

Transformational Leadership and Performance in Sport for Development and Peace (SDP): Serial Mediation Through Shared Leadership and Engagement

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This study examined how transformational leadership affects job performance among employees in Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) organizations by focusing on the serial mediating roles of shared leadership and job engagement. Survey data were collected from 105 non-executive SDP practitioners worldwide. Results showed that transformational leadership did not directly influence job performance. Instead, it indirectly enhanced performance by promoting shared leadership, which in turn increased employees' job engagement and ultimately improved their perceived performance. The serial mediation pathway was significant, while individual mediation paths were not supported. These results provide empirical evidence for a process that has been theorized but rarely examined. The study contributes to leadership research by demonstrating that transformational and shared leadership jointly work to shape employee outcomes. It also highlights that leadership effectiveness in SDP organizations should be understood as a multi-layered process. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed for advancing leadership theory in sport management and offering actionable guidance for SDP organizations.

Keywords: sport for development and peace (SDP), transformational leadership, shared leadership, job engagement, job performance

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Introduction

While traditional, leader-centered models remain prominent in sport management research, there is a growing emphasis on more collective and relational approaches. Scholars increasingly highlight that leadership effectiveness arises from interaction, collaboration, and shared responsibility among multiple participants, rather than being solely dependent on the actions of an individual leader (Ferkins et al., 2025; Fransen et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2018). Within this broader paradigm, research in the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) sector has underscored that relational, collaborative, and participatory models of leadership align well with the mission-driven values of SDP organizations (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019, 2022). In particular, shared leadership is notable as a dynamic and interactive influence process in which employees mutually lead and influence one another to achieve collective goals, thereby advancing a sense of collective ownership across organizations (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019, 2022; Pearce et al., 2008; Saah & Svensson, 2025).

At the same time, there is increasing recognition that different leadership models may work effectively in combination rather than in isolation. Within this evolving landscape, transformational leadership still stands out as an effective approach that not only complements but also enhances collective leadership practices. This style of leadership is characterized by presenting a clear vision, facilitating creativity, and supporting individual development (Burton et al., 2020; Sun & Wang, 2017). Extensive studies in both sport and non-sport settings have consistently shown that transformational leadership is associated with positive outcomes for employees and organizations (Bakker et al., 2023; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Importantly, transformational leadership is recognized as a viable form of vertical leadership because it can inspire and empower staff members. This, in turn, helps create the conditions needed for shared leadership to emerge and thrive rather than functioning in isolation (Hoch, 2013; Kang & Svensson, 2023).

Over the past 25 years, SDP organizations have earned recognition from national and international governing bodies for their efforts to address diverse social issues through sport programs. These activities have also led to collaborations with partners across many sectors (Welty Peachey et al., 2018a). This commitment to both sport and positive social change makes SDP organizations unique and shapes the daily experiences of their staff. Given this distinctive context, SDP organizations present an important yet underexplored setting for examining how leadership models such as transformational and shared leadership function in practice. Different from most nonprofit sport organizations, SDP agencies typically operate with a small group of full-time staff (Svensson et al.,

2017; Wegner et al., 2023). Combined with frequent challenges such as heavy workloads, limited compensation, and high staff turnover, the ongoing success of SDP agencies relies heavily on employees who are engaged and motivated to perform well in their roles (Halsall & Forneris, 2016; Shin et al., 2020; Svensson et al., 2017; Wegner et al., 2023; Whitley et al., 2019).

In these circumstances, effective leadership is essential for fostering positive employee experiences and enhancing job performance (Banks et al., 2016). Although the importance of leadership is widely recognized in SDP scholarship (Schulenkorf, 2017; Welty Peachey & Schulenkorf, 2022), research on how transformational and shared leadership interact to shape employee experiences remains limited. Recent scholarship emphasizes the need for more empirical study on this leadership dynamic within SDP settings (Kang & Svensson, 2023; Svensson et al., 2021). This gap is significant because it limits our understanding of how leadership combinations influence key workforce outcomes in resource-constrained, mission-driven environments such as SDP organizations.

