

# **Female Sport Leaders' Perceptions of Leadership and Management: Skills and Attitudes for Success**

Margaret Lovelin & Maylon Hanold, Seattle University

## **Abstract**

*While women have made notable progress in leadership in business corporations, little has changed in the sport industry with still far fewer women than men in senior decision-making positions in sports management. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore what female sport leaders consider important to their development and advancement as a leader in the industry via Kotter's (1990a) framework of leadership and management. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 high-ranking, successful female administrators from organizations spanning the sport industry, including collegiate and professional sport teams, non-profit sport organizations, and sport equipment manufacturing and retail companies. The findings of this research indicate that female sport leaders recognize that leadership and management serve separate but complementary functions in an organization. Despite various capacities to articulate the differences, these women understand leadership and management in ways such that they practice both skills consciously and deliberately according to the context.*

## **Introduction**

The sport market is an expanding industry that hosts more than 49,000 firms and employs over one million people (Humphreys & Ruseski, 2009). As such, the sports industry abounds with opportunities for administrative and leadership positions. Despite these opportunities, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions within sport organizations (Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Coakley, 2009; Evans, 2011; Hovden, 2010; Reinhold, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Strawbridge, 2000). In the non-sport business sector, 51.5% of working women hold management, professional or administrative positions (Evans, 2011). In sport, however, women hold only 34% of all administrative jobs in collegiate athletics, 19.3% of athletic director positions nationwide and less than 9% of the athletic director positions at the Division I level (Acosta & Carpenter, 2000; Burton et al., 2011). Burton, Grappendorf, and Henderson (2011) explain that this trend of inequality holds true across many other administrative positions in a variety of sport contexts. In other words, relative to the general business sector, there are few women in senior decision-making positions in sport management (Acosta & Carpenter, 2000; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Strawbridge, 2000).

Research concerning women leadership in sport has tended to focus on the barriers women face (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Schneider, Stier, Henry, & Wilding, 2010; VanDerLinden, 2004), job inequities (Shaw & Frisby, 2006) and perceptions regarding competency (Burton & Peachey, 2009; Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005). Lack of strong networks (McKay, 1997), minimal influence of these networks (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004) and lack of mentors (Abney, 1991) have been cited as the most prominent barriers women face in moving into sport leadership. Furthermore, research suggests that women in sport organizations

are more likely to be hired into positions with less power, less pay and fewer opportunities for advancement (Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Studies focused on perceptions of competency reveal notable complexity and paradox. Some research shows that when women are in leadership positions they outperform their male counterparts (Pederson & Whisenant, 2005; Whisenant, Pederson, & Obenour, 2002). Other research suggests that women are perceived as having little chance to actually get hired as an athletic director despite perceptions of being just as likely to be successful if given the opportunity (Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011). While these perspectives contribute to our understanding about the lack of women in sport leadership positions and how they are perceived when in leadership positions, there have been few studies that specifically look at what makes women sport leaders successful.

Over the past 15 years, there have been several calls to investigate more deeply how female sport leaders have attained these higher positions and attribute their success. As Sagas and Cunningham (2004) note:

Little is known of what influences the success of athletic administrators as they climb the career ladder. . . an understanding of these career success determinants can prove to be invaluable toward understanding and establishing career theories of women's career progression in sport. (p. 412)

Furthermore, the most knowledgeable resources are the women who currently occupy leadership positions. Strawbridge (2000) reminded, "Obviously, more and more women are making sports administration their careers at higher and higher levels. . . and the women who have persevered and are functioning in these top positions have much to teach us" (pp. 46-48). In particular, Knoppers and Anthonissen (2008) point out, "little is known about how senior managers or executive directors of sport organizations construct the cluster of skills that comprise their work" (p. 94). We assert that understanding the "cluster of skills" is one of the necessary steps to providing guidance for women who are looking to become sport leaders. The notable gap in the literature regarding how female sport leaders become successful within a male dominated industry implies that new directions with respect to studying female sport leaders is warranted.

