

Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching + Thematic Map

Online

Examining the Effectiveness of a Transformational Leadership Development Program

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The importance of this article is demonstrated by the ringing endorsements of seventeen female student-athletes evolving into coaching careers at the collegiate level. They were the beneficiaries of a leadership development program conducted under the auspices of the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association. Especially edifying was the realization by many of the women of leadership strengths they did not realise they possessed. The author's recommendations are practical and achievable, so long as sport leaders are engaged and committed to achieving gender equity in collegiate coaching. A crucial element is the author's call for including such leadership development programs as an integral part of every mentorship program, for which they build a compelling case. - Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor

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By Danielle Cyr

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Overview

Gender inequity in coaching continues to be an issue in collegiate sport in Canada. Only 26% of female teams and 3% of male teams have female head coaches.

In 2004, the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) established the Female Apprentice Coach Program (FACP) to provide opportunities and mentorship for newly graduated female student-athletes (FACs) to coach in the CCAA. Nevertheless, the CCAA and other performance sport institutions in Canada continue to struggle to recruit and retain female head coaches. Issues they face include a male-dominant sport culture and a lack of leadership development opportunities.

To supplement a recent CCAA mentorship program, in 2020 a transformational leadership development program involving seventeen FACs examined both issues with a view to assessing how to develop the leadership competence and confidence of young female coaches. This approach “addresses root causes to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers, and empower disadvantaged populations by making changes in law and policy, adapting and improving systems and services and distribution of resources, and changing negative or harmful norms and beliefs.”

The leadership development program was led by Danielle Cyr, a CCAA women’s soccer head coach, while the research aspect was conducted by them in partnership with the CCAA and supported by a Mitacs grant (<https://www.mitacs.ca/our-programs/accelerate-core-business/>). This article focuses on the leadership development program, which proved to be highly successful.

Included in the program were 10 Zoom sessions that explored the four factors of transformational leadership (otherwise known as the “four I’s”): Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Also examined were feminist issues and barriers in sport. Four informal Zoom sessions enabled the FACs to suggest discussion topics, and access to a leadership and gender equity resource website was available.

Since athletic leaders play a vital role in ensuring that the varsity sport environment supports FACs and student-athletes in developing their leadership skills, included were two education sessions for mentor coaches and athletic directors. One explored their role in developing transformational leadership skills. The other analyzed issues and barriers women face and implementation of relevant remedies. The final session featured a panel discussion with current CCAA female head coaches.

Various surveys and an analysis of transcribed interviews and facilitator observation notes confirmed that the leadership development program increased the confidence and competence of FACs to lead in a collegiate environment. The program increased FAC, mentor coach, and athletic directors’ understanding of barriers and issues for women in coaching and supported the FACs within each of the four transformational leadership factors.

Given the success of the leadership development program and the results of the research project, it is possible to conclude that future female apprentice coach programs should include a leadership development component that is led by a female/gender diverse coach educator, connects FACs, and educates sport leaders in the FACs’ environments in working to achieve systemic change.

Leadership Development Program Pays Dividends

Sixteen of the 17 FACs reported that gaining new leadership knowledge and tools increased their confidence in their new role as collegiate coaches. They pointed to a perceived increase in

competence, being positioned as knowledge holders, feeling empowered, recognizing they have a unique leadership identity, and feeling that they were not alone on their collegiate coaching journey.

“After completing the program, I feel more competent as a coach. The program gave us resources, strategies, and a support network that makes me feel a lot more confident moving forward.”

The ability to apply the learning was also a confidence-builder.

“My confidence has changed a lot since beginning the program. It has instilled in me the need for female coaches in sport, but it has also shown me the importance of stepping out to try new things. This experience was so growing for my confidence, as we discussed the four factors of transformational leadership, and I found myself able to put them into action right away. This made the experience that much richer and enabled me to grow in confidence.”

As they assumed their new role as a collegiate coach, reflection was a key tool for the FACs in realizing the competence they already possessed.

“My confidence improved drastically. I have more knowledge and experience than I thought I had.”

