

Evaluator or Partner? An examination of the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach in NCAA Division I athletics

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The relationship between the sport supervisor and head coach is a critical dyadic relationship within NCAA Division I athletics. The purpose of this study was to explore how the sport supervisor/head coach relationship is perceived by both NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches utilizing the leader-member exchange theory. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach sport supervisors and head coaches from NCAA Division I institutions were interviewed. Findings affirmed sport supervisors serve as critical mediators in athletic departments and can shape the department's internal climate through their relationships with head coaches. This study found trust to be foundational to high quality relationships between head coaches and sport supervisors. However, sport supervisors and head coaches have different perspectives on what builds a high-quality relationship outside of trust. Head coaches desire sport supervisors who show care and investment in the sport program and head coach and who are intentionally present (emotionally and physically). Sport supervisors desire head coaches to be transparent to build the trust and create a true partnership. This study elucidates critical needs of each party to nurture a successful relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach in NCAA Division I athletics.

Article History:

Received:

August 2025

Revised:

November 2025

Accepted:

November 2025

Keywords:

Sport Supervisor, Leader-member exchange, Trust, Dyadic Relationship, Middle Management

Numerous relationships exist within the context of sport organizations: coach/athlete (Caliskan, 2015; Case, 1998; Cranmer, 2016; Cranmer & Myers, 2015), head coach/assistant coach (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004), administrator/staff relationship (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001), coach/parent (Santos et al., 2024), and board chairs and volunteer board members (Bang, 2011, 2013; Hoye, 2004, 2006). Research suggests the quality of the relationship between two individuals, known as a dyad, can influence multiple factors for the pair including job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Epitropaki & Martin, 2016; Gerstner & Day, 1997). College athletic departments model several of these relationships, but also one that is unique – the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach.

The title of sport supervisor – sometimes referred to as sport administrator – is an added role given to intercollegiate athletic administrators by athletic directors that implies a level of administrative leadership and oversight to an assigned sport team or teams. It is more common for mid- to senior-level athletic administrators to hold this role in addition to the tasks associated with their formal titles and primary roles (e.g., associate athletic director of marketing, assistant athletic director for strategy and innovation, senior associate athletic director for finance and operation). Furthermore, as they are situated within the organizational structure, athletic administrators who serve as sport supervisors also act as conduits connecting the athletic director with the individual sport teams (Green & Hancock, 2023).

Prior research has noted the complexities of the role of the sport supervisor within the organizational structure of intercollegiate athletics (Green & Hancock, 2023) as the role has no formal recognition by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) or consistency from institution to institution. In fact, current and former sport supervisors describe the role as a “sink or swim” experience (LEAD1 Association, 2019). Additionally, sport supervisors have acknowledged they are, in fact, middle managers, serving as key organizational connectors within the athletic department but without the full authority for decision making (Green & Hancock, 2023).

While the role of the sport supervisor is undoubtedly important to coaches and, thus, athletic departments, it is also very loosely defined by the college sport enterprise. Previous research on sport supervisors has aimed to bring clarity to the role by defining the role as one “held by athletic administrators whose function is to be a partner with the head coach by providing support, advocacy, and oversight and evaluation of the program(s) they supervise” (Green & Hancock, 2023, p. 575). The language in this definition suggests the existence of a partnership between the sport supervisor and head coach; however, little is known about the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach or how the relationship affects the dyad (i.e., coach and sport supervisor) and performance. Furthermore, Welty Peachey et al. (2015) noted coaches and athletes have a unique influence on the leadership process; however, they failed to consider another important internal stakeholder, the sport supervisor. This study responds to the call to action from previous research (i.e., Welty

Peachy et al., 2015) to further understand the relationship or partnership between the sport supervisor and the head coach.

While most leadership studies in intercollegiate athletics have focused on athletic directors (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Hardin et al., 2013; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Welty Peachey & Burton, 2011; Whisenant et al., 2002) and coaches (Kim & Andrew, 2015; Turner & Chelladurai, 2005), middle management roles and relationships like those of a sport supervisor and head coach have yet to be explored. Interestingly, middle managers in other industry sectors, like business and higher education, have been studied extensively. Research in these areas have found middle managers influence multiple functions of organizations including organizational strategy (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Van Rensburg, et al., 2014), knowledge integration and transfer (Costanzo & Tzoumpa, 2008), emotional support (Huy, 2002), and idea generation (Dutton et al., 1997; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, 1997; Mondt & Martyn, 2023; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Thus, it is important to look at the relationship of sport supervisors and coaches to (a) understand the relationship, and (b) consider how the quality of the relationship may affect people and organizational functions. As such, this study employed leader-member exchange theory as a framework to explore and understand the relationship between sport supervisors and head coaches.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provides a framework to understand the relationship, not just the interaction, between the leader/supervisor and the member/follower. LMX research has shown individuals involved in a high-quality dyad have high levels of trust, mutual obligation, and respect; whereas low-quality dyads are absent of trust, mutual obligation, respect, and hinder the follower's experience in the organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how the relationship between the head coach and sport supervisor is perceived by both NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches. As such, two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do sport supervisors perceive the relationship between themselves and the head coaches they supervise?

RQ2: How do head coaches perceive the relationship between themselves and their assigned sport supervisor?

