

Leading During a Pandemic: Lessons Gleaned From Sport Psychology

Justine J. Reel

University of North Carolina Wilmington

It is jolting to realize that it has now been over a year since the *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology* (JCSP) editorial board was meeting in person in Chicago. We were attempting to offer a virtual option to those who could not make the flight and Internet was unusually spotty in our conference room. There was some debate over whether we should host the 2020 annual meeting during the American Psychological Association or at the Association for Applied Sport Psychology conference. Who would have realized that we would be embroiled in a societal pause, pandemic lockdown, and “Zoom or bust” modus operandi? In March of this year when reports of COVID-19 cases were hitting Italy and other parts of the world, none of us could have anticipated the extent of the widespread impact on our daily lives and professional realities.

Rewind to the beginning of our country’s shutdown when I found myself fulfilling several leadership roles. At the university, I was managing two units—an interim director for sponsored programs, a research compliance position, and my associate dean role. I was also continuing my service as the editor-in-chief for the *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*. Managing people during the months of the pandemic’s uncertainty forced me to lead with compassion and to borrow from my background in sport and exercise psychology for many of the necessary tools to successfully motivate my team members. Providing healthy and open communication; identifying defined roles, goals, and expectations; and offering positive and continuous feedback were increasingly necessary for even the most self-disciplined and independent employees who found themselves isolated to their dining rooms. I searched for diverse ways to stay connected and to keep my team members engaged—WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and the simple telephone call. Doing team and individual check-ins became frequent. Suddenly my self-proclaimed compassionate and authentic leadership style took me right into a zone of compassion fatigue. I literally hit a wall. Burnout anyone?

This made sense given that we were (and remain) in unprecedented times. The spread of the virus was out of our control. Within days, we shifted from being an operation that thrived on face-to-face interactions to one that was solely online. At the time, I was supervising a total of 17 direct reports within the university. Each of

Reel (reelj@uncw.edu) is the editor-in-chief, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC, USA.

those employees had unique stories and different ways of reacting to the test before us. They ranged in age from individuals in their early 20s to people approaching 70 years of age: a dad of a new-born baby; a part-time returning student; a woman living alone who required intensive hip surgery; several with underlying conditions. Many experienced anxiety and worried about coming to work or leaving the home. Upon an initial analysis, it seemed that the extroverts were struggling the most from the lack of social interaction. In time, however, it was apparent that many were feeling worn down from the monotony of their home situation coupled with not knowing when or if we would return to “normal,” or whether there would be a new “normal” to dislodge the comfortable status quo.

As a leader who has measured highest in empathy and developer according to the Strength Finder tool (Rath & Conchie, 2009), it was critical to tap into this empathetic reaction without becoming overburdened or embroiled in the emotions of my team members. So, here is what I did and continue to do, as well as some lessons learned during this challenging time:

- (a) *Embrace individual differences.* I reminded myself constantly that each person is unique. Just like the athletes we work with on sport teams, each has their own childhood, relationship with sport, and different things that make them tick (or motivate them to play). Never make assumptions and continually ask my employees how they are doing, what is a challenge, and what will improve their well-being and mindset.
- (b) *Team cohesion.* Encourage interaction beyond just task cohesion. Social cohesion became increasingly more important for teams. WhatsApp provided a forum for more playful banter and messages of encouragement than platforms such as Teams that were more task-focused in nature. Virtual coffee hours allowed for less formal conversation and prevented social isolation of team members.
- (c) *Maintain a present focus.* Like our athletes, who we encourage to stay in the moment to improve concentration, our employees benefit from focusing on the task at hand. The reminder that everything is temporary and acknowledging difficulties is helpful. Being real about emotions “right now” helps show an authentic self. Recognizing that others may not be the best versions of themselves helps decrease sensitivity to potential flare-ups.
- (d) *Encourage flexibility, adaptation, and patience.* Like running a marathon, surviving a pandemic takes endurance. Helping team members know that while we try to mentally prepare (and incorporate strategy for reopen), some unknowns remain. The best advice we can borrow from sport psychology is that we can control our response to the situation or stressor. A ski jumper cannot control the direction that the wind blows on a given day but can control their reaction as they prepare to execute an impressive leap.
- (e) *Instill confidence to aid performance.* For our team members, whether athletes or employees, helping them realize that we can do (almost) everything virtually. Emphasizing that having a more virtual setting opens the door for more global collaborations, is more environmentally friendly, and allows for increased efficiencies. For sport psychology practice, I often found the need to meet with athletes by phone or Zoom due to their competition

schedules and travel. The pandemic pushed this expectation and need to everyday employees and many handled the transition quite remarkably.

