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Business of Athletics:
Dynamics Between Collegiate Athletic Organizations and the Business World

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Author Note

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Malcolm Guya is now a senior in the Department of Psychology at Carnegie Mellon University and was a visiting student at Duquesne University for the Spring 2016 Semester. This research was a conceptual study conducted as a result of encouragement by professors after the 8th annual

Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Symposium.

Abstract

The goal of this conceptual paper is to study the organizational structure of succeeding, failing, and growing athletic departments in relation to the organizational structures of successful companies. The present study aims to discern what structural changes are necessary for athletic departments to move towards a more successful path in student-athlete performance, both on and off the field, better communication among the athletic hierarchy, and overall executive decision making. Prior research shows that athletic organizations have four primary roles as defenders, prospectors, analyzers, and reactors, which each contribute to different types of success (Miles & Snow, 1978). Task interdependence — pooled, sequential, reciprocal and team — play a factor in the manner that work flows within an organization, ultimately leading to success (Thompson, 1967). These prior studies, combined with Schein's (1992) study of organizational culture and performance, can provide great insight into how to lead a struggling athletic department to future success by making minor changes over time. The author of the present study will present a conceptual review of the literature in preparation for a study to be conducted in the Fall of 2016. Potential participants for this study include coaches and student athletes at Carnegie Mellon University. Methodologies to be employed may include surveys such as the Academic and Athletic Identity Scale (Yukhymenko, 2014) and Scale for Effective Communication in Team Sports (Sullivan, P. J., & Feltz, D. L., 2003) and in-person narrative interviews to gain insight into these programs' current structures.

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When it comes to success in the playing field, athletic organizations employ several different tactics to achieve the ultimate goal of winning and being successful. From recruiting the right players, hiring the right coaches, to scheduling practice, game and traveling times, there are many different factors that come into play. Businesses employ similar tactics as well in coordinating the interviewing process, hiring the best suited employees and choosing when to take risks in the market. An obvious question comes to mind: What similarities do these successful business organizations have with winning athletic organizations, and how can we apply the organizational evidence base to athletic organizations that may be struggling in order to enable success? When looking at NCAA and high school athletic organizations, there has not been extensive research conducted on how to implement business tactics to improve athletic organizations. This conceptual study seeks to employ research-based methods to discern why and how athletic organizations are struggling, and how business strategies can be implemented to lead to future success. As a former student athlete on the football field who also has had experience working for various successful and failing startups, I have been given the opportunity to see these issues first-hand.

Literature Review

Prior research in this domain has focused on the development of student athletes' identities (Yukhymenko, 2014) and the shared identities of teams (Franses, Haslam, Steffens, Vansbeselaere, Cuyper & Boan, 2015), communication amongst athlete and coaches (Sullivan & Callow, 2005), how coaching practices relate to the manner in which executives successfully run businesses (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker & Fernandes, 2008), improving athlete performance

through the practices of sport psychology (Aoyagi, Portenga, Poczwardowski, Cohen & Stratler, 2012), and short-term and long term performance of athletes and employees (Minbashian & Luppino, 2014). Using these resources, I have elected to focus this study on how to improve athlete performance and communication, as well as coaching and executive decision-making in athletic departments that will lead to increased success of collegiate athletic organizations.

Performance

When it comes to performance, the challenges for student-athletes at the collegiate level include achieving a successful performance in the classroom and on the athletic field. Student-athletes are usually held to a higher standard when it comes to expectations within the NCAA, their academic institutions, and their athletic teams. In improving performance, student-athletes' social identity appears to be one of the first factors that comes into play. Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). The identity of collegiate student-athletes is formed and sustained within the contexts of academic institutions, sport teams, close friends, and classes. Student-athletes are involved in two primary and dominant social contexts: they are concurrently both students and athletes. They are expected to have both student and athlete identities simultaneously (Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson, 2011). Marx et al. (2008) used a typology that identified four main types of student-athletes based on their commitments to the athletic versus academic roles. The first type, the scholar-athlete, is committed to both academic and athletic roles. The second and the third types, pure scholars and pure athletes, are committed to only one of the roles. Finally, the fourth type includes student-athletes who do not commit more heavily towards either of these roles.