To learn more about the experiences of female sport leaders, we explored the perceptions of successful female sport leaders, specifically how they perceive the set of skills that helped them attain and maintain success. The present study is part of a larger, theoretically informed qualitative investigation in which female sport leaders were asked to articulate the differences between management and leadership and the relative importance of these skill sets. Along these lines, we asked them to talk about experiences and relationships that they believed helped set them apart as competent leaders. This paper specifically focuses on the skills and attitudes of management and leadership that these women attributed to their success. To this end, this paper is organized in four main parts. First, we highlight what we know about female sport leaders. Second, we expound on the conceptual framework that shaped how we made sense of the "cluster of skills" these women attribute to their upward movement in sport organizations. Next, we present the findings according to our conceptual framework. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and implications for the global sport context. Ultimately, this paper seeks to advance the scholarship on women in sport leadership in two ways. First, we hope to add to our understanding of how female sport leaders achieve success in the complex, fast-paced sport industry. Second, we aim to show how theoretically informed qualitative research can help us understand what successful sport leadership looks like for women at the practical level. These nuanced understandings, while comprising but one aspect

of what matters in women's efforts to gain access to higher ranking sport leadership positions, are needed to help women who want to be in sport leadership positions clarify the skills they need and focus their efforts.

### ***Barriers and the competency paradox: Setting the agenda***

Administrative leaders within sport organizations and governing bodies play a major role in deciding how sport is structured and who gets to participate. Through this decision-making power, these individuals influence and shape the meaning of organized sport and all those involved. Despite the exponential growth in women's participation in sport, women are severely under-represented as high-ranking decision makers in sport organizations compared to their male counterparts. To illustrate, men hold 81% of the athletic director positions nationwide and outnumber women 3 to 1 in lower level administrative positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2000; Burton et al., 2011; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Pfister & Radtke, 2009; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). Concerned with the glaring lack of women in senior level athletic administration positions, researchers have examined this issue from a variety of perspectives (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009).

One of the most prominent barriers that prevent women from advancing in sports organizations is the lack of strategic networking opportunities (McKay, 1997). Sagas and Cunningham (2004) indicate a "differential return" on investments in social capital between men and women. When comparing the determinants of success among male and female athletic administrators, Sagas and Cunningham show that men reap more benefits from their well-established social networks than do women. These findings suggest that not only must women work harder to create these ties, but that these connections also carry less weight and are less influential in determining their success (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012).

Another barrier identified for women who pursue higher-ranking sport leadership positions is gender stereotyping that prevents them from being hired into positions of more responsibility. In a study that used hypothetical vignettes, Burton et al. (2011) show that participants predicted the male candidate to be selected as the athletic director despite the fact that "whether the candidate was male or female was not relevant to perceptions of (potential or actual) success" (Burton et al., 2011, p. 41). For positions of lesser power such as the compliance officer, participants felt that either the male or the female could be hired. For positions viewed as being more suitable to female qualities such as a life skills coordinator, women were perceived as more likely to get the job over their male counterparts. Such research suggests that sex role perceptions have much more to do with whether or not women will be hired into higher-ranking leadership positions than the skills and competencies they possess.

Still, not all female sport leaders appear to be subject to these barriers. When studying the rate of advancement among interscholastic athletic directors, Pederson and Whisenant (2005) demonstrate that female senior administrators were more successful than their male peers when the Managerial Achievement Quotient was used as the measure of success, which measures rate of advancement as dependent on rank and age. Although men made up 90% of the sample size in this study, the athletic directors that were women had a higher success ratio than those who were men when taking into account the age of the subjects when they achieved the athletic director position as well as their school's state issued classification level (Pederson & Whisenant, 2005). Similar results were found in an earlier study where in two out of the three NCAA divisions, female athletic directors had higher success ratios than the males when measured as position level relative to age (Whisenant, Pederson, & Obenour, 2002). These

results indicate that women, despite their disproportionate gender representation and the barriers they must overcome to get there, possess some combination of skills, relationships and experiences that allow them to move upward in the hierarchical positions in Division II and III university athletic departments more swiftly than their male counterparts.

In an effort to explore specific skills that might contribute to women's success in sport leadership, some scholars (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Powell, Butterfield, & Bartol, 2008) propose a "female leadership advantage" because they argue that the preferred leadership style, which aligns with transformational leadership, is more congruent with female qualities. Notably, much of the gender-based sport leadership literature extends from and employs the concepts of transactional and transformational leadership. For instance, Doherty (1997) measured the differences of transactional and transformational leadership behaviors across gender and age among athletic administrators as rated by coaches in the Ontario Universities Athletic Association. The results of this study showed that female Athletic Directors and Associate Athletic Directors exhibited charisma, inspiration and individualized consideration, all interpersonal behaviors characteristic of transformational leadership, far more often than males in the same positions (Doherty, 1997). In addition, Doherty reported greater perceived effectiveness of the female leaders compared to male leaders. While these findings align well with the idea that there may be a "female leadership advantage," further investigations complicate our understanding of the skills necessary for women to be successful.

