It Takes Two: Uncovering the Psychological Contract of Community Sport Clubs

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The concept of the psychological contract originated from the works of Argyris (1960), Levinson (1962), and Schein (1965) and has increasingly been employed to explore the relationship between employees and employers (Conway & Briner, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Guest & Conway, 2002; Millward & Hopkins, 1998). More recently, the theoretical concept has been applied to the volunteer context (Blackman & Benson, 2010; Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009; Liao–Troth, 2001, 2005; Nichols & Ojal, 2009; Stirling, Kilpatrick & Orpin, 2011; Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, & Cuskey, 2006, Vantilborgh, Bidee, Pepermans, Willems, Huybrechts, & Jegers, 2011) where typically volunteers do not possess written contracts and therefore rely on other means to determine what their role entails. The psychological contract has been defined as “the perceptions of both parties to the employment relationship – organization and individual – of the reciprocal promises and obligations implied in that relationship” (Guest & Conway, 2002, p. 22).

While the definition of the psychological contract emphasizes two parties to the agreement, the focus of psychological contract research has been on the employee or volunteer perspective, and specifically the nature of their contract with the organization (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Millward & Hopkins, 1998; Raja, Johns & Ntalianis, 2004; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003), the fulfillment or breach of that contract (Conway & Briner, 2005; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), and the further impact of that breach or fulfillment (Ali, Haz, Ramay, & Azeem, 2010; Kingshott & Pecotich, 2007; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). However, by definition, a psychological contract is based on exchange or mutuality, and therefore the consideration of the organization’s perspective is intuitive (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Guest & Conway, 2002; Guest 1998). The organization’s perspective has been considered by a few scholars who argue that a complete understanding of the reciprocity of the psychological contract cannot be achieved until both parties to the contract are considered (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000, 2002; McFarlane Shore & Tetrick, 1994; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). When employees consider what their organization expects of them, they give the organization an anthropomorphic identity, personifying the organization with human qualities (Conway & Briner, 2005). It is possible to conceive of an organization having a psychological contract as actions by the agents of the organization are interpreted by employees or volunteers as actions by the organization itself (Conway & Briner, 2005). Capturing both the volunteer and the organization’s perspective of the psychological contract will aid in understanding the state of the psychological contract in terms of incongruence (expectations unknown to the other), and reneging of expectations (not fulfilling known expectations) (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000), as well as the reciprocity of the relationship (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002).

Building on a previous study (Authors, 2014) that uncovered the psychological contract of volunteer youth sport coaches – what they expect from their community sport clubs and what they expect to provide in return – the purpose of this study was to identify the psychological contract of those clubs; that is, what sport clubs expect to provide to their volunteer coaches, and what they expect their volunteer coaches to provide in return. The current study also examined how sport clubs communicate these expectations. In doing so it completed the examination of both sides of the psychological contract associated with volunteer coaches in this context. A multiple case study approach was used to allow for in-depth study and comparison of different sport clubs to create a profile of the organization psychological contract in that context (Patton, 2002). A purposeful sample of three nonprofit community-based sport clubs that offer both recreational and competitive youth sport programs, and rely on volunteer coaches for program delivery were included. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted with a sample of board members, as this approach allowed for the collective perspective of each club providing a voice for the organization’s psychological contract. Following data collection a priori coding according to broad themes of transactional and relational expectations allowed data to be grouped by a given set of standards consistent with the literature (O’Neil, Krivokapic-Skoko & Dowell, 2010. Subsequently, emergent coding was performed to identify the
specific content of the relational and transactional contracts.

The results revealed that sport clubs had both transactional and relational expectations of themselves and their coaches. Common expectations that the sport clubs had of their volunteer coaches were: (1) assigned coaching role, (2) certification, (3) team administration, (4) team leadership, (5) providing a positive experience, and (6) professionalism. Further, several common expectations of what the sport clubs expected to provide were also identified: (1) provision of fundamental resources, (2) club administration, (3) formal training, (4) coach support, and (5) conflict resolution. The sport clubs also identified a variety of means by which they communicate their expectations to their volunteer coaches, although the use of an orientation meeting was the only common source employed by all three clubs.

The findings extend understanding of psychological contract theory, and have several implications for practitioners. First, they suggest that sport clubs do possess a psychological contract, with specific expectations of their coaches and themselves that appear to be unique to this context. Second, a comparison with previous research (Authors, 2014) indicated that there is incongruence between volunteer coaches and their clubs expectations. This has important implications as previous research indicates that unfulfilled psychological contracts have a significant impact on volunteers’ attitude and behavior (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009; O’Donohue & Nelson, 2009; Starnes, 2007). A disconnect may be apparent between coaches and clubs as clubs reported transmitting their expