Transactional Leadership in Professional Football:

Is Servant Leadership the Preferred Alternative?

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This paper explores the existence of Transactional Leadership in Professional Football and the preferred alternative of Servant Leadership (SL). Relevant data supporting the preference of servant leadership and its attributes are explored with foci on existing coaching styles and a player’s subsequent perception of their coaches’ positive/negative influence. Poor player performance is correlated with an athlete’s negative perception of their coach’s leadership style and optimal performance is correlated with a coach’s adherence to a democratic coaching style while engaging in positive feedback. The measurement of a coach’s leadership style and effectiveness is examined via the dimensions of the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) and the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ). A proposed servant leadership model for Professional football is offered, and the social implications of its adoption and adherence are discussed as areas for future research.

It is postulated that influence is the essence of power and an effective leader is an individual that is able to exercise influence upon others (Bass & Stogdill, 1974; Burns, 1978; Yukl, 2002). Emerging evidence supports the assertion that coach’s have this sort of significant influence upon their athletes (Case, 1998; Chelladurai, 1981). Therefore, data supporting this relationship between a coach’s demonstration of leadership and the subsequent impact it has upon an athlete continues to receive inquiry (Eiche, Sedlacek, & Gaston, 2004; Smith, 1974).

This inquiry has its underpinning in Transactional Leadership theory and Servant Leadership theory; the latter examines leadership from the perspective of contingent reward (Bass & Stogdill, 1974) while Servant leadership establishes a construct of servant first in its leadership delivery (Greenleaf, 1977, 1998; Patterson, 2004) and on-going relationships with team members. The significance of the two theories is related to the long term implications of their implementation and adherence in a sports context.

Transactional Leadership

The theory of Transactional leadership (Bass & Stogdill, 1974; Burns, 1978) catapulted to the forefront of peoples minds in the late 1970’s as a new paradigm of leadership. Transactional leadership offers a cognitive framework which helps to explain the willingness of a coach to embrace a methodology of working with athletes in purely a contractual manner (Case, 1998). Burns’ (1978) book Leadership served to catapult two types of leadership orientation theories, on the surface the theoretical foundation appeared to be simple and yet the concept of leaders transacting with followers to get things done was a new concept. Leaders would
now set expectations, goals, and provide recognition and rewards when a task was completed (Goethals, Sorenson, & Burns, 2004). For Burns this represented a direct link between his observance of political leaders and their behavior as it relates to getting things done (Bass & Stogdill, 1974). Burns’ work significantly marked the course of leadership research for the next twenty-five years resulting in transactional leadership being the most widely researched construct in leadership throughout the 1990’s (Kolenda, 2001).

Bass (1985) continued Burn’s work through the expansion of Burn’s theory and providing a higher order construct of the theory of transactional leadership. In other words, “Bass set out to define the component constructs of transactional...leadership while also identifying the behavioral indicators associated with... [the] leadership construct” (Goethals, et al, 2004, p. 1558). The end result postulated that if you produce the desired behavior, then you will receive the contracted reward; while conversely if you don’t produce, then here is what you will not receive. (Bass & Stogdill, 1974).

Bass (1974) effectively identifies the correlation between the contractual expectation of a leader and the parallel expectation of the follower that is transactional relationship. “The transactional leader may contribute to the adequacy of their performance by clarifying what is expected of the employees, explaining how to meet such expectations... [and] allocating rewards that are contingent on their meeting the objectives” (p. 339). However, based upon the transactional theory of leadership the mandate remains the same, achieve the goal or do not receive the award (Esposito, 2004).

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf’s (1977) seminal work regarding the concept of servant leadership produced a definition of servant leadership that is predicated on “servant first”. This tenet is revealed as the need or aspiration by the leader to place the highest priority on serving others and developing a holistic approach to work and the adoption of spirit in the workplace as a precedence (Greenleaf, 1998). The same tenets mentioned above are revealed as the servant leader makes the choice to engage in intuitive decision making in order to strategically target dilemmas (Yurdadon, 2005).

A servant leader understands that he/she while in an organization is committed to serving and supporting people and the society. Within a professional sports context, the servant leader is able to minimize the autocratic nature of their decision making policies. In stark contrast, transactional leaders prefer to lead by scientific and mechanistic (Morgan, 1997) management mottos.

According to Greenleaf’s model, the ultimate question for all coaches that are making indelible impressions upon those entrusted to them should be, “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).

Professional Football

Thought to be the father of professional football due to his uncharacteristic inclusion of intelligence, strategy and organizational skills in coaching; Paul Brown set the benchmark for Professional Football Coaches (Goethals et al., 2004). However, Paul Brown’s coaching style was that of a stern, humorless leader that embraced an autocratic type of leadership.

He maintained strict control over his players and brooked little argument against his style of leadership (Goethals et al., 2004). The significance to this inquiry is related to the emulation by other, Professional, College and High school football coaches that still occurs today. Coach Brown wielded such a level of influence (Yukl, 2002) upon the game of football at each level, that his type and style of coaching still extends to present day.