When student-athletes first enter the collegiate level of competition, as employees do in a new job setting, their cognitive thinking is at its highest because of the several challenges surrounding them (Murphy, 1989). Being able to predict how student-athletes will respond to various changes in their environment is advantageous to figuring out what their weaknesses and strengths are before issues arise. Once these weaknesses are identified, focusing on improving them by allocating resources to specific tasks will lead to improved performance. Murphy (1989) proposed a simplified version of Ackerman's (1987) model in which cognitive ability-job performance relationships are proposed to be strong during transition stages of jobs but lower during maintenance stages. According to the CAPS model, individuals can be conceptualized as using interconnected cognitive and affective processes that mediate the effects of situations on behavior (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), including performance-related behavior. Such underlying processes can be thought of as a system that dictates how a given individual behaves on a given occasion and explains why their behavior varies across occasions, contingent on variations in situational cues. For example, for a given individual, exposure to situations like pressure to adhere to expectations or increased workload, may activate mediating cognitions and emotions such as the fear of failure, a sense of challenge, and other cognitive-affective processes that are connected to task demand. These processes may in turn lead to behavioral responses, such as increased effort and focus (e.g., see Minbashian, Wood, & Beckmann, 2010). Conversely tasks that place low demands on the individual may result in decreased effort relative to how hard the person usually tries. According to this view, performance is expected to suffer when an individual diverts their resources away from a task at hand, and conversely, the individual is expected to be maximally effective within his or her own limits when devoting all of his or her resources to the task (Beal et al., 2005). Consequently, variation in an individual's performance

from occasion to occasion over short periods of time is likely to come about as a result of variation in the amount of resources allocated to different tasks.

Communication

When it comes to athletic organizations and success, communication plays a big factor in relaying information between department heads, head coaches, assistant coaches, and ultimately players. Each of these messages has a distinct motivation behind it. Foa and Foa (1974) and Kelly and Thibaut (1978) posited theories of social exchange. These theories conceptualize all human interactions as a series of exchanges between interdependent actors. The individuals involved in these exchanges are motivated toward their long-term accumulation of valued resources (e.g., love, money, information), although it is assumed that a reciprocal relationship is understood as an efficient means toward these ends. Using this framework, communication has been defined as, “a social process that involves the simultaneous exchange of symbols of behaviors (translatable symbols) between two or more people” (Mabry & Barnes, 1980, p. 9). Consequently, within sport teams, communication could be viewed as those messages sent and received between teammates (and coaches) that involve the exchange of valued resources. The content of these messages within teams can vary widely as well and there is ample literature to support the notion of valued resources being exchanged between teammates. These include such task-oriented messages as tips about one’s play (Widmeyer & Williams, 1991) and Hanin’s (1992) concepts of orienting (i.e., motivation prior to competition), stimulating (i.e., motivation during competition), and evaluating (i.e., motivation and appraisal after competition). Leaders in fields ranging from sports to politics to business acknowledge that in order to succeed, they have to strengthen team members’ confidence in the capabilities of their team. Prior research on positive psychological capital and transformational leadership proposes that a critical component

of leaders' effectiveness derives from their positive psychological capital which can be summarized as positive appraisal and belief in the situation, and available and/or potential psychological resources that can be used to attain success (Bono & Ilies, 2006). Bono and Ilies (2006) found that leaders' positive emotional expressions determined followers' perceptions of leaders' effectiveness. In addition, leader's displays of positivity have also been found to enhance team members' trust in leaders (Norman et al., 2010). Basically, the psychology and behavior of team members is shaped not only by their capacity to think, feel, and behave as individuals (as "I" and "me"), but also—and often more importantly—by their sense of themselves as group members (as "we" and "us") (Haslam, 2004; Postmes & Branscombe, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Social identity approach then points to particular social psychological mechanisms through which the leader's confidence transfers to other team members. More specifically, leader's confidence should transfer to followers not through a mystical process of contagion (Reicher, 1987), but rather by means of group processes that strengthen team members' collective sense of "us," as manifested by their increased social identification with the team (Haslam, 2004).

Coaching and Executive Decision Making

When it comes to coaching and decision-making, even one mistake can lead to the overall demise of a particular program or business. Executive coaching is a short-term interactive process between a coach and a manager to improve leadership effectiveness by enhancing self-awareness and the practice of new behaviors. The coaching process facilitates the acquisition of new skills, perspectives, tools, and knowledge through support, encouragement, and feedback in the organizational context (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, & Fernandes, 2008). Executive coaching has become a method of choice for leadership development because of its unique

position in helping modify perspectives and behavior without sacrificing competence and self-esteem (Strickland, 1997). A new perspective develops by examining the underlying patterns of perception and behavior and utilizing that insight for change (Pilette & Wingard, 1997). The most important factors in the success of a coaching relationship are clear, honest communication and good action ideas (Hall, Otazo & Hollenback, 1999). Effective coaches understand contemporary organizational issues, human motivation, and the impact of emotions and interpersonal style on executive leadership. Coaches also need to understand leadership and management issues from a multisystem viewpoint, as well as the political and economic realities within the organization and its competitive environment (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker & Fernandes, 2008). Outstanding coaches are described as approachable, compassionate, and relate well with others. They often ask clarifying questions in the process of building rapport, and they are excellent listeners who reflect accurately what is said. They are known for their high level of integrity, personal honesty, and clear boundaries of professional conduct (Brotman et al, 1998).

