Background and Inquiry Rationale

In their discussion of the importance of leadership in sport, Lim and Ployhart (2004) referred to leadership as having, “its most importance consequences for teams.” (610) Cha, Lam, and Schaubroeck (2007) made reference to the importance of value and belief systems that affect the performance and moreover, the affects that said values and beliefs of the team leader have on the performance (positively or negatively) of the team. These values and beliefs have effect the development of the team culture or spirit. (1022) As such, the importance of the team leader or coach in the development of a positive team culture that leads to, yet is also caused by, the individual motivation of team members, is tantamount team success.

Team leaders, or in the case of this inquiry the team coach, must to remain reflective and seek out meaningful feedback from players, fellow coaches, other stakeholders resulting in constant and continual reflection on coaching / leadership behaviors. Former European and Olympic Basketball Coach Sandro Gamba placed a high emphasis on such reflective behavior saying, “The key is for the coach to be able to listen, minute by minute, to question himself and understand himself…to think clearly.” (Guenzi and Ruta, C5. p. 68) In order to be a successful team leader, the leader must develop a positive team culture or spirit and be able to motivate individual team members and the team as a whole. This can be best done through the building of positive
interpersonal relationships with individual team members and in doing so, the leader will cause the team to demonstrate positive team characteristics that signify team excellence.

For the purpose of this inquiry, positive interpersonal coach – player relationships are characterized as high in what Wubbels and Brekelmans (2005) termed as Influence and Proximity. (8) High influence is characterized by Leadership whose characteristics include: organization, setting tasks, structure, and holding attention. (9) High levels of proximity include: assisting, demonstrating interest, being friendly, joking and inspiring confidence. Claessens et. al. (2016) go on to remark that these positive relationships extend beyond the classroom and are characterized by, “repeated interactions,” and that these relationships are, “reciprocal by nature,” (1) Specifically in terms of high – school athletics, these relationships are built inside and outside the classroom, with the majority occurring outside the classroom, 53%. (6) They found that teachers and students created areas outside of the classroom where these, “informal interactions,” (12) occurred. This inquiry focuses on these other spaces within a high school where these relationships are built; that atmosphere being the Junior Boy’s High School Basketball Team.

In the case of this inquiry, the team being evaluated will be a team of 12 high school basketball players that range in age from 14 to 16 and from grades 9 to 11. The team has been together since the beginning of September, has three team appointed captains, three student managers, one Head Coach and one Assistant Coach.

The role of the captains is to demonstrate leadership on the court and to hold team members accountable for their play, as well as in certain situations, deliver important
technical and motivational messages to team members. The managers assist in the running of practices, keeping statistics, taking video, and assisting the coach in reflecting on and evaluating team performance. The assistant coach on the other hand plays a different role on the team. The assistant coach with regards to this team has a more ‘hands off’ role in that he runs one practice a week and focuses mostly on skill development, rather than the development of team spirit or culture. It is the view of this inquiry that the Assistant Coach has not played a significant role in developing team standards, spirit or motivation. These important aspects of team performance instead lie strongly with the Head Coach as he interacts with players inside and outside of practice both as a group and individually on an interpersonal level, runs the vast majority of practices (often between 6 and 8 hours per week) and has actively taken on the role of team leader.

The team’s season officially begins November 27th 2017 and as such this inquiry seeks to evaluate the team’s development of team spirit, interdependence and motivation at this critical junction prior to the beginning of the season. This evaluation will be done through the application of differing aspects of team leadership to the team’s current state. The inquiry will apply the Characteristics of Team Excellence as outlined by Larson & LaFasto via Northhouse (2016) and the micro portion of Guenzi and Ruta’s New Model for Team Leadership.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the team leader’s application of team leadership theory, player responses to designated questionnaire issued anonymously by team
managers will be collected and compared to a similar questionnaire by the team leader. After all responses are collected and evaluated the team leader will use appropriate leadership literature to reflect on and make recommendations regarding his team leadership in order to improve team performance.

