

Note: This field study is one of ten qualitative research projects that helps to drive The Academy for Sport Leadership's leadership development programs.

OH CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!

ACADEMY FOR SPORT LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

Purpose:

The main objective of this study was to investigate student-athletes' experience of the role of team captain. In prior research I found the number of team captains on a varsity athletic team to be most likely two or three student-athletes. The previous study also revealed that the captains are generally chosen by the coach, though closely followed by selection of teammates.

Methods

Focus groups were used to obtain students' opinion and experiences regarding participation on a varsity athletic team as a team captain. Sixty (60) students were selected from a data base consisting of 200 student-athletes with each student-athlete assigned to one of ten groups (ten groups with six participants). A focus group design was used to investigate the student-athlete's view of the role of peer leader and the experience of being a team captain. The focus group process involved organized discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences of leadership and team captaincy. To analyze the data the method used to code and categories focus group data were adapted from approaches to qualitative data analysis.

The student-athletes were arranged in ten groups of six students (no participants were coupled with team captains from the same team). To open up dialogue—the goal being student-athlete interaction—the moderator used ten open-ended questions that were related to their team captain experience. The following topics were used to stimulate discussion.

1. How do you feel about being a team captain?
2. How do you feel about leadership?
3. Is there anything about the role of team captain that caused you to feel anxious about it?
4. Would you like to talk about those leadership experiences which you found most anxiety producing?
5. Which leadership experiences did you find enjoyable?
6. What was the best thing that happened to you as a leader?
7. What was the worst thing that happened to you as a leader?
8. What did the other team captains worry about regarding the peer leadership experiences?
9. How do you think the team captain experience can be improved?
10. What is your expectation for you of future leadership experiences?

Results

The data from this study was very thick, intense, and very insightful. Four prominent themes emerged.

1. Lack of Preparation: From the student-athletes' point of view, "initial anxiety," proved to be a real threat causing an emotional state of uneasiness with the role of team captain. The participants overwhelmingly acknowledged feeling a sense of inner turmoil when enacting their first few leadership actions. For many, they never got over the fear of rejection that might occur if a teammate dismissed an action (verbal or visual) performed by the student-athlete as a team captain. Almost all of the participants expressed that at times they "dreaded" having to lead.

One of the student-athletes expressed: "I was elated at my selection as a team captain. I was quickly deflated when I made my first attempt to lead."

2. Lack of Feedback: From the student-athlete's point of view they felt "worry" and were often frustrated by the lack of feedback. Most participants noted that feedback by coaches was minimal, often out of synch with the timing of need, and felt like "something" was wrong because no one, player or coach, offered valuable feedback. They felt like they were on an island, and the only person they could (and would) relate the fear with were the other team captains.

One of the student-athletes expressed: "All I want to know is am I being effective."

3. Lack of Competency: Fear of failure and making mistakes concerning peer leadership was expressed by most of the student-athletes. Because of this fear, many overlooked leadership opportunities preferring to stay on the "safe ground."

One of the student-athlete's expressed: "The year before I looked up to the team captain, but when I was placed in the role I felt like a fraud. I never really knew if I was making a difference as a leader."

4. Lack of Confidence: While almost all participants shared a sense of self-confidence as an athlete, the opposite was true of the role of team captain. A healthy portion of the participants never overcame the sense of "self-doubt." Rather, they continued to lead with the expectation of confidence being discovered along the way.

One of the student-athletes expressed: "I think I lacked self confidence because I had unrealistic expectations of the role. I was more concerned with my teammates' opinions than my ability."

Conclusion

The result of this study showed that student-athletes were not satisfied with the outcomes of their role as team captain. They experienced fear, uneasiness, and inner turmoil for most of the time they were team captains—as it related to the role of team captain. Many participants never really felt competent as a result of lack of preparation for the role. Many of the participants were glad to have the opportunity to "reflect" on their experiences with others. The reflection proved to be a trigger to learn more and take more risks in future leadership.