Literature Review

Leader-member exchange (LMX) suggests that supervisors create differentiated relationships with their followers (Dansereau et al., 1975). LMX also argues the relationship a supervisor builds with a follower affects not just the follower, but also the organization's performance (Dansereau et al.). LMX derived from role theory, which identified the exchange of expectations and behaviors between dyadic members in a role set. For the purposes of this study, the role set is the sport supervisor and head coach. While role theory focuses on the expectations and behaviors of the individuals, LMX is centered around the social exchange, or interactions, of the leader/follower dyad (Graen, Novak, et al., 1982; Graen & Scandura, 1987). To explore

the social exchange of the sport supervisor and head coach, this study examined the process of LMX through the Leadership Making Model (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The Leadership Making Model is a descriptive, practical approach to understanding how supervisors may work with each follower. Where other leadership models take a leader-centric *or* follower-centric perspective, LMX illustrates the process that links the leader and the follower with a focus on the social exchange between the two parties (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). The Leadership Making Model considers the supervisor-subordinate dyad from a partnership perspective. Instead of focusing on how a supervisor builds differentiated relationships, which was the focus of early LMX literature (Dansereau et al., 1975), the Leadership Making Model focuses on the process each supervisor can take to build an effective relationship with each follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Graen and Uhl-Bien believed supervisors should want to develop a high-quality relationship with all subordinates. Thus, supervisors should provide the initial offer of a high-quality relationship to each of their subordinates.

The Leadership Making Model (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) is comprised of three stages: (1) the “stranger” phase, (2) the “acquaintance” phase, and (3) the “mature partnership” phase. In the “stranger” phase, the interactions between the supervisor and the follower are transactional in nature. The focus is on the job and tasks and what the follower needs from the supervisor to be successful. This initial interaction is the first test in building trust, respect, and mutual obligation between the supervisor and the follower. If a level of trust, respect, and obligation is evident in the stranger phase, the relationship can move to the “acquaintance” phase. In this phase, either the supervisor or the follower makes an “offer” to the other member of the dyad for a deeper working relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien). During the “acquaintance” phase, the interactions become less transactional as the interactions begin to focus on both work and personal inquiries. Additionally, the overall number of social interactions increases between the two members (Graen & Uhl-Bien). During this phase, the trust, respect, and obligation between the two members increases as they begin to share more information with one another. The “acquaintance” phase sees the member’s levels of trust increase through the different psychological exchanges occurring in the give-and-take of the relationship (Graen & Scandura, 1987). If said trust is broken, the relationship can stay in the “acquaintance” phase or, resort back to the “stranger” phase until/if the trust is rebuilt. The leader-follower relationship can move to the third and final stage, a “mature partnership” when the members move away from individual role-making to team-making showcased by a high level of trust and influence. Members in this stage of the relationship are true partners. These are highly developed relationships where both members share a high level of mutual respect, trust, and obligation for each other and the relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As noted by Graen and Uhl-Bien, “in partnership relationships, the potential for incremental influence is nearly unlimited, due to the enormous breadth and depth of exchange of work-related social contributions that are possible” (p. 232). Through this process, the supervisor and follower move into a true partnership filled with support, encouragement, honesty, and mutual reciprocal influence (Graen & Uhl-Bien).

The mutual reciprocal influence allows the dyad to rotate the leadership role as the members look to accomplish common goals (Graen & Uhl-Bien). Additionally, the hierarchical nature of the relationship diminishes as the relationship becomes more of a peer-to-peer relationship.

Because the purpose of this study is to examine the perception of the relationship between NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches, the focus is on how sport supervisors and head coaches interact to build their partnership. Still, LMX research suggests there are several factors and outcomes that can impact the quality of the relationship between the supervisor and follower.

Factors affecting LMX

High-quality dyadic relationships are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). However, for the dyad to develop these characteristics, specific factors related to both the supervisor and the follower—as well as the quality of their interaction—must be present (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). For example, early studies in LMX discovered specific factors of high-quality exchange relationships (Graen, 1976; Graen, Liden, et al., 1982; Graen & Schiemann, 1978). In a meta-analysis of antecedents and consequences of LMX, Dulebohn et al. (2012) identified follower and supervisor characteristics, as well as interpersonal relationship characteristics that affect high-quality exchange relationships. The follower characteristics are: (a) competence, (b) agreeableness, (c) conscientiousness, (d) extraversion, (e) neuroticism, (f) openness, (g) positive and negative affectivity, and (i) locus of control. Conversely, the supervisor characteristics identified are: (a) supervisor's expectations of followers, (b) contingent reward behavior, (c) transformational leadership, (d) extraversion and (e) agreeableness. Furthermore, the following seven interpersonal relationship factors were identified: (a) perceived similarity, (b) affect/liking, (c) ingratiation (supervisor reported), (d) ingratiation (follower reported), (e) self-promotion, (f) assertiveness, and (g) leader trust. While the identification of factors affecting LMX have been examined quantitatively, such examination tells us little about the actual human experience; therefore, it is essential to understand the outcomes these factors influence (Table 1).

Outcomes Associated with LMX

LMX posits that, “the quality of the relationship that develops between a leader and a follower is predictive of outcomes at the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis” (Gerstner & Day, 1997, p. 827). Therefore, much of the research on LMX has focused on the relationship between LMX and outcomes (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Epitropaki & Martin, 2016). The outcomes examined in the LMX literature include (a) behavioral (Dulebohn et al., 2012), (b) attitudinal (Epitropaki & Martin, 2016; Gerstner & Day, 1997), (c) role status (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen, Novak, et al., 1982) and (d) perceptual measures (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Continuing to follow the framework provided by the meta-analysis completed by Dulebohn et al. (2012), these outcomes are relevant to understanding the relationship between

the sport supervisor and head coach and the relationship's effect on outcomes, like organizational success. Table 1 provides a summary of the LMX determinants and outcomes found in previous research.

LMX in Sport

LMX has been used as a framework in the context of sport organizations to explain some of the dyadic relationships that exist within the sport environment - coach/athlete (Caliskan, 2015; Case, 1998; Cranmer, 2016; Cranmer & Myers, 2015), head coach/assistant coach (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004), administrator/staff (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Mondt & Martyn, 2023), and the relationship between board chairs and volunteer board members (Bang, 2011, 2013; Hoye, 2004, 2006). Research on each of these dyads within the sport context has illuminated the importance of high-quality relationships for members of the dyad and for organizational performance. Coaches who provide emotional support and reciprocal communication strategies build higher quality LMX relationships with their players (Cranmer, 2016; Cranmer & Myers, 2015). While athletes with high-quality LMX relationships with their coach also indicate stronger relationships with their teammates (Cranmer & Myers, 2015). Similarly, a high-quality LMX relationship between the head coach and assistant coach positively affects the job and career satisfaction of the assistant coach (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). Further demonstrating the value of high-quality relationships, high-quality LMX relationships between athletic directors and middle managers (e.g., assistant or associate athletic directors) not only have a positive effect for the middle managers but for their direct reports (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001). Additionally, for intercollegiate athletic employees, a high-quality relationship increases the employee's organizational creativity, which provides the employee with greater access to resources and a freedom to innovate (Mondt & Martyn, 2023). As evidenced from previous studies, high quality relationships within the sport industry have a direct positive effect on members of the dyad and the organization. However, there is a lack of understanding of how high-quality relationships are developed, especially from the perspective of both supervisors and followers. Utilizing a unique and integral dyad within intercollegiate athletics, this study aims to explore how the relationship between the head coach and sport supervisor is perceived by both the sport supervisor and head coach to illuminate findings for an important dyad in the intercollegiate sport industry.

Table 1: *Summary of LMX Determinants and Outcomes*

Dyad Member	Characteristics/Outcomes
Supervisor Characteristics	Supervisor’s expectations of followers Contingent reward behavior Transformational leadership Extraversion Agreeableness
Follower Characteristics	Competence Agreeableness Conscientiousness Extraversion Neuroticism Openness Positive affectivity Negative affectivity Locus of Control
Interpersonal Characteristics	Perceived similarity Affect/Liking Ingratiation (supervisor reported) Ingratiation (follower reported) Self-promotion Assertiveness Leader trust
Outcomes	Behavioral Attitudinal Role status Perceptual measures

Method

As the purpose of this study is to examine the perception of the relationship between NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches from the perspective of both parties, this study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA; Smith & Nizza, 2021) to understand relationships through the lived experiences of the individuals in the dyad (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). As a qualitative methodology, IPA is rooted in the understanding that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes how people make sense of their lives, actions, and environments (Smith & Nizza, 2021). IPA allows the participant to interpret and describe one’s experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2021), while also capturing the highly significant and complex perceptions of the

relationship for each member of the dyad (Glesne, 2016). Furthermore, IPA recognizes experiences are situated within social and cultural contexts, which influence the participant (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In this study, IPA allows for the exploration of the complexity of the sport supervisor role and coaching relationship as it is situated within the intercollegiate athletic department. The research team analyzed the data through a social constructivist epistemology in which knowledge and meaning are formed through social interaction and cultural mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, the sport supervisor–coach relationship is understood as a relational reality co-constructed through shared dialogue, practices, and organizational norms. This aligns with IPA’s emphasis on how individuals make sense of their experiences within their sociocultural context (Smith & Nizza, 2021).

Positionality Statement

Both members of the research team have worked in intercollegiate athletic administration and have seen first-hand the interactions of the coach-sport supervisor relationship. Additionally, one member of the research team has a spouse that is a head coach at the Division I level; as such, this researcher has an intimate understanding of the dynamic that is the coach-sport supervisor relationship. The other research team member serves on the athletics board and offers coaching sessions and professional development workshops for athletic administrators, which also include sport supervisors. The professional and personal experiences and observations of the research team were both impetus for the research.

Participant Sample

The study population consisted of sport supervisors and head coaches at NCAA Division I institutions. IPA emphasizes small, purposive samples to allow for individual meaning making (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Accordingly, the research team used criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in combination with snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) to identify participants who met the study criteria and to expand the sample through the participants’ and researchers’ professional networks. Criterion sampling ensured that all individuals met specific characteristics relevant to the research purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018): participants had to be either (a) current sport supervisors—athletic administrators formally designated as supervising one or more NCAA Division I sport programs—or (b) current NCAA Division I head coaches listed as head coaches on their department staff directory.

Data Collection

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for the study, emails were sent to a random selection of individuals located on departmental websites that met the criteria for the study and to professional contacts of the first author. Follow-up emails were sent two weeks later. A total of 22 participants (11 sport supervisors and 11 head coaches) from various NCAA Division I institutions participated in the study (see Tables 2 and 3).