**Applied Leadership Overview**

Northhouse (2016) defined leadership as a process, one that involves interaction and influence between leader and followers, with an emphasis placed on the growth of both parties involved. (6) Success can be based measured by a number of factors, one of which is learning or growth, which can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Northhouse went on to define leadership as occurring in groups whereby the leader influences members to achieve commonly predetermined, goals. (6) However, leaders also need to be nimble enough to shift goals and expectations often as the process of leadership is fluid and ever changing, as leadership involves interaction with diverse individuals that have different needs, abilities, and characteristics.

This focus of this essay is on team leadership, its application and effectiveness in a high school coaching setting. The essay inquiry seeks to apply team leadership, defined by Northhouse as, “process orientated,” (364) involving increased, “communication skills,” (366) and involving the leader’s ability to assess and evaluate, “the situation that the team is experiencing.” (366) As such, team leadership is inherently situational. Situational leadership involves a leader’s ability to evaluate different circumstances and, “adapt his or her style to the demands,” (93) of each situation. In this way team
leadership is leader focused, yet involves a very high amount of interaction between follower or team member and team leader.

The study’s first purpose is to assess and evaluate the degree to which the coach fostered Larson and LaFasto’s (1989) Characteristics of Team Excellence in his team. Larason and LaFasto outlined eight Characteristics of Team Excellence that are used to measure, “a team’s health.” (368) These characteristics were as follows: (1) Clear and elevating goal, (2) Results driven structure, (3) Competent team members, (4) Unified commitment, (5) Collaborative climate, (6) Standards of excellence, (7) External support and recognition and (8) Principled leadership. As the focus of the study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the coach in implementing team leadership, the success of the team in meeting these characteristics provides an empirical means by which to measure the coach’s success or lack thereof of his or her ability to implement effectively, team leadership.

While Northhouse (2016) used the Hill Model for Team Leadership a model of the implementation of team leadership theory, Guenzi and Ruta in their book Leading Teams (2013) constructed a new model of team leadership by applying leadership strategies from the world of business to the world of sport. Guenzi and Ruta advocated for a two-fold model of team leadership. The first section of the model (Figure 1) is represented as a macro take on team or organizational management (stakeholders that exist outside of the team being coached i.e. fans, the CEO, perhaps the principal of a school), while the lower portion of the model operates on a micro or individual/group
team leadership (leadership of the stakeholders directly involved in the team being coached) level.

![A New Model of Team Leadership](image)

This essay will focus on the micro section of the leadership model. Specifically the study will focus on the degree to which the coach has fostered team spirit and motivated effectively both individuals in the team and the team as a whole. The study will judge the degree to which the coach has fostered team spirit according the following criteria and has motivated individuals according to the motivational toolkit set forth by Guenzi and Ruta. For the purpose of this paper team spirit refers to the leader’s ability to, “optimize intra-team interactions” and manage effectively, “interdependent activities assigned to various team members,” resulting in positive responses by team members to coach, staff and fellow teammates. (Guenzi and Ruta, C3, p. 20) In order to achieve this shared respect or, “unity of purpose,” team members must have a common and, “overarching goal.” (C3, p. 21) Here path – goal theory places a heavy emphasis the leader setting high standards for his or her followers and on team motivation.
The leader then must choose the appropriate path to which followers must follow in order to overcome obstacles to challenging goals. (Northhouse, 116)

The second section of the model that will be evaluated is the coach’s ability to motivate players individually. Here Guenzi and Ruta offer a comprehensive discussion of motivation and the evaluation of effective motivational strategies. For Guenzi and Ruta motivation is interdependent, meaning that the coach or team leaders must make a series of decisions and though many decisions are individual, these decisions influence and affect other team members. Moreover, motivation is situationally dependent and people focused. It involves the building of interpersonal relationships through placing a high importance on the individual and in doing so promoting cohesion and fostering emotional bonds between team members and team leader. (C5, p. 17) As such, motivational coaching, though individually significant, is impactful on the entire team as it, “serves to enhance the individual and collective efforts of team members and the team as a whole.” (C5, p 1) This essay will utilize appropriate aspects of the motivational toolkit provided by Guenzi and Ruta that include: providing feedback for individuals and the group, establishing team standards, managing rewards and punishments with a focus on consequences rather than punishments, giving personalized attention, and encouraging socialization among players. It is important to note that Guenzi and Ruta’s model was intended for professional sports teams, which is why the macro portion of the model is not applicable to this current evaluation and why aspects of the motivational toolkit have not been included.
Lastly, as has been mentioned above, team leadership is inherently situational, but it is important to note that team leadership, as postulated by Guenzi and Ruta, involves the implementation of multiple leadership theories including but not limited to situational, transformational, team leadership, and path–goal theory. Cruichshank and Collins support this view of a hybrid form of practical leadership saying that leadership in practice differs in its application from its postulation at an, “epistemological” (1200) level. Leadership has, “complex dynamics and contingencies” (1200) that make it impossible to put a one-size fits all label on it. Cruichshank and Collins point out that often the “darker – sides” (1201) of leadership are not in and of themselves so much negative as they are applications of real world situations that require real world solutions. Leadership as postulated by Northhouse is interactive, team leadership is situational and as such sometimes situations demand morally objective behavioral interventions and at times coaching needs is not only supporting, but also highly directive in order to motivate players effectively. (Northhouse, 94)

