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John R. Wooden, Stephen R. Covey and Servant Leadership

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

Simon Jenkins' article investigating Stephen Covey and John Wooden on a number of leader characteristics provides some interesting food for thought. Obviously both Wooden and Covey are iconic leaders who have influenced entire generations of leaders in organizational settings both inside and out of sport. They also seem to personify many of the now generally agreed upon characteristics of good leadership which can be summed up in this quote from Admiral Arleigh Burke (former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Navy under President Eisenhower and President Kennedy):

Leadership is understanding people and involving them to help you do a job. That takes all of the good characteristics, like integrity, dedication of purpose, selflessness, knowledge, skill, implacability, as well as determination not to accept failure. [1]

Burke's definition of leadership identifies many of the key qualities necessary for success, but he leaves some room for *how* these characteristics are put into action. For example, it could be argued that other iconic leaders such as Bobby Knight, Bear Bryant, Vince Lombardi, Phil Jackson, Bill Parcells, and Sir Alex Ferguson all possess the characteristics Burke describes, but implement them in very different ways. Whether these differences are merely stylistic or philosophical in nature is up for debate. However, this debate leads us to one of the questions which Simon Jenkins directly poses in his essay: specifically, can we categorize John Wooden as a true servant leader?

Jenkins comes to the conclusion that he is not. Jenkins draws on both autobiographical and biographical work and argues that Wooden may be better thought of as a paternalistic leader rather than a servant leader.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

Before I share my opinion on Jenkins conclusion, let me briefly discuss an alternate framework, as well as some data from my own work, which may help shed some light on this concern. In 1974 one of the great leadership theorists of the 20th century, Ralph Stogdill, presented a view that placed leadership style on a continuum from autocratic to fully participative. Called the Likert System of Management, Stogdill's model allows for the

notion that leaders behave in different ways, with different motivations, for a variety of reasons at different times. On one extreme is the *exploitative autocrat* where the message from the leader is “You will do it, or else!” Decisions are made at the top of the hierarchical structure, there is a tight authoritarian control over performance and coercive power may be used. Moving to the right on the Likert continuum, we find *benevolent autocrats*, whose leader behaviours are defined by their paternalistic attitude. Here, the message from the leader to team members might be “Do it now, please.” Like the exploitative autocrat, decisions are made at the top of the hierarchical structure, but in return for their loyalty, team members are treated reasonably well and in a rather paternalistic manner. Some follower variance is allowed from the leader’s directions, but participants know when not to “cross the line” with the coach. Often, this style is used when a leader believes people should do something for their own good. The benevolent autocrat is still directive, but the motivation is in the best interest of others, rather than self. The next point on the continuum Stogdill labels *consultative*. At this point along the continuum, the leader might ask for input. The coach retains the right to make all the decisions but discusses common problems with his/her team. The atmosphere is more one of co-operation and there is a two-way exchange of information. Here the message from the coach to team members might be “How would you like to do it?” Finally, at the extreme right of the continuum, Stogdill identifies a style he termed *participative*, where the leader not only seeks information from all participants, but includes team members in the decision-making process. Decisions are often made by the group and supervision is supportive rather than authoritative. The message from leader to participants is “What do you think we should do?” This style allows for full group involvement throughout the leadership and decision-making process. It implies full trust between the leader and group members and is generally only effective when group members are mature, experienced, and self-sufficient.

Jenkins is clearly arguing that Wooden would fit nicely into Stogdill’s benevolent autocrat category. However, this isn’t the end of the story. We have one more question to ponder – namely what is the relationship between Stogdill’s [2] framework and servant leadership?

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN SPORT

We have few peer reviewed data points to rely on in our attempt to answer this question. One of the few data-based studies examining servant leadership’s potential applicability in a sport coaching context was investigated by myself and several colleagues [3]. We showed that college athletes who perceived their coach to be a “servant leader” also displayed higher intrinsic motivation, were more “mentally tough,” and were more satisfied with their sport experience than athletes who were coached by non-servant leaders.

For students of sport psychology, these findings shouldn’t be news as most of us have a good understanding of servant leader principles as well as what constitutes effective coach behaviors. However, for many others these results were seen as incongruent with the commonly held coaching beliefs that the coach as “servant” theory will produce athletes who are “soft.” Many coaches believe that an autocratic coaching style is a necessity in order to instill mental toughness and promote the growth of mental skills in their athletes. The study results seem to suggest that the “keys” to promoting “mental toughness” do not lie in autocratic, authoritarian, or oppressive styles. It appears to lie, paradoxically, with the coach’s ability to produce an environment which emphasizes trust and inclusion, humility, and service. This paradoxical approach to developing toughness may well serve as a foundational skill for coaches of the future as older fear-based models of coaching go by the wayside.

Interestingly, and more directly to the point of our question of concern, our study also

identified a group of coaches who were “almost” as effective as the servant leaders in promoting satisfaction, motivation, and mental toughness in athletes. This group, which we termed the “benevolent dictators,” displayed characteristics similar to Stogdill’s “benevolent autocrats.” The benevolent dictators in our study [3] showed a strong commitment to developing trust and inclusion with their athletes and also were “service” oriented (e.g., they sought to serve, rather than be served, by their athletes). They differed from the more traditional servant leaders on only one concept: humility. I would suggest that this lack of humility on the part of benevolent dictators may not necessarily be a negative in the eyes of their athletes, as some may have interpreted the assessment questions relating to humility (e.g., my coach does not need to be front and center at every team function) as defining their coach as being low in confidence.

Thus, from our study we can conclude that the key pieces of the servant leader model lies in the coach’s commitment to inclusion and trust in combination with a serving attitude. Assuming these key pieces are present, humility (while still desirable) becomes a less important characteristic in the formulation of athlete satisfaction, motivation, mental skill development, and performance [3]. Benevolent dictators, then, become a sort of hybrid servant leader who embodies many of the characteristics of the pure servant leader but retains some more “traditional” coaching attributes which may in turn enhance their ability to lead in a sport environment.

I would argue that Wooden’s philosophy and behaviors (as described in outstanding detail in Jenkins article) would fit very nicely into our “benevolent dictator” category. Wooden clearly was committed to building a trusting and inclusive environment where everyone felt loved and cared for. He also emphasized the importance of having a serving attitude – especially when it came to making sacrifices for the good of the team. Had we assessed Wooden’s players with the same instrumentation used in our study described above, I think it’s quite likely he would have also scored fairly low on the humility dimension. This would most certainly be the case early in his career. And as our data suggests, this isn’t necessarily a negative trait – especially if athletes view this dimension as a proxy for self-confidence. This notion is especially important given the cultural context of coaching college basketball in the 1960’s and 70’s. Being “vulnerable” and “humble” was a difficult platform to coach from during that era – and still poses some problematic concerns to this day – especially when dealing with athletes that may need stern discipline from time to time.

CONCLUSION

In my opinion, the benevolent dictator conceptualization – similar to Jenkins notion of a paternalistic leader – is an accurate description of how Wooden framed his leadership style. While this conceptualization captures some of the essence of servant leadership – and may very well constitute a “hybrid” version of servant leadership - it does not capture all of it. Thus, I stand in agreement with Jenkins assessment that Wooden’s genius was more paternalistic in nature and not a pure servant leader approach.

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