The Perceived Organizational Support of Minor Hockey Officials

Shawn Eckford, Brock University & The Centre for Sport Capacity
Julie Stevens (Advisor), Brock University & The Centre for Sport Capacity

Management/leadership  Saturday, May 31, 2014  20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Conference Center B)

Abstract 2014-300  4:30 PM

Introduction

Officiating ice hockey is described as “probably the most challenging job in team sports” (Abraham, 2000). Officials receive verbal and physical abuse for performing a job “where they could never be praised, only vilified…” (Moore, 2006). Within this disrespectful hockey climate, the rate of attrition among minor ice hockey officials has persistently increased and is currently cited as an annual loss of approximately 30% to 33% of the 33,000 officials registered with Hockey Canada (Balch & Scott, 2007; Deacon, 2001; Forbes, Betts, & Livingston, 2003) with an estimated cost of approximately $500,000 annually (Livingston & Forbes, 2007).

The literature on sport official adherence typically explores the reasons for attrition. For example, studies identify various causes of sport official stress such as fear of physical harm, fear of failure, interpersonal conflict, the crowd atmosphere, and game action (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Goldsmith & Williams, 1992; Fucini, 1979; Sawyer, 1981; Trudel & Cote, 1996; Zoller, 1985). These stressors correspond with those identified by Dorsch and Paskevich (2007) who studied minor hockey officials. While existing research is insightful, further research on attraction and adherence rather than attrition of hockey officials is needed. Consequently, the purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the extent to which on-ice officials perceive support from the minor hockey system in order to better understand why an individual would choose to become an official and/or continue to serve as an official.

Support for officials may be analyzed according to a management concept called “perceived organizational support” (POS), which was first described within an employment context by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa (1986) as a trade of effort and loyalty for material commodities like pay or social rewards such as esteem, approval or caring. POS is defined as “beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values [employees’] contributions and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger et. al, 1986, p. 500; Fuller, Barnett, Hester, & Relyea, 2003, p. 789; Loi, Hang-yue & Foley, 2006, p. 102). POS is grounded in social exchange theory and organizational support theory. These theories argue that when one person treats another well or behaves favourably, the treatment should be reciprocated. Since employees tend to assign humanlike characteristics to their organization (Gouldner, 1960), employees develop beliefs concerning the extent to which their organization values their efforts, cares about their well-being, and would give help when needed to deal with a stressful situation (Shore & Shore, 1995; George, Reed, Ballard, Colin, & Fielding, 1993). Forbes and Livingston (2013) argued that sustained sport official attrition points to an underlying organizational problem and proposed a POS framework would be a first step to address the issue in a novel way.

Methodology

This study utilized a survey design. The first section of the survey included demographic questions for participant age, gender, experience, certification, involvement, activity, and organization. The second section measured POS with the 16-item Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Since the SPOS was created for an employee-business context, minor modifications were made to reflect the circumstances of a minor hockey official. During the Fall of 2013, surveys were distributed at 17 officiating clinics which officials are required by Hockey Canada to attend annually. Individuals who met Hockey Canada eligibility requirements and had one year of experience were invited to complete the survey at the start of the 4-hour workshop. Completed surveys totalled 261 (n=261). Data were subject to basic descriptive and frequency statistical analysis, t-tests, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to compare POS according to demographic groups.

Results

For the t-tests, significant POS differences were found for age (Myoung = 4.24, Mold = 4.06, t(250) = 1.583, p < 0.01), experience (Mless = 4.30, Mmore = 3.99, t(256) = 2.689, p = 0.01) and certification (Mlow = 4.24, Mhigh =
3.99, t(259) = 2.243, p = 0.02). No significant difference for activity and involvement was found and the sample of female officials (n=9) was inadequate to conduct an analysis. A one-way ANOVA analysis revealed a significant difference between the levels of extra-role performance for minor hockey officials, F(2, 258) = 4.14, p = .017. Bonferroni post-hoc analysis showed only one significant difference (Mno-extra-role = 4.32, Mone-extra-role = 3.94, p = .02). A one-way ANOVA showed no significant POS difference among organizations, F(4, 217) = 1.96, p = .10) however, participants identified an array of hockey organizations such as national, provincial and local associations and leagues, that they felt were responsible for providing support to them.

Discussion and Implications

The data indicated that officials who are younger, less experienced or hold low certification (novice officials) have greater POS than officials who are older, more experienced or hold high certification (veteran officials). This result contradicts Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) who found longer tenured employees have high POS and a more favorable view of their organization. However, this finding supports Ghani and Hussin (2009) who argued that access to opportunities for information sharing, learning and development is a strong predictor of POS. Older employees are far less likely to have access to training and development opportunities than younger employees (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009; Barth, McNaught, & Rizzi, 1993; Rix, 1996; Taylor & Urwin, 2001), which was the case in this study as extra-role data indicated novice officials are recipients of opportunities to develop while veteran officials tend to serve as providers of these opportunities.

In addition, novice and veteran hockey officials report different sources and levels of stress (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007). Novice officials experience low stress levels which suggests they need less support or current support in the hockey system meets their needs. However, veteran officials’ stress levels are high and their POS is low, which suggests they need more support. Unfortunately, an emphasis on recruitment creates an atmosphere that favours novices and as a result, support to officials currently in the minor hockey system becomes a low priority and, over time, possibly deficient.

Implications relate to the ‘who and how’ of the support that hockey organizations give to on-ice officials. Research suggests organizations that engage in training and development practices that target older employees will be more successful in retaining these employees than organizations that do not engage in these practices (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009). Further, employees who experience support from their organization will repay the effort by remaining in the organization (Allen, Shore and Griffith, 2003). Given this, investment or reallocation of current investment, on retention as opposed to recruitment would pay dividends for organizations facing shortages of minor hockey officials. Since officials expect support from a variety of organizations within the hockey system, the organizations need to either collaborate better in the area of officiating programs, or provide explicit direction to officials on where they can best gain support from the system. The striking lack of female officials in this study demonstrates a need for intentional action to recruit and retain more female officials to the sport.