More recently, Burton and Peachey (2009) and Peachey and Burton (2011, 2012) explore the influence of gender on leadership preferences and predicted organizational outcomes among intercollegiate athletic department personnel. These studies show various inconsistencies regarding the relationships between male and female leadership behavior as described through the transactional and transformational frameworks across Divisions I, II and III. In each of these three studies, results indicate that transformational leadership leads to greater follower satisfaction and extra effort. Yet, transformational leadership and transactional leadership are equally effective with respect to overall organizational effectiveness. Still, scholars suggest that transformational leadership is likely to influence positively overall organizational performance (Burton & Peachey, 2009; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002). For instance, both male and female transformational leaders are seen as producing better organizational outcomes (Burton & Peachey, 2009; Peachey & Burton, 2011, 2012). More importantly, gender does not appear to be an influence positively or negatively with respect to leader preference. When evaluating leadership outcomes, Peachey and Burton (2011) remark, "Participants in our study put the female athletic directors on equal standing with the male athletic directors" (p. 422). Thus, when men and women display transformational leadership qualities, they are equally perceived to contribute positively to satisfaction, effort and organizational outcomes despite the statistical differences between transactional and transformational leadership on organizational effectiveness.

In sum, while prior research examining the intersections of gender and sport leadership provides important understandings, the landscape is far from complete. Barriers appear to emanate from social constructions of gender whether in regards to the efficacy of social networks or the (mis)alignment of expectations of leadership responsibilities and assumed masculine and feminine skill sets. Despite these perceptions, women tend to fair well when given leadership responsibilities in sport. In response to questions that build on gender expectations and leadership style preferences, investigations based in transactional and transformational leadership have sought to clarify what leadership styles lead to organizational effectiveness and whether or not women are naturally more inclined to display more effective

leadership styles. Results indicate complexities. While transformational leadership is preferred, it does not necessarily result in a more effective organization. Furthermore, as transformational leaders, women and men are perceived as equally competent. While the general outcomes and effectiveness of transactional and transformational leadership are understood along the lines of gender, what remains unexplored are the specific leadership skills that lead to success. The present inquiry aims to fill this gap, specifically with respect to female sport leaders. As such, the purpose of this paper is to explore how female leaders themselves understand their competencies that led to success.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In order to explore this phenomenon more closely, it is important to consider the environment in which sport leadership takes place. Soucie (1994) noted that sport administrators are often responsible for functions of both leaders and managers simultaneously. In Burton and Peachy's (2009) study regarding leader effectiveness in intercollegiate athletics, the authors explain that the intercollegiate context is complex. While followers prefer a transformational leadership style overall, they also recognize that many transactional skills such as coordinating and planning are also important skills for the people in leadership positions. This explanation alludes to the idea that perhaps both types of leadership are equally important in sport organizations. In addition, it has been suggested that transactional leadership aligns with management practices while the transformational style is reflective of leadership as understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Rost, 1993). Accordingly, one early study (Quarterman, 1998) confirmed that both management and leadership skills are needed in sport organizations. This view that transactional/transformational or management/leadership are separate but complementary concepts supports the most current thinking within organizational leadership research.

Given this foundation, Kotter's framework (1990a, 1990b) regarding the fundamental differences between management and leadership provides a useful framework from which to make sense of the "cluster of skills" that women employ as they make their way upward in sport organizations and maintain successful careers. At its core, Kotter suggests that management deals with complexity while leadership deals with change. More specifically, the key activities and processes of management are planning and budgeting, organizing and staffing, and controlling and problem solving (Kotter, 1990a, 1990b; Quarterman, 1998). When planning and budgeting, managers strategize for the immediate or short-term future by establishing targets and detailed steps for accomplishing these goals. Organizing and staffing involves creating the organizational structure and putting the right people in place to follow the plan (Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 1990a, 1990b; Quarterman, 1998). Finally, a manager relies on various metrics to track deviations from the plan in order to control processes and solve problems (Kotter, 1990a, 1990b; Zaleznik, 2004). These activities have a relatively narrow focus with the primary purpose of maintaining the status quo so that the organization can move consistently towards achieving established goals (Kotter, 1990a; Kotterman, 2006; Zaleznik, 2004). Conversely, leadership is very different from management as "it produces movement" (Kotter, 1990a, p. 4) in the form of organizational change. Leadership is a proactive process that brings meaningful change to an organization as it strives to survive and compete in the complex and competitive environment of the modern world (Kotter, 1990a, 1990b). Kotter (1990a) posits that leadership is about establishing direction, communicating vision, aligning people, and providing inspiration. Establishing direction requires vision and the ability to articulate that vision. Kotter explains that part of setting the direction is creating and putting in place the systems so that managers can manage. Aligning people necessitates a controlled and comprehensible communication approach as the reach of the message extends far beyond immediate subordinates and

