

Elite High-Level Sport Coach and the School Leader: What Can We Learn from Them?

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Abstract

The authors' sporting backgrounds and the increasing uptake of coaching-leadership principles informed our investigation into the experiences of school leaders who had previous elite sports coaching experience. Our primary research question focused on what we can learn from school leaders with previous elite high-level sports coaching experience to guide leadership development programs. We conducted qualitative interviews with seven participants and analyzed the data using a theme-based approach. The findings demonstrated that participants had many specific traits, skills, and dispositions that facilitated their leadership including high levels of self-efficacy, and they embraced a performance development approach. The study identified some potential areas to include in leadership development, including the incorporation of more experiential practice opportunities into leadership programs.

Keywords

Sport Coaching and School Leadership, Educational Leadership Preparation, Leadership Traits, Skills and Dispositions

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, the term *coaching* has taken on various meanings and exists in several disciplines: there are academic coaches, executive coaches, life coaches, career coaches, and performance coaches, to name a few, and all are growing in popularity. Although the different types of coaching each have their own nuances and specifics, all coaching is oriented around a general understanding, which Gallwey defined in his seminal sports coaching book, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (Gallwey, 2008: p. 10): "Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than

teaching them”. Starr (2021) added to this definition in his 2021 *Coaching Manual*, emphasizing that coaching enables people to create change through learning. As scholars, practitioners, and the developers of educational leadership programs consider how to prepare school leaders who are equipped to meet the ever-increasing demands of schools, we were curious as to whether coaches who have worked in more than one field could have insights to share.

Our sporting backgrounds influenced this research. Both authors were previously elite-level coaches, each with more than 20 plus years of experience, and we both work in the field of education and educational leadership, each for more than 10 years. The first author was a public-school teacher for 12 years, currently teaching at a Canadian university in a graduate program for educational leadership for 10 years. The second author was a public-school teacher for 8 years, a school principal for 9 years, and is currently a Senior Educational Officer in Ontario, Canada. Given that we both work as education researchers but share backgrounds in the sporting world, we sought out individuals in our catchment area of Southwestern Ontario who had experience coaching at the elite sporting level and currently work or previously worked in school leadership positions. Our purpose was to gain insights into how their coaching influenced their leadership; what skills, traits, and dispositions they felt were connected to coaching; and how these insights from their elite sports coaching could be used to improve leadership preparation programs. Our objective was to explore these questions using qualitative interviews. We specifically used the term *elite* to signify a full-time coach working at a national, world or Olympic level, and to distinguish the difference in roles from a recreational-level coach. The findings are presented in this paper and the insights could be beneficial for school leadership development program.

2. School Leadership

Leadership research has been increasing dramatically in the 21st century, and there is a wide variety of theoretical approaches to explain the complexities of the leadership process (e.g., Bass, 2008; Bryman et al., 2011; Day & Antonakis, 2012; Dinh et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2020; Hickman, 2016; Mumford, 2006; Northouse, 2022; Rost, 1991). Some researchers have conceptualized leadership as a trait or behavior, whereas others view leadership from an information-processing or relational standpoint. In the field of education, it is crucial to develop school leaders capable of meeting the increasing demands within schools. This is particularly significant in the post-COVID era, where leaders must be adaptable and able to pivot. School leaders are widely regarded as having a key influence in schools (Klar et al., 2020); though their influence is primarily indirect, it is significant and second only to the influence of classroom teachers (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). The high expectations placed upon school leaders have led to extensive interest in leader identification, training, professional develop-

ment and learning, and the content and effectiveness of leadership preparation programs.

