Emotional Intelligence as an Individual Difference in Sport Organizations

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In 2005, Wolfe, Weick, Usher, Terborg, Poppo, Murrell, Dukerich, Crown Core, Dickson, and Simmons Jourdan conducted a comprehensive review of sport-focused research in the management literature and found that work studying the effect/s of emotion in this context was lacking. These findings are surprising given that abilities related to understanding and managing emotions are central to many aspects of sport specifically leadership, individual performance and interpersonal relationship management. Related to the study of emotions, the construct of Emotional Intelligence (EI) has garnered considerable attention amongst management scholars in recent years. EI refers to a series of individual abilities related to emotional processing, emotional thought, emotional comprehension, and emotional management (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). While the relationship between individual and group EI and organizational performance has been studied in multiple contexts including government (Higgs & Aitken, 2003), manufacturing (Kerr, Garvin, Heaton & Boyle, 2006), service (Feyerherm & Rice, 2002), and university (Boyatzis, Stubbs & Taylor, 2002; Cote & Miners, 2006; Rapisarda, 2002), the construct has yet to be investigated in the team sport context. Given the important role that the management and control of emotions has in team sport, I argue that the introduction of the construct of EI to sport management research is appropriate and timely. The framework I outline in this presentation develops a theoretical model introducing propositions that help explain the role EI plays in performance and success in the context of team sports in which interpersonal relationships are a key determinant of an organization’s success.

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) made a compelling case for a positive relationship between individual EI abilities and leadership success in organizations. Others have examined the relationship between EI and leadership in organizations (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Ferres & Connell, 2004; Higgs & Aitken, 2003; Huy, 1999; Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006). The conceptual model integrates the findings of these studies into the development of propositions examining the relationship between EI abilities amongst head coaches in the team sport context and team success, strategic adaptations, receptivity to change and the establishment of trust. Building on previous research indicating a positive relationship between individual EI and leadership effectiveness in non-sport organizations (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Higgs & Aiken, 2003; Kerr et al., 2006) this model posits a similar positive relationship in the team sport context.

One of the most frequently analyzed relationships has been individual and/or group EI and its impact on team performance (Bell, 2007; Cote & Miners, 2006; Frye, Bennett, & Caldwell, 2006; Reilly, Lynn & Aronson, 2002). These findings indicate a link between the cumulative EI abilities of individuals and team performance. Thus, the model builds on this research by introducing propositions to examine the extent to which individual athlete EI impacts task performance. Also, the relationship between team EI, defined as the cumulative individual EI of those athletes competing, and team performance is addressed by the model.

Further studies have determined EI to be a significant predictor of team communication and member flexibility (Afolabi & Ehigie, 2005; Gantt & Agazarian, 2004). These findings relate to the present study with respect to the role of individual EI on team performance over an extended period of time. Due to the high turnover that is common amongst both athletes and coaches in this environment, I argue that the extent to which coaches demonstrate EI will influence athlete organizational commitment over single season and multiple season durations.

It should be noted that the conceptual model does not decipher between the individual components of EI as a variable within the research propositions. Others have noted similar issues in investigating EI in organizational contexts (Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Hartel, 2002).

This paper was developed to introduce a model detailing the potential impact of individual EI on job performance and leadership in the team sport context. By examining the impact of individual EI on both individual job performance and leadership competence, new insights can be gained into how these differences amongst employees within a sport organization can impact the likelihood of success achievement by the team. As this concept has not been applied to sport organizations previously, I have argued that EI as an individual difference can be used to
provide new insight into the variance of organizational performance in this environment. The conceptual model
developed in this study is intended to introduce EI to the team sport context as well as inspire new research on EI as
both a main effect and as a moderating variable in the study of organizations in sport. Thus, the propositions
presented are intended to serve as a starting point for empirical research examining this construct in sport.

The implications of gaining a better understanding of the role that EI plays in sport are two-fold. First, further
analyzing EI will enhance our understanding of how interpersonal relationships impact different organizational
levels and individuals within a sport organization. As a component of leadership, emotional aptitude amongst team
members is expected to impact organizational performance. As a component of job performance, EI abilities are
anticipated to associate positively with task performance. At each organizational level, I propose in the model that
higher levels of EI will allow for more objective and thoughtful decision making. A second potential benefit of using
an EI lens to analyze individual and organizational phenomena is related to the potential contributions that this
research may make to both the sport management and management literatures. Studying EI in the team sport may
enable researchers to better analyze the effects of EI on decision-making, leadership, and performance in this unique
context. Through the introduction of this model to sport management research, I hope to inspire subsequent
research examining the role of EI in team sport.