Sport supervisors and head coaches participated in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to understand the experience from the interviewees' point of view, thus bringing meaning and understanding to their own experiences and as it relates to others (Kvale, 1996). Before beginning the study, a pilot study with a former sport supervisor and a former head coach were conducted. Minor edits were made to the interview protocol based on recommendations by the pilot study participants. The interview questions were developed from the leader-member exchange theory literature and adapted for the role of the sport supervisor and head coach, respectively. Example interview questions for sport supervisors included the following: (a) in one word, describe your relationship with the head coach(es) you supervise (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hoyer, 2006); (b) in your role as a sport supervisor, what are the most helpful behaviors a coach can display to build an effective relationship with you? (Dulebohn et al., 2012); (c) do you consider you and your current head coach to have similar interests, values, and attitudes (Dulebohn et al., 2012)? Interview questions for head coaches sought to understand the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach. Questions included the following: (a) in one or two words, what is your relationship with your sport supervisor based? (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hoyer, 2006); (b) do you consider you and your sport supervisor to have similar interests, values, and attitudes? (Dulebohn et al., 2012); (c) how does your sport supervisor provide feedback to you? (Dulebohn et al.). Each interview was conducted via a video teleconferencing platform or via phone and lasted 40 to 80 minutes. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

The interpretive phenomenological approach allows for the use of existing theory in data analysis, while also offering flexibility for new concepts to emerge (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Thus, the research team utilized both deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding, also known as a prior coding, is the development of codes before data collection typically from previous literature (Miles et al., 2020). In keeping with IPA (Smith & Nizza, 2021), the research team served as active interpreters throughout the coding process, working to understand how sport supervisors and head coaches made sense of their relational experiences. Each researcher independently conducted first-cycle coding to remain close to the participants' words and capture nuances specific to the sport supervisor-coach dyad. As such, the research team used "in vivo" coding through the first cycle coding phase (Saldaña, 2016). The team then met to compare interpretations, interrogate assumptions, and reconcile differences, recognizing that IPA involves a double hermeneutic—the researchers making sense of participants who are themselves making sense of their relationships (Smith & Nizza, 2021). During second-cycle coding, the team collaboratively organized codes into broader categories and themes, using reflexive dialogue to ensure interpretations remained grounded in the lived realities of NCAA Division I sport supervisors and head coaches rather than researchers' prior knowledge of intercollegiate athletics (Saldaña, 2016; Smith & Nizza, 2021).

Themes were identified for each participant group – sport supervisor and head coach – as well as themes that converged across both groups (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Specific self-reported demographic information was collected from each participant (see Tables 2 and 3) to better understand the sample. This data included the participant's formal title, institution, years working in the intercollegiate athletics industry, years in current role, years served as a sport supervisor or head coach, gender, and race.

Trustworthiness

Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In this study, the experiences and perceptions of the relationships between sport supervisors and head coaches were examined from the perspective of both groups. To enhance credibility, the researchers employed triangulation by corroborating perspectives across and within participant groups, conducting member checks, and engaging in regular research team debriefs (Glesne, 2016). The findings were interpreted through the lens of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory to support both confirmability and dependability. Additionally, transferability was addressed through purposive criterion sampling, the use of rich, thick descriptions, and member checking (Glesne, 2016). As a result, the findings may be transferable to individuals in similar roles who may recognize and relate to the experiences shared in this study.

Table 2: *Sport Supervisor Participants*

Pseudonym	Title	Job	Revenue/ Non-Revenue	Years in Cur- rent Posi- tion	Years as a Sport Super- visor	Years at Current Institu- tion	Years in college sports	Gen- der	Race
Sandy	Senior Associate AD	Strategic Affairs	Non-Revenue	0-2 years	15	12	26	F	W
Peyton	Executive Senior Associate Athletics Director	External Affairs	Non-Revenue	16 - 20 years	9	19	24	M	W
Andrea	Deputy Athletics Director	Internal Affairs	Revenue & Priority	10 - 15 years	14	14	24	F	AA
Virginia	Senior Associate AD	External Affairs - Development	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	4 as primary/ 3 as secondary	4	13	F	W
Rexton	Deputy Athletic Director	Internal & External Affairs	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	20	3.5	33	M	W
Sarah	Senior Associate Athletic Director	Internal Affairs	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	3	3	8	F	B
Linda	Deputy Athletic Director/ SWA	Internal Affairs	Revenue & Non-Revenue	0	12	20.5	20.5	F	W
Sheldon	Chief Financial Officer	Finance	Non-Revenue	3 - 5 years	4	7	9	M	W
Dave	Deputy Director of Athletics and CFO	Finance	Non-Revenue	20+ years	16	25	30	M	W
Paula	Chief of Staff/ Sr. Associate Athletics Director	Internal Affairs	Tier I & 2	10 - 15 years	18	12	20	F	W
Marlon	Deputy Director of Athletics	Finance & External Affairs	Priority	0 - 2 years	14	8 months	14 years	M	B

Table 3: *Head Coach Participants*

Pseudonym	Sport	Gender	Race	Revenue/ Non-Revenue	Years in Current Position	Years with Current Sport Su- pervisor	Sport Super- visor Gender	Sport Super- visor Race
Charlene	Women's Basketball	F	B	Revenue	2	2	F	W
Jeff	Men's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	2	1	M	W
William	Women's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	8	2	F	W
Samantha	Women's Volleyball	F	W	Non-Revenue	5	2	F	W
Heather	Softball	F	W	Non-Revenue (Priority Sport)	10	1	F	W
Matt	Football	M	W	Revenue	1	5 months	M	W
Brad	Men's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	3	5 months	F	W
Duncan	Rifle	M	W	Non-Revenue	16	2	M	W
Lamar	Men's Soccer	M	W	Non-Revenue	4	3	M	W
Sally	Field Hockey	F	W	Non-Revenue	3	3	F	W
Rachel	Women's Basketball	F	B	Revenue	2	2	F	W

Findings

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory provides a valuable framework for examining the relationship between supervisors and followers, particularly in the context of NCAA Division I athletics. The contrasting perspectives of sport supervisors and head coaches on what constitutes a high-quality relationship underscore the complexity and nuance of their professional interactions. From the analysis, 6 distinct themes were constructed (see Table 4). Notably, only one theme – trust – was commonly identified by all participants. Sport supervisors contributed one additional unique theme, while head coaches identified four additional themes—two of which were associated with characteristics of low-quality relationships. A discussion of each theme is presented below in table 4.