Generally, school leadership preparation programs rely on standards (i.e., National Leadership National Educational Leadership Preparation [NELP]) or leadership frameworks (e.g., Ontario Leadership Framework [OLF]) as the guidepost to design their programs with relevant courses and leadership opportunities. Given that we conducted this research in Ontario, Canada, we primarily focused on the OLF. The OLF contains the “standards and expectations for educational leadership as a guide for leadership selection, development, and self-appraisal” (Leithwood, 2017: p. 31). A further review of other standards included similar statements to this effect: Programs are “designed to ensure that educational leaders are ready to meet effectively the challenges and opportunities of the job today and in the future as education, schools and society continue to transform” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015: p. 1). The OLF also makes specific reference to personal leadership resources:

In addition to the practices found to be effective for most schools, systems and leaders in most contexts, the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) includes a small but critical number of personal resources which leaders draw on in order to enact effective leadership practices. Considered together [practices and personal resources], these resources substantially overlap some of the leadership “traits” which preoccupied early leadership research, and which lately have proven to be powerful explanations for leaders’ success (Leithwood, 2012: p. 44).

The argument for including leadership traits was that personal characteristics foster a consistent pattern of leadership performance across a variety of group and organizational situations: “While many traits or personal characteristics have been associated with leaders and leadership (e.g., Zaccaro, 2007), the OLF includes only those for which there is compelling empirical evidence suggesting that they are instrumental to leadership success” (Leithwood, 2017: p. 33). The personal resources identified in the OLF are:

- 1) Cognitive resources: Problem-solving expertise, domain-specific knowledge.
- 2) Social resources: Perceiving emotions, managing emotions, acting in emotionally appropriate ways.
- 3) Psychological resources: Optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, proactivity (Leithwood, 2017: p. 38).

Although research continues to be conducted on understanding the nature of leadership and how to prepare future school leaders (e.g., Barnett, 2004; Carr et al., 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Fry et al., 2005; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Young & Crow, 2017), one area that requires more development is the traits, skills, and dispositions that make a person a good school leader (e.g., problem-solving abilities and decision-making skills). In this study, we investigated the traits, skills, and dispositions of elite sporting coaches that they felt made them good school leaders. We aimed to provide insight into

the specific personal resources that can target leadership development in leadership preparation programs.

3. The Concept of Coaching

Although the concept of coaching originated in sport (Whitmore, 2009), the practice of coaching has been adopted in the business, management, and education spheres. According to Parsloe and Leedham (2009):

The notion of coaching began to enter the language of people management and development literature, either implicitly or sometimes explicitly, in accordance with one of Blanchard's situational management leadership styles... The model comprises four quadrants, depicting the simple concept of the four leadership styles a manager may need to adopt in any given situation. One of those quadrants is called 'coaching' (p. 4).

Coaching is typically defined as an action for providing guidance, support, mentoring and instruction to individuals or groups. Although these definitions do not capture the depth, nuance, or specific actions of a coach's roles and responsibilities, they provided us with the central understanding that coaching is focused on performance development and improving those they coach as well as themselves.

3.1. Differentiating Elite High-Level Sports Coaching from Other Coaching

For this study, it is imperative that readers understand why we chose elite high-level sports coaches and why they are different from other types of coaches. Overall, each classification of coaching defines coaching as working with, helping, and supporting individuals to improve. As Serpell et al. (2021) explained, however, elite high-level sport coaches are unique: They are leaders in their field who are subjected to highly uncertain and pressured environments. For example, coaching Olympic performers to reach even higher standards is highly sophisticated and especially challenging when the coach is often at a different performance level than the performer (Serpell et al., 2021).

Elite-level sports coaching is a full-time job that involves working with national-, world-, and Olympic-level athletes to improve individual or team skills, strategies, and performance. Elite sports coaching is focused on high-level performance development and execution, and this includes identifying what or who is needed to assist in improving an athlete and then managing a constellation of professionals (e.g., sports psychologists, physiotherapists, etc.) to meet the high level of performance required. Therefore, they are also managers responsible for the coaching team to ensure the necessary supports for the development and performance of individuals or the team are in place.

Although there are similarities between the roles and responsibilities of a coach and a school leader—for example, both roles lead and manage others and are focused on continuous performance improvement—sports coaches work in

highly competitive, performance-driven environments with motivated individuals focused on achieving specific athletic goals. School leaders are in noncompetitive school settings with broader responsibilities among individuals or teams where motivation may or may not be present. In this research, we interviewed participants who have engaged in both roles of elite high-level sports coach and school leader to gain a deeper perspective into these similarities and differences, and where insights from the coaching world could be applied to educational leadership development programs.

