Assisting Sport Managers in Making Ethical Decisions through a Proven Online Course

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Introduction: One of the challenges facing sport managers is balancing the importance of achieving success (winning or making money) and the personal growth of their personnel. In the process of accomplishing success, often an ethical dilemma occurs when sport managers are placed in a situation that challenges their beliefs and they are forced to act. Ethical dilemmas involve making choices between two competing values (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2002). The tricky part is knowing which value is the more important in being successful and being a good leader. How does one know and ferret out these tricky situations? The center of the decision making process for the sport manager is personal belief system and value structure. Hence, deliberate reflection must be undertaken to identify the underpinnings of one's belief system. By examining personal belief system, and creating and actualizing a value driven mission, a foundation for growth can occur that will provide an opportunity for consistent moral growth and performance improvement for the personnel in an organization. Consequently, "...be prepared to live the mission and belief system that you desire to actualize for your organization" (Van Mullem, Brunner, & Stoll, 2008).

However, what is known about leadership and ethics is very different than what occurs in practice. Often, individuals are hard pressed to apply what is learned (known) to actual situations, or to reflect on personal choice and action. The pressure to succeed challenges the building of personal relationships that are vital to developing a successful organization. The process of reflection and application assists the sport manager in serving a person's need to grow psychologically and professionally by demonstrating genuine interests in their gifts and talents. Recognizing talent and abilities that contribute to the group is the strength of a leader (Greenleaf, 1990).

An online, interactive course was developed by team members at the University of Idaho Center for ETHICS* to provide professionals a practical tool to assist them in developing, applying and reflecting on their values as applied in a competitive world. The components of the online course are established from a strong ethical, theoretical and philosophical base, (DeGeorge, 2009; Fox & DeMarco, 2000) creating a formal education program that challenges moral reasoning and cognitive dissonance. Therefore a sport manager completing the course learns to challenge, reflect upon, and apply their own values in their competitive world (Gill, 1993). This process improves their reasoning and decision making skills.

To explore the effectiveness of the online course a recent study involved 37 participants (male = 31, female = 6) (Van Mullem and Stoll, 2008). The participants were randomly assigned to either a control group or intervention group. Both the control and intervention group received continued exposure to the same character education program. The intervention group completed the online course created by the Center for ETHICS*. The control group received no additional instruction beyond the organizations' program. Both groups were pre and post tested with the Hahn-Beller Values Choice Inventory (HBVCI), a valid and reliable (Cronbach Alpha .77-.89) tool for measuring moral reasoning in a competitive environment. A significant difference was found with the interaction of group (treatment, control) by time on HBVCI scores. In addition the treatment group scored significantly higher from pretest (mean = 31.58 + SD = 6.78) to posttest (mean = 35.35 + SD = 8.03) compared to the control group pretest (30.60 + SD = 5.07) to posttest which decreased (mean = 28.8 + SD = 6.13). The intervention group significantly improved their moral reasoning, while the control group declined in scores. The control group was exposed to their professional organization's character education program, developed around five core values that appear to not be very clear, concise, or articulated in such a way that a reasoning person could easily find the answer. According to ethical pedagogists, values must be clearly articulated and practically applied to make meaning in the educational process (Gill, 1993; Fox & DeMarco, 2000). None of the five core values are stated as more important and some values can be subsumed in others, which causes confusion in trying to apply the values to practical real world situations. For a value laden character education program to make meaning the values must be placed in a hierarchal order and discussion of the order must occur (Frankena, 1993).
This online intervention curriculum and pedagogy appears to improve the ethical reasoning of competitive, sport professionals. The online cognitive intervention follows a very specific ethical pedagogical style that is based in cognitive dissonance, challenge, and reflection and is supported by theorists (Gill, 1993; Fox & DeMarco, 2000; Fox, 2008; DeGeorge, 2005; Piper, Gentile & Parks, 1993). Therefore, our session will focus on how you can develop a successful program in ethics education for your organization. This session will 1) emphasize the key components of the online program in making ethical decisions, 2) examine the methodology, theoretical background, and philosophical base used in the development of a online program, 3) discuss current research on intervention ethical education programs, and 4) offer practical suggestions and provide examples for assisting the sport manager in making ethical decisions and developing an online program.