Table 4: *Head Coach/Sport Supervisor Relationship Themes*

Type of Relationship (Dyad Perspective)	Theme #1	Theme #2	Theme #3
High Quality Relationships (Coach's Perspective)	Trust	Overall care and investment in the program	Intentional presence
High Quality Relationships (Sport Supervisor's Perspective)	Trust	Transparency	
Low-Quality Relationship (Coach's Perspective)	Lack of Presence	Evaluative Focus	

Trust (Shared)

Trust emerged as a shared theme for both sport supervisors and head coaches. Nine out of the 11 sport supervisors interviewed identified trust when asked about the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach. Ten out of the 11 head coaches indicated trust between themselves and the sport supervisor as imperative for a high-quality relationship.

From the sport supervisor perspective, Virginia noted, "I think my [sport] coach trusts me, because he knows that I really care." Dave described the relationship and the importance of trust by stating,

you have to develop trust... she [head coach] has to trust that I don't have any ulterior motives, she has to trust that I'm going to have the best interests of her staff and the student athletes. She has to trust that if there's something wrong with the program, and there's a problem, I'm going to tell her.

Similarly, Linda expressed how sport supervisors build trust with their coaches by matching their actions with their words. She stated,

showing integrity... coming through on what you say you're going to do. And then if you said you were going to do something and then it can't happen for some reason, or it changes, going in yourself and saying, 'Hey, I wanted to let you know I said this. But now it's this and I apologize if I misled you or I misspoke. I wasn't aware of the circumstances or circumstances change.' I think that's in the onus of building trust.

Linda also acknowledged that it is important for a sport supervisor to be vulnerable with a head coach to build trust in the relationship. She shared, "Letting [coaches] get to know you, being a little vulnerable, you got to open up a little bit." Sport supervisors acknowledged they must show trustworthy behavior (i.e., doing what you say you will do), in addition to head coaches showing trust in the expertise of the sport supervisor.

Similarly, from a head coach's perspective, Brad described the evolution of his relationship. He noted, "It took me a while to build that trust with him." Now Brad feels the trust he and his sport supervisor have built allow for more open conversa-

tion and feedback. Brad expressed, “we both have zero inhibitions when we walk in the room and have a conversation.” Charlene echoed the sentiment of creating safety and transparency to build trust in describing how her and her sport supervisor, each of whom are of different racial backgrounds, were able to build trust in their relationship early on through conversations about social justice:

... she mentioned a few times that she just had never had a person that she can just talk and not feel like, there’s no judgment with us, or just like a complete judgment free zone. You might say something maybe, comes out wrong, but we both have built that relationship where it can come out wrong, and we can still finish the conversation and say why it was wrong.

Or say why you should say it differently, and it’s been a cool relationship.

When sport supervisors are willing to be vulnerable with their head coaches, they can build the trust and develop high-quality relationships that are true partnerships. As Charlene noted, “I didn’t anticipate the type of relationship that [sport supervisor] and I were able to build, you know, honestly, just in terms of like a working relationship, but then also a friendship in a lot of ways.”

Conversely, considering what they desired in a relationship with their sport supervisor, Lamar and Rachel both gave examples of how they wish they had more trust in their relationship with their sport supervisor. Lamar hopes for “the trust that I could say anything and it’s not going to effect the future of my job here.” While Rachel shared, “I’ll just say for my part that lack of trust comes from the understanding of what I feel like I’m up against, and you know, the I think, the benefit of the doubt is not always given to me if that makes sense.”

Sport supervision is an integral component of the coaches’ success and, thus, the success of the athletic department. When trust is present and felt by both parties, the parties experience a sense of support and safety to foster a healthy and effective partnership.

Transparency (Sport Supervisors)

Sport supervisors identified transparency as critical to building a high-quality relationship. Marlon noted that without transparency from his head coaches he cannot adequately advocate or support them. He stated,

So, if our job is to support and protect and be a resource, you’re better off keeping me updated on issues. Because if you don’t, and I’m surprised by something that’s 100% on you, and I can’t go to bat for you. I can’t help you navigate how to handle those situations.

Sarah shared a similar sentiment,

I can advocate for you better if I know what’s going on. I have a lot of meetings where [sports] come up, and I don’t know where your position is on things then you’re at a disadvantage because I’m missing an opportunity to speak up for you...But I think that just being open to the sport supervisor in that way is a helpful behavior and mindset of a head coach in order to build the most effective relationship.

Linda echoed the importance of transparency in building the partnership with the head coach. She stated,

I think one of the pieces is being forthcoming, not creating the divide or a silo of like, “don’t tell the administration,” like let’s keep this in house and handle it. Just being forthcoming and open and honest with what’s going on in the program. That’s really helpful, and then we can be very productive moving forward because I can help those coaches through those situations.

From a sport supervisor perspective, head coaches can build high-quality relationships with their sport supervisors by building trust and being transparent. Additionally, when head coaches are transparent with their sport supervisor, it strengthens the sport supervisor’s trust in their head coach as well; therefore, strengthening the overall relationship.