3.2. Moving Towards Leadership-Coaching

There is a growing body of empirical research demonstrating that incorporating coaching principles can facilitate better leadership (e.g., [Bush, 2008](#); [Kennedy, 2005](#); [Rhodes, 2012](#); [Rhodes et al., 2004](#)). The terms coaching-leadership or leadership-coaching depends on location. For example, in the United States, the literature uses leadership-coaching, while coaching-leadership is more common in Australia. Regardless, both terms refer to the same concept. By incorporating coaching principles and techniques into leadership, leaders can enhance their effectiveness and create a culture of continuous learning and improvement within their organizations. According to the literature, incorporating elements of coaching enables leaders to:

- Establish and act toward achieving goals,
- Become more self-reliant,
- Gain more job and life satisfaction,
- Contribute more effectively to the team and the organization,
- Take greater responsibility and accountability for actions and commitments,
- Work more easily and productively with others (boss, direct reports, peers), and
- Communicate more effectively ([Robertson, 2016](#)).

Many organizations and associations have heavily invested in the development of their leaders through the concept of coaching-leadership (e.g., [Boaden, 2006](#); [Fulmer et al., 2000](#); [Giber & Friedman, 2006](#); [Growth Coaching International, 2022](#); [Robertson, 2016](#); [Vicere & Fulmer, 1998](#)). Based on the success reported in research findings ([Aguilar, 2013](#); [Grissom & Harrington, 2010](#); [Robertson, 2016](#)), leadership-coaching has begun to be implemented by school boards, professional development organizations as a leadership development strategy ([Klar et al., 2020](#)) and deemed an effective way of supporting both new ([Grogan & Crow, 2004](#); [Searby, 2010](#)) and experienced school leaders ([Louis et al., 2010](#); [Parylo et al., 2012](#)). Furthermore, according to [Growth Coaching International \(2022\)](#), an Australian-based professional development provider founded in 2002, coaching in leadership is fundamentally about how to best support and grow the capacity, motivation, and well-being of others through more intentional conversations that lead to better relationships and, ultimately, better student outcomes.

Some practitioners have cautioned about using sport-based coaching concepts

in non-sport-related contexts. Whitmore (2009) strongly advocated for preserving the integrity of sports coaching and suggested that collapsing the boundaries could compromise the psychological depth and breadth of sports coaching:

[The concept of coaching] can easily distort the fundamental methodology, application, purpose, and reputation of coaching...good coaching is a skill, an art perhaps, that requires a depth of understanding and plenty of practice if it is to deliver its astonishing potential...While we can all develop our self-awareness, most people don't aspire to be Olympic champions at work. My intention is to keep the record straight by describing and illustrating what coaching really is, what it can be used for, when and how much it can be used, who can use it well and who cannot (Whitmore, 2009: p. x).

Based on the literature, coaching-leadership has produced favourable improvements for leadership development; however, as Whitmore (2009) pointed out, the view and practices of coaching-leadership could potentially compromise the integrity of sports coaching on which the concept was founded. These concerns are not especially relevant to this research, as we are concerned with how elite sports coaches apply their personal resources in school leadership, and the concepts that would benefit a school leadership development program.

4. Terms

How a person approaches leadership development depends on their conceptualization of leadership. Over the years, scholars have defined leadership has been defined in many ways. For example, in 1991, Fleishman and his colleagues identified as many as 65 different classification systems to define different dimensions of leadership (Fleishman et al, 1991). For this study, we adopted Northouse's (2022) definition: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2022: p. 59). This definition involves the following four subpremises: 1) leadership is a process, 2) leadership involves influence, 3) leadership occurs in groups, and 4) leadership involves common goals (Northouse, 2022: p. 59). Using these definitions, we further focused on the traits, skills, and dispositions that effective leaders possess and develop.