Another component of leadership in Professional football requires an emphasis on communication, specifically player motivation (see Figure 1) by the coach to achieve the desired ends of the team (Yurdadon, 2005). It is through this level of cognitive interaction between the coach and a player that a crucial relationship begins to emerge. A players self-efficacy, self-esteem, and subsequent performance is tied to the level and type of motivation that they receive from their coach (Carron, 2000; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Kellett, 1999).
Preliminary research concerning the demonstration of certain types of motivational leadership behavior suggests a positive correlation between an athlete’s perception of group cohesion and the type of leadership style that a coach employs (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980).

**Social Implications**

The concept of professional sports has the ability to transcend all social and cultural constraints (Yurdadon, 2005). However, it does not simply end there; there are eternal constructs that imply a preferred path or a direct relationship between the very nature of sport and biblical dispensation (Connor, 2002). The viewing of sports for ethical implications and the impartation of values is not a new concept (Dulaney, 2001; Ellis & Janelle, 2000; Greenleaf, 1977); with regard to the history of sport we have several biblical examples Hebrews 12:1,2; Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7 (New International Version).

Of particular import is the metaphor of running, juxtaposed against a life devoted to Christ; this metaphor and others are utilized by the Apostle Paul as he conveys to the church at Corinth his experience while observing the Isthmian games in Ancient Greece (Gebhard, 1991). “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize” 1 Corinthians 9:24.

In Paul’s example, we are shown the microcosm of the world from an athlete’s perspective, “Just as a sportsperson improves his or her performance through training and practice, through discipline and commitment, so Paul wants the Christians to whom he is writing to develop their spiritual lives” (Weir, 2000, p. 21-22)

From an ethical perspective, the metaphor mentioned above transcends time and serves as a vivid picture of the discipline and sacrifice of sport transposed upon Christian ethos. However, when moving into the realm of professional sports, the proverbial ethical line can become blurred due to several variables. In Professional Football the concept of ethics can become blurred by the sheer magnitude of the revenue received from ticket sales and gate receipts. With an average of 60 percent going to the home team and 40 percent going to the visiting team (Soonhwan & Hyosung, 2002) each team stands to make an enormous net profit for victory which correlates with popularity and increased fan base.

For example, from a numerical perspective, in 1962 the NFL contracted with CBS for $4.6 million a year, in 1998 just the rights to televise NFL games as well as the Super Bowl were divided between networks for $17.6 Billion dollars (Soonhwan & Hyosung, 2002).

Based upon the aforementioned figures, there is a tremendous amount of pressure upon both the coaches and the players to perform at an optimal level to maintain their contracts with the organizations (Frey & Eltzen, 1991). This pressure moderates a transactional leadership paradigm of contingent reward by the team’s owners, investors and coaches.

The proposed construct (see Figure 2.) shows the progression from: (a) the coach’s initial leadership style, (b) the next step of mediation via pressure to achieve high performance, (c) the subsequent autocratic or transactional delivery of coaching behaviors, and (d) the outcome of poor player performance.

**Coach as Servant Leader**

In the coaching styles of Tony Dungy and Joe Ehrmann, the concept of Ethics and Agapao love (Barker, Merrill, & Toussaint, nd; Patterson, 2004; Winston, 2002) emerges with a emphasis that cannot be ignored. Servant leadership is revealed in this poignant example of a coach and his relationship with his football players before a big game:

“What is our job as coaches’ he asked”? “To Love us”, the boys yelled back in unison. “What is your job”? Joe shot back. “To love each other”, the boys responded. The words were spoken with the familiarity of a mantra, the commitment of an oath, the enthusiasm of a pep rally (Marx, 2003, p. 3).

The aforementioned example demonstrates how a coach builds a foundation upon which their players or others can model themselves after. Coach Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts also evokes a level of followership from professional athletes that is predicated upon mutual respect, love, humility and altruism for his players (Greenleaf, 1977; Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004).
LB Hardy Nickerson shares this concerning coach Dungy. “Tony talks about being a championship team doing things on a championship level. He’s a real football coach...players see that and respect it. It makes you go out and lay it on the line” (Smith, 1998, para.11). Furthermore, coach Dungy readily reveals his servant leader mentality as he shares his outlook on coaching. “I kind of think of myself as an older brother. I would like my guys to think at the ends of their careers, ’we were successful and this guy helped us get there, let us grow and helped us grow at the same time’”(Smith, 1998).

In Patterson’s (2004) model of servant leadership (see Figure 3) coach Dungy demonstrates the construct of Agapao love. This type of love serves as the crucial catalyst for a coach’s burgeoning understanding and demonstration of servant leadership. Through this model a crisis of belief or a catharsis of freedom to coach emerges. For example, in Professional football the extrinsic motivation (Ivancevich, 2002) from owners to win and win now at all costs may cause a coach to weigh the risk versus contingent reward (Bass & Stogdill, 1974) against a player who is not performing at an optimal level.

