

SAM AND BONNIE RECHTER FELLOWSHIP IN POSITIVE LEADERSHIP Research Report

Positively Leading Immigrant West African Athletes and Families in the Global Sport Arena
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This project sought to investigate and characterize leadership within a West African-United States sports and youth development organization (IET; a pseudonym) that is committed to safeguarding and assisting school-aged African athletes who migrate overseas to North America in the pursuit of global sports careers and education. These athletes risk and endure exploitation and IET seeks to establish itself as a leader in enforcing new ethical standards for recruiting and working with young African athletes and their families. Positive leadership (University of Louisville College of Business, n.d.) is defined as:

. . . an influence process in which (1) at least one person exhibits at least one virtue (such as courage, compassion, integrity, or humility) with more excellence than he or she would have exhibited if he or she had conformed to social expectations; (2) at least one other person feels admiration, elevation, gratitude, or awe, respect, or inspiration in response to that excellence, and (3) they follow by imitating, complying, or building on the first person's excellence.

Challenging the status quo within a high-revenue global sports market necessitates courage and demonstrates compassion for those most marginalized within that system, i.e. young athletes. IET leadership seeks to inspire other individuals and organizations that work with school-aged African athletes to engage in socially just work that does not exploit these young people as they pursue sports and education. IET's leadership appears to align with positive leadership. Leadership is critical to the economic, political, and logistical success of an organization, which, in turn, impacts the health and wellbeing of individual and collective benefactors of the organization's work, in this case young West African athletes. As positive leadership has been an under-theorized and under-researched field (Blanch et al., 2016), this project sought to engage in deeper study of positive leadership to grow understanding of positive leadership as a construct and as potentially enacted by IET.

Theoretical Basis of Positive Leadership

Positive leadership emerged out of the larger field of positive organizational behaviour (Blanch et al., 2016). There are different models of positive leadership – authentic, servant, spiritual, moral, and transformational leadership – which commonly emphasize that leaders must encourage and maintain performance in their followers by promoting and/or modelling particular “virtuous and eudemonic behaviours (Cameron & Plews, 2012)” (Blanch et al., 2016, pg. 170).

There are three basic aspects of positive leadership: a focus on people's strengths and abilities that reaffirm their human potential; an emphasis on results and facilitating above average individual and organizational performance; and a field of action concentrated on the components that can be seen as essential virtues of the human condition (Blanch et al., 2016). In another model of positive leadership, drawing on disciplines such as positive psychology and positive organizational psychology, Cameron (2013) advocated for leadership strategies that emphasize positivity in climate, relationships, communication, and meaning. These, in turn, support positive leadership practices such as creating a culture of abundance, in which an organization and its individual members are positioned to thrive and

“achieve extraordinary positive performance” (p. 47), and creating positive energy networks, in which feelings and behaviours that drive performance, creativity, and persistence interactively build between the leader and followers, sustaining these forces of positivity (Cameron, 2013). Establishing high aims and expectations, i.e. “Everest goals,” is an additional positive leadership practices, in which the goals are: above and beyond the norm; virtuous and intrinsically valuable; affirmative and positively oriented (as opposed to focused on solving negative problems); value-additive and beneficial to others; and uplifting, elevating, and energizing.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research questions were: (1) How has positive leadership been enacted within IET? (2) How has positive leadership impacted IET beneficiaries, i.e. young Guinean and Togolese athletes? Data were collected from July – December, 2023. Data collection is ongoing and includes/will include: (i) interviews with IET leadership, IET athletes, family members, coaches and scouts; (ii) participant observations and field notes of IET leadership as they conducted their work; and (iii) artefacts documenting IET activities and outcomes, e.g. public online media coverage of IET and/or IET athletes. IET leadership also completed/will complete surveys to assess key characteristics of their leadership styles, which will factor into their interviews.

So far, data have been collected from five athletes, one coach and one leader all of whom are affiliated with IET. For data analysis, a codebook was constructed from a review of literature on positive leadership and used to analyse the data. Preliminary analyses are presented below:

Preliminary Findings

How has positive leadership been enacted within IET?