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants from this study will be recruited from the student-athlete bases at Carnegie Mellon University, Duquesne University, and University of Pittsburgh. Student-athletes will be administered various questionnaires that are discussed in the following sections. Mainly fall-sport athletes (e.g., football, soccer, field hockey, soccer, cross country) will be questioned due to the time limitations of this study. Head coaches from each respective sport will also be administered surveys along with the Athletic Directors from each institution.

Materials

Ideal-types. The first task I would like this research study to tackle is identifying athletic directors' views on their organizations. A short survey will be sent out to Athletic Department heads asking them to identify which one of the Miles and Snow's four descriptions of athletic organizations most likely fit with their institution. Miles and Snow (1978) put forth a framework of the ideal-types — prospector, analyzer, defender, and reactor — that best describe the strategic orientation of an organization. Defender institutions are characterized as the most conservative and predictable of all the ideal-types. They strive to dominate a portion of the total market in order to create a stable set of services or products targeted to a clearly defined market and have the ability to maintain aggressive prominence within the chosen market segment. Prospector institutions have a prime capability of finding and exploiting new product and market opportunities. They operate in settings that are fluid and unpredictable and also utilize high levels of environmental scanning so as to effectively identify opportunities in the market arena. Analyzer institutions minimize risk while maximizing the opportunities for profit. They are known for successfully copying other firms through extensive scanning of market mechanisms but struggle with deciding on how to adapt structure process components to accommodate both stable and fluid areas of operation. Reactor firms are usually the least successful in that their context, structure, and strategy alignment is both inconsistent and unstable. They are known to be unsettled because they lack resources allowing them to react to their environment over time, they do not match strategy and structure, and/or they simply do not alter their strategic or structural course despite the clear contextual signs that indicate they need to do so.

Athlete communication. In order to study communication amongst athletes, implementing Sullivan and Feltz (2003) model Scale for Effective Communication in Team Sports (SECTS) will be used. To aid in the systematic process of studying communication,

Sullivan and Feltz (2003) presented SECTS which measures four resources for intra-team communication: Distinctiveness, Acceptance, Positive Conflict, and Negative Conflict using a 15-item scale. Distinctiveness refers to those messages that serve to promote a shared and inclusive team identity (e.g., nicknames). Acceptance includes those messages that support individual members. Positive conflict messages are those that deal with team disagreements in a positive, productive fashion, whereas negative conflict messages are those that agitate and personalize such disagreements.

Identity. Also to discern athletes view of themselves and improve their sense of identity and which roles they fit into so coaches know how to treat each player or groups of players appropriately, a similar method such as the Academic and Athletic Identity Scale (Yukhymenko, 2014) will be implemented to athletes to compete as part of their pre-season questionnaires. This questionnaire will investigate whether athletes who categorize as students pursuing athletics, athletes pursuing an academic degree, or both, play a factor into that individual sport team's athletic success along with the graduation rates and academic performance within that team.

Analysis

Once data collection in the form of surveys is completed, SPSS analytical software will be used to analyze all the data and notice particular trends amongst student athletes, coaches, athletic directors, and the overall success of each program as a whole and individually as a team.

Discussion

This conceptual study will be conducted in the Summer and Fall of 2016 and the results will be published in the Spring of 2017. There are a few possible limitations that may arise out of this study however. The first is having access to the athletic departments of Division I institutions such as the University of Pittsburgh and Duquesne University. Carnegie Mellon

University is a Division III program in Pittsburgh, PA that I had the pleasure of playing for from Fall 2012 to Fall 2015. This leads to the second limitation of receiving biased results from my home institution due to my involvement and presence on campus. The final limitation I see coming from this study is student-athletes and coaches not willing to partake in the study or giving false results so as to not have the image of the team be tarnished in anyway. If an institution knows of some loopholes amongst certain teams they may elect to alter results that student-athletes or coaches provide.

Future research in this domain will focus on hiring and recruiting practices of Athletic Directors and coaches. The idea behind this would be to implement specific systems to identify which individuals will be most successful within particular organizations so as to help differentiate between potential candidates and lead to the overall success of an Athletic Organization.

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