

WHAT YOU THINK IS WHAT YOU DO

Problem: The need to identify how student-athletes conceptualize leadership.

Research Question: How do the ways in which high school student-athletes conceptualize leadership shape their participation in leadership of the team?

Data Collection: Four focus group sessions of ten student-athletes per group were conducted at individual school (four schools) sites. Participants were selected randomly by school athletic director. Participants were all “senior-to-be” and had three years of sport participation. Groups watched a 15-minute series of video cuts of sport team practices (clips from various sports). The video was used as a tool for “priming the pump,” directing participant’s minds to sport leadership. After viewing the clips, each participant completed a concept map with the simple instruction of “Leadership is....” Concept maps are graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge. They include concepts, usually enclosed in circles or boxes of some type, and relationships between concepts indicated by a connecting line linking two concepts. While creating the concept map each participant was instructed to create a hierarchy of concepts—most important to least important.

Data Analysis: Concept maps were coded and analyzed using six common themes: responsibilities, traits, abilities, skills, behaviors, relationships. Using the concept maps and the participant rankings of the concepts the researcher created a brief profile of each participant’s conceptualization developing a personalized task assessment tool. Post season surveys using the individual’s concept profile were given to respective participant coaches. The participant’s coach rated the participant on the six dimensions citing: SE (strong evidence), LE (limited evidence), NS (not seen), and OE (opposing evidence).

Results: After comparing individual concept map with coach evaluation the data indicate a moderate connection between participant conceptualization and leadership behavior. However, the results show that the majority of participants were consistent; the actions and behaviors they did exhibit with strong evidence were those concepts at the top of their hierarchy of concepts (such as “effective leaders show they care about their teammates”). Data also indicate—via concept maps—limited breadth and depth of knowledge of leadership.

Discussion: The study participants were not given leadership training and sport team environments varied tremendously. The culture of the team, the role of the player, and the leadership opportunities are difficult to tease out of the results. However, the limited breadth and depth of knowledge of leadership illuminates a tremendous opportunity for coaches. Further research is needed to better understand how an increase in knowledge will affect leadership behavior. Also necessary is a better understanding of how taking actions and behaving like a leader can expand the student-athletes’ concepts of leadership.