Through the leadership development program, the FACs were able to identify leadership behaviours and skills within effective coaching that they felt they already possessed. It also helped position the FACs as knowledge holders for their teams and their mentor coaches. Numerous FACs shared that they were able to take the leadership skills they were learning and teach them to their team and to their mentor coaches. This empowered them to contribute to the collegiate sport environment as active knowledge holders and not merely passive knowledge receivers. Mentor coaches also noted this empowerment:

“... she's loved the program and what you've been able to deliver for her ... And she's been really diligent and taking a bunch of notes and she sent me a couple of really big things over the holidays that I'm just starting to get into ... she's got a few things she wants to sink our teeth into ... so I can work through it with her and help her take the lead and follow her lead as well.”

Through knowledge shared by the facilitator and discussions with other FACs and CCAA female head coaches, the FACs felt empowered to take on their new roles as collegiate coaches:

“... And so I feel way more empowered now. And with that, I think comes confidence ... I feel more confident now and am embracing the fact that, yeah, I am young, yeah, I'm a female, but I'm in this position for a reason. I didn't just get it because they needed someone ... they chose me because they saw these things in me.”

The FACs came to realize that their unique perspective as recent varsity athletes gave them an understanding of the players that the mentor coach would not have. This empowered them to step into their new role with increased confidence to lead a collegiate sport program.

Replacing Silos with Networks

The leadership development program provided the first opportunity in the 16-year history of the FACP for FACs to connect and learn alongside each other. Previously, each FAC worked in their own silo with their mentor coach at their respective school. The program allowed the FACs to share experiences and discuss leadership and coaching topics through Zoom sessions connecting participants from across the country. This new connection increased the FACs' confidence as they felt less alone while starting their collegiate coaching journeys. A FAC noted:

"It was a great feeling to know there are others going through the same thing, with the same struggles and we could use each of our unique experiences to help one another. This aspect made me much more confident as a coach."

This sense of connection also boosted confidence by alleviating uncertainties or anxieties associated with taking on a new collegiate coaching role, as one FAC indicated:

"I just honestly can't say enough good things about it [the program]; I just feel like everything I was worried about starting as an assistant coach, this program has either validated that yes, that worry is normal ... you're not in this alone, nobody's expecting you to know everything."

By replacing silos with networks, the leadership development program allowed the FACs to feel supported and visible in their journey. Part of this process also involved learning from diverse perspectives and recognizing each coach's own unique leadership identity.

FACs were given the opportunity to learn about different leadership behaviours and styles outside of what they may have traditionally been exposed to as athletes. As sport continues to be male dominated, especially at the collegiate level, the leadership development program allowed an exploration of transformational leadership, a leadership style that combines both masculine and feminine ways of doing. The program also exposed the FACs to role models of women and gender diverse individuals leading as collegiate head coaches, including the facilitator and panel participants. Reflecting on the representation of women leading, one FAC said:

"Going into it, I was really not confident because this is all I have to do, I have to become this kind of coach, I have to make these adjustments and all this stuff. But hearing other people's stories and also just learning from you [the facilitator] has been awesome, too. Because I like the way you go about things; it's fantastic and gave me

more confidence. I like that a whole lot more than what I've been taught this entire time."

In the above example, the FAC is expressing confidence after finding a leadership style that aligns more with who they are and how they want to lead. After being exposed to a leadership style such as transformational leadership that combats feminine devaluation and working with female head coaches, the FACs began to feel more aligned and confident in their own leadership styles. It is crucial for coaches to be able to work hard to maximize their strengths. One FAC mentioned how nice it was to hear from a more introverted collegiate coach during a panel discussion. The CCAA head coach didn't see herself as a head coach when they first started because they didn't think they fit the typical model of what a head coach should be. However, over time they developed their own effective leadership style. The FAC really connected with this message:

"Being myself will allow for more meaningful connections with athletes. In that sense I feel like my confidence has gotten a bit better but still lots to work on".

