Reality Appeal: Content Analysis Examining Leadership and Management Lessons from “Undercover Boss”

Sonja Lilienthal, San Jose State University

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For the past decade, the distinctive genre of reality television has dominated mainstream television programming. College students represent a significant portion of the demographic age groups targeted by reality shows (Andrejevic, 2004; Brioux, 2004). The purpose of this research was to conduct a content analysis of “Undercover Boss” so that sport management educators become better equipped to demonstrate a variety of management principles, promote discussion and capture student attention using the show. The primary rationale for selecting the CBS series “Undercover Boss” was the recurrent selection of sport business settings. The series has gone “undercover” in at least seventeen sport related businesses over the five US production seasons and illustrates current and relevant sport managerial leadership and sport organizational behaviors in every episode. Secondary but supporting reasons are the international appeal, consistently high ratings, and the series is still in production.

As the classroom of the future changes in response to new technologies, student demands, and industry needs, so too must our approach to teaching and learning. The contemporary sport management educator is obligated to include innovative pedagogical tools that include diverse instructional technologies, active learning and critical thinking activities (Bean, 2001; Rada & Kurth, 2003). This paper is an attempt to supplement essential teaching innovations.

Multiple business educators have demonstrated how reality TV (RTV) can be integrated into a business and management curriculum to engage students, to promote learning and to retain knowledge (Reilly, 2005; Kinnick & Parton, 2005; Easter, Vermer & Conner, 2007). Specifically, the lessons learned from “The Apprentice” have been examined in various articles (Gill, 2005; Merritt, 2004; Simon & Cadden, 2004; Davis, Easter & George, 2003) and have been echoed by the American Management Association (AMA). While, sport management scholars have called for a focus on the role of high-quality teaching in sport management (Cuneen, 2004; Cuneen & Parks, 1997), there are few examples within sport management literature of the inclusion of reality television as a teaching tool in sport management education.

The method used in this study was media content analysis, a well-established message centered methodology (Neuendorf, 2002), used widely in mass communications research including television shows (Riffe & Freitag, 1997). For this study, three coders selected seventeen (17) episodes from the total of 66 episodes as being organizations within the sport industry. All seventeen (17) episodes were copied onto a DVD. Using a method described by Gradlyan and Baghdasaryan (2013), a list of fifteen (15) managerial leadership and organizational behaviors were assessed as the criteria to form the coding system. Three coders watched all seventeen episodes two times each, and recorded the frequency and context of each of the managerial behaviors into a results table.

Preliminary results indicate that the most frequently observed managerial behaviors in the selected sport business episodes were job rotation, motivation, job satisfaction, managing diversity, people skills, power relationships, trust in management and the effective delivery of negative messages. This is tangible evidence that the management strategies and situations depicted throughout the series have enduring relevance and appeal for the sport management classroom. A more systematic and rigorous analysis of the data is underway.

Millennial students in particular want visual presentation material. The use of video from “Undercover Boss” may encourage sport management students to be more attentive, interested and energetic when learning about sport managerial leadership and sport organizational behaviors, especially when the settings of the show are actually real and familiar sport business organizations. The challenge for the sport management educator is to capitalize on the compelling messages and real-life business challenges and use them for classroom stimulus in order to maximize student learning against the backdrop of sport management theory.