common understanding is key. By appealing to the human side of individuals and evaluating mechanisms through which to motivate, leaders gather input, challenge subordinates and involve them by sharing knowledge and information. These actions serve not only to motivate and support people, but also to energize them because this type of inclusion satisfies “basic human needs for achievement, a sense of belonging, recognition, self-esteem, a feeling of control over one’s life, and the ability to live up to one’s ideals” (Kotter, 1990b, p.107). Though these processes seem straightforward enough, leadership involves the creation of informal networks so as to gather an array of information when setting the direction of the organization and a fair amount of risk taking when not every possible outcome is known (Kotter, 1990b; Zaleznik, 2004). Because they differ with respect to their primary functions, “both are needed if organizations are to prosper. . . Leadership by itself never keeps an operation on time and on budget year after year. And management by itself never creates significant useful change” (Kotter, 1990a, p. 7). Leadership and management are complementary practices and they must work together to balance one another so that the vision of the organization can be realized. Given the complexity of sport organizations and our present understanding of sport leadership, Kotter’s framework provides a logical next step from which to explore how female leaders, who are underrepresented in sport administration positions, negotiate their work and become successful.

### **Methods**

This study aims to provide insights into the perceptions of successful female sport leaders regarding what they consider as most important to their advancement and success within sport organizations. In order to explore these women’s individual experiences, we adopted a qualitative approach. The qualitative method allows for a richer, more in-depth exploration of the precise skills these women feel have helped them reach senior-level administrative positions in sport (Gratton & Jones, 2010). Our overall approach is constructionist in that we assume that experiences of female sport administrators are complex and must be uniquely examined and understood as each woman will have had different experiences in her career and will have created her own meanings and interpretations of these experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). While this exploratory method allows for a diverse collection of findings to emerge from the interviews (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), a constructionist approach also embraces comparing data with prior knowledge and theories as well as situating specific details within a particular conceptual framework (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007). These considerations guided the data collection and data analysis.

Given that we were interested in exploring how successful female sport leaders understand how they achieved their success, we used the stratified purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2002). This non-probability sampling technique allowed for the examination of a particular subgroup of participants, who were likely to illustrate particular characteristics. In our case, the characteristics we were most interested in understanding were their understandings of leadership and management and how they perceived these characteristics to contribute to their success as leaders. As such, we set specific criterion in order to identify participants as successful sport leaders (Patton, 2002). First, we identified women in high-ranking decision-making administrative leadership positions within a variety of sport organizations. Selections were based primarily on their leadership positions within their sport organizations. Participants had to have had the title of Assistant Director (or an equivalent phrase) or higher to be considered for inclusion in this study as this designation puts them in the minority of women employed in sports. These women’s positions in the top tier of administrative leadership in sport

organizations highlights success and advancement that could only come from top performance in their respective sectors.

After identifying potential participants based on our criteria, we sent out informational emails that briefly introduced the topic of the research and provided potential participants with the opportunity to contact us if interested in participating. Initially, we sent out 5 emails. If they were not interested in participating, we asked if they knew of another female sport leader who met the criteria, a technique referred to as snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). We sent out a total of 15 emails, out of which we interviewed 10 female sport leaders who met our criteria. We did not seek any more participants once we reached saturation (Patton, 2002). The participants are primarily located on the west coast of the United States, though their sport enterprises have locations that span the globe. The women interviewed range in age from 28 years to 52 years old and are predominantly White. Participants included representatives from the sport equipment manufacturing and retail sector, all three NCAA Divisions of university athletics, non-profit sport organizations, and professional sports teams. As this study was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board, we followed specific guidelines to protect the well-being of the participants, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the study. All participants signed an IRB approved consent form that indicated the results were neither confidential nor anonymous. All participants agreed to their names remaining associated with the data in any subsequent publications. Thus, the names used in this paper are participants' real first names.