Overall care and an investment in the program (Head Coaches)

In addition to trust, coaches identified overall care and an investment in the program as another need for a high-quality relationship with their sport supervisor. Charlene exemplified this when she stated, “I think knowing that she cares about me as a person allows me to trust her.” Thus, when sport supervisors think about the overall care, it is not just about the program or the coach, but about the coach as a person. Sally shared a similar sentiment when she describes her relationship with her sport supervisor, “I’m a pretty positive coach and a positive person. And so, I like having that [sport supervisor] that can kind of uplift me when maybe there’s times throughout the season that are really, really tough.”

In discussing how a sport supervisor can demonstrate their investment into the program, David, a head coach, shared the following story:

I think [sport supervisor] is quite proud of ‘his baby,’ his program. As we all are, obviously, but like, I believe his sincerity, like when we lost against [opponent in NCAA tournament], I could tell that it really hurt him. And I think that’s really, I think that’s really important...I think he’s emotionally invested in it now, as well.

Heather recognized that sport supervisors that are emotionally invested help the coach feel like a priority,

Invested meaning so if there’s 35 sports at a school and your supervisor is overseeing 12, that you still feel important to them, you know, that they truly do care about your program and the happenings of your program. You don’t want to feel dismissed in those conversations of like, you know, ‘there’s a football game and sorry, you’re not important today.’

Heather also noted that sport supervisors can show investment through check-ins. She gave the example of asking coaches about recruiting trips or how practices are going, “I think those check-ins can make you feel like they’re [sport supervisor] invested.”

Coaches desire a sport supervisor that will care about them as a person as well as their program. By showing care and an overall investment in the program, sport

supervisors can show their emotional investment in the program and thus, feel like true partners with their head coaches.

Intentional presence (physical and emotional presence) (Head Coaches)

Head coaches want sport supervisors to have an intentional presence with them *and* the program. Intentional presence is a two-prong approach that includes physical presence (i.e., visibility) and emotional presence (i.e., accessibility). Examples of physical presence shared by head coaches includes, being around the program on more than just game days; it includes consistent face-to-face interactions with the coach, coaching staff, and players; and, physical proximity of offices. Emotional presence is described as accessible to the head coach to provide support and be a sounding board.

Charlene described how her sport supervisor is a frequent visitor to practices, “she’s around a lot. I think she comes to practices a few times a week.” Sally expressed the importance of her sport supervisor being physically present as it relates to the student-athletes, “The importance of that support, seeing her at our games or seeing her interact with our players. I think that really shows that she supports our program. I think that’s really important to me.”

In discussing what she would want in a relationship with her sport supervisor, Rachel discussed how she would like her sport supervisor to be physically present stating, “being visible, whether it’s in practices, at maybe events that we’re doing at games and showing that you are completely invested in our team and in what it is that we are doing.”

David highlighted how the physical proximity of his office to his sport supervisor’s office has aided in the quality of their relationship,

So, proximity between our offices is great, he’s 30 steps down the hallway from me. So honestly, that aspect of things, as I said, as our relationship has evolved, has become more and more informal.... So, funnily enough, when I come upstairs into the building, he’s pretty much the first office I see, to get to my office. So, if the door is ajar, and I’ve got five minutes, I’ll put my head and if he’s not too busy, what I think will be a five-minute conversation can sometimes be 20 minutes to half an hour. Similarly, he has no reservations about walking down here, coming into my office sitting down... cross his legs, look very, very comfortable.... And we’ll talk about anything.

Discussing emotional presence, Charlene described the importance of the sport supervisor being accessible to a head coach stating, “I just think the accessibility because that’s where people start to feel a bit either frustrated or lonely. Like, I wanted to reach out and talk when you weren’t there. And so, I think that part is big.” Heather echoed her appreciation for her sport supervisor being accessible stating, “her accessibility is what makes her a great supervisor. I think that how she’s able to respond and be available for us is absolutely something that I value.”

Simply stated, sport supervisors who are present (physically and emotionally) have high quality relationships with their head coaches. Conversely, sport supervisors who are not intentional about being both physically (e.g., traveling with the

team, attending practices occasionally, going to the coach's office) and emotionally present (e.g., accessible), develop low-quality relationship with their head coaches. Thus, when sport supervisors are not present, head coaches may be more likely to perceive the relationship as low quality. For example, both Rachel and Lamar discussed how their respective sport supervisor was not visible and how, ideally, their sport supervisor would be more present both physically and emotionally. Lamar shared his frustration in the lack of visibility of his sport supervisor when describing their weekly check-in meetings. He shared that his sport supervisor doesn't always attend their weekly check-in meetings, "our weekly check-in meetings that sometimes he's on and sometimes he's not." Similarly, he noted the importance of being around saying, "know what we're doing good. Like the buzzword is always culture. What does culture look like? You only know culture if you're in it." Rachel expressed how being physically present can help the coach feel supported and create a sense of emotional support for her. She shared,

I do want you [sport supervisor] to know what's going on, you know what I mean? So, I don't know, I think it should be kind of a meet in the middle. I want you to know what's going on in my sport, so that if something does come up, you're aware of what's going on already. So, you can kind of say, hey, no, I've seen this with my own eyes. Or, you know what I mean, I've been around [coach], I've seen her coach, I know how she approaches things.