Leadership not only affects employee performance but also the day-to-day experiences that sustain staff over time (Burton et al., 2020). In particular, job engagement has been identified as a key factor that enriches work experiences and enhances employees' perceptions of their own performance (Rich et al., 2010). However, little research has examined whether transformational and shared leadership jointly influence engagement among SDP employees and, in turn, how this engagement translates into their performance. Likewise, while performance is a major concern in sport organizations (Wu et al., 2022), the specific pathways leadership shapes staff's perceptions of their own effectiveness remain underexplored. To address these gaps, this study examines whether shared leadership and job engagement serially mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance among employees in nonprofit SDP organizations. By empirically testing this serial mediation model, the study advances sport management leadership theory and provides practical insight for organizations seeking non-financial strategies to support positive employee experiences and sustainable performance in demanding contexts.

Literature Review

Transformational Leadership and Job Performance

Transformational leadership has been widely examined across organizational contexts and is consistently associated with favorable employee outcomes (Chelladurai & Kim, 2023). This leadership approach is characterized by articulating a vision, providing inspirational motivation, addressing employees'

needs, offering individualized care, and fostering intellectual growth (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). Lowe et al. (1996) highlighted that transformational leadership shows stronger relationships with subjective performance assessments than with objective indicators, suggesting that while objective metrics are more common in for-profit settings, perceptual measures may provide a more appropriate lens for evaluating leadership influences in mission-driven organizations. This insight is particularly relevant for nonprofit SDP organizations where capturing social impact and performance outcomes through conventional indicators remains challenging (Brimhall, 2019; Shilbury & Moore, 2006). In addition, in non-sport contexts, transformational leadership has been linked to diverse psychological and behavioral outcomes, as well as broader organizational benefits, with its influence on employees' job performance particularly well established (Bakker et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

Within sport management, transformational leadership has been the most frequently examined leadership style (Burton et al., 2020). In collegiate sport contexts, prior research has primarily focused on its influence on attitudinal outcomes such as commitment, sense of belonging, job satisfaction, and turnover intention (Choi et al., 2007; Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Wells & Welty Peachey, 2011). Beyond varsity athletics, recent research in collegiate club sports similarly shows positive effects of transformational leadership on participants' motivation and perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Hutchens et al., 2020). Together, these studies indicate that transformational leadership is recognized as beneficial across collegiate sport contexts. However, little research has examined how this leadership approach shapes employees' perceptions of job performance, particularly among nonprofit SDP professionals who face multifaceted performance demands (Kang & Svensson, 2019). While transformational leadership's attitudinal benefits in collegiate and recreational sport settings are well documented, its effects on performance-related outcomes in mission-driven SDP organizations remain unexplored. Recent scholarship in the SDP field has similarly called for broader examinations of leadership styles, noting that transformational leadership remains underexplored despite its potential to shape both employee and organizational outcomes (Svensson et al., 2021). These insights lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Transformational leadership is positively associated with job performance among SDP employees.

The Mediating Role of Shared Leadership

Shared leadership refers to a dynamic process in which multiple individuals share influence and collectively guide the organization toward its mission,

rather than depending on the authority of a single formal leader (Carson et al., 2007). This approach is particularly relevant in SDP organizations, where mission-driven goals, collective responsibility, and resource constraints make it necessary to rely on the diverse capacities of staff (Kang & Svensson, 2019). Vertical forms of leadership including transformational leadership can further provide vision, trust, and organizational cultures that create the conditions for shared leadership to emerge (Dinh et al., 2014; Hoch, 2013). Shared leadership has been shown to strengthen employee, group, and organizational outcomes including performance (Han et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2018). In the SDP context, Kang and Svensson (2019, 2023) conceptually proposed the link between vertical and shared leadership and later offered qualitative evidence of servant–shared leadership relationships. Svensson et al. (2021) provided quantitative support for servant–shared leadership in a U.S. sample and explicitly called for empirical research to examine how transformational leadership may relate to shared leadership in SDP. Taken together, literature indicates that although vertical leadership, shared leadership, and employee outcomes have been studied, they remain largely examined in isolation. No empirical research has examined whether transformational leadership influences employee job performance through shared leadership, leaving a critical gap for investigation. This mediating process is particularly important to understand in SDP organizations operating in challenging environments where positive employee experiences and strong performance are essential for sustainable impact. On this basis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Shared leadership mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance among SDP employees.