We conducted semi-structured interviews, which were scheduled at a time convenient for both the participants and the researchers. The interview guide consisted of an outline of formal questions, but allowed room for further probing and clarification when necessary (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Such an approach was deemed appropriate because interview participants "often have information or knowledge that may not have been thought of in advance by the researcher" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 102). The first set of questions asked about participants' background in sport, career paths, and current responsibilities. We did not provide any definitions of management and leadership. Instead, we then asked them to articulate the difference between leadership and management and their actions as leaders that reflected these understandings. Then, we asked them talk about what skills they believed to be fundamental to their success as a woman within the sport industry. These inquiries afforded the participants the opportunity to directly apply their own descriptions of the terms leadership and management to themselves and their own advancement through the upper ranks of sport management. Four of the participant interviews were conducted face to face, while the six others, due to distance, were conducted over the phone. All interviews were audio recorded and lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and stored electronically.

Analysis began with a thorough reading of each of the interview transcripts. During this "first run through" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 305), we employed open coding techniques and made memos along the lines of the important concepts (Gratton & Jones, 2010). Given that we specifically asked participants about their own understandings of management, leadership and the relationships between the two, we began with these categories as start codes. From this initial read-through, five first-order themes were identified from the raw data: management, leadership, communication, the need for both management and leadership, and developing as a leader. We then engaged in axial coding whereby we further developed themes that emerged within these categories by searching for and uncovering major concepts among the transcripts that described the properties of these categories and the interrelationships among them. As a

result, we collapsed and re-organized themes as well as identified any data that did not fit (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Guided by Kotter's framework regarding the separate and distinct purposes of management and leadership, we looked at the ways in which the women described each of the concepts in detail. After separating the components of each and identifying themes within both management and leadership, respectively, we moved to selective coding (Gratton & Jones, 2010) and determined which specific statements best illustrated the themes.

Trustworthiness and validation of the data interpretations were achieved primarily through reaching saturation, reflexivity and the use of a conceptual framework in order to understand the complex experiences of these women (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Patton, 2002). As one way to validate the data, we relied on the notion of saturation, a point at which no new themes can be identified, and existing themes are well-supported (Patton, 2002). Second, we validated the findings through the practice of reflexivity. Specifically, there were two researchers who interpreted the data and discussed the findings in ways that challenged us in terms of our own beliefs, values, perspectives and assumptions (Patton, 2002). Such questioning was additionally supported in our use of a conceptual framework, which provided a basic structure within which our findings and discussion of those findings could be located (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Finally, our constructivist approach also provided a level of trustworthiness through overt acknowledgement of multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

### ***Management***

According to the participants, management is primarily about the daily work of producing outputs and meeting goals. In line with Kotter's (1990a, 1990b) explanation, participants unanimously view management as dealing with short-term objectives. With management, "the focus is really narrow and specific to the roles within a certain position" (Sarah). Focusing on short-term objectives, managers "make things happen today" (Gina). Sharing a similar sentiment, Laurie remarks, "Management the way I see it is kind of something we have to do every day, we have to go with the flow, get things done and check off the tasks on a daily basis." These women find that management is a daily responsibility and requires constant practice in terms of coping with the complexities of the organization and executing the plan. This information directly supports Kotter's (1990a, 1990b) claim that managers primarily deal in the now and work to define and refine the steps needed to reach established targets and organizational goals. Gina explains, "For me, management is working towards a goal and organizing people or processes and taking steps to achieve a certain goal. You have to already know the direction because you are working to get to that place." What is common among the participants' explanations is that in management the goal is known and the direction has already been set. Rachel alludes to this idea when she says that "management is, it's really working within an established paradigm and seeing in what ways we can execute or optimize incremental improvement within that paradigm." Management is the execution of the previously established vision, while keeping the systems and the organization on-track. Thus, at its core, these women believe that management keeps the system working once a direction is established. This view of management assumes the goal of keeping the status quo by simply making sure the systems in place work well.

In terms of the detailed skills of management, participants mention various aspects of Kotter's (1990a) tasks of management. The skills of planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling and problem solving are noted either directly or indirectly according to participants. For instance, planning, organizing, controlling and problem solving are implied in the following description of management:

Essentially we are managing to an output and looking at the end result and measuring successes against our vision. So we set an objective and work backwards from that and manage our business to the process. Everybody on my team is a part of that process and I manage their tasks and how they roll out strategically to the end result. I see management as a lot of setting parameters, setting goals, and metrics, things that are measurable and achievable. (Shannon)

In order to “ensure plan accomplishment” (Kotter, 1990b, p. 104), Kotter indicates that managers must monitor and be able to point out deviations in the plan along the way and solve these problems to ensure objectives are met. Working within a given system, these activities require managers to have the appropriate task knowledge to be able to deal with complexity and oversee the work so that it is on time and on budget (Kotterman, 2006; Zaleznik, 2004). Findings in the current study support these notions as these female leaders stress the importance of knowledge acquisition as one of the important skills of managers:

