **Leadership Change**

When leaders leave an organization there is a period of adjustment. The initial response of an organization often negatively affects performance (Soebbing & Washington, 2011). The new leader is tasked with either attempting to implement the strategy set by his or her predecessor, or to implement a new one. This change in leadership is hard on the employees to adapt to and requires patience as the new leader gets used to the organization, the skills of the staff, the environment and can have enough time to positively affect production. The process that the leader goes through to affect a change in the strategy involves four stages: intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing.

The new leader has to recognize possibilities for the organization, explain these possibilities to the staff, develop an action plan among the various groups in the organization and finally formalize the process (Soebbing & Washington, 2011). This process can take anywhere from months to years and the longer the leader is in the position the greater the overall organizational success. The organization and its stakeholders need to understand that adjusting to leadership change is a process and to give their new leader the opportunity required to enact a change in strategy and subsequent success.

### **Applied Leadership and Strategy**

Those organizations that have been able to adequately achieve their unique strategic vision are everywhere in sports and athletics. Part of their success lays in the crafting of their

strategy and the ability of the leaders to engage the followers toward the achievement of that strategy (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Effective leadership is dependent on many factors; the inherent values of the organization, the culture of the organization, the temperament of the athletes or employees and the leadership style and attributes of the leader (Chelladurai, 2009). When these qualities are out of alignment the organization will not achieve success. When these qualities are in alignment, the organization can achieve greatness.

That ability to achieve strategic success changes over time. When the organization is transforming it requires a strong leader that can inspire others to achieve that change (Chelladurai, 2009). Once that change is realized, the constant forward push can be too much to sustain over time and a new leader is required. Organizations have to adapt and change with their environment and their circumstances in order to grow and thrive.

Recognizing those changes and being able to meet them is no small task. It requires different leadership and different skill sets to continuously achieve success. The leadership team has to be able to quickly identify the changing needs of the organization and respond accordingly. When situations are highly task oriented the autocratic coach is required (Slack & Parent, 2006). When the situation requires less focus on tasks and more response to the environment, then a leader will need to be more personal oriented to support their staff, and encourage innovation and shared ideas. By opening up the communication channels the leader can learn more about the problems and work with the staff in a democratic way to change course.

Followers routinely state that their ideal leader has transformative qualities and is able to generate excitement, encouragement, empowerment and inspiration among the followers in the pursuit of the organizational strategy (Wallace & Weese, 1995). This leadership strategy is best

suited for the pursuit of a new goal, or a cultural change, or a more radical change in the direction of the organization. Once that initial upheaval has begun, the leader may need to change their style for the ongoing management of the organization (Branch, 1990). An organization cannot remain in a state of upheaval. At some point, it will need to flatten out. When that occurs, the leader should begin a more transactional approach in their leadership, since this is best suited for maintaining the status quo and embedding the new strategy in the organization's culture (Slack & Parent, 2006). As time goes on, the organization may go through many changes in strategy and require the skills of more than one leader, or style, in order to maintain success.

### **Conclusion**

Effective leaders develop a mission, set goals and objectives, craft a strategy to achieve those goals, execute the strategy effectively and evaluate the performance of that strategy on the determined criteria for success (Fuller & Green, 2005). Since there is no universally accepted definition of success, the evaluation has to be done on a per organization basis (Soucie, 1994). Successful organizations, however, do display some commonalities: a strong leader capable of developing a vision worth achieving, the ability to inspire and support those in the organization to achieve that vision, and the ability to sustain the organization once it has become successful.

Successful leaders have to analyze their environment, set a vision and align the organization to the continued pursuit of that vision. Success not only lies in the ability to inspire and lead others, but in the ability to adapt to changes in the environment (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Astute leaders change their style to reflect the wants and needs of their staff and the unique situation that is presented.

There is no universally guaranteed way of making success happen. Every organization and every circumstance is different. Those organizational leaders that acutely evaluate every situation and make the necessary adjustments to the organizational strategy they develop and the leadership style they utilize with followers will enjoy ongoing success.

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