Improving Organizational Effectiveness: Understanding Athletes' Socio-Cultural Adaptation to New Training Environments

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Sport organizations rely on the performance of their athletes for the on-field competitive success of the organization, which, in turn, affects the overall marketing, management, and performance of the organization. Consequently, it is important for sport organizations to identify, select, and recruit (or draft) quality athletes, and to train them to obtain optimal performance. They must learn and fit into a new environment with new teammates, coaches, training schedules, demands, and expectations. In short, they must learn to adapt to an entirely new culture.

A plethora of research exists to assist athletes to adapt to the increased physical demands typical of advancing to higher competitive levels (e.g., Gorostiaga et al., 2005; Krustup et al., 2005). Physiological changes may be some of the easiest to prepare for as they are easily quantified and there are well-known scientific principles to guide athletes in their adaptation to increasing physical demands. Yet, athletes must adapt to more than changes in physical demands. Athletes must also adapt to a new socio-cultural environment with different social and psychological demands. This transition is often an invisible one.

At the core of the change from one training environment to another is the need to understand and adapt to new demands, new expectations, and new ways of doing things. In short, the athlete must adjust to a new culture and may be comparable to culture shock. Oberg (1960), defined culture shock as the anxiety that results from losing the signs and symbols familiar to the individual. Culture shock is a well-studied phenomenon (e.g., Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Hall, 1959; Oberg, 1960) with clearly defined symptoms and stages, which include: (a) a sense of stress; (b) feelings of loss and deprivation in relation to old friends and status; (c) fears of rejection; (d) confusion about role identity; (e) disorientation engendered by unanticipated expectations in the new culture; and (f) feelings of inadequacy (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Typical adjustment to a new culture consists of four phases (Winkelman, 2001): (a) the honeymoon phase; (b) the crisis or cultural shock phase; (c) the adjustment and gradual recovery phase; and (d) the adaption or acculturation phase. While there are recognizable symptoms and phases, little is known about issues such as who is most susceptible, how long the adjustment between phases lasts, and how the symptoms correlate with the phases. What is known is that successful adaptation can be facilitated (Ward & Kennedy, 1994), and that performance is predicated on successful adjustment (Bruner et al., 2008). Further, the broader performance of the team and/or organization is also affected. As Palm (1991) notes, “a newcomer can engender a complex set of disturbances to the team because he or she is not initially able to comply with the norms and standards of the group” (p. 59).

For sport organizations that want or need to obtain high performance as an outcome for core success of the organization, understanding athletes’ socio-cultural adaptation and their behaviors related to the stages of culture shock can help managers plan ways to minimize the shock and ease athletes’ transitions while minimizing the disturbances to team performance. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine key factors that foster and/or hinder athletes’ ability to successfully adjust to new training environments, and to develop managerial strategies to better facilitate athletes’ advancement to increasingly higher levels of competition and performance.

The participants of the study were 10 male and female triathletes, ages 16-23, attending the high performance training camp at the Olympic Training Center (OTC). These athletes were targeted as they were transitioning from their home club environment to high performance training at the OTC in Colorado Springs. To understand the potential disturbance to the existing training group, two female and six male current triathletes that reside permanently at the OTC shared their thoughts via a focus group.

A mixed method design was used for this study. Participants completed a 10-minute questionnaire at 4 points in time: 5 days prior to camp, day 5 of camp, day 10 of camp, and upon returning home. The questionnaire measured culture shock (CSQ, Mumford, 1998), self-efficacy (PSES, Ryckman et al., 1982), perceived stress (PSS, Cohen, et al., 1983), sense of community (SOC, Nasar & Julian, 1995) and satisfaction. The quantitative analysis was supplemented with qualitative data collected via 30-minute interviews with each camper and a one-hour focus group with the resident athletes at the halfway point of camp. The semi-structured format probed for athletes’ views of the demands and changes they faced in response to the new training environment, and their perceptions of internal and external factors that assisted or inhibited their ability to adjust to the new environment and its demands.
Using a clinical case study approach, individual respondent profiles were generated based on mean responses at each of four points in time. Means are presented via graph for each athlete. The qualitative data were used in conjunction to the profiles to provide an in-depth examination and explanation of each athlete’s adjustment. Interview data were individually analyzed using the types and stages of culture shock as an initial framework. Emergent categories were allowed to form within and outside of the culture shock framework. Qualitative data were matched with survey results to look for patterns, which can explain differences in the trend lines of athletes making successful adjustments and those experiencing difficulty in adjusting to the new environment.

Athletes reported low levels of stress and culture shock at all points in time. Interview data suggest that athletes were somewhat nervous prior to arrival at the camp, but were confident in their ability. Individual athlete profiles show variations in both self-efficacy measures – perceived physical ability and physical self-presentation – over the course of the camp. Halfway through the camp, athletes participated in a local triathlon. This race experience seems to have precipitated changes in athletes’ self-efficacy, albeit not lasting change. Although all athletes talked at length about the friendly and supportive nature of the group, they also noted that workouts were highly competitive and offered a chance for social comparison that was not available to them in their home training environment. Based on the high levels of community reported via the survey data, social comparison did not interfere with the experience of community. Sense of community was one of the most discussed elements of the camp. Most of the athletes trained and competed alone prior to the camp. They enjoyed the interaction with like others and valued having others there to push them to excel. Many of the athletes had originally been swimmers or runners in a team environment; this training environment offered them many of the benefits they valued in the team environment. Likewise, resident athletes expressed a need for more social interaction among peers and campers; many missed the team training environment and the opportunity to mentor new athletes.

Athletes are a significant investment for most sport organizations. In order to nurture their investments, sport organizations must consider more than technical and physical training support; they must also consider the socio-cultural adaptations their athletes must make to enhance their performance. This study identified the importance of a sense of community in successful adaptation to the training environment and demands placed on athletes. Specific organizational recommendations for creating community, avoiding interfering with community building, and enhancing the adaptation experience are discussed.