I think management requires having the technical knowledge necessary to run your program, understanding the world within which the entity you are managing sits, content expertise, I guess I would call that. Also, I think understanding the legalities and the procedural components of what you need to do for your position. (Anita)

Rachel understands the importance of using task knowledge appropriately. She says that “good managers have a broad scanner and understand how to prioritize the message at that time.” This knowledge however is only beneficial and useful to the manager in the achievement of goals when these individuals are also skilled at prioritizing, collaborating with others, delegating and understanding how to utilize metrics and analytics to one’s benefit (Kotter, 1990a, 1990b). Rachel illustrates this thinking in the following:

A solid manager understands how to establish priorities, and how to evaluate against those priorities, how to take performance from one level incrementally to the next simply by understanding what’s important and how to again set that priority and communicate well and ensure that there is strong execution. So good management needs solid prioritization and good communication, and the appropriate coaching and recognition, understanding what metrics are most important and how to utilize those to your benefit for the solid execution of your business objectives.

Rachel’s detail regarding the skills and activities of a manager supports Kotter’s (1990b) framework where management is prioritizing, planning, organizing and working with individuals to execute a vision and reach the organizational plan. From both Kotter’s work and the explanations provided by the women in this study, we get a much deeper understanding as to the skills possessed and practices used by successful female sport leaders.

### ***Leadership***

Every participant believes that leadership is about being able to implement change. To illustrate the depth of this sentiment, Beth unequivocally says, “Vision, strategy, intellect, I’m not afraid of change, in fact I cause change, I’m a change agent.” She adds to this belief by explaining that leadership is “not settling for the status quo” and requires “the ability to bring people along for a common mission.” These women’s accounts of the basic function of leadership support and confirm the findings from other research on leadership (Yukl, 1998) and are in line with Kotter’s

(1990a) view that the essential functions of leadership include producing movement within an organization.

The first leadership skill all these women feel is imperative for moving an organization successfully through change is the ability to establish the direction and set the course for the organization. Gina illustrates this view when she says, “Leadership is about defining goals. A leader has to have the ability to see long term, to think about things in broader terms and be more strategic. It’s about setting priorities and providing a direction or an idea.” When thinking about establishing a direction, Rachel thinks about communicating that vision. She says, “I think about ensuring that not many things are just left to chance in terms of how a vision is articulated and how getting clarity about what strategies will help you deliver that vision.” As a leader, that direction extends from knowledge about the organization and the environment in which it operates. Participants agree that one must not only seek this input, but also know what questions to ask and be able to analyze the data collected. This process is vital to one of the key responsibilities of a leader, which is making strategic decisions on behalf of the organization. These findings align well with Kotter’s (1990b) explanation of the components of setting a new direction for the organization as an inductive process. He posits that “leaders gather a broad range of data and look for patterns, relationships, and linkages that help explain things. What’s more, the direction-setting aspect of leadership does not produce plans; it creates vision and strategies” (p. 104).

Finally, according to these women, being a leader is about more than simply guiding a team to an ultimate goal. Leadership is also about getting people to embrace the vision and grow to become leaders themselves. The successful women in this study claim the act of inspiring and leading by example has the greatest impact in getting people on board with the vision and direction of their teams. Rachel explains this aspect well in the following:

If you can have some energy and direction or a movement towards something that is new, that’s leadership. It’s telling a story that is much bigger than what we know today to get people fired up and then you can start moving people and organizations towards something. Leadership is thinking really broadly and building a vision that can be inspiring and can create a new era of perspective about where it is possible for an organization to go.

In essence, “leadership matters” as Rachel remarks, it involves “those people dimensions where you can really tether folks to something that feels like it has more intrinsic value and I think that the best of leaders know how to do that.” Other characteristics these women believe are crucial to effective leadership are human characteristics such as honesty and integrity (Anita), humility and dependability (Megan), consistency (Beth) and trust (Sarah). Here, Shannon provides a useful expansion on this idea of relationships and people development:

Leadership is more personal and less institutional (than management). Some of the things that I am the most proud of as a leader are the team building aspects, compiling a team of people that will accomplish far greater things than what the individuals would have done. Being a good leader is taking the time to teach and grow others. I’m helping to facilitate their growth and the progress of the organization forward and hopefully that leads to big visionary things. (Shannon)

These descriptions affirm Kotter’s (1990a, 1990b) use of the term alignment as a central feature of leadership. Leadership is rooted in relationship building, which appeals to human qualities and aligns individuals through strategic challenges with inspiration and motivation to energize

them to reach the end goal. In satisfying these basic needs, employees and followers are invested (beyond rewards) in the work that they are doing (Kotter, 1990a, 1990b).