Rachel also discussed how she had to advocate for herself due to the lack of presence of her sport supervisor when it came to a student-athlete issue. She shared, "And I think if she would have been around a little bit more, she would have understood a little bit more. Just you know, why the things were happening, my perspective on it, and could have spoken to it a little better."

Evaluative Focus (Head Coaches – Low-Quality Relationship)

In addition to the sport supervisors not being present, Lamar and Rachel both discussed how their relationship with their sport supervisor felt less like a partnership and more like they were being evaluated. Thus, the theme of evaluative focus was derived from head coaches with low-quality relationships. Lamar provided the example, "Well, again, when you don't come around very often, and then all of a sudden you come around when you lose a game, it makes you feel that that's [winning] the only thing that matters." He continued,

not being around, not knowing what we're doing on a daily basis, not seeing the good that we've done, and only coming into the picture when something's maybe not going as well as it should. That leads me to not want to go to him if there's something minimal even that I need to I need help with. Right? I just don't want to do that because it could ignite something bigger and I'm like, this is now my boss. So, I feel like he's my boss.

Lamar shared another example when discussing the role of his sport supervisor in the decision-making process stating, "Back to the comments I made before about being evaluated. For instance, it's like 'Is that a recommendation? Or is that something we

should do?’ And if I don’t do it, am I being evaluated? Because we didn’t do it?” Lamar noted that “as time has progressed, it’s more difficult to call even, just simply because I guess I do feel a little bit of being evaluated.”

Head coaches experience low-quality relationships with their sport supervisors when the sport supervisor is not present. Sport supervisors who do not prioritize being present (visible and accessible), dilute the trust in the relationship with their head coach. Additionally, not being present creates a sense of uncertainty for the head coach when the sport supervisor does come around. While evaluation is undoubtedly an important component to any job, for coaches that experienced a feeling of being constantly evaluated, it eroded the relationship of trust.

Differences/Similarities

The interpretive phenomenological approach allowed the research team to explore how individuals in the coach/sport supervisor relationship interpreted the same relational context, revealing convergence or divergence in meaning-making. Additionally, individuals of each group (coach/sport supervisor) shared similarities and differences in what each group needs to build an effective relationship. Both groups, sport supervisors and head coaches, identified trust as an integral component of the sport supervisor/head coach relationship. In the examples from the head coaches, the role of trust was apparent in the development of the high-quality relationships and the strong desire for trust from those head coaches in low-quality relationships. Trust was, however, the only similarity.

Differences emerge as head coaches feel high-quality relationships are built when sport supervisors have an overall care for the coach and the program as well as show investment in the program. Additionally, coaches feel very strongly about the need for sport supervisors to be intentionally present, both physically and emotionally, to build a high-quality relationship with their head coaches. In contrast, sport supervisors note that it is important for head coaches to be transparent with sport supervisors. Doing so allows the sport supervisor to more properly support and advocate for the program. When the sport supervisor is left in the outside looking in, they are more of an acquaintance than a partner.

Discussion

Sport supervisor is not a formal title of an athletic administrator in NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, but a role that is uniquely situated as an essential organizational connector critical to helping the coach feel supported, connected, and valued (Green & Hancock, 2023). Thus, the relationship between the sport supervisor and the head coach is important; therefore, an understanding of how a sport supervisor and head coach build a high-quality relationship is paramount for intercollegiate athletic departments. The findings from this study offer contributions to LMX literature (theoretical implications) and provide actionable behaviors and expectations needed by both parties to form a high-quality relationship (practical implications).

Theoretical Implications

Previous LMX research has identified numerous factors affecting LMX including agreeableness, openness, and competence (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Additionally, trust has been established in previous studies and was confirmed to be integral to the development of a mature partnership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This study expands the LMX literature by identifying new supervisor characteristics identified by followers for high-quality relationships: intentional presence and overall care and investment. The coach's desire to have a supervisor who shows an overall care and investment is similar to the previously found supervisor characteristics of transformational leadership, specifically individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Coaches described high-quality relationships as those in which supervisors demonstrated an overall care and investment to not only the team, but also to the coach. This concept is consistent with the LMX literature that suggests leaders and members in high-quality, mature partnerships share information and resources on a personal level, not just at the work level (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Coaches desire social support and social exchanges from their supervisors, which are elements known to build trust (Blau, 1964; Kang & Stewart, 2006).

Previous research on LMX and physical distance has indicated that LMX positively affects follower performance regardless of distance between the leader and the member (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999). However, findings between the sport supervisor/coach dyad indicate intentional presence – physically present and emotionally accessible – matters and is desired by followers (i.e., coaches). These findings highlight how coaches desire the relationship to be more relational than hierarchical. Additionally, these new factors highlight the desire by coaches to develop a mature partnership with their sport supervisor; intentional presence is connected to more frequent interactions and increase the overall “breadth and depth of exchange” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 232) described in mature partnerships. Conversely, when coaches perceived sport supervisors as less present, the relationship felt more evaluative. As such, the partnership stagnated in either the “stranger” or “acquaintance” phase. This distinction echoes Dansereau et al.'s (1975) framework, which differentiated between leadership (influence without authority) and supervision (influence through formal authority), underscoring the need for relational rather than hierarchical dynamics.

