

Full Length Research Paper

Leadership, Women in Sport, and Embracing Empathy

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Leadership has frequently employed sport stories and metaphor to exemplify attributes and attitudes that leaders should embrace in order to succeed. Competitive sport entered educational contexts in elite British boarding schools for the very purpose of providing training for future political and corporate leaders. As such, the paradigms for leadership reproduced through sport metaphors have held on to traditional, masculine views of leadership. Yet, these paradigms are outdated and do not fit the values embraced by twenty-first century leadership concepts. New sport metaphors are needed. This article begins the task of shaping new perspectives about leadership from the sport world. Specifically, attitudes and practices of high-performance female ultrarunners provide prime examples of the new lessons for leadership, focusing on empathy as one of the crucial aspects of successful leadership for today.

Keywords: leadership, sport, untrarunners

Introduction

Within the context of twenty-first century leadership, the lessons learned from sport and the analogies supported may be outdated and contrary to contemporary purposes. Sport has historically been a site for (male) leadership development and continues to provide metaphorical significance within the context of today's leadership. The unquestioned competitive ideals in sport, which reflect predominantly masculine ideals (Anderson, 2010; Messner 1992, 2007), facilitate their reproduction in today's leadership context. Consider the fact that the corporate world takes on the language of sport. For instance, the development of the corporate coach and references that leaders should be more like coaches is not uncommon (Behavioral Coaching Institute, 2005; Corporate Coach U, 2002). Organizations must win the contract and compete for market share. Underlying such attitudes and nomenclature is the concept that competition remains a contest in which only one person or team can prevail. It is a mindset, which is grounded in the assumption of scarcity and the idea that competitors (corporations) are all against one another, vying for the limited reward (profit).

Yet, twenty-first leadership ideals are grounded in very different assumptions and need new sport stories and metaphors to illuminate key aspects. For instance, wholeness and

interconnectedness (Gardiner, 2006, 2008, 2009) are fundamental concepts of transcendent leadership. Gardiner (2009) suggested that interconnectedness should refer not only to relationships within organizations, but also exist across boundaries and on higher levels such as planet. This perspective is one of abundance; that is, it is the view that we are connected on levels that should take into account the whole "web of life" (Capra, 1996, p. 295) in order for us all to flourish. It is a mentality of working with others for the reward on some higher level, not against others (Gerzon, 2006). The perspective taken in this article is that stories and metaphor are powerful ways to clarify meaning (Zacko-Smith, 2007). The aim here is to highlight the typical sport metaphor present in leadership, deconstruct underlying assumptions, and provide alternate ways of viewing sport stories. Such a perspective is important in order to take new lessons from sport in order to elucidate contemporary perspectives on leadership. To provide an entrée into how new metaphors from sport can emerge, this article highlights the attitudes and practices of high-performance female ultrarunners and the role empathy plays in their successes.

The Outdated View of Sport as Training and Metaphor for Leadership

In the late nineteenth century, elite British boys boarding schools established sports programs for several reasons; but primarily participation in sports was said to help young boys, who were to become the nation's business and political leaders, learn to negotiate rules and develop leadership (Light-Shields & Light-Bredemeier, 1995). In essence, the game or competition existed as a socializing process. During this socialization process, it was expected that boys would learn to be tough and thus resilient to the demands of leadership in a highly competitive political and corporate world. While the aims of sport in this context highlighted psychological attributes, the actual experience remained highly physical. In this way, sport experiences, as distinct from the classroom, allowed competitive mindsets and the lessons therein to become embodied.

Once embodied, assumptions about competition became part of the cultural fabric. A good example of this phenomenon is a story Collins (2001) recounted about a highly successful cross-country coach. The point of the story was that the coach was able to identify one simple vision for the team. Articulating this vision allowed the athletes to do what they could do best and generate their own enthusiasm for wanting to win the state championships, which they did. Collins (2001) used this example to support one of his main points: when leaders articulate in simple terms where they can be the best, they will move from good to great, outperforming their competitors. Certainly, having a clear, simple vision has purchase in leadership literature (Gardner, 1990; Kouzes & Posner, 2007); however the unquestioned practices that result from this vision are worthy of closer scrutiny.