Although recognizing that they have more room to grow, the FAC was able to see who they are, an important part of being an effective coach. Similarly, another FAC reflected on how the program allowed them to recognize that the obstacles they face aren't unique to them alone but are systemic barriers faced by women in coaching. They noted that their confidence increased within the leadership development program as they learned that the values they hold as a woman in coaching are sought after and valued:

"Je suis plus confiante en mes moyens puisque je comprends que les obstacles qui sèment mon parcours sont semblables à ceux de l'ensemble des femmes en coaching. Je comprends aussi que mon intérêt pour les personnes derrière les athlètes, l'importance d'être un modèle pour ceux-ci et l'authenticité en tant que coach sont des valeurs recherchées et valorisées. Je me sens en phase avec ce que devrait être un coach, c'est rassurant."

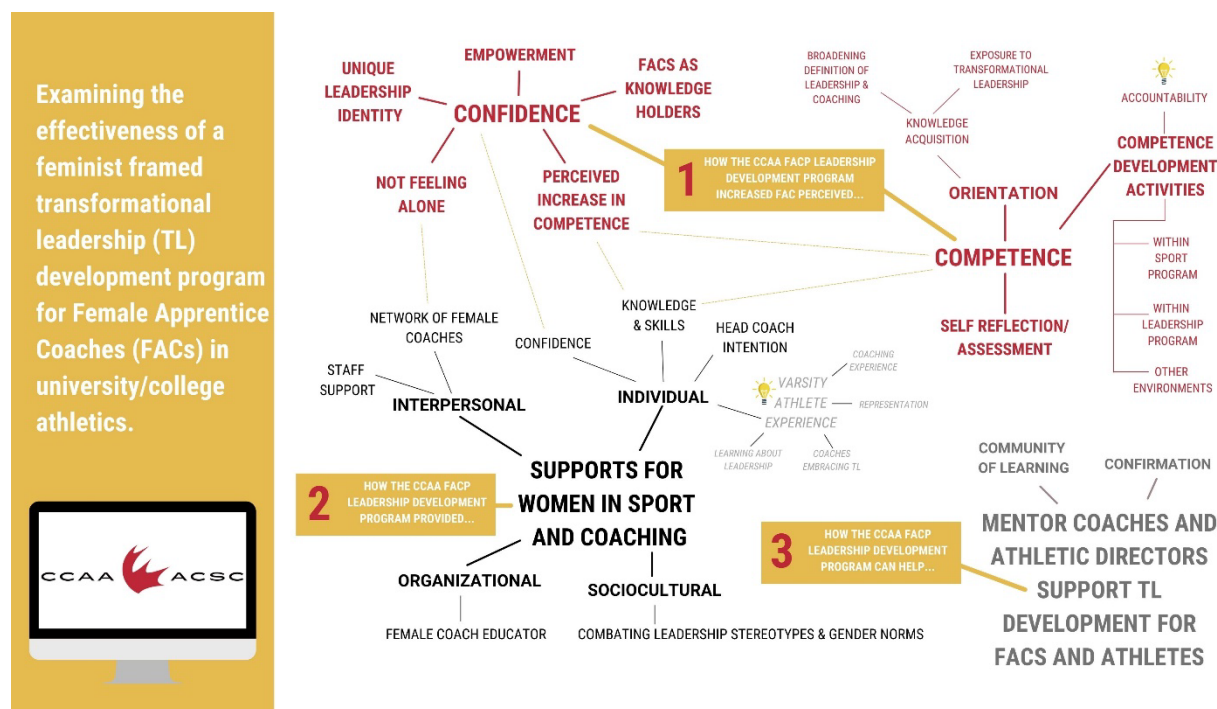
As this FAC explained, they are more confident as they feel aligned with the transformational leadership skills and behaviours required of effective coaches.

After completing the leadership development program, the FACs felt they had gained relevant knowledge, skills, and experience to better navigate and lead in their new roles as collegiate coaches. This was expressed through a positive view of their perceived ability to lead. The FACs were able to self-reflect during formal sessions as well as informal self-assessments through an end-of-program survey. Although the COVID-19 pandemic prevented some FACs from completing competence development activities where they could apply their new knowledge and skills in their sport program, many were able to utilise this new learning through the leadership program sessions, in their work or in their community.

