Employee Stress and Coping in Mega-Event Host Committees

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Mega-event host committees are tasked with the enormous responsibility of planning and delivering an international event within a limited time frame. Accounts from employees of previous mega-events have noted that host committee work can be quite taxing particularly due to the rapid growth, the changing organizational structure, and the temporary nature of the host committee (McDonald, 1991; Xing & Chalip, 2009). Given these comments and the limited work in this area, the present study sought to broaden our understanding of the dynamics that guide host committee employees by elucidating the stressors and coping strategies that affect long-term employee participation (i.e., over a year working in the host committee).

Among the most established models of stress, Lazarus (1966, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) proposed that stress is viewed as a transaction or an ongoing process where individuals react to stressors in the environment and cope accordingly (Cooper, Dewe, O'Driscoll, 2001). The front part of this model is the primary (i.e., cognitive) appraisal where the individual evaluates whether something is at stake in their encounter with a stressor (i.e., potential harm, threat, or challenge; Lazarus, 1966). After this initial appraisal, the individual will conduct a secondary appraisal of their ability to cope (Lazarus, 1991). Through the multiplicative influence of the primary and secondary appraisal, the individual will then decide if and how to cope (Folkman et al., 1986).

According to Folkman et al. (1986), coping strategies are grouped into two functions: (a) emotion-focused coping which includes strategies to regulate the emotions resulting from the stress (i.e. distancing, escape-avoidance, positive reappraisal) and (b) problem-focused coping which includes action taken to address the stressor (i.e., confrontive, planful problem-solving). While the coping process may involve both emotional and problem-focused coping, the different coping strategies can vary in terms of effectiveness (Cooper et al., 2001; Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus, 2005) which has been the subject of much debate throughout the years (see Skinner, Edge, Altman & Sherwood, 2003). Nonetheless, the current study draws from an established coping framework from Folkman et al. (1986) to qualitatively assess the coping mechanisms that manifest from employees of the Super Bowl Host Committee. This framework was chosen because of its long history and its fit to the present study.

Six employees across two consecutive Super Bowl Host Committees were chosen using stratified purposeful sampling. Following the operational modes of organizing committees laid out by Parent (2008), two of the respondents were in the “wrap-up” phase of one committee, four were in the “latter planning” phase of the subsequent Super Bowl, and all had an organizational tenure of over a year. Semi-structured interviews were conducted which began by asking what stressors they have encountered while working at the host committee. This general question was followed by inquiries about common work stressors (e.g., job insecurity, work-family, role ambiguity, workload, and time pressure). The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed using a general inductive approach to locate salient themes among the responses.

From the initial coding, several themes emerged. The primary theme was employee selflessness. For stressors relating to their immediate job (i.e., role ambiguity, workload, and time pressure), the employees engaged in a problem-focused coping strategy. Even in cases where unreasonable demands outside of the individual’s job scope were made, the employees generally reacted to stressors related to work at the Super Bowl by working harder. One respondent made the comment: “…you are expected to know everything and get it done and in the last second. Especially the NFL will come in and say ‘I need this, make it happen.’ And then you just figure out how to do it, you never say no, we joke like we’re miracle workers.”

Two stressors were examined with outcomes that affected the individual rather than the organization: (a) work-family and (b) job insecurity. For these stressors the respondents tended to engage in emotion-focused coping and worked hard to make sure it did not interfere with their work. Work-family conflicts were especially prevalent. For example, one of the respondent’s marriage ended, while another was thrown a “going away” party by friends prior to starting work on the Super Bowl in anticipation of an absent social life while working.

Job insecurity is perhaps the most unique stressor affecting mega-event host committee employees. By its fleeting nature, the host committee will end within months of the event leaving all of its employees jobless. The interview respondents claimed to cope with job insecurity emotionally by putting it in the back of their mind (i.e., distancing), while others commented on job search efforts made on what little time they had off the clock. One additional point emerged from the respondents who commented on how different the job search experience is when others are aware of the impending joblessness. In this regard, being on a temporary assignment was seen as an advantage: “… if you’re working somewhere people don’t know that you’re
looking [for work] and sometimes they’re averse to calling, just assuming that you’re happy because you’re in a position.” The biggest fear was receiving a job offer that had a start date before their current position’s end date.

Respondents were very cognizant of the end date of their respective positions (i.e., the date of the Super Bowl), as both an absolute deadline and as a day that marked the end of their stress. While the vast majority of the employees keep their jobs for at least a month after the event, there is a drastic change in workload and pressure after the end date. This may be the very element that drives the coping strategies for the stressors: where work-family and job insecurity can wait for after the end date, stressors relating to the event must be handled in order to meet work required for the event. How stress affects mega-event host committee employees and their coping strategies for handling the stressors appears to be different from employees in other organizations, the effect of having an end date may be a major reason why. The themes mentioned are used to draw theoretical contributions and implications for future research will be discussed.