### ***The need to be skilled in both management and leadership***

Notably, all 10 female sport leaders mention skills from both management and leadership when talking about success in sport administration. In line with Kotter's (1990b) view, the women in this study view leadership and management as distinct but complementary skill sets. Following her descriptions of leadership and management as separate elements, Sam indicates, "I don't think you can have one without the other. . . I guess maybe they also share a goal or end direction." Rachel shares her own impression on the relationship between leadership and management by stating that "you can't really speak about one without the other. They're not synonymous, but highly complementary." Shannon adds to this understanding, "I think both are necessary to get you from point A to point B and I think they need to come together. But, they are also different, so they sort of work in concert with each other." Most importantly, the participants possess a sense of what they need to do to manage but are very careful to wield leadership skills when the situation calls for them. When talking about management versus leadership, Rachel implies a sense of doing what is required given the context. She elaborates, "[managing is] solid prioritization and good communication, and the appropriate coaching, appropriate recognition, understanding what metrics are most important and how to utilize those to your benefit....When you're making a shift, it requires leadership." Suggesting that both management and leadership are critical to career success for female sport administrators, these discoveries confirm findings on this relationship from previous studies done in sport administration.

While all the women recognize the importance of skills from both the management and leadership contexts as important to their own success, differences exist among the female sport leaders in how clearly the distinctions were articulated and developed. The type and size of the organizations appears to shape their approach. Sport leaders in university and non-profit organizations describe less differentiation between the two, recounting that they dealt more in the realm of management. While articulating the differences came less readily, these women easily talked about what they would *do* in various circumstances. Shannon explains,

I think the key differences have to do with someone's approach. If I strive to be a great leader, my approach is going to be one of engagement and understanding. If I am coming from a management standpoint, I am going to have an approach about understanding what the steps are and the technical aspects of the execution. I think both are necessary to get you from point A to point B and I think they need to co-mingle, but they are also different in how you use them to attack a situation.

Those individuals with a background in for-profit sport enterprise are more consciously aware of and adept at explaining the differences among leadership and management as well as more consciously dedicated to developing leadership and management skills. For instance, both Rachel and Gina talked about how their companies support leadership development. Such exposure has resulted in these women having ways of talking about management and leadership as understood in the literature. To illustrate, Rachel overtly refers to the concepts of transactional and transformational leadership. She says, "I often think about transactional which tends towards a little bit more management versus leadership, in its greatest assets can be transformational." It is noteworthy that the women who had the highest ranking positions such as CEO or Vice President in large companies displayed the greatest facility with language around the concepts of management and leadership. As a result, these women are also more

strategic and purposeful in developing these abilities by attending seminars, seeking out and reading books on the subject, and looking for examples of success to emulate.

### **Conclusions, Implications and Future Research**

Although participation numbers of women in sports continues to grow, there has not been a corresponding addition in the number of women in top-level administrative positions within the sports industry (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; Strawbridge, 2000). Due to this trend, the lack of the female voices at the decision-making levels of sport enterprises is becoming increasingly apparent. As a result scholars (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008, Sagas & Cunningham, 2004) have called for a greater understanding about how the women in those few positions achieved their success in order to identify elements that might help women attain more sport leadership positions. To this end, the purpose of this study was to explore the skills and activities that comprise the work of successful female sport leaders. Prior to the current research, most studies concerning sport leaders and gender used quantitative methods and focused on the differences between men and women in relation to leadership style, perceived leader effectiveness, and the reporting of the numbers of men and women represented in sport leadership positions. The qualitative approach taken in the present study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the skills and practices of successful female sport leaders.

The use of Kotter's (1990a, 1990b) framework on the defining characteristics that distinguish leadership from management, and the complementary relationship between the two concepts, proved particularly useful in making sense of the "cluster of skills" these women attribute to their success. In their descriptions of management, participants described what they actually do to maintain smooth movement of an organization towards its goal. Beyond planning, organizing and clarifying expectations and roles, these women involved themselves in learning the parameters of a situation, and acquiring the appropriate task and industry knowledge (Kotter, 1990a, 1990b) to effectively solve problems and overcome obstacles that might stand in the way of the success of the organization. In addition, the current study sheds light on the approach taken by women to enact change in an organization through the skills of leadership. Establishing a strategic direction (Kotter, 1990a) is noted as one of the key skills as a leader. Information gathering and broad scanning of the environment facilitates this task. The female sport leaders also explain the methods with which they motivate and inspire their followers, which move beyond the reward systems of transactional and transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), to aligning people (Kotter, 1990a, 1990b; Kotterman, 2006). This relational practice ties employees to something greater than themselves and aids them in their own growth and development as a leader (Kotter, 1990a). Such details regarding practices provided by the women interviewed for this study and analyzed through Kotter's framework give us a deeper understanding of what contributed to their success as women in sport leadership.