The leadership development program increased the FACs' competence and confidence by providing opportunities to learn and practice new knowledge and skills while also being able to reflect on leadership skills and abilities they already possessed. As a result, the FACs could position themselves as experts on their teams, especially in terms of their new knowledge. The FACs were not only receiving knowledge in the mentorship relationship but were playing an active role in giving value to their team and mentor coaches. The FACs felt empowered through the process, especially when reflecting on the positive potential they bring as recently graduating student-athletes. Through new connections with other FACs, the facilitator, and other female CCAA head coaches, the FACs felt less alone and were able to identify leadership behaviours and styles that aligned with their unique leadership identities.

Addressing Feminist Issues and Barriers in Sport

The leadership development program also increased the FACs' understanding of feminist issues and barriers in sport that affect FACs, mentor coaches, and athletic directors. It provided a number of supports as the FACs began their coaching journey. Individually, the FACs knowledge, skills, and confidence increased. As well, the program had a positive impact on strengthening their commitment to continue coaching in collegiate sport and to aspire to become head coaches. Within the interpersonal realm, it provided a network of female coaches to support the FACs and encourage increased staff support from mentor coaches and athletic directors within athletic departments. The organizational realm included having a female/gender diverse coach educator; sociocultural barriers were addressed by educating FACs and sport leaders within the FACs' environment to combat leadership stereotypes and gender norms.



Key Recommendations for Sport Leaders

When implementing coach mentorship programs for women, strongly consider a supplemental leadership development program. As one FAC said:

“I would recommend this program 10 times out of 10 because I really did learn so much and you know they've done it in the past without the leadership components... I think having the two together is super important. And I think if you just have one or just the other, I do think that's a miss because I think it's important to learn these things, but then to also be able to practically apply them while having somebody watch you or talk with them about it or whatever that kind of mentor coach relationship looks like.”

Connect Female Apprentice Coaches.

The network gained from the leadership development program by intentionally connecting FACs through online sessions was consistently reported as one of the most valuable parts of the program and played an important role in increasing FAC-perceived confidence and competence. Future female apprentice coach programs should incorporate opportunities for connection between apprentices to allow the FACs to feel supported, connected, and part of their female coach network.

Start at the student-athlete experience.

The FACs identified key areas within their student-athlete experience that could have helped them transition into their new role as collegiate coaches more successfully. These included gaining coaching experience, learning about leadership, having varsity coaches who embrace transformational leadership, and connecting with other female head coaches. Collegiate head coaches should be made aware of these areas and work to integrate them into their varsity programming to start the sport leadership journey even sooner, especially for their female-student athletes.

Focus on the important role of sport leaders in helping female apprentice coaches and student-athletes develop their leadership skills.

As athletic directors and mentor coaches often hold the power in allowing female apprentice coaches and student-athletes to practice and learn leadership skills, mentorship programs should strive to educate them on the importance of creating a supportive culture, including providing tangible actions.

To achieve gender equity in collegiate coaching in Canada, intentional efforts need to continue to create supportive coaching environments that provide the opportunity for women to develop and enhance their coaching and leadership skills. Mentorship programs provide the one-on-one support required to help develop coaching skills by learning from an experienced mentor coach. By adding a supplemental leadership program that engages the new coach to explore and develop

her own leadership and involves the athletic leaders in her environment, mentorship programs can help increase the supports and decrease the barriers women face in collegiate coaching.

About the Author

Danielle Cyr is an associate faculty member, researcher, and doctoral student at Royal Roads University exploring sport, gender, communication, leadership, and organizational studies. Their research focuses on performance sport for leadership and community development as a conduit for safer sport experiences. They are the head coach of the Mount Saint Vincent University women's soccer program and a staff coach within the provincial and national soccer development pathway. Passionate about developing great coaches, athletes, and people, Danielle is a leadership development consultant and coach educator working with athletes and coaches across the country.