Abstract 2010-106  
June 4, 2010  
11:10 AM  
25-minute oral presentation  
(Snowy Egret)

The sport industry may be worth over a half-trillion dollars (Howard & Crompton, 2005), but it has no greater immunity to economic hardship than any other industry. The Arena Football League (AFL) cancelled their 2009 season, dismissed all but five employees from their league headquarters in late December (Lefton, 2009a), and then subsequently folded. Faced with a struggling global economy, the sport industry has been forced to reexamine itself, refresh consumer relationships, and generate creative ways to increase revenues (Ourand, 2009; Schoenfeld, 2008; Show, 2009). The National Basketball Association (NBA), for example, has lifted a previous ban and established rules for liquor marketing (Lefton, 2009b).

Interestingly, one topic that has not been frequently discussed is ways to improve performance in sport organizations through hiring more productive sport employees. For instance, one criticism of NASCAR race teams has been “a gearhead owner would spend millions trying to shave a tenth of a second at the track, but it was like pulling teeth to add an employee to the marketing division” (Smith, 2008, p. 34). Considering how the sport is now a thriving business with teams employing hundreds and bringing in over $200 million in sponsorship revenue, owners and managers are now seeing their personnel needs change.

Regardless of whether it is a new league commissioner or new facilities manager, effective human resource (HR) practices within a sport organization can lead to a more efficient and productive workplace. This can not only save organizations time and money (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), but it can also lead to increased revenue. Take the example of Major League Soccer (MLS). Over ten years ago, Don Garber, a former senior vice president/managing director of NFL International, was named the commissioner to the struggling soccer league. Despite criticisms at the time (e.g. he had no soccer background), this personnel decision paid off greatly for MLS because it “now boasts 15 teams, expansion fees worth more than $30 million...and collects broadcast fees from ESPN, Fox Soccer Channel and Univision” (Mickle, 2009, p. 15).

Overall, sport organizations have focused heavily on improving sport consumers’ identification to sport teams because team identity (team ID) has been linked to positively influencing consumer behavior (e.g. merchandise purchases) (Madrigal, 2001; Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003). Heere and James (2007a) even made the case for broadening team identification on the premise that fans are no longer just sport consumers, “they are members of an organization committed to its existence” (p. 323). Instead of such a heavy marketing emphasis though, it may serve the sport industry well to study team ID through a management lens.

One rationale for a management perspective is sport fans have demonstrated strong in-group bias (Franco & Maase, 1996; Sage, 1996) as well as strong support and favoritism toward other fans of their respective team (Wann & Branscombe, 1995; Wann & Grieve, 2005). Thus, given the nature of team ID, employees characterized by a high level of team ID may be more engaged (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) and be more likely to perform organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), each of which can positively influence organizational effectiveness (Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). Additionally, individuals with high team ID may also save sport organizations time and money because they are more likely to have a stronger sense of affiliation, stronger organizational commitment, increased desire to stay, better job performance, and the desire to maintain and improve the organizational reputation (Meyer, Allen, & Topolnytsky, 1998; Stanley, Meyer, Topolnytsky, and Herscovitch, 1999).

Sport organizations need to investigate whether highly identified employees make greater contributions to a sport organization than employees who are less identified with the specific sport team for which they are employed. In particular, sport employees with a high level of team ID may be more likely to engage in OCB, which is “performance
that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place” (Organ, 1997, p. 95). Essentially, this is going “above and beyond” the normal call of duty. Recently, Paille (2009) argued for a four-dimensional model of OCB that includes: Altruism, Civic Virtue, Helping Behavior, and Sportsmanship. With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework for how team identification within a sport organization may improve employee OCB.

In sum, we hold that both individual (e.g. locus of control) and situational variables (e.g. organizational culture) will have an impact on sport employee attributions. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1980, 1992) provides an explanation for “how” individuals explain their successes and failures. Attributions will then impact emotion, and according to the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998), emotional cues will lead to an emotional response tendency, which may then result in an emotional response. Further, as Levine (2009) argued, if the emotions are positive (e.g. joy, serenity, admiration) they will increase the likelihood of OCB toward the organization as a whole (OCB-O) and toward individual team members (OCB-I).

This is the basic structure of our model, however, we also argue team identification will moderate the relationship between attributions and emotion and that more highly identified fans will have a greatly likelihood of engaging in OCB. The theoretical basis for the role of team identification is grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). One underlying argument of social identity theory is that the self-concept is a basic human need, thus, there is a strong motivation to maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Hence, “if belonging to a certain group makes individuals feel good about themselves, maintaining affiliation with that group and preserving its positive evaluation compared to other groups will be very important to them” (Shinnar, 2008, p. 554). Accordingly, highly identified employees may be more likely to engage in OCB than individuals who lack a significant level of team identification. If so, then this can be both a positive and a negative for sport organizations.

Several potential dysfunctional outcomes of OCB are role overload, stress, and work-family conflicts (Bolino & Turnley, 2005). On the other hand, several positive OCB outcomes include greater employee efficiency and productivity, corporate entrepreneurship, improved performance evaluations and reward allocation decisions, and reduced employee turnover (Allen & Rush, 1998; Dunlop & Lee, 2004; Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004; Koyss, 2001; Podsakoff & Mackenzie, 1997; Walz & Niehoff, 2000; Zhang, Wan, & Jia, 2008). In their recent meta-analysis, Podsakoff and colleagues (2009) reported “OCBs were positively related to a variety of organizational effectiveness measures (i.e., productivity, efficiency, and profitability) and customer satisfaction and negatively related to costs and unit-level turnover” (p. 131).

Not only that, but from a practical standpoint, one direct application of this line of thought for team managers is to reconsider employee recruitment methods. When properly executed, recruiting methods can be very successful in targeting people with the necessary skills (Rai & Kothari, 2008), which can then improve organization performance (Taylor & Collins, 2000). During the recruitment process, the sport organization is identifying and selecting individuals that will be impacted by the organization’s culture and HR practices. Regardless of talent, if the prospect is not a good “fit”, this can impact organizational performance (e.g. employee turnover) and diminish the utility of the selection process (Lado & Wilson, 1994). Thus, instead of only being sport consumers, sport fans who possess the necessary training and education may also represent a viable and logical option. As a result, both researchers and practitioners need to more carefully examine current employment policy biases and how team ID can be harnessed to improve sport organization productivity through behaviors such as OCB.