Focus of Professional Inquiry

The purpose of this inquiry is thus twofold. First in order to measure the success of the leader, the team leader will evaluate his leadership abilities by measuring the team’s success against Larson & LaFasto’s Characteristics of Team Excellence as outlined by Northhouse (2016). Secondly, this inquiry will use these characteristics as a manner in which to measure the performance of the leader in applying the micro portion of Guenzi and Ruta’s (2013) New Team Leadership Model. The results of the team’s feedback in terms of specifically the leader’s abilities to foster team spirit and individually motivate team members will be measured.
Inquiry Results

The Head Manager, a fellow student, handed each player a 14-question questionnaire whose questions were derived from Larson & Lafasto’s Characteristics of Team Excellence. Players responded anonymously to the survey, submitting it to the same manager who then turned the survey over to the coach. Though all sections of the Larson & Lafasto’s Team Excellence Characteristics are represented, due to space constraints only six will be analyzed here. Those characteristics include: Goal Setting, Results Driven Structure, Competent Team Members, Unified Commitment, Collaborative Climate, External Support or Motivation. The results of the survey, including the coach’s response, are listed below (Figure 2) along with the corresponding questions. Furthermore, the coach’s responses were completed prior that of the player and it should also be noted that the nature of the questions were such that to cater to English Language Learners, to which the entirely team is compromised.

Figure 2: Team Feedback Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Q1 – Goal Setting</th>
<th>Q2 – Results Driven Structure</th>
<th>Q4/5 Competent Team Members</th>
<th>Q6 Unified Commitment</th>
<th>Q7/8 Collaborative Climate</th>
<th>Q13 External Support / Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaches Response</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8/8</td>
<td>Defense/Work hard/6:30</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9/9</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5/7</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6/8.5</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7/8</td>
<td>Play Hard</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8/9</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Win</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9/9</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Team Feedback Questionnaire Questions

1. What is our team’s goal?
2. On a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high, rate our team’s communication.
3. On a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high, rate your trust of other members of the team.
4. On a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high, rate your trust of the coach.
5. What is our team’s identity?
6. Do you feel that the coach is honest and open with the team?
7. Do you feel you can be honest with teammates?
8. Do you feel the coach motivates you?
9. What is our team’s goal?

The results of the questionnaire are such that the coach and team demonstrated a similar overall outlook regarding communication, trust, identity, and motivation; however, they have different pre-set goals. Path – goal theory and goal – setting theory emphasize goal – setting as an important aspect of team leadership, that being the leader’s ability to motivate players to achieve challenging pre-set goals. (Guenzi & Ruta, C.5, p. 4)

All players responded contrary to the coach’s response,” Improvement”, with a strong desire to “Win.” There are a number of reasons as to why this was the case, but taking a closer examination of Question 14, may provide an explanation. Question 14 asked individual players “What is one personal goal you have as a player?” Answers to this question varied, ranging from the specific “dunking” and “shooting the three”, to the more general “get better” or “be better.” However, these answers reflect individual player’s desire to improve personally set goals, demonstrating heightened levels of self-efficacy, defined by Bandura as, “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance.” Self-efficacy is a significant factor in the determination of how an individual thinks and acts, strongly influencing motivation.
(Bandura) Guenzi and Ruta emphasized the importance of self and collective efficacy in terms of the group’s shared goals and ability to achieve them. (Guenzi and Ruta C5, p. 57) These two factors have a strong influence on individual motivation, leading to team motivation, culminating in increased team performance.