The Mediating Role of Job Engagement

Job engagement refers to a stable psychological condition in which employees simultaneously apply their physical, emotional, and mental resources to their work, showing strong involvement and commitment to their roles (Christian et al., 2011). Engaged employees tend to persist in tasks and invest greater energy, which enhances both task performance and discretionary behaviors (Rich et al., 2010). Prior research consistently shows that job engagement is positively associated with job performance across organizational contexts (Corbeanu & Iliescu, 2023). In mission-driven nonprofits such as SDP organizations, which often face resource constraints and limited capacity, employees' psychological investment through engagement is especially important for sustaining effectiveness in the workplace (Nordin et al., 2024; Slatten et al., 2021; Welty Peachey et al., 2018b).

Transformational leadership has a profound influence on job engagement as it motivates employees and helps them connect their activities to the overall

mission of the organization (Tims et al., 2011). Breevaart et al. (2014) demonstrated that transformational leaders promote higher engagement by fostering supportive work environments. Research further shows that increases in engagement resulting from leadership are linked to improved job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Collectively, these findings indicate that job engagement serves as a psychological mechanism through which transformational leadership can enhance employees' perceived job performance. Despite general evidence for these relationships, the mediating role of job engagement has not been directly examined in the SDP context. Understanding this mechanism is particularly important, as sustained job engagement plays a key role in helping these organizations achieve their social impact objectives. Building on prior findings that transformational leadership promotes engagement and that engagement predicts performance, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Job engagement mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance among SDP employees.

Serial Mediating Role of Shared Leadership and Job Engagement

Vertical leadership can provide the conditions for shared leadership to develop, and shared leadership itself has been associated with stronger employee attitudes and performance outcomes (Dinh et al., 2014; Han et al., 2021; Kang & Svensson, 2023; Zhu et al., 2018). In practice, it is reflected when employees collectively enact leadership functions such as guiding communication, providing mutual support, and sustaining cohesion, rather than leaving these responsibilities solely to formal leaders. Such collaborative influence not only facilitates organizational functioning but also strengthens employees' psychological involvement in their work, thereby linking transformational leadership to job engagement. Building on this, job engagement has been widely recognized as a critical predictor of job performance. Engaged employees invest greater effort and persistence in fulfilling their roles, which enhances job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Rich et al., 2010). Leadership behaviors can also stimulate engagement, thereby indirectly contributing to improved employee performance (Breevaart et al., 2014). Together, findings from prior literature suggest a serial process in which transformational leadership promotes shared leadership, which enhances job engagement and, in turn, leads to improved perceived job performance.

Importantly, Ng (2017) demonstrated that transformational leadership influences performance through multiple mediating mechanisms including motivational, affective, and relational pathways rather than a single direct link. This broader evidence reinforces the rationale for examining serial mediation processes. In line with this perspective, this study proposes shared leadership

and job engagement as complementary mechanisms that together explain how transformational leadership shapes employee performance in nonprofit SDP organizations in which collaboration and sustained commitment are critical for advancing social outcomes.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Shared leadership and job engagement serially mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance among SDP employees.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

