

The Impact of Mediating Factors on Transfer of Training in Minor Hockey Coaches

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Management/leadership

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(including questions)**

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Relevance and Significance

Transfer of training (TT) research is a growing area of scholarship within human resource management (zu Knyphausen-Aufseß, Smukalla, & Abt, 2012; Cheng & Hampson, 2008). However, this topic has just been initiated within empirical sport research, as demonstrated by Millar and Stevens' (2012) work on TT and Canadian national sport organization (NSO) managers. Their study provides a catalyst for additional research on TT among other sport stakeholders, such as coaches. In ice hockey, a sport with tremendous cultural prominence in Canada (Whitson & Gruneau, 2006; Robidoux, 2002) our understanding of the challenges coaches face while applying player development training within an intensely competitive minor hockey system can be enhanced through a TT perspective.

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine the factors that mediate the transfer of player development training of minor hockey coaches during their games and practice.

Review of Literature

A recent movement termed Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) has gained momentum within amateur sport in Canada. A key feature of the CS4L initiative is the development of a long-term athlete development (LTAD) plan (Canadian Sport for Life, 2007). In the context of ice hockey, the implementation of the LTAD model has proven difficult. On one hand, hockey coaches who take certification are taught key principles and techniques that focus upon player development. On the other hand, the competitive context in which the coaches must apply these techniques often creates barriers to the transfer of this learning (Gilbert & Trudel, 2005).

Yamnill and McLean (2001) developed a concise model for the evaluation of the transfer of training that captures learning (both understanding and applicability), individual and organizational outcome variables, as well as three mediating variables. The inclusion of mediating variables is critical for understanding TT because they address both personal and contextual factors that influence the transfer of learning (Lim & Morris, 2006). While past research indicates various labels for the mediating factors (Yamnill & McLean, 2001; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Velada, Caetano, Michel, Lyons, & Cavanagh, 2007), the following three factors reflect the predominant commonalities in the literature. First, training design relates to the design and delivery of a training program (Saks & Belcourt, 2006). The second factor, individual characteristics, relates to the attitudes and motivations of the trainee and finally, transfer climate relates to the context in which the training is applied by training (Tziner, Haccoun & Kadish, 1991). The training transfer model, specifically these three mediating factors, provided the theoretical foundation for this research.

Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study utilized in depth, semi-structured interviews. A total of five head coaches of competitive minor hockey teams in southwestern Ontario were interviewed during the 2011-2012 season. Based upon Patton (2001), a criteria sampling technique ensured participants coached youth aged 12 years or younger, and had a disposition towards skill development as evident in, for example, previous hockey camp instruction or teaching experience. In addition, a small sample is advantageous when the research question and context are very focal to a study (Marshall, 1996; Sandelowski, 1995). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and data analysis included both open, axial and selective coding, as explained by Strauss and Corbin (1998), and thematic content analysis as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006).

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Findings, Discussion and Implications

While the focus of this study was to examine mediators of training transfer, it is important to first recognize the TT outcomes that were evident among the participants. All five coaches indicated they understood the player development training they had received through coach certification clinics, and that they applied this training in games and practices. This result demonstrates TT led to a change in both learning-understanding, and learning-applicability. However, the findings also indicated that the influence of the mediators upon both learning outcomes differed in two ways.

First, the degree of influence varied among the mediators. Data revealed training design had a neutral effect on learning, individual characteristics had a positive influence upon learning, and transfer environment had a negative impact upon learning. In particular, participants identified the lack of support, management and education from the minor hockey association in which they coached as a detrimental aspect of their environment. Further, the coaches indicated that perceived pressure from their team's parent group, whose focus on winning and competition was a hindrance to a coach's ability to apply player development training. These findings concur with other TT studies that found a variation in the degree of impact among mediating factors (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010, Burke & Hutchins, 2007). Second, the timing of influence during the TT process differed across the three mediators. Specifically, data indicated training design and individual characteristics influenced the first learning outcome of understanding, whereas transfer climate influenced the second learning outcome of applicability.

Both practical and theoretical implications can be drawn from the results of this study. From a theoretical view, Millar and Stevens (2012) identified that the two learning outcomes – understanding and applicability - were separate constructs. This study conceptually extends their work by demonstrating how two TT mediators (individual characteristics and training design) impact understanding while the third (transfer climate) impacts application. This is a novel approach within TT studies, where the learning outcome is frequently treated as one factor and consequently, the differentiation of mediators across learning outcomes is infrequent. From a practical view, the findings strongly indicate the importance of coach support within the youth hockey system. An investment by minor hockey associations into strategies, such as mentorships (Pomeroy & Steiker, 2011) and peer support (Harris, Winskowski, & Engdahl, 2007) may enhance a coach's ability to transfer training within this environment.

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