Examining the Effectiveness of Ally Training Among Sport Employees

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Diversity

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Despite an increased awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues in both mainstream sport media and the sport management literature, heterosexism and instances of sexual prejudice continue to diminish the experiences of LGBT individuals in sport (Cavalier, 2011; Cunningham, 2012b; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). For instance, lesbian coaches and athletes frequently encounter heterosexist environments within women’s sport—compelling many of these women to conceal their sexual identity and portray themselves in ultra-feminine (and thus, presumably heterosexual) manners (Krane 2001; Krane & Barber, 2005). Sadly, those who disclose their sexual orientation, or fail to appear heterosexual, oftentimes encounter workplace discrimination, negative stereotypes, or social exclusion in team or work settings (Krane, 1997; Griffin, 1998).

To circumvent these negative outcomes and ensure sexual minorities feel welcomed in sport settings, sport organizations have increased their efforts to educate sport employees, participants, and spectators on why inclusion is important and how they can display ally (i.e., LGBT-supportive) behaviors. For instance, there has been a significant rise in the number of non-profit organizations focused on eliminating LGBT discrimination in sport; the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) published a best practices guide on creating LGBT inclusive sport spaces; and more sport organizations now offer sexual orientation diversity training to help coaches, administrators and players address LGBT issues (see Griffin, 2012). A growing body of literature argues that organizations should use these programs and initiatives to identify and train employees to be allies (individuals who make conscious and deliberate attempts to support LGBT inclusion; Brooks & Edwards, 2009; Martinez & Hebl, 2010), as these individuals are instrumental in creating inclusive environments.

Unfortunately, little empirical work examines the effectiveness of sexual orientation diversity training programs on changing people’s attitudes and behaviors (Cunningham, 2012a). In addition, some evidence indicates that while these initiatives may improve attitudes toward sexual minorities (Brooks & Edwards, 2009; Madera et al., 2013), there may be individual or organizational barriers that hinder an ally’s willingness to publically advocate for LGBT inclusion—particularly in the sport context (Melton & Cunningham, in press). The purpose of this research is to address this void. Specifically, we draw from the transfer of training literature to explore the effect ally training has on learning outcomes associated with sexual orientation diversity awareness, ally motivations, and ally behaviors.

According to Kraiger, Ford, and Salas (1993), there are three components of training effectiveness: cognitive learning, affective learning, and behavioral learning. Cognitive learning refers to the extent to which trainees process, acquire, organize, and apply knowledge. When assessing cognitive learning, a researcher may ask the participant to define terms such as transgender or gender queer. If the researcher is interested in higher level cognitive learning outcomes, she or he may ask the participant to describe strategies they would use in certain situations (e.g., if two teammates were in a same-sex relationship). Affective learning outcomes relate to changes in attitudes, motivations, or goals that are relevant to the objectives of the training. Finally, behavioral learning outcomes concern the trainee’s actions. When the training is effective, trainees’ should successfully perform the desired skill and be able to do so in a fluid, confident manner.

Consistent with Kraiger et al.’s (1993) work, we anticipate that participation in an LGBT-inclusion training program will impact learning outcomes among sport employees. Specifically, participants will exhibit higher levels of cognitive learning related to LGBT awareness issues (H1) and inclusive strategies (H2); affective learning (H3); and behavioral learning (H4). Furthermore, a secondary purpose of this research is to explore what aspects of the training impact desired learning outcomes. Most training research examines if training affects outcomes, but stops short of investigating how the training influences outcomes (Kulik, & Roberson, 2008) Thus, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: What elements of a training program have the greatest impact on learning outcomes?
To examine our research question and hypotheses, we collected data from 71 sport employees in the Pacific Northwest who work in college athletics (n=43), youth sport (n=18), and recreational sport (n=10). Thirty-five of the participants attended an all-day training program on how to create more inclusive sport environments for sexual minorities. Participants in the control group were randomly selected from department websites (n=36), did not attend the training, and work in similar sport settings as the trainees. All participants were sent an online survey one week prior to (Time 1) and after (Time 2) the training date in October. We will also collect data 3 months (Time 3) and 6 months (Time 4) after the training. Consistent with previous training research (Holladay & Quinones, 2008), the questionnaire items assessed each learning outcome related to the training. Cognitive learning was assessed in two ways: through a 10-item, multiple-choice test covering LGBT awareness issues, and a situational judgment test assessing participants’ ability to address LGBT issues in five hypothetical scenarios. In addition, ally motivations (α = .71) and ally behaviors (α = .84; Madera et al., 2013) were measured. The post-test survey also asked the trainees to indicate if a particular portion of the training (i.e., educational lecture, motivational speaker, group discussion session with non-coworkers, group discussion session with coworkers, or the inclusive strategy workshop) enhanced a specific learning outcome.

We conducted a MANCOVA to examine the effect of training on learning outcomes. The LGBT awareness knowledge, situational judgment knowledge, ally motivations, and ally behaviors at Time 2 served as the dependent variables, while the scores at Time 1 were the covariates. The results of the multivariate effects were significant, Wilks’ λ = .52, F (4, 62) = 11.58, p < .001. There was a significant effect for training on LGBT awareness knowledge, F (1, 65) = 20.11, p < .001, partial η2 = .24, and ally behaviors F (1, 65) = 22.86, p < .001, partial η2 = .26, supporting Hypotheses 1 and 4. There was no significant effect for training on situational judgment knowledge, F (1, 65) = .01, p < .92, partial η2 < .001, and ally motivations, F (1, 65) = .10, p = .76, partial η2 < .001. Thus Hypotheses 2 and 3 were not supported. Finally, with respect to RQ1 the majority of participants indicated that the educational lecture (57.1%) and motivational speech (42.9%) influenced their increase in LGBT awareness knowledge. However, the motivational speech (31.4%), group discussion session with coworkers (31.4%), and inclusive strategy training (37.1%) had the greatest impact on participants’ ally behaviors.

Findings from this study have the potential to further the theoretical development of the transfer of training literature and impact practice. From a theoretical perspective, this research enhances understanding related to the outcomes of ally training, and the longitudinal design should reveal the pace of training transfer. Such knowledge will help researchers and practitioners move beyond knowing whether training works, to why training works.