

The Commitment of Volunteers in Community-based Sport: an Explanatory Design Study

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Session 6: Other Presentation (25-minute)

Thursday, May 31, 2007

1:00 PM - 1:25 PM

It is increasingly being recognized that the organizational commitment of volunteers is critical to the effective management and delivery of community-based sport. Most definitions of organizational commitment emphasize the attachments that an individual has for his or her organization. Positive attachments have been found to make the individual more likely to remain in the organization and exert effort on its behalf (Meyer & Allen, 1997). These outcomes are of key significance to voluntary sporting organizations, where turnover and performance have become topics of concern. Thus, sport organizations and managers should direct their efforts at fostering organizational commitment (Chelladurai, 2006).

A large volume of research exists supporting the link between commitment and positive outcomes in paid employee settings (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1997). Research examining the commitment of sports volunteers and its impact on key outcomes such as turnover and performance has only recently begun to emerge (e.g. Cuskelly & Boag, 2001) and there are still questions unanswered. For example, can volunteers become committed to other organizational targets, such as other volunteers in their organizations, or committed to the role(s) undertaken (e.g., official, coach, committee member)? If so, what are the implications of these commitments for performance and turnover? Research with paid workers has found that commitments directed to other organizational targets may improve the prediction of outcomes above and beyond organizational commitment alone. In addition to this, the question of the experience of being committed has not been explored from the perspective of the volunteer.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on volunteer commitment in sport by examining the nature and targets of volunteer commitment, namely commitment to the sporting organization, commitment to the team of volunteers, and commitment to the role(s) undertaken. The first phase seeks to examine the relations of each target of commitment to two aspects of retention: staying in the role and staying in the organization. The second phase explores the experience of commitment from the perspective of the volunteers.

The study uses a sequential two-phase mixed-methods explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). In the first phase (already completed) quantitative survey data were collected and analyzed. In the second phase (ongoing) focus group interviews are being conducted to further explain some of the statistical findings in more depth and to allow volunteers to "have a voice" about the meaning and implications of their commitment.

Phase 1: Quantitative. Participants were recruited from 120 athletics centers in Queensland, Australia. All organizations sampled were managed and run by volunteers who fulfill the roles of committee members, coaches, officials, team managers, amongst others. Two hundred and four participants completed surveys. Survey items were adapted from Meyer and Allen's (1997) organizational commitment scales, making them relevant to the sport volunteer situation (e.g., "sports organization" for "organization"). In addition, new items, drawing on Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) general commitment model, were developed to assess commitment to the volunteer team, and the volunteer role. Intention to continue in a role, intention to remain as a center volunteer, and self-rated performance were also assessed.

Results indicated that volunteer commitment is multidimensional (Meyer & Allen, 1997) and that the three targets of commitment were distinct. Commitment scale reliabilities (alphas) were above .7. Results of hierarchical regression analyses suggest that commitment to these targets contribute unique variance to intention to quit the center. As expected, commitment to the role is the best predictor of intention to remain in the specific role undertaken. Consistent with previous research in paid settings, tenure (number of seasons as center volunteer) was significantly related to organizational commitment. Committee members' commitment to all targets was stronger than the commitment of volunteers in other roles.

Phase 2: Qualitative. Participants in a variety of volunteer roles are currently being recruited from various sporting organizations in Queensland, Australia to participate in a series of focus groups. Sports represented so far include junior soccer, athletics, surf lifesaving, junior basketball and water polo. Preliminary findings indicate that the commitment of volunteers in decision making roles (e.g., committee members) is generally of a different nature than that of other volunteers who do not fulfill such roles (such as coaches or team managers). For example, the former develop strong attachments to their organizations and to other

2007 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2007)

volunteers and these attachments appear to strengthen over time, whereas the latter are more committed to their roles and less willing to venture into other roles, specifically committee roles.

The findings of the first phase are consistent with Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) conceptualization of commitment. Volunteers hold differing commitments to targets other than the sport organization (namely the volunteer role undertaken and the work team) and these commitments contribute uniquely to the prediction of key outcomes. These results are of theoretical importance as they provide added support to the multiple targets of commitment conceptualizations and add to the understanding of the experience of volunteering from the volunteers' perspective. Further, they are of practical importance to sport volunteer managers seeking to improve retention rates, role-specific retention, and performance. The advantages of mixed methods research in understanding volunteer commitment will also be addressed.

References

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