Perceptions of Leader Character for Sport Performance

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The crisis in confidence for leadership has manifested not only in business, but in several domains including sport (Crossan, Mazutis, Seijts, & Gandz, 2013). Character has been neglected in the field of leadership, which is largely competency focused (DeRue & Myers, 2014; Sturm, Vera, & Crossan, 2017). Character is a set of virtuous behaviors formed into a habit that work together to support optimal judgment and decision-making (Gandz, Crossan, Seijts, & Stephenson, 2014). According to Crossan and colleagues (2013), these character behaviors include transcendence, drive, collaboration, humanity, humility, integrity, justice, accountability, courage, all informing judgment. Contrary to popular belief, character is not naturally developed over one’s lifetime, but requires continuous practice for development (Braques, 2006).

Some of the character behaviors typically receive more attention than others (Seijts, Gandz, Crossan, & Reno, 2015). The undervalued character behaviors, such as humanity and humility, are likely the outcome of poor judgment, suboptimal performance, and sometimes catastrophic outcomes (Crossan Furlong, Gandz, & Seijts, 2018). However, there has been a surge of interest in elevating character alongside competence, as evident in the character-based interviews used by many organizations (Crossan, Côté, & Virgin, 2020) and by professional sport teams, which is demanding foundational research to support character development. Although there is growing research on why character is important to support judgment and performance, little is known about how character can be developed. This research responds to this demand by using an online survey to identify the gaps between the scholarly meaning of leader character and the understanding of it in practice.

Context can significantly influence or reveal the manifestation of character (Gandz et al., 2014). Therefore, studying character development in a sport context is ideal because of the high-pressure found in elite sport that can lead to stressors (Donohue, Chow, Pitts, Loughran, Schubert, Gavrilova, & Allen, 2015), in addition to the clear performance metrics sport offers to evaluate performance outcomes. This study focuses on intercollegiate athletes (N = 1100); however, the findings are expected to be generalizable and beneficial to any group.

This research has three objectives: (a) identify student-athlete perceptions of leader character, (b) identify student-athlete perceptions of whether character is beneficial or detrimental to their sport performance, and (c) examine whether gender, type of sport, member tenure, leadership capacity, or perceptions of their coach’s character contribute to their value of character. Data collection is still in progress. The data will be compared to leader character as defined in the literature. Identifying misconceptions of character will inform phase two of this research project that is focused on how character can be developed through the use of an intervention designed to elicit behavior change. Understanding how character can be developed alongside competence, and how this process elevates judgment to enhance performance, will not only significantly contribute to the literature on leadership, but will also inform best practices for organizations.