However, when viewed from Greenleaf’s and Patterson’s (1977/1998; 2004) construct of servant leadership, the coach is willing to personally sacrifice for the advancement and well-being of another. The same premise is observed in Winston’s (2002) suggestion of, “the platinum rule” which intimates, doing for others what they perceive you should do. Clearly, a paradigm of servant leadership promotes a feeling of “espirit de corps” or a common desire from members in a group to achieve for the collective.

Discussion and further research
Preliminary research concerning the phenomenon of Servant leadership as the preferred leadership behavior in Professional football, suggests a need for further research. Based upon the existing literature and personal interviews with current professional football players (see Figure 4) there appears to be a direct relationship between an athlete’s, (a) perceived performance, (b) positive group cohesion and (c) their coach’s demonstration of leadership style.

The Leadership Scale for Sport (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980) is the proposed instrument to gather data due to its sports specificity and inclusion in a number of documented studies (Chelladurai, 1980; Chelladurai, 1981; Chelladurai & Quatman, 2005). The LSS measures five dimensions of leadership behavior and consists of three 40 item scales that target five dimensions of leader behavior.

Relative to this study, the dimensions represented by the LSS (see Table 1) mirror the servant leadership dimensions suggested by Patterson (see Table 2.) and offer the best probability for maintenance of validity (Creswell, 1994) while measuring an athlete’s preference for servant leadership in professional football. Specifically, (a) Agapao correlates with social support, (b) altruism with democratic behavior, and (c) visioning with positive feedback behavior.

Based upon the convergence of the dimensions of the LSS and the Servant Leadership model offered by Patterson (2004) a modified model is offered by Carthen (see Figure 5.) with a construct built upon coach as servant first in order to achieve optimal performance from players. In the model, inclusion of the variable, Team cohesion is measured via the Group Environment Questionnaire. The GEQ reveals players perceptions concerning the social situations of the group, how they are socialized into it, and the subsequent set of beliefs they develop concerning the group.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are suggested for further study concerning the phenomenon of Servant leadership in professional football as the preferred leadership alternative:

Hypothesis 1
HO: There is no significant relationship between a player’s higher task cohesion and a coach’s adherence to the leadership dimensions of training and instruction and autocratic style.

H1: There is a significant relationship between a player’s higher task cohesion and a coach’s adherence to the leadership dimensions of training and instruction and autocratic style.
Hypothesis 2
H0: There is no significant relationship between higher level of social cohesion and democratic style and the leadership dimensions of democratic style, social support behaviors and rewarding behaviors.
H1: There is a significant relationship between higher levels of social cohesion and the leadership dimensions of democratic style, social support behaviors and rewarding behaviors.
References


**Table 1.** Dimensions of LSS Coaching Behavior

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<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Coaching Behavior Dimensions:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training and Instruction</strong></td>
<td>Behavior of the coach that entails teaching the skills, techniques and tactics of the sport as well as arranging and conducting practice sessions in order to maximize the mastery of the skills and coordinating and clarifying the roles and activities of each of the team members.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Support Behavior</strong></td>
<td>Behavior of the coach characterized by a concern for individual athletes, for their welfare, for positive group atmosphere, and for warm interpersonal relations with members.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Feedback Behavior</strong></td>
<td>Behavior of the coach which includes providing reinforcements for an athlete by recognizing and rewarding good performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Democratic Behavior</strong></td>
<td>Behavior of the coach which allows greater participation by the athletes in decisions pertaining to group goals, practice methods, and game tactics and strategies.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Autocratic Behavior</strong></td>
<td>Behavior of the coach which involves independence in decision making and which stresses personal authority.</td>
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Figure 1. Leader Behaviors Attuned to An Individual’s Motivational Process

Figure 1: LEADER BEHAVIORS ATTUNED TO AN INDIVIDUAL’S MOTIVATIONAL PROCESS

Figure 2. Carthen’s Existing Transactional Leadership Model for Professional Football
Figure 3. Patterson’s Servant Leadership Model

Figure 4. Responses from Interviews of Current Cleveland Browns Professional Football Players

“Servant Leadership is preferred because they care more about you than football”! (WR) Frisman Jackson Cleveland Browns (Personal Communication, July 5, 2005).

“Coach Crenel talks to the whole team equally” I like that sort of coaching” (QB) Josh Harris Cleveland Browns (Personal Communication, July 5, 2005).

“My motivation for playing will change; when I stop struggling financially and then I will be motivated by a love for the game” (OLB) David McMillan (Personal Communication, July 5, 2005).

“I don’t like feeling like I can’t do anything right. The servant leadership you described by my coach helped my self esteem and motivates me to love the game” (OL) Andrew Hoffman (Personal Communication, July 5, 2005).

“I know that coach wants what is best for me and that motivates me to play the game. Because you want more than just the money” (DB) Brodney Poole (Personal Communication, July 5, 2005).

**Key:**
1. **OL**: Offensive Lineman
2. **DB**: Defensive Back
3. **QB**: Quarterback
4. **OLB**: Outside Linebacker
5. **WR**: Wide Receiver
**Figure 5.** Carthen’s proposed Servant Leadership Model in Professional Football