A Model of Emotional Labor in Coaching Sports

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Management/leadership Saturday, June 4, 2011 20-minute oral presentation
Abstract 2011-169 8:30 AM (Room 240)

Emotional labor, defined as the regulation of both feelings and emotions to be effective in jobs (Hochschild, 1983), is a topic that has not been addressed adequately in sport management literature. It is a critical issue when we consider that sport management is concerned with production of services the quality of which is largely determined by regulations of emotions by both parties in the employee-client interface. The significance of emotional labor is even greater in the case of those service providers who are also in leadership positions as in the case of teachers and students or coaches and athletes.

Coaching in sports represents a relatively more emotion-laden context. Various instances in coaching evoke disparate emotional displays such as joy and exuberance in winning a contest, grief and frustration in a loss, anger at referee’s calls, and disappointments in player performances. However, coaches are expected to regulate their emotions in dealing with their athletes, the opponents, the referees, the media and such other stakeholders. For instance, the coach may need to control the anger aroused by athlete mistakes and, in contrast, may express anger at the referees’ mistakes in order to influence future decisions. As such regulation of one’s emotions is laborious, it is rightfully labeled emotional labor. Previous research studies have continuously showed that different kinds of emotional labor tend to result in different individual outcomes such as job burnout, emotional well-being, and job performance. It is not clear how emotional labor in the coaching context affects coaches’ well-being either positively or negatively. With a view to examine the dynamics of emotional labor in coaching, and as a preliminary step toward that end, a model of emotional labor is presented below.

The events that evoke emotions among coaches are labeled affective events (Weiss & Cropanzo, 1996) which could include winning, losing, and lack of discipline and/or motivation among athletes. Each of these affective events undergo appraisal by the coaches (i.e., a cognitive evaluation of the events). Such an appraisal results in aroused emotions which could include joy, fear, surprise, sadness, and anger. As coaches are expected to regulate these emotions, they engage in emotional labor. Emotional labor involves either surface acting (the process of modifying one’s expressions such as smiling as expected by display rules without changing inner feelings), deep acting (the process of actually trying to change one’s feelings required by the display rules), or genuine expression (the process of experiencing and displaying felt emotions spontaneously and genuinely). The outcomes of emotional labor for the coach could be either job satisfaction or job burnout and/or job performance as evidenced by team performances in competitions and/or athlete satisfaction with coach behaviors.

Our model also includes individual difference variables of emotional intelligence, affectivity, and past experience as moderators of the relationship between appraisal of the event and the arousal of emotions, and between arousal of emotions and emotional labor. Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to perceive, express, understand, and regulate emotions in the self and others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) is said to moderate the relationship between arousal of emotions and emotional labor. That is, “the management and regulation of emotions also require the intelligence to perceive, learn, and adjust behavior as necessary” (Opengart, 2005, p. 57). Affectivity is composed of positive affectivity (PA) representing enthusiasm and optimism, and negative affectivity (NA) referring to pessimism and aversive mood states (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Research has shown that NA was positively associated with surface acting but not with deep acting and that PA is positively related to deep acting.

As for past experience, experienced coaches are more likely to be successful in regulating and expressing appropriate emotions in different contexts. That is, they are expected to have learned through their experiences to correctly appraise the affective events, control the aroused emotions, and express those emotions appropriate to the situation.

The theories and research behind the proposed model, future research directions, and its practical implications will be discussed.