IET’s establishment is centred on “Everest goals” that are above and beyond the norm for both leaders and beneficiaries, as well as goals that are virtuous and intrinsically valuable. IET leaders aim to develop ethical youth sport practice and culture in Africa and in working with African athletes. IET athletes and coaches aim for high levels of achievement in sport as professional athletes and coaches. As one athlete stated:

I want to get better, improve myself and I know [Coach A, one of IET’s two leaders] can help me to do that and I want to be [a professional basketball athlete]. I want to work improve myself. . . . My plan is to go on another space, cause right here, I don't think that I can. I can go far, see, because there is some limits I can . . . become better. (CT)

IET leaders’ interactions with athletes and coaches forefronted positivity and strengths-based inclusivity. All athletes and coaches who expressed interest in sport were welcomed as opposed to selecting only athletes believed to be of elite potential. Additionally, developmental plans, including mentorship, were individualised. Importantly, IET leaders explained their plans of action by engaging in transparent communication with their beneficiaries. In the context of the competitive and profit-oriented international sport environment, IET focused on their athletes’ and coaches’ strengths and abilities and reaffirmed their human potential.

[Coach A and Coach B, IET’s two leaders] told me [that I] had to be patient, had to listen to [my college] coach and [Coach A] told me I had to work [extra] on my own. Work on my finishes . . . my body and everything, and then at the end of the year, I was the Best Defensive Player of the Year. And in the Showcase, I was like [one of] the Best 40 Players in the country [US]. So, it was listening, it was just listening. (TL)

The humanistic and positively affirming culture of IET cultivated positive energy networks that dialectically built between IET leaders and their athletes and coaches. The beneficiaries validated, appreciated and reciprocated the effort that IET leaders put into their development.

[I am] doing this interview because the lot of time that [I] spent with [Coach A], he has dedicated himself. He showed up even though no one was paying him. He showed up teaching them [the athletes]. [I feel] like the least they [the athletes] can do is also show up and come get knowledge because of how he's able to give them something that they haven't received ever. [Typically, in the past, with the athletes' former clubs] they . . . could be practicing and if they made a mistake, no one is correcting them. They just let them as long as they spend the one to two hours together as a club (LA)

How has positive leadership impacted IET beneficiaries

Athletes self-reported that the quality of coaching within IET has been markedly different than typical past coaching experiences. Compared to past typical experiences, IET provided a strengths-based, positive culture and emphasized results. They expressed satisfaction in their growth and development and are motivated to persist. Additionally, IET leaders go beyond sport by providing their young athletes and aspiring coaches with mentorship about life, in general, and providing crucial networking and professional development opportunities.

[Coach A] is someone that . . . beyond just coaching him is teaching them about life. . . . He [stays] after practice to talk to them, to get to know them. He [has] a slogan that he told me he said to them - that we are working to progress. So, therefore, they shouldn't be scared to try. (CT)

Compared to typical past experiences as young athletes and coaches, as part of IET, the beneficiaries were exposed to positivity in climate, relationships, communication, and the meaning they derived from their work in IET, in terms of both evidence of results, e.g. athletic honours for performance, and consequential outcomes for their efforts, i.e. moving towards stated goals for college scholarships and professional coaching opportunities. This helped create a “culture of abundance” where the beneficiaries were positioned to thrive and already saw evidence of growth and success.

. . . the way things differ in IET is when [I am] doing something wrong, [I am] being corrected and being taught the right way of doing it. And [I have] also been encouraged to do certain things that [I] usually wouldn't be doing because of what [Coach A] is helping [me] with [I have seen] improvement in [my] skills. (LA)

As a result of their interactions with IET leaders and witnessing their own success, athletes and aspiring coaches were inspired to establish additional “Everest goals” themselves that were value-additive and beneficial to others like them, i.e. young, aspiring African athletes and coaches.

We [have] got a lot of talent here [in Africa] . . . today, young athletes are dreaming to reach their goal, to help their family through sport. . . . That's why I . . . take all my time to try to help them I do all my best to try to help them. (DTL)

References

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