Who Makes a Good Leader? Gendered Evaluations of Leadership Competencies in Intercollegiate Sport

Lauren Hindman, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Lindsey Darvin (Advisor), State University of New York College, Cortland

Management - Diversity (College Sport)
virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2020-135
Session: Women Leadership I

Nearly 50 years after the passage of Title IX, men continue to outnumber women in leadership positions in sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2018). At the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I level, women only represent 9.2% of athletic directors. Additionally, women hold less than half of heading coaching positions for women’s programs across Division I (40.1%), II (35.8%), and III (44.3%) levels (Lapchick, 2018). Prior research in role congruity and social role theories has posited that men are viewed as better suited for leadership roles that require stereotypically masculine traits, while women are preferred for positions with stereotypically feminine traits (e.g. Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011).

The assignment of these stereotypical traits often results in fewer women in positions of power and leadership (LaVoi, 2016). For example, traditional gender role beliefs likely contribute to the associations drawn between sport, leadership, and masculinity as women athletes tend to view their women coaches more negatively than their men coaches (Madsen, 2016). Women are also often less likely to be hired for leadership positions than men, even when deemed to have equal likelihood of potential success (Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011). Subsequently, previous work has indicated that perceptions of leader effectiveness are not different based on the sex of the leader (Burton & Peachey, 2009; Welty Peachey & Burton, 2011).

That being said, many sport management studies considering the gendered nature of leadership has taken a top-down approach by asking participants whether they would consider individuals as qualified or hireable for certain positions. When evaluating leaders, however, it may be more appropriate to ask employees to rate their supervisors. We take this latter approach in the present study, asking NCAA Division I, II, and III administrators and coaches (n = 650) to evaluate their supervisors using an adapted Zenger Folkman leadership competency scale. This scale evaluates 16 successful attributes leaders should maintain across industry segments.

Based on prior literature, our research questions for the study included 1) how does the supervisor’s gender affect their leadership competency rating and 2) how do the a) gender match between supervisor and employee, b) supervisor's family status, and c) supervisor's background as a former student athlete background affect the relationship between supervisor gender and leadership competency rating. ANOVA results indicate that women’s leadership competency scores are significantly higher than men’s (p < 0.01). The moderating effect of supervisor-employee gender match was also significant (p < 0.01), with both men and women rating their women supervisors more favorably. The moderating effects of family status and student-athlete background were not significant.

Discussion will focus on the implications of results, including how women employees’ significantly lower ratings of the men who supervise them suggest potential issues with men’s leadership competencies when leading women. Additionally, we will discuss possible explanations for women’s overperformance compared to men on the leadership competency scale. This study offers several contributions to the literature on women’s leadership in sport, including the first use of the Zenger Folkman scale and new insights into how men and women leaders are evaluated differently.