An important finding in this study is the belief that both management and leadership skills are important to their success. All of the participants believe that not only do they need both skill sets, but that they really need to use them in the appropriate context. In other words, the skills of management and leadership are both highly important, and as a woman, one must be adept at both. These findings align with Quarterman's (1998) results that statistically speaking, athletic administrators spend more time and effort in the role of manager, but that both the practices of leadership and management are important. Although Quarterman did not speak directly to gender, given that all these women talked about the need for both skill sets, leveraging both seems to be particularly salient for women.

Through this exploratory research effort, two important implications for female sport leaders can be noted. First, successful female sport leaders need a rather complex skill set and the ability to employ the right skill at the right time. While these women clearly talk about the importance of having both management and leadership skills, the findings do not suggest that this complex skill set is uniquely imperative for women. Future research along similar lines needs to be conducted with men. Second, the findings suggest that the skills of both management and leadership can be learned, and that such learning facilitates development and implementation of the complex skill set. Whether this knowledge comes from informal lessons, readings and observation or through formal trainings and seminars, the process of learning the difference between leadership and management empowers women and aids in their development, effectiveness and ultimately their success in sport leadership. It appears as though the current study confirms calls for more formal education (Strawbridge, 2000) as well as internships and experiences that develop both skill sets (Kotter, 1990b; Whisenant, Pederson and Obenour, 2002), especially for women.

The findings in this study also have implications for sport in the global context. Transnational athletes, the impact of internal federations such as the International Olympic Committee, the sports industry's movement into international markets and the use of third world countries' workforce indicate that the globalization of sport is moving solidly alongside other industries (Thibault, 2009). Thibault suggests that issues arise when western models are simply imposed in other contexts. These issues include marginalization of athletes, rising costs of international sport participation and unfair working conditions in less developed nations. These issues present unique challenges to leading in a global sport context. The complex skill sets of the women in this study who worked in international sport organizations emerged from both experience and active learning about leadership and management. Such findings support research that suggests learning about leadership and management beyond experiential learning helps leaders become more adaptable to specific contexts, especially the global context. For instance, Christensen and Raynor (2003) caution against solely relying on experiential learning when it comes to implementing new ideas in hopes of improved organizational performance. These scholars argue that managers are quick to adopt practices that worked in similar organizations without considering where organizations are located and cultural values unique to that context. They note this approach often results in failure because reproducing what worked in one context to another is not simply a matter of doing what worked for other organizations. Instead, they suggest that learning more about management theory provides managers the tools to discern key elements of practices and adjust their approaches according to context. Christensen and Raynor also suggest that studying what works as well as failures provide important information for how to improve organizational performance. Along these lines, there is a need to further investigate the leadership in global sport organizations in terms of what has worked and what has led to failure. Other questions specific to this line of inquiry include: Where are women succeeding in sport leadership? What barriers exist for female sport leaders in international contexts?

Finally, several limitations should be noted. First, the study consisted of a relatively small sample population with only 10 female sport leaders participating. Furthermore, the findings were confined to the responses of women based primarily in the Pacific Northwest and the majority of them were White. Although these participants represented many sub-sets of the sports industry beyond intercollegiate athletics, including professional sports teams and non-profit sport organizations, the study remains limited in scope with a large proportion of the sample group working in the outdoor retail and manufacturing sector. A second limitation may be eliciting responses from the women leaders themselves. It may be difficult for individuals to

accurately reflect on their personal successes and that assessing the perceptions of subordinates, the targets of a leader's behavior, could be a more valid measurement of these characteristics (Doherty, 1997). Finally, the present study provides little insight into how these women overcame barriers produced by stereotypical beliefs about gender and leadership. Thus, more research is needed to explore the effects of barriers created by subconscious biases and beliefs regarding leadership and gender (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hanold, 2013). Such investigations will help elucidate the complex terrain that women negotiate as they move into and become successful in sport leadership.

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