A critical examination of the team's practices revealed underlying assumptions that run counter to those of various forms of twenty-first century leadership. The cross-country team's simple vision was to go fast at the end. Every athlete aimed to run the last mile of the race faster than the previous miles. To measure this, athletes counted how many competitors they passed in the last mile of the race. For every competitor they passed, coaches awarded *head bones* to each runner. These head bones were "beads in the shape of shrunken skulls, which the kids made into necklaces and bracelets" (Collins, 2001, p. 206). Embedded in these symbolic practices is the idea that competitors must be completely vanquished. Once competitors became shrunken skulls, they were then worn as trophies. While this practice may be productive in terms of results, one critique of this practice resides in its outdated underlying assumption about success.

This practice supports an ego-centered approach to individual or team success. Furthermore, it reproduces the scarcity mindset about competition as well as furthers the idea that competitors are enemies. Indeed, while sport stories such as this may provide inspiration to corporate leaders on one level,

sport is notorious for creating in groups and out groups (Anderson, 2010). While this sport metaphor was intended to promote the power of vision, the embodied practice of head bones served to support an in group/out group mentality.

The issue with an in group/out group mentality is that it creates mindsets which are void of empathy, an acknowledged important skill for leaders today (Choi, 2007; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Garner, 2009). The unquestioned practice of wearing head bones exemplified the lack of empathy for competitors. Empathy is defined as being able to feel and understand another's feelings (Badea & Pana, 2010; Garner, 2009). Certainly, if the athletes felt empathy, they may have questioned the symbolism of their head bones practice. Indeed, as a society, we have come to assume that competition implies being against another. For instance, *compete* means "to strive against another or others to attain a goal" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2006, p. 376). Despite this definition, empathy has legitimate grounding in the word "competition," which stems from the Latin root, *compere*, meaning "to strive *with*." The relational aspect of "with" is quite different from "against" and connotes interdependence. Ultimately, competition cannot exist without competitors; therefore, competitors literally enter into a mutually agreed relationship in which they help each other become the best each can be (Feezelle, 2004). From this perspective, empathy can develop since competitors have clear understandings of each other's experiences. In other words, empathy would be directed not only towards teammates, but also towards competitors. Such an understanding of empathy opens up new ways of viewing sport as a metaphor and provides new leadership lessons.

Higher Level Goals Enhance Empathic Relationships

While sports may seem like an unusual place to look for examples of empathy, ultrarunning provides a few clear examples of how empathy leads to success. In short, ultrarunning is any race longer than a marathon, but runners typically race distances of 50k, 50 miles, 100k, and 100 miles. Most ultra races take place on forest or mountain trails, defined by uneven terrain and significant elevation loss/gain (Brannen, 2006). Over the past 20 years the number of ultra races held in North America has tripled (Medinger, 2009; Milroy, 2001). More importantly, the growth of women participating has increased six-fold (Medinger, 2009). While only comprising 30% of the total participants (Medinger, 2009), high-performance female ultrarunners do very well relative to the men. When asked about the competition in a recent race, the male winner said, "I knew there were so many talented guys and gals, that I'd have to run my own race" (Trent, 2007, p. 22). In this comment there is the explicit notion that ultrarunning is a gender-integrated event. In other words, men and women not only participate together, but they also race together. Additionally, ultrarunning situates itself as a unique sub-culture, one that distinguishes itself from marathon and triathlon by having less focus on a competitive ethos (Allison, 2001; Brannen, 2006; Massa, 2006; Medinger, 2009; Milroy, 2001). Yet, it not so much a matter of what ultrarunners avoid

as much as it is a matter of what they strive to create. In short, ultrarunners express that there is camaraderie and a strong sense of community among competitors (Hanold, 2008; Helliker, 2010). Women are often noted as embodying this ethos and unlike many other sports, embodying the true athlete. For instance, one male runner noted, “What else can be said? She passes you coming and going, she is all smiles, and friendly and totally at ease, a true athlete” (Rodatz, 2007, p. 48).

Specifically, it appears as though the challenge of running these long distances over difficult terrain positions ultrarunning as a sport in which community develops (Hanold, 2008). In particular, high-performance female ultrarunners believe that this higher goal brings them together as competitors in positive ways. One competitor mentions the support they give each other in ultrarunning. She says “it’s a very supportive environment, particularly among women [and] I feel happy when women I know perform well” (Hanold, 2008, p. 123). As such the competitive drive coexists with the fun of being together. As another women notes, “whether I’m racing other women or not, it is more social, and I like that, even though I hate the stereotype sometimes of a woman being more social and being more supportive of one another” (p. 123). Finally, these high-performance female ultrarunners view competition as performing to one’s potential with the help of others to achieve those goals. For example, one of the top performers says, “I don’t know if it’s being a woman or it’s just who I am [but, for me] it’s all about just being out there doing our best and working with each other” (p. 123). The larger challenge of completing an ultra race with uncertainties that abound creates a sense of togetherness, a sense of *with* in such a way that the relative placing of competitors falls as a secondary success. Because competitors have this larger goal in mind and recognize the enormity of the task at hand, empathy develops through this sense of interconnectedness.