Traits: Traits refer to distinctive characteristics, qualities, or attributes that describe a person and determine what makes certain people great leaders. They are inherent and relatively unchanging over time. Traits are derived from our personality and are fundamentally fixed (Northouse, 2022: p. 86).

Skills: The competencies of a leader are based on three basic personal skills: technical, human, and conceptual. Skills are what leaders can accomplish, whereas traits are who leaders are (i.e., their innate characteristics). Leadership skills are the ability to use knowledge and competencies to accomplish a set of goals or objectives. Leadership skills can be acquired, and leaders are trained to develop them (Northouse, 2022: p. 147).

Disposition: The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence

behaviors that are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2006: p. 53).

5. Methods

This qualitative study collected and analyzed participants' perspectives with elite high-level sports coaching experience and current or previous school leadership positions. Although other leadership contexts (i.e., business, health) could demonstrate a transfer from non-educational leadership to school leadership, we specifically framed this research to include elite-level sporting coaches for a few reasons. First, our sports coaching backgrounds piqued our curiosity. Second, although there are far more non-elite or recreational coaches who are in school leadership roles, we chose elite high-level coaches based on three aspects: 1) they coached as a full-time job at the highest level of sports coaching with elite athletes, 2) they would have more in-depth experiences with a sophisticated performance development skills focused on elite athlete and the support team and 3) their extensive time involved in high-stakes competitive environments. As for the framing of leadership, considering there are as many definitions of and approaches to leadership as there are books written about leadership, we chose to focus on the leadership traits, skills, and dispositions that they considered predictive of their successful school leadership.

5.1. Participants

To frame our participant search, we selected participants in our catchment area of Southwestern Ontario, where we were familiar with the school boards. As previously outlined, we chose high-level sports coaches over recreation coaches. We also had three specific criteria for participant selection: 1) at least ten years of involvement in sports beyond the recreational level, 2) at least five years of elite high-level coaching experience beyond the recreational level coaching experience and considered coach, and 3) being currently or previously in a school leadership position for a minimum of five years. Although we did not specify team or individual elite coaching experience, all participants were team coaches. Most participants ($n = 5$) were selected by purposeful sampling because of our sports experience and knowledge of school leaders who fulfilled the research criteria; our selected participants then recommended other participants ($n = 2$). This study had seven participants. Their ages ranged from 30 to 65, and their school leadership experience ranged from 5 to 35 years. All participants described themselves as 1) having more than 10 years of previous experience with elite-level coaching and 2) in secondary school leadership positions, although some had experience with elementary level.

The sport-specific areas involved competitive cheerleading, hockey, basketball, field hockey, softball, and football. It was also essential to note that all participants came from team sports and not individual (i.e., figure skating, tennis, and so forth). Although we did strive for a gender balance, this did not happen:

five participants were men and two were women.

5.2. Research Questions

Our research questions included a focus on skills, traits, disposition, and experiences. The interview questions focused on gathering background information on their sport/coaching involvement, their school leadership experience, and their perceptions of how their coaching has affected their leadership style and disposition. Once we gathered their demographic information, we asked participants the following questions:

- 1) In your opinion, what traits, skills, and dispositions do you think transferred from your elite coaching experiences to your leadership?
- 2) What are some of the benefits from your elite high-level coaching that helped you with your school leadership roles and responsibilities? Do you think you have transferred these from your coaching to your leadership? Explain.
- 3) How do you see your coaching experience influence your leadership style and approaches?
- 4) Did your coaching experiences influence your emotional intelligence?
- 5) Could you share suggestions or ideas that you have for a leadership development program in relation to your coaching experiences and background that have been beneficial to you as a school leader?
- 6) Do you have any further comments or ideas to share about the connections or parallels between coaching and leadership that you feel are important for us to know?