A quantitative survey was created and distributed via Qualtrics to a global cohort of SDP practitioners. The sampling frame was developed by reviewing organizational listings from major international SDP platforms and networks including the International Platform on Sport and Development, Beyond Sport, Common Goal, Action Sport for Development, Laureus Sport for Good Cities, Sport for Development in Latin America, and Nike's Sport for Social Change Networks. Email invitations explaining the study's purpose and containing a survey link were sent to these individuals with two reminders issued. A total of 105 SDP practitioners completed the survey and were included in the present study. All respondents held non-executive roles, which aligns with the study's focus on employees' experiences rather than executive leaders' perspectives. This design choice was appropriate because transformational leadership was assessed through employees' perceptions of their leaders' behaviors, which made non-executive staff the most relevant respondents. Importantly, a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 indicated that a minimum of 59 participants was required to detect a small effect size ($f^2 = .02$) with $\alpha = .05$ and power $(1 - \beta) = .80$, confirming that the achieved sample size ($N = 105$) provided adequate statistical power. The demographic profile of the respondents revealed a nearly even gender distribution with women comprising 59% ($n = 62$) and men 41% ($n = 43$). The largest age group was 30–39 years ($n = 39$; 37.1%). Additional demographic details are summarized in Table 1.

Measures

The survey instruments were developed by adapting established scales to ensure contextual relevance for the SDP setting. Following a thorough evaluation of the items for clarity, redundancy, and relevance, the authors discussed necessary modification to the original items (Rogalsky et al., 2016). To ensure accuracy

Table 1. Demographic Information

Variable	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Men	43	41%
	Women	62	59%
Age	< 30s	37	35.2%
	30–39	39	37.1%
	40–49	16	15.2%
	50–59	7	6.7%
	Over 60s	6	5.7%
Career (Years)	1–5 years	63	60%
	6–10 years	22	21%
	11–15 years	12	11.4%
	16–20 years	2	1.9%
	21 years or more	6	5.7%
Location	Asia	17	16.2%
	Europe	18	17.1%
	North America	45	42.9%
	South America	3	2.9%
	Africa	11	10.5%
	Oceania	11	10.5%
Total		105	100%

and contextual fit, three sport management scholars reviewed the instrument, confirming the alignment with the research objectives (Hardesty & Bearden, 2004). The final survey questionnaire was refined through rewording and removal of redundancies. All items, except demographic questions, were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Transformational leadership was assessed using six items adapted from Carless et al. (2000). Shared leadership was measured with six items adapted from Grille and Kauffeld (2015) focusing on the task- and relation-oriented dimensions, as other dimensions showed conceptual overlap or were less relevant to the nonprofit SDP context (Han et al., 2018). Job engagement was measured with three items adapted from Schaufeli et al. (2006), and job performance was measured with three items adapted from Kirkman and Rosen (1999).

Data Analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus 7.0 to examine the validity and reliability of measures. To test direct and mediating roles of shared leadership and job engagement on job performance, we employed Model 6 of Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro in IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows (version 29.0.1.0).

Results

Measurement Model Validation

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess validity and reliability of the measurement model, following guidelines by Hair et al. (2006). The model fit indices were acceptable ($\chi^2/df = 1.85$, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .09). Although RMSEA slightly exceeded the .08 benchmark (Hu & Bentler, 1999), the overall fit indices were within acceptable ranges, and SRMR indicated good fit (.05–.10; Satorra & Bentler, 1994). All factor loadings for the measurement items were statistically significant and exceeded 0.70 (see Table 2). Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from .61 (job performance) to .80 (transformational leadership), exceeding the .50 threshold. Composite reliability (CR) ranged from .83 (job performance) to .95 (transformational leadership), surpassing the .70 criterion. These results support the convergent validity and reliability of the constructs. Discriminant validity was also established as AVE values exceeded the squared correlations among constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Overall, the results provide adequate support for the construct validity and reliability of the measurement model. Table 2 presents the summary results of the measurement model validation. Correlations among the study variables are also reported in Table 3.