Practical Implications

In addition to theoretical implications, the findings from this study also provide numerous practical implications for NCAA Division I coaches, sport supervisors, and athletic administrators. First and foremost, athletic department leaders must acknowledge the role of a sport supervisor as important to the success of the athletic department *and* a critical partnership for head coaches (Green & Hancock, 2023). This begins by understanding the role, communicating expectations of the role with both sport supervisors and head coaches (Green & Hancock), providing sport supervisors the time to be present to build trust with their coaches, and offering training

and professional development for athletic administrators who serve as sport supervisors. Furthermore, athletic leadership should be intentional with *who* is selected to serve in the role of sport supervisor. The role is not just a professional necessity for athletic administrators, but a critical organizational connector (Green & Hancock, 2023).

This study confirmed both supervisors and followers indicated trust as an integral component of a high-quality relationship between a sport supervisor and a head coach. The desire for trust indicates each party recognizes the needs of the relationship are greater than their individual needs (Simpson, 2007). Trust is required for the development of a mature partnership and is developed through different interactions and over time (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Research on trust has shown various behaviors by managers as necessary for building trustworthiness, including, behavioral consistency, behavioral integrity, sharing and delegation of control, communication (e.g., accurate, openness), and demonstration of concern (Whitener et al., 1998). Thus, for sport supervisors to build a mature relationship with their head coaches they need time in their workday to be present and opportunities to build trust, which aligns with the findings indicating coach's desires to have their sport supervisor be intentionally present. Supervisors who made efforts to engage in the daily rhythms of teams were perceived as more trustworthy and supportive. Therefore, sport supervisors should be intentional about leaving their offices and deliberately engaging with the program(s) they supervise. In doing so, they show a level of investment and help build trust with the head coaches they supervise. This finding echoes the sentiment of Doherty and Danylchuk (1996) that found head coaches are more satisfied, perceived to be more effective, and are willing to perform extra-role behaviors for leaders that are involved. However, recent studies of intercollegiate athletics employees indicate that rising workloads have contributed to substantial overwork and elevated levels of burnout amongst intercollegiate athletic department employees (Huml et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019). Moreover, recent data found that NCAA Division I sport supervisors provide oversight to an average of 3.5 teams in addition to their roles and responsibilities associated with their formal titles (Green et al., 2025). This necessitates thoughtful consideration by athletic administrators when assigning sport supervision responsibilities. Recognizing the role of the sport supervisor as an added role (Green & Hancock, 2023) and one that requires intentional presence and time to build a mature relationship with the head coach, athletic leaders need to recognize the required time needed for sport supervision and consider employee's workloads when designating sport supervisors. Oversight of multiple sports, or those with overlapping seasons, may compromise the ability to be fully present—an essential component of relational success. Otherwise, it could be argued that sport supervision is adding to the overwork climate in intercollegiate athletics.

For sport supervisors, transparency is highly important to a successful relationship with the head coach. The sport supervisor/head coach relationship is unique as individual sport programs, in many ways, act as their own organization while still part of a larger organization (the athletic department). Thus, sport supervisors find themselves in a challenging middle management role balancing the needs of the

athletic department with the individual needs of the program(s) they supervise and the head coaches they oversee (Green & Hancock, 2023). Head coaches who fail to share information – the good and the bad – with their sport supervisors create discord in the relationship causing the sport supervisor to feel uninvolved, disjointed, and disconnected from the head coach and the program. Interestingly, when coaches felt disconnected from their respective sport supervisor, they were more likely to feel evaluated and under supervision than in a mature partnership. Thus, coaches could create undesired relationships themselves by not being transparent with their sport supervisor. Sport supervisors need head coaches to be transparent with them so they can feel included and be stronger supporters and advocates for their programs. To build a high-quality relationship, both individuals need to be willing to share information. This illustrates the power and responsibility both parties have in developing a trusting relationship.

Head coaches value supervisors who invest time to learn the nuances of their sport and program, enhancing mutual respect. This aligns with Bang's (2011, 2013) findings that perceived expertise enhances leader credibility. Although coaches did not expect sport supervisors to have technical mastery of their sport, knowledge of current trends and issues served as a proxy for care, reinforcing trust. Notably, this study positions competence and sport knowledge as valued supervisor traits, diverging from previous literature where such characteristics were framed primarily as follower attributes (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen & Scandura, 1987).

Finally, the findings reveal a reciprocal model of relationship-building. Trust, respect, and mutual obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) require continuous, intentional engagement from both coaches and sport supervisors. While this study did not focus on the distinct process of how trust is cultivated, head coaches and sport supervisors provide a glimpse into factors contributing to developing trust and, thus, a more mature partnership. For example, head coaches must demonstrate transparency (e.g., sharing good and bad information) while sport supervisors must receive that transparency as an act of trust and respond with partnership and support. This cycle of trust begins with the sport supervisor being present and showing an overall care and investment in the head coach and the program. When either party withdraws—coaches by withholding information, or supervisors by remaining inaccessible—relational quality diminishes, with implications for morale and team and departmental cohesion.

Future Research and Limitations

Future research should explore the structural and relational elements that define this role, including its evaluative authority and expectations, to further guide effective practice in collegiate sport leadership. Additionally, future research could examine shared leadership, focusing on the upward and downward influence on leadership, especially in the context of head coaches. It is also unknown how the athletic department leadership (e.g., athletic director) affects the sport supervisor/coach dyad. LMX research has also examined outcomes, and thus, it is recommend-

ed to examine the performance of sport supervisor/coach dyads to better understand outcomes. Examining individuals within a single dyad would also be recommended.

While this study is limited to NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, triangulation of the data supports in the transferability and trustworthiness of this study for other professionals in the sport supervisor/coach dyad. It is also understood that every sport supervisor and head coach's relationship is unique and dependent on each party's past experiences, as well as organizational factors that may not be considered.

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