Developing a Sense of Community among Umpires: Retaining Sports’ Vital Resources

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Sense of community is an important consideration for management—not only of employees in the workplace (e.g., Klein & D’Aunno, 1986; Lambert & Hopkin, 1995), but also for athletes in the sport setting (Warner & Dixon, 2009). Umpires, not only provide a vital service to the sport “workplace”, but are also consumers of the activity (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). From a managerial standpoint, understanding this balance and the environment that creates a sense of community (SOC) for umpires is especially key considering that Kellett and Shilbury’s (2007) work emphasized that the “social worlds” created via umpiring was paramount to their retention.

SOC has been defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met by their commitment to be together” (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandermans, 1986, p.11). Although most of the early SOC literature focuses on neighborhoods, a growing body literature has relayed the importance of understanding SOC in the workplace (e.g., Klein & D’Aunno, 1986; Lambert & Hopkins, 1995; Pretty, McCarthy, & Catano, 1992). Understanding the idiosyncrasies of SOC in the workplace is important to managers because of its direct relationship to job satisfaction, and job satisfaction has been shown to decrease turnover, and improve performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Li, 1993; Ostroff, 1992). SOC in the workplace has also been associated with reduced role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload (Royal & Rossi, 1996); as well as reduced absenteeism and stress (Keline & D’Aunno, 1986). It has also been demonstrated that a positive relationship exists between SOC and seasonal-employment retention (McCole, 2006), which is of particular importance to those in the sport industry due to the non-traditional work and training hours that vary by season.

Considering that many sport organizations report difficulty in recruiting and retaining umpires, there has been a concerted effort to understand why umpires leave such roles. Research has found that umpires experience role conflict (Rainey & Cherilla, 1993), role overload (Reilly & Gregson, 2006) and stress (Rainey, 1995; Rainey & Hardy, 1997), all of which are implicated in umpire drop-out. Clearly, literature has demonstrated the importance of SOC in workplace to overcome each of these issues. The objective of this research is to identify the factors that lead to, or detract from, SOC for umpires.

This study examined SOC for twenty-two umpires in the sport of Australian Rules football. Umpires from each of the three required roles (field, boundary, and goal umpires) were interviewed. There were four key factors that impacted the development of SOC for umpires. Two factors were clearly detrimental to the development of SOC, while the remaining factors had both positive and negative implications for SOC.

Umpires in this study reported a felt sense of lack of consideration from umpire administration—particularly in relation to routine managerial matters such as selection processes, day-to-day organizational matters, and logistical issues. Inequity between umpire groups—with regard to remuneration, access to resources, and the development of negative inter-group perceptions was also salient. Both of these factors detracted from SOC, while competition and shared interest were seen to be both positive and negative to the development of SOC for umpires. First, umpires described competition within their umpire groups. On the one hand, competition was viewed as a healthy component of umpiring that created a SOC. Umpires competed against one another in training exercises, and on the field during games to demonstrate mastery. On the other hand, umpires competed against each other for selection to officiate at grand-final games, which was detrimental to the development of SOC. Second, umpires reported a felt sense of shared interest in the sport of football. Amateur level umpires reported enjoyment from interacting with players, coaches, and other football officials. Their attachment to football was clearly one of involvement, being part of the game, having the “best seat in the house” and consequently sharing that experience with other insiders. Although professional level umpires felt an attachment to the sport, their interactions with the football community beyond their fellow umpires was limited and detracted from a development of SOC.
Extending previous research that understands the experience of umpiring (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007) and consistent with research that understands SOC in the workplace and sport settings (Warner & Dixon, 2009), this study demonstrated that SOC is key in umpire retention. The factors that contribute to the enhancement of, and detraction from SOC have been identified in this research. In this instance, like in any other team environment, umpires experience healthy competition and a shared interest within others. However, as a result of perceived administrative lack of consideration, and organizational inequities, rivalry within and between umpire groups can be negative and therefore detract from the development of SOC for umpires. Administrators need to be cognizant of fostering healthy and fair competition among all umpires.

In the case of this research, a shared interest in the sport of football was an important factor in the development of SOC. However, SOC was seen to narrow as umpires progressed from amateur to professional levels of the sport. That is, when umpires advance, rules mandate that their relationships with coaches and players alter (such relationships become more formalized and impersonal). Umpires need to be prepared for their SOC to change as their careers evolve. Umpires not prepared for this change may experience a dramatic drop in SOC resulting in greater likelihood of turnover. Therefore, this transition needs to be carefully managed to ensure umpire retention.

There is need for further research on the umpiring experience and SOC. For example, there are important implications for gender with regard to competition and the development of SOC. For males (as was the case for participants in this research), healthy competition was imperative for enhancing SOC. However, literature (Lambert & Hopkins, 1995; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991; Warner & Dixon, 2009) has posited competition may detract from SOC for females. This may be a barrier for female participation in umpiring—not only in Australian Rules football, but for umpiring in general. Research in umpire recruitment and retention is embryonic, but as this study has highlighted, umpires should not be considered as merely service providers, but as a vital human resource and important consumer of the sport experience.