Table 2. Summary Results of Measurement Model Validation

Measurement Items	CR	AVE
<i>Transformational Leadership</i>	.95	.80
[My supervisor] treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development.	.90	
[My supervisor] gives encouragement and recognition to staff.	.87	
[My supervisor] fosters trust, involvement, and cooperation among team members.	.90	
[My supervisor] encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions.	.86	
[My supervisor] is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches.	.87	
[My supervisor] instills pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent.	.86	
<i>Shared Leadership</i>	.92	.70
We clearly communicate our expectations.	.74	
We ensure that everyone knows their tasks.	.71	
We take sufficient time to address each other's concerns.	.86	
We recognize good performance.	.84	
We promote cohesion within the organization.	.86	
We support each other in handling conflicts within the organization.	.80	
<i>Job Engagement</i>	.90	.75
I am enthusiastic about my job.	.85	
My job inspires me.	.87	
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.	.88	
<i>Job Performance</i>	.83	.61
I meet/exceed my goals.	.84	
I complete my tasks on time.	.80	
I respond quickly when problems come up.	.70	

Note: β = factor loading; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4
Transformational Leadership	1			
Shared Leadership	.80**	1		
Job Engagement	.50**	.52**	1	
Job Performance	.17*	.29**	.30**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Testing Hypothesis

To examine the mediating roles of shared leadership (SL) and job engagement (EG), a serial mediation analysis was performed using bootstrapping procedures as recommended by Hayes (2013). The total indirect effect of transformational leadership (TL) on job performance (PF) was significant ($\beta = .218$, $Boot SE = .099$, 95% CI = [.022, .418]), whereas the direct effect of was not ($\beta = -.123$, $SE = .088$, $p = .167$, 95% CI = [-.298, .052]). Therefore, H1 (TL→PF) was not supported. Among the mediation pathways, the serial pathway of transformational leadership (TL) → shared leadership (SL) → job engagement (EG) → job performance (PF) was statistically significant ($\beta = .065$, $Boot SE = .053$, 95% CI = [.001, .193]). This supports H4. In contrast, the two other indirect effects—transformational leadership (TL)→ shared leadership (SL) → job performance (PF) ($\beta = .267$, $Boot SE = .141$, 95% CI = [-.032, .525]) and transformational leadership (TL) → job engagement (EG)→ job performance (PF) ($\beta = .053$, $Boot SE = .057$, 95% CI = [-.029, .192])—were not significant, indicating that H2 and H3 were not supported. Table 4 summarizes the results of the hypothesis testing while Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the structural model results with standardized path coefficients.

Table 4. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	CI	Effect Type	Results
H1	TL→PF	-.123	-.298, .052	Direct	Not Supported
H2	TL→SL→PF	.267	-.032, .525	SL mediation	Not Supported
H3	TL→EG→PF	.053	-.029, .192	EG mediation	Not Supported
H4	TL→SL→EG→PF	.065	.001, .193	Serial mediation	Supported

Note: TL = Transformational Leadership; SL = Shared Leadership; EG = Job Engagement; PF = Job Performance; β = standardized regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval

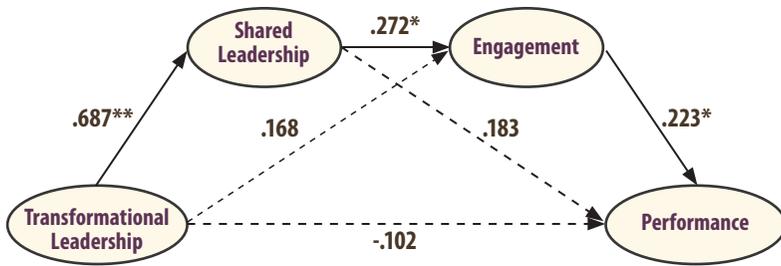


Figure 1. Serial mediation result.

