The Impact of Volunteer Youth Coaches’ Psychological Contract Fulfillment

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There continues to be interest in and support for psychological contract as an important management concept in general (Conway & Briner, 2005; Guest & Conway, 2002; Millward & Hopkins, 1998) and in the volunteer context in particular (Blackman & Benson, 2010; Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009; Liao-Troth, 2001, 2005; Nichols & Ojala, 2009; Starnes, 2007; Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, & Cuskelly, 2006). With its basis in social exchange theory, a “psychological contract is individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). A psychological contract comprises an individual’s perception of what they expect to provide to the organization (e.g., hard work, loyalty, quality work), and what they expect the organization to provide to them (e.g., decent pay, safe work environment, opportunity for advancement). Empirical evidence (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Millward & Hopkins, 1998; Rousseau, 1990, 2001) indicates that the psychological contract can be categorized into transactional (economic) and/or relational (socio-emotional) elements. According to psychological contract theory, it is the perceived fulfillment (expectations are met), breach (expectations are unmet) or violation (intense emotional reaction to a breach) of a psychological contract that impacts on an individual’s attitude and behaviour with respect to the organization (Conway & Briner, 2005). With their purported impact psychological contracts appear to be a critical aspect of the work and volunteer environment.

It is important to understand the nature of the volunteer environment as there is a decreasing trend of volunteerism in general (e.g., Statistics Canada, 2007) and in sport in particular (Breuer & Wicker, 2009, 2010; Cuskelly, 2005, Nichols, 2005). This issue is also found amongst volunteer coaches, where it has also been noted that the turnover of volunteer coaches can lead to a lack of qualified coaches who are crucial to positive program delivery and ongoing participation in sport (Canadian Heritage, 2013). This need for qualified coaches is highlighted in the Canadian Sport Policy 2012 (Canadian Heritage, 2012) which identifies the importance of recruiting and retaining qualified coaches to deliver sport programs. Understanding the psychological contract of volunteer youth sport coaches may provide valuable insight into the working environment of this group of volunteers who are integral to community sport, with implications for their retention.

The purpose of this study is to examine the content, fulfillment, and further impact of the fulfillment of the psychological contract of volunteer youth sport coaches in community sport clubs. Specifically, it is of interest to understand what coaches expect to provide to their club, and what they expect their club to provide in return, how well these expectations are fulfilled, and what difference that makes to coaches.

A sample of volunteer youth sport coaches (N = 187) was surveyed regarding what they expect their sport club to provide to them, and what they expect to provide in return. As well, participants identified how well their club fulfilled their expectations. Multiple items were developed to measure both the transactional and relational expectations of coaches’ expectations of self and the sport organization, using the themes uncovered by Harman and Doherty (2012). Fulfillment of the psychological contract followed Robinson’s (1996) measure, in which participants were asked to identify on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) the extent to which their sport club provides the things the coaches expect. The degree of fulfillment was calculated by subtracting an individual’s perception of the extent to which the club provides each item from the extent to which it was expected. For example, if an item was highly expected by a coach (a score of 7) and was perceived to not be provided by the sport club (a score of 1), it resulted in a high fulfillment discrepancy or breach (7 – 1 = 6). The scores ranged from -6 to +6, and each fulfillment item was then reverse-scored to aid in conceptual interpretation, such that positive scores indicate over-fulfillment, negative scores breach, and a score of zero as fulfillment. Measures of coach satisfaction (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins & Kelsh, 1979), commitment (Engelberg, Zakus, Skinner, & Campbell, 2012), and intent to continue (Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007) were also included.
The results indicated that expectations of volunteer youth sport coaches appear to be distinctive, lending support to the notion that psychological contracts are context-specific (Anderson & Schalk, 1998; Chu & Kuo, 2012; Guest, 2004; Guest & Conway, 2002; Kickul & Liao-Troth, 2003; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Providing further insight to this context, the findings also revealed that coaches have high relational and transactional expectations of themselves, however their relational expectations were slightly stronger. The results also indicated that coaches have both transactional and relational expectations of their sport club, with coach support (relational) being their primary expectation. The study also found that, overall, coaches’ psychological contracts were slightly unfulfilled by their sport clubs. Further, contract fulfillment was found to significantly and positively predict coaches’ satisfaction, commitment and intent to continue, with the provision of coach support and positive coach environment making a unique contribution to those outcomes.

The findings have implications for ensuring an effective coaching environment in the community sport club setting. Clubs should be aware of and attend to the notion that their volunteer youth sport coaches possess psychological contracts; there are things coaches expect to do for the club, and things they expect the club to do in return. Most importantly, the extent to which the club fulfills (or breaches) the coaches’ expectations may be expected to impact their attitude and behavior towards the club. It is critical that clubs understand what volunteer youth sport coaches expect of them, and strive to meet those expectations.

References


