

# COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS: “IT’S A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE”

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## Abstract

Division I athletic departments have contended with loss of revenue following the COVID-19 pandemic, record turnover in employees (Huml et al., 2022), and rising costs to support the needs of student-athletes. Intercollegiate athletic employees have also long suffered from more chronic issues including long work hours (Hancock & Hums, 2015), workaholism (Hancock et al., 2019; Huml, Taylor, & Dixon, 2021), burnout (Taylor et al., 2019), staff attrition (Huml & Taylor, 2021), and discrimination. The combination of these factors has created unprecedented challenges for leaders across college athletics, particularly athletic directors, as they look to retain employees.

Research has suggested that compassionate leadership is critically important during moments of crisis (Powley & Piderit, 2008) as well as in everyday scenarios (Dutton et al., 2014; Shuck et al., 2019). Compassionate leaders foster more loyalty and engagement (Shuck et al., 2019), as well as a sense of purpose, professional growth, and overall better mental and physical well-being (Tramuto, 2022). As a result, compassionate leaders foster healthier work environments, stronger teams, and deliver results even in times of turmoil (Tramuto, 2022).

Shuck and colleagues (2019) argued that “the central role of any one compassionate leader behavior may also have clear, direct connections and overlap to those well-developed, and grounded ideas” (Shuck et al., 2019, p. 539), but also may go beyond historical boundaries of traditional leadership theories. Here, compassionate leaders may engage in authentic, transformational, or servant type-behaviors; however, compassion, as an act, is not defined by those boundaries, but rather the action and behavior of the leader. For example, compassionate leaders recognize suffering and have a willingness to take action in ways that transform the situation authentically (Shuck et al., 2019). That is, compassionate leaders share the characteristics of leadership styles such as authentic and servant leadership, but compassion is a series of principled behaviors that leaders demonstrate. Compassionate leadership has yet to be explored in college athletics. The exploration of compassionate leadership in intercollegiate athletics could provide novel insights and strategic leverage points for an industry contending with philosophical, legislative, and structural changes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore compassionate leadership from the perspective of Division I intercollegiate athletic directors.

To date, 9 NCAA Division I athletic directors (8 men, 1 woman) representing FBS and FCS schools and conferences have been interviewed for this study. These individuals were identified as compassionate leaders by peer athletic administrators in the industry. Results of the study underscored compassionate leadership behaviors (e.g., empathy, integrity, accountability, presence, authenticity, and dignity) and provided insight as to how compassionate behaviors manifested in communication, accountability, setting expectations, and demonstrating trust. Athletic directors also expressed compassion as a catalyst for building relationships, learning and growth, and developing a strong workplace culture. In addition to a discussion of the findings, this presentation will discuss the implications of compassionate leadership for all athletic department employees.