- (f) *Revisit work/life balance versus work/life integration.* Prior to the pandemic, there was much discussion about how to achieve work/life balance. For our 2019 retreat, I had assigned the book by Stewart Friedman (2014), *Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life*, to my employees. Friedman acknowledges the role that technology plays in giving increased access to our work life around the clock and argues that integration is a better concept to strive for than balance. Early in the pandemic, I started to feel like I had won the magic coin. It seemed like work–life integration was at my fingertips! My laptop remained on the dining table all day instead of when I got home, and I could check e-mails first thing when I woke up and last thing before I went to sleep. There was no silly travel time to commute to the office and I actually could (shock!) eat lunch! Over time this integration with work and life also meant a lack of separation between the two. Monday was no different than Sunday or Saturday. The same walls surrounded me regardless of the work task or leisure activity. I started feeling stale, fatigued, and my energy dipped.
- (g) *Prevent burnout and manage potential for compassion fatigue.* As counselors, sport psychology consultants, and leaders, we have been fighting to maintain the right amount of self-care before the pandemic. This may take the form of taking frequent breaks, changing rooms, walking outside, or taking time off/staycations. Now that my employees have my mobile phone number and there is nowhere to go, I am literally accessible all of the time and I want to support my employees. In Brené Brown's (2018) book *Dare to Lead*, she discusses the importance of vulnerability. Leading with vulnerability takes work and a lot of energy. While being available to athletes, clients, and employees, we have to manage our own potential for burnout.

In summary, leading during a pandemic presents several challenges. Sport psychology continues to offer wisdom and application beyond sport that can be applied to organizations and managing teams. As far as serving as *JCSP's* editor-in-chief, the silver lining has been that we have not experienced a disruption in services, operations, or in review turnaround time. More than ever, we recognize the need for relevant publications around burnout and compassion fatigue. Therefore, J.D. DeFreese and his Guest Editors are organizing a special issue around the topic (see [Appendix](#)). The Call for Papers follows and has a deadline of February 1, 2021.

References

- Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to lead*. London, UK: Penguin Random House.
- Friedman, S.D. (2014). *Leading the life you want: Skills for integrating work and life*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2009). *Strengths based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.

Appendix

Special Issue: Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology

Burnout in Sport and Performance

Guest Editors:

J.D. DeFreese, PhD

Henrik Gustafsson, PhD

Daniel J. Madigan, PhD

Recent recognition of burnout in workplace environments by the World Health Organization, as well as an enhanced cultural understanding of the importance of psychological health and well-being for those involved in sport (i.e., athletes, coaches, sports medicine providers), has served to reinvigorate awareness on this important topic. Burnout has been studied in sport and performance settings for the last 25+ years, yet many important gaps in our knowledge remain. This special issue is devoted to moving this topic forward and filling these gaps by providing a collection of innovative articles that emphasize a balance of research and clinical implications related to burnout in sport and performance settings. The target readership of this special issue includes sport scientists, clinicians, sport psychology practitioners, and other sport and helping professionals.

Original research papers and practice papers that evaluate clinical strategies are encouraged for submission. Submissions must appeal to and be relevant for both sport psychology researchers and applied practitioners. We welcome the following types of submissions related to burnout in sport or other performance settings:

- Systematic reviews and/or meta-analyses that are novel to the field
- Original research articles on burnout in varied populations (e.g., athletes, coaches, sports medicine providers, practitioners)
- Clinical and applied implications of burnout in sport or other performance settings
- Case studies that illustrate problem and intervention strategies
- Description of context-specific approaches regarding prevention, screening, referral, and/or treatment
- Intervention development and/or evaluation papers
- Cases or studies of compassion fatigue in clinical care providers in sport or performance settings
- Special considerations in methodology, measurement, and ethics

For inquiries and to discuss potential contributions, authors can contact the organizing Guest Editor, Dr. J.D. DeFreese at defreese@email.unc.edu.

Articles should be prepared according to *JCSP* submission guidelines (<http://journals.humankinetics.com/page/authors/jcsp>). Manuscripts should be a minimum of seven pages and maximum of 35 double-spaced pages in length, including abstract, tables, figures, and references. For this special issue, shorter and applied

articles are encouraged. Authors must conform to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 7th Edition.

Submissions can be made via ScholarOne (https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/hk_jcsp) from **October 1, 2020** and no later than **February 1, 2021**. Authors **MUST** indicate “Special Issue” in the drop-down menu for the type of article. All articles will be peer reviewed no later than April 1, 2021 following the journal’s procedural requirements. Publication of this special issue is projected for 2021.