5.3. Data Collection

We collected data through virtual semi structured qualitative interviews. We interviewed each participant online for approximately one hour. We recorded the interviews and transcribed them for data analysis. At the end of the interview, we asked participants to share any ideas they felt would benefit leadership preparation programs based on their experiences. Although the interview questions were set, we allowed participants to diverge into other areas as needed, which resulted in ample anecdotes.

5.4. Data Analysis

The interview results were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Content analysis aimed “to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992: p. 314). The interview audio recordings were transcribed, and both authors individually completed a first read of the transcripts and noted the main content for each question. This initial content was synchronized and organized into data displays (Glesne, 2016; Miles et al., 2020) for each question to help identify patterns and frequency of the content. Then, we identified core consistencies and meanings based on the main research questions: 1) what skills, traits, and dispositions did they feel connected to

coaching? 2) how can these insights from their elite sports coaching be used to improve leadership preparation programs? These questions served as the analytical framework of the study. The content was analyzed and categorized based on the primary research questions, aligning responses with the study's objectives. We integrated key themes emerging from responses into the discussion (Kumar, 2014). In some cases, codes were assigned to responses displaying repeated content, and tallies were conducted for frequency. The findings and discussion sections present these objectives and responses.

5.5. Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations of this study that should be highlighted. First, our sample size was small. We attributed this to deliberately restricting participant selection to the specific catchment area where both researchers were employed. This approach aimed to ensure a nuanced understanding of participants' responses to school leadership within our district. Expanding the catchment area would have garnered more participants. Second, we focused exclusively on elite high-level sports coaches rather than all sports coaches or non-educational leaders (i.e., business or health) who transitioned into the education school leadership context and roles. While we recognized that all coaches would enrich the study, we began with high-level coaches based on the abovementioned reasons and intent to follow up with further research. A third point was that all our participants were team coaches rather than individual high-level sports coaches. While this exclusion was not intentional, it did limit the perspectives of this study, creating a clear pathway for follow-up research to explore differences between team and individual leadership styles.

6. Findings

Our findings indicated that elite high-level sports coaches who are currently or previously school leaders attributed their success in leading their school and staff to specific aspects. We have organized the findings based on the content focus areas of the study: 1) traits, skills, and dispositions; 2) benefits from previous coaching experience; 3) leadership approach; 4) role of emotional intelligence; 5) suggestions for the future development of school leaders and leadership; and 6) key connections between coaching and leading.

6.1. Traits, Skills, and Dispositions

Our first question asked participants to reflect on the traits, skills, and dispositions that transferred from their coaching to their school leadership. Most participants responded by speaking about all three and did not make any distinction between traits, skills, and disposition. All participants spoke about their ability to be resilient and take risks, as well as their experiences of learning from failure and overcoming disappointment. Other participants talked about how being a reflective learner can inspire growth for the team, which required the coaches

to respect both themselves and their team. Other comments focused on the self-discipline needed to achieve goals: To do this in elite sports, participants argued that one must be detail-oriented, humble, transparent, adaptable, knowledgeable, and able to take criticism.

One concept that came up repeatedly was building trust with your team. As one participant stated, “You have to have trust among your team and staff, and this comes from your skills, attitude, and disposition.” Many participants connected building trust with their focus on relationships. They were also clear that in sports and in a school setting, the relationships you build with your team or staff will depend on the progress you can make with achieving goals and increasing performance. One participant stated, “I am always planning, and, in this planning, I am being specific and deliberate with my decisions and then being transparent.” Another participant noted, “A positive mindset is always needed to show others that you are about growth, which means there will sometimes be difficult changes and courageous conversations”.

All participants also made comments about having high expectations. For example, one participant stated, “As in sports, you have to expect a lot and know how to support them to achieve the expectations.” These comments led to participants identifying another trait: the ability to have courageous conversations with their staff about difficult topics when upholding high expectations. One participant gave the example of having difficult conversations when he had to cut players from the team who had worked hard but still had to be cut. The participants agreed that courageous conversations are challenging but necessary and they felt their experiences of delivering important and uncomfortable information was a valued skill with which they have seen many other school leaders struggle.