The questionnaire’s results also highlighted similarities between the coach and player’s assessments of the implementation of team leadership. The players and coach agreed upon the need to improve overall communication. Though both players and coach believe there is a high degree of trust between one another, that trust has not translated into high levels of communication between players. That said, team members and coach did agree on their unified commitment in terms of team identity, external support and motivation with both players and coach having relatively the same team identity (defense and working hard). Both sides also felt motivated or that they motivate well.

Reflection

Guenzi and Ruta identified Team Spirit and Individual Motivation as directly linked to the Credibility of the Leader, leading to heightened Team Performance. The results of the survey indicated a unified commitment to defense and individual improvement. They demonstrated goal interdependence on an individual level to which independent goals are, “mutually compatible,” (Guenzi & Ruta, C5, p. 7) leading to common team goals. Individual improvement then leads to increased team belief in success, presumably leading to improved team performance and subsequently team
success. This further demonstrates that the team leader has instilled a culture of improvement and interdependence within the team.

Players have developed autonomy and a sense of meaning with regards to the task at hand. They have also provided honest and meaningful feedback to the coach, demonstrating elements of positive interpersonal relationships between the coach and players. They have developed a shared belief in terms of team identity and continually use this to motivate themselves and one another.

The coach needs to improve his communication between him and the team, as well as and maybe most importantly, between team members. This communication is at the heart of what Guenzi and Ruta identify as individual and team motivation. The coach could employ a more democratic decision-making style encouraging players to take more of an active role in decision-making. After the culmination of this study, the coach identified this shortcoming and when the offense was having trouble executing, rather than directing them, he allowed them to get together for 30 seconds and attempt to make improvements on their own. The recognizing of the situation and the type of coaching to employ is at the heart of team leadership theory.

Another area of improvement is concerned with the coach’s personal attention to players or people orientation. In order to improve team leadership the coach needs to improve his communication between himself and individual players, specifically the ‘role players’ or ‘the bench’ on the team. Though the coach has developed interpersonal
relationships with each player, improving the degree to which he builds, “cohesion and fosters emotional bonds” leading to improved, “team spirit and the quality of interpersonal relationships,” (Guenzi and Ruta, C5, p.17) he still could work to ensure that each player understands his designated role within the team. If each player has a better understanding of their role, they will be better motivated to perform it and in doing so, lead to improved team performance.

Conclusions

The Characteristics of Team Excellence as put forth by Larson & LaFasto provide coaches an excellent opportunity to evaluate their team’s progression in terms of success. It would be valuable for coaches to conduct surveys regarding team motivation, identity, and communication throughout the year. It provides coaches a clear snapshot of their team leadership performance. If done repeatedly a coach could use such surveys to judge the progress or process of their application of team leadership. Furthermore, it allows the coach to obtain meaningful feedback from players, helping to build interpersonal relationships. By building quality interpersonal relationships, the coach is able to improve communication, interdependence, self and collective efficacy, resulting in enhanced team spirit and motivation.

Guenzi and Ruta’s New Model for Team Leadership provides important areas for coaching reflection and improvement on a micro level. The model allows coaches to test their use of motivation, communication, and apply goal interdependence as well as self and collective efficacy theory to team leadership. Although the model is dedicated to
professional team sports, on a micro level the model can be applied effectively to amateur team sports. However, more research is needed with regards to its application to team amateur sports and specifically high – school level team athletics.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to determine the model’s effectiveness on a macro level, or its team organizational structure, in terms of amateur athletics at the high school level. Guenzi and Ruta emphasize the importance of environmental reputation (reputation inside and outside the organization with various stakeholders) and synchronization of organizational resources (use of scarce resources within and outside the organization) when the coach functions as team or organizational manager. In order for effective application one would have to account for a coach’s inter-dealings with administration, sponsors, and local media as well as their interworking’s with the parents of players, fellow teachers and other students at the school.
Works Cited