Discussion

This study advances leadership theory in the broader sport management field and the SDP field (Kang & Svensson, 2019; Schulenkorf, 2017; Shilbury et al., 2020) by providing empirical evidence for a serial mediation pathway that had previously been theorized but rarely tested. Specifically, transformational leadership was found to influence job performance indirectly through its effects on shared leadership and, subsequently, job engagement. This finding underscores the need to understand leadership processes as interconnected rather than as a single pathway. As such, we highlight that the current study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, while most prior research has examined transformational leadership and shared leadership separately, this study integrates them into a coherent model, showing that vertical and collaborative forms of leadership can work together to shape employee outcomes (Hoch, 2013; Kang & Svensson, 2023; van Knippenberg et al., 2025). Second, it extends the scholarship on employee psychological states by demonstrating that job engagement is not merely an outcome of leadership but also a pivotal mechanism linking leadership practices to performance. Third, by examining these relationships in the underexplored context of SDP organizations, which operate with limited resources and depend heavily on employees' motivation and commitment for success, the study illustrates how leadership processes function in this setting where leadership is particularly critical (Wegner et al., 2023; Welty Peachey et al., 2018b).

Together, this research moves beyond direct-effect models by showing that leadership effectiveness often emerges through multi-layered and interacting processes. Transformational leaders create vision, trust, and supportive culture that allow shared leadership to develop. Shared leadership, in turn, strengthens collaboration and mutual support, which heightens employees' engagement to work. Engagement ultimately translates these psychological resources into

improved perceptions of performance. By empirically validating this sequence, this study provides a more integrated perspective on leadership in SDP organizations and highlights the importance of examining leadership as a dynamic and multi-level process.

Practically, the findings provide useful directions for leaders in SDP organizations. Transformational leadership enhances performance not by directly driving outcomes, but by creating conditions where shared leadership can thrive. Leaders can practice transformational leadership in concrete ways that are realistic in resource constrained settings. For example, they can communicate a compelling vision by linking program activities to the organization's social mission during team meetings or community events. They can mentor staff individually through short but consistent check-ins, which provide professional guidance without requiring formal programs. They can also encourage staff to explore new solutions by organizing low-cost idea sharing sessions or problem-solving circles that invite input from all employees. Finally, they can motivate employees by celebrating small achievements such as highlighting staff contributions in newsletters, social media posts, or weekly gatherings. These everyday practices cost little but build trust and culture that enable collaboration for shared leadership to emerge.

For leaders who are unsure how to apply transformational leadership behaviors in practice, external resources can provide valuable guidance. Free or low-cost programs offered by professional associations, university outreach initiatives, or NGO-led leadership/HR workshops can serve as useful models and supply concrete tools that can be adapted to the realities of SDP work. Partnerships with external agencies, foundations, or educational institutions may also provide training in communication, coaching, and mentoring skills. Such training can help leaders support staff more effectively and sustain the conditions where shared leadership can thrive. Taken together, these insights emphasize that leadership in the SDP context should be understood as a layered process. Formal leaders can establish the foundation, shared leadership strengthens employees' job engagement, and the engagement drives better performance. This perspective not only advances theory but also offers practical guidance for developing motivated and high performing organizations in a resource constrained mission-driven setting.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides important insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design did not allow us to examine how the relationships among transformational leadership, shared leadership, job engagement, and performance evolve over time, which limits causal inference.

Longitudinal or experimental research designs would be valuable for capturing the dynamic processes through which leadership influences employees' psychological states. Second, although the sample size ($N = 105$) was sufficient for the present analysis, future studies could build on this work by drawing on larger and more diverse samples to examine the robustness of the findings across different organizational contexts. Third, this study relied on self-reported data, which capture employees' perspectives that are relevant in nonprofit SDP settings. To complement this approach, future research could include supervisor or peer ratings to provide a more comprehensive investigation of leadership and performance. In addition, qualitative or mixed-method designs may yield richer insights into the mechanisms linking leadership, engagement, and performance in SDP organizations (Kang & Svensson, 2019). Beyond these methodological considerations, future research could broaden the scope by comparing SDP organizations with other types of sport organizations such as professional teams, collegiate programs, or community sport organizations. This would help us understand whether the leadership dynamics found in this study are specific to SDP or evident across different contexts in sport. This line of inquiry would not only deepen theoretical understanding but also help tailor leadership development strategies to the realities of diverse sport sectors.

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