6.2. Perceived Benefits from Coaching Experience

The second question asked participants to describe the benefits of their coaching experiences that helped them in their leadership. All participants agreed that they are leaders today because of their sports coaching backgrounds. More specifically, participants commented on being goal-focused and able to execute a plan. For example, one participant stated, “I know how to set goals, and I can achieve these goals. This is what coaches do all the time.” In addition to this goal-oriented focus, participants also described a developmental focus on themselves and their team. For example, one participant explained:

I see who needs what to develop, and I can start planning. I differentiate their needs and focus on planning how to provide support and pressure for them to be their best. I am then explicit and detailed in my plan and hold each of my staff or team members to high expectations.

This comment was reflective of the general attitude among participants and exemplified that a coach, like a leader, must know their team and provide an individual plan for each member of the team to develop and be their best. Some

even offered their conceptual framework for leading, including one participant who stated that for development, you “manage, act, plan and carry out.” Many of the participants again commented on the importance of knowing their team and building relationships and trust, including one who said that “dealing with failure and disappointment is a team effort, and when you know your team because of the relationships with them, then you can support improved performance.” Another participant succinctly described the importance of relationships: “You cannot coach them until you know them.” In terms of challenges, many participants commented on the motivation differences between high-performance athletes and school staff. They stated that learning how to motivate school staff was a new skill they had to learn, but they attributed their ability to do so to their previous experience in demanding performance-oriented contexts and their psychological adaptability.

In the world of sport, [Jensen \(2008\)](#) noted that effective coaches have sophisticated skills for building trust, effective communication, and leading teams and individuals to higher performance levels. The participants felt they had developed sophisticated skills for communicating and interacting with people, and they presented themselves with a high level of self-efficacy when speaking about their relationship-building skills.

6.3. Leadership Approach

Participants were asked if they had a specific type of leadership style. Unequivocally, all agreed that they used a team approach, were goal-oriented, and always lead by example. Some felt that their leadership approach or style should always be based on the context and people. Based on our analysis, their leadership style was focused on developmental bias, which [Jensen \(2008\)](#) described as “a concern for the whole person and an individual’s development as a human being” ([Jensen, 2008: p. 15](#)), as well as servant leadership, which is a leadership approach that is focused on the followers needs. [Northouse \(2008\)](#) explains, “leaders should be attentive to the needs of followers, empower them, and help them develop their full human capacities” (p. 336). The participants saw their leadership role as serving their people so that they could become the best they could be. For example, one participant stated, “I am always looking to help my staff become their best; the better they are the better we are”. Another added, “I am there to help the team become their best and that means that I too have to make sacrifices and share the success and disappointments”.

6.4. Role of Emotional Intelligence

We asked participants how their coaching backgrounds influenced their emotional intelligence, specifically their ability to understand and manage 1) the emotions of the people they lead and 2) their own emotions.

6.4.1. Understanding and Managing the Emotions of Others

All participants reflected on their responsibility as a coach: to manage their ath-

letes' emotions towards ideal performance and to support them in their development by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. One participant described this as "being both the pressure and the support." Another commented, "Sometimes you give the pat on the back or the kick in the behind, and you need to figure out which is needed... them taking ownership of their actions my support is also needed." One participant described this balance in terms of management: "Some people need to be micromanaged, others need minimal management, and others need to feel empowered. You must know what everyone needs to be their best." In general, participants understood leadership as requiring them to have a high level of emotional intelligence, and an ability to deftly identify the needs of each person and adapt accordingly.

6.4.2. Managing Their Own Emotions

The participants described self-knowledge as being as crucial as knowing others. Emotional intelligence suggests that people who are more sensitive to their emotions and the impact of their emotions on others will be leaders who are more effective (Northouse, 2022: p. 101). For example, one participant stated, "You must be able to control your emotions in times of crisis or stressful situation. Leaders who can control their emotions while leading others are critical, particularly in times of crisis and high-stakes environments". The participants agreed that they had much practice from their elite sports backgrounds that presented them with practice in high-stakes competitive situations. One participant explained, "emotions are high, and calmness is necessary".

6.5. Developing Future School Leaders and Leadership

At the end of the interview, we asked participants to give their opinions on how to develop future leaders. Specifically, we asked them to make suggestions for future leadership preparation and development. The most common response was that leaders need experience. For example, one participant stated, "Leaders need more experience, not baptism by fire." Another participant advocated for "more day-to-day experience. There is no substitute for experience. Just as in sport, to improve, you need to practice. You need to play the game." Another commented that "some skills are just difficult to learn, especially in a course. For example, dealing with disappointment". Many participants stated that leadership needs to be developed over time, not over a few years, through professional development courses. One participant commented, "Principal professional development should be diversified and individualized. It should be what we do for our students in learning—diversified! Principals are all different, and they need diversified training as well".

6.6. Participants' Key Connections between Coaching and Leading

At the end of the interview, we asked participants for their final comments related to their key connections between coaching and leading. The comments reflected many key leadership traits and mantras found in the literature on school

leadership. These comments were mainly focused on learning and team building. For example:

- Learning is a continuum, so know what each person needs and put a plan in place.
- Always plan, act, observe, and reflect.
- Trust yourself and learn with your team.
- Create a team and learn how to manage and lead your team successfully.
- Some leadership skills are hard to teach or learn. Adopt a team mentality and work as a team.

One participant concluded, “Coaching is a skill I developed throughout my life. Therefore, developing leaders and one’s leadership should be developed over a long time.” This participant suggested that perhaps leadership preparation programs and development have adopted a narrow view of leadership development rather than considering it as a long-term process.

7. Discussion and Recommendations

7.1. Discussion

The main objective of this study was to collect the perspectives of current or previous school leaders who had previously been elite high-level sports coaches on how their sports coaching experiences helped them in their leadership. Our results showed that the participants held specific traits, skills, and dispositions that they felt were relevant and transferred to their school leadership role and that made them better leaders. We learned that they are goal-setters and deliberate planners with sophisticated skills who are highly focused on achieving goals. They are disciplined, seek knowledge, self-reflect, and learn from their failures. They use a developmental performance approach, have high expectations, and always plan for others to become their best. They are willing to take risks and have developed resilience in the face of challenges and failures. They are humble about their wins and will give support to and credit their team. Collectively, these traits, skills, and dispositions are what the participants felt made them effective school leaders. Our participants’ understandings of the relationship between their coaching and their leadership reflected Whitmore’s (2009) argument that coaching is about “unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance and helping them to learn rather than teaching them” (Whitmore, 2009).

Our findings also reflected the personal resources (cognitive, social, and psychological) contained in the OLF. The participants described using problem-solving expertise and focusing on systems thinking. In terms of social resources, the participants were clear that the high-pressure competitive environments in their coaching experiences helped them to act in emotionally appropriate ways. As for psychological, participants described working with elite athletes who demanded excellence and needed positive support to perform under pressure using optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, and proactivity. One area that par-

ticipants described as differing between sport coaching and school leading was the level of motivation among their followers. In high-level sports, the athletes are highly motivated, whereas in a school environment, they may or may not have a highly motivated staff. In these situations, they would triage and assess the context and change their approach to goal setting and achievement according to what was needed.

7.2. Recommendations

The second objective of our study was to discover new areas of focus that can help develop leadership development programs that prepare effective future leaders. Based on the data, we identified four main areas: 1) an ability to set and achieve goals; 2) be a team member; 3) practice, practice, practice; and 4) focus on building self-efficacy.

7.2.1. An Ability to Set and Achieve Goals

All participants had a robust developmental focus or bias (Jensen, 2008). The participants repeatedly talked about not only achieving goals but also knowing how to develop the team or the individual to achieve the goals. This developmental focus, which we also concluded, is interconnected with the processes involved with setting and achieving goals. Throughout the interviews, the participants emphasized four main ideas necessary for achieving goals: 1) effective communication, 2) knowing how to build trusting relationships, 3) practice dealing with failure and disappointment, and 4) how to approach courageous conversations with their staff through the lens of a development focus. These ideas speak to knowing how to set goals and the skills, ability, and disposition to carry out them.

7.2.2. Being a Team Member

The participants consistently talked about how to develop their team and each team member. As school leaders, the participants often viewed their staff as their team, and they interchangeably referred to their staff members as team members. In general, the participants used a developmental approach, which is unsurprising given that as an elite high-level sports coach, it is their job to support athletes in their focus on becoming better. They all described relationships and trust as necessary for the team to achieve goals. They also spoke consistently about supporting staff members on an individual level—whether they needed support or pressure. The consensus was that working with each team member to become their best was the solution to helping everyone in the school support student success.

7.2.3. Practice, Practice, Practice

Data from this study suggested that people with elite high-level sports coaching experience prior to school-level leadership had more practice at being an effective leader. All the participants agreed that their life-long experiences with sport and coaching led them to become school leaders, and that leaders need practice.

They spoke about other school leader colleagues without coaching backgrounds who had difficulty transitioning from being teacher to being school leader; the participants felt their experiences in elite-level coaching prepared them for the public demand and exposure of being a school leader.

Participants recommended that future leaders need opportunities to practice their roles. These comments about their life-long experiences made us question the role that experience plays in leadership development and whether emerging leaders have enough experiential opportunities. As one participant stated, leadership should not be “baptism by fire”. These findings have directed us to question the length of leadership preparation programs and the opportunities within these programs to practice leadership. For example, a short-term professional learning course focused on sport-minded leadership or coaching leadership ([Growth Coaching International, 2022](#)) would not yield the same ability an elite-level sports coach has acquired over a lifetime of sports involvement and many years of coaching. However, leaders still can learn about aspects of coaching as a form of leadership in an ongoing capacity, even though decades of experience cannot be replicated in a professional development setting. Learning to lead like a coach requires experiential experiences over time, and therefore, leaders need practice, practice, practice.

7.2.4. Focus on Building Self-Efficacy

According to the work of [Bandura \(1977\)](#), self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in their capacity to execute the behaviors necessary to produce a specific performance. Since then, there have been many variations on how to describe self-efficacy—for example, the belief an individual has in their ability to do the job ([Abu-Tineh et al., 2011](#)). [Goker \(2006\)](#) put forward the idea that a person who believes in being able to be a source of causation can live a more active and self-determined life. The commonalities among definitions of self-efficacy are about a person’s belief in their own ability to accomplish tasks and influence others through effort and persistence. Our participants had high levels of self-efficacy, and based on our data it seems that their coaching experiences were at least partially responsible for developing it.

The findings from this study support the notion that the principles of coaching-leadership could add value to leadership preparation programs. However, as one participant said, “Sport-minded people are different.” Based on our participants’ dispositions and high levels of self-efficacy, we are cautious to expect that short periods of professional development or a short-term coaching session would foster such a change in a person’s disposition, beliefs, and values. As participants explained, their traits, skills, and disposition took a lifetime of sports and coaching involvement—any meaningful changes would have to be developed over time.

8. Conclusion

Our findings confirmed that prior elite coaching experience influenced the lea-

dership style of—and had transferable benefits for—those individuals who went on to hold positions of school leadership. Based on this data, our findings have the potential to inform meaningful changes to leadership development programs. Specifically, these changes could include adopting a program framework has a strong focus on performance development and increasing experiential learning opportunities for emerging school leaders to practice leadership: building a team, practicing resilience, learning from failure, embracing a positive mindset, focusing on setting goals and practicing how to achieve them, and supporting individuals as a part of building the team’s capacity to achieve the goals. Therefore, our central actionable taken away from this research is that leadership preparation programs should intentionally include many opportunities to develop and specifically practice leading a team. To this effect, the concept of coaching-leadership would be beneficial for guiding emerging school leaders as part of the preparation programs and during their initial transfer to school leadership roles. Building confidence in their leadership with more practice can help increase their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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