Empathy has a significant place within the leadership literature, especially in light of twenty-first century leadership concepts such as interconnectedness and wholeness (Gardiner 2006, 2008). Scholars (Badea & Pana, 2010; Choi, 2007; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Garner, 2009; Jordan & Ashkanasy, 2006) affirm that empathy is an invaluable skill for leaders in unstable and changing environments that characterize today’s world (Friedman, 2006). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee defined empathy as “feeling the emotions of others [and] understanding their perspectives” (as cited in Badea & Pana, 2010, p. 77). Empathy is the “foundation that builds trusting relationships” (Garner, 2009, p. 84) and “makes resonance possible” (Badea & Pana, 2010, p. 77). Choi (2007) posited that empathy allows for shared feelings, which in turn produces “a feeling of oneness, an interconnectedness” (p. 27). Such interconnectedness brings forth cooperation and trust across the organization (Garner, 2009). Yet, this empathy is framed within the context of specific organizations and how this skill might enhance organizational effectiveness.

The lesson from ultrarunning may be that viewing challenges from much broader perspectives would lead to empathic understanding. If companies could see what their industries face as larger challenges, then perhaps they might see ways to work together to solve larger problems. Gerzon (2006) illustrated how solutions to worldwide problems can be solved when leaders cross boundaries, develop insights about others and take perspectives much broader than their own. Gerzon framed this idea in the context of competition. He said, “winning does not mean annihilating one’s adversaries; it means raising the level of competition” (2006, p. 204). For Gerzon, competition might entail corporations fighting for market share. He noted that often the corporations do not “choose to seek higher ground. They are *compelled* to seek it” (p. 204). In other words, empathy results when broader tasks or challenges are addressed. Certainly, this has overlap with the tenets of goal setting and creating vision, but what is important here, is that such actions are not simply relegated to a single organization. Empathy can extend across organizational boundaries and in the context of competition when higher-level challenges are identified.

Empathy is Embodied: Cognitive Skills Alone Won’t Make a Difference

In interviews with high-performance female ultrarunners, the support expressed for each other was pervasive (Hanold, 2008). The striking quality of this support was that it was embodied, a distinctly felt sense (Hanold, 2008; Stelter, 2000). For instance, one runner noted that “you’re running across streams that are knee deep and going up snow and mud and there’s lots of challenges out there . . . it really bonds us” (Hanold, 2008, p. 184). This connected sensation is almost palpable at 100-mile pre-race meetings according to another runner who explains that there is a “quiet, silent, unknown respect and understanding” (p. 184). Thus, the shared experiences of difficult terrain and long distances create a physical bond that aids in the production of empathy.

Indeed, research shows that empathy has a biological component (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008), lending support for the idea that empathy is primarily developed through non-verbal bodily cues (Badea & Pana, 2010; Garner, 2009; Johnson, 2009). Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) showed that “when we consciously or unconsciously detect someone else’s emotions through their actions, our mirror neurons reproduce those emotions. Collectively, these neurons create an instant sense of shared experience” (p. 76). While these researchers describe this particular empathic response as social intelligence, the significance that these experiences are embodied clearly makes the case that an intellectual understanding or mental, attitudinal shift in views towards others is not sufficient for empathy to take place. Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) argued that leadership is “less about mastering situations—or even mastering social skill sets—than about developing a genuine interest in and talent for fostering positive feelings in the people whose cooperation and support you need” (p. 76).

For the ultrarunners, support comes from competitors to a large extent, the only other people who truly understand the task at hand at the deepest physical level. Sport stories that emphasize the connection felt among all players can enhance our understanding of empathy as embodied. Perhaps this aspect of empathy also helps frame the idea of interconnectedness and wholeness. Given that we are of mind, body, and spirit, it follows that connection on all these levels might be aspects of empathy. To be sure, both the female ultrarunners' experiences and research on the biological aspect of empathy encourage the view that empathy is an embodied experience and requires more attention than simply intellectual understanding.

Empathy Raises Everyone's Performance

The connection and camaraderie high-performance female ultrarunners feel results in specific practices of caring that raises everyone to higher levels of performance. When speaking of ultrarunners in general, one runner commented, "I think that everybody is out there for everybody. I think anybody out there would do anything for you to help you see success" (Hanold, 2008, p. 121). The women stated that they often helped each other during the race by running together for hours, waiting for each other, and encouraging each other. One runner's comments illustrate this concept well:

It really is whomever is feeling the best that day is going to win, but we work together, you know, for the first half of the race or the first three-quarters of the race or whatever it is. And I really feel like we're helping each other out . . . at the end of the day I do want to do my best. I want to get out there and if I think I have the potential to run a fast time, I'm going to pursue that. The only way I really think I'm going to be successful is working together with other girls at that level. I think that that makes all the difference in a race. (Hanold, 2008, p. 124)

Also, ultrarunning allows pacers in the longer events. A pacer is someone who is allowed to run with a competitor, encouraging him/her throughout the final miles of longer races. Stories abound of pacers and competitors helping out each other through the nights and difficult last miles (Hanold, 2008). In other words, embedded in the practice of ultrarunning is the idea that relationships matter. Ultrarunning is not entirely a solitary endeavor. In fact, these women firmly believe that by helping each other, they are able to produce their best results. In this instance, the challenge of ultrarunning produces significant empathy, that competitors know that helping each other out will result in more of them succeeding (Hanold, 2008). Thus, in this sport context, the connections between empathy and performance begin to emerge in ways that have implications for leadership.

Indeed, Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) suggested that empathy as it relates to social intelligence might be considered a soft side of business. Yet, as they remind, "as new ways of

scientifically measuring human development start to bear out these theories and link them directly with performance, the so-called soft side of business begins to look not so soft after all" (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008, p. 81). It appears as though, even when personal perspectives differ significantly, empathy provides the means through which others feel understood, (Badea & Pana, 2010). This connection is powerful because it is visceral rather than intellectual. As a result positive attitudes develop and people in organizations become more committed to the task at hand (Garner, 2009). In turn, this commitment improves performance of individuals as well as that of the organization. Such connections are highlighted in resonant leadership literature in which resonant leaders connect with others in ways that result "in people working in sync with each other . . . help[ing] us to become the best that we can be" (Boyatzis & McKee, 2006, p. 16). Beyond shared goals and group identity, positive relationships produced through empathy move people past tolerance and improves relationships (Badea & Pana, 2010), group cohesion and resultant performance (Garner, 2009).

The illustration of the link between empathy and performance for these female ultrarunners can help leaders visualize the powerful role of empathy. First, empathy takes on a serious and practical role for the ultrarunners. In addition, to making it more safe and fun (Hanold, 2008), empathy raises performances among competitors. Second, despite the fact that they are competing for place, this experience brings forth varied understandings of competition, ones that are less narrow than in traditional sport examples. Each of the high-performance female ultrarunners held different views about competition (Hanold, 2008), but were able to maintain these unique views while being supportive of each other because of empathy. Thus, this sport example shows that despite having different intellectual beliefs about competition, empathy produces positive feelings of connection that promote working together on a deeper, more powerful level, raising the performance of everyone along the way.

Concluding Comments

While sports has historically been connected to masculine understandings of competition and leadership, twenty-first century leadership ideals such as empathy require different sport stories that illustrate different lessons. The experiences and attitudes of high-performance female ultrarunners provide a springboard to new sport metaphors and illustrative stories, which draw attention to the value of empathy and lend credibility to this soft side of business. Indeed, with the focus on empathy, these sport stories highlight competition as an interconnected endeavor, in which support from other competitors—as well as those on the periphery—abounds because of a deep mutual understanding of the formidable task at hand. Furthermore, this support arises from an embodied experience, which enables empathic responses. Finally, these responses promote people helping each other within competition, allowing these high-performance female runners

to achieve their best. In the quickly changing corporate environment of today, organizational structures are becoming more horizontal and flexible (Friedman, 2006). As such, twenty-first century organizations need leaders who are flexible and open to change. With shifting goals and flexible organizational structures, strong connections and positive relationships become even more important as people work together in organizations to respond quickly to changes and move forward on tasks at hand. As suggested by the sport stories of female ultrarunners, empathic understandings provide the grounding for working together in order to handle adverse and variable conditions, resulting in success. As such, embracing empathy may be one of the new leadership lessons from sport that warrants consideration by twenty-first century leaders.

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