Exploring the Role of Mentorship in Achieving NBA Success: Narratives Told by Nine Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Inductees

Mark Lasota, University of New Mexico  
Todd Seidler (Advisor), University of New Mexico  
David Scott (Advisor), Texas A&M Corpus Christi  
Arlie Woodrum, University of New Mexico  
Wade Gilbert, California State University, Fresno  
Douglas Thomas, University of New Mexico  

Management - Leadership (Professional Sport)  
virtual asynchronous  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Leadership III  
Abstract 2020-105

Mentorship is a term used loosely in professional contexts broadly referring to a process of a more experienced and knowledgeable individual providing guidance to a less experienced and knowledgeable individual. Considering the widespread application of mentoring in sport, it is imperative that professionals in the field have an understanding of mentoring and the mentoring process. Professional sports organizations, such as the National Basketball Association (NBA), are trending toward younger performers. In February 2019, the NBA submitted a proposal to the National Basketball Players Association that will lower the draft age to 18 from 19 (USA Today, 2019). In the 2019 NBA Draft, 10 of the top 15 players selected were 20 years old or younger (Pro Basketball Reference, 2019). According to several former NBA players, mentorship is critical to the growth of young players and is lacking in today’s game.

Kram (1985) suggested mentoring serves two main functions: career and psychosocial development. Mentoring is a potentially transformative career development strategy that offers benefit to the mentor, protégé, and organization (Gilbreath, Rose, & Dietrich, 2008). Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima (2004) conducted a meta-analysis comparing various career outcomes of mentored and non-mentored employees and found mentored employees received higher compensation, obtained more promotions, experienced higher career satisfaction and commitment, and perceived greater opportunities for career advancement. Although sport coaches have been studied as mentors, there is a lack of research focused on the perspectives of retired professional athletes in a position to introspectively reflect on their mentoring experiences.

The purpose of our study is to examine the perceptions of retired NBA legends regarding their mentorship experiences and the impact mentorship had on their basketball careers. Through their stories, we hope to bring greater awareness to the importance of mentorship, not only for current and aspiring professional athletes, but for people from all walks of life. Furthermore, we aim to attract the attention of individuals who are supposed to be providing mentorship as well as help younger individuals become receptive to seeking and receiving mentorship. Guided by servant leadership theory, the study focuses on how mentoring helped former players make it to the NBA and then how mentoring in the NBA helped them achieve success as players. Sullivan (2019) points out that mentoring is a key tool used by servant leaders to influence followers and suggests that in order to reap maximum benefits from a mentor-mentee relationship, servant leadership qualities are necessary.

The study is in the data analysis stage. The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame granted participant access. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Hall of Fame Inductees. The method of interviews encourages individuals to provide in-depth information that resonates at a personal level and captures the subjective meaning in contextual situations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Purposive snowball sampling techniques were used to select and recruit participants. The methodological approach is narrative inquiry, which focuses on understanding lived experiences and told stories (Creswell, 2017). The study has groundbreaking potential and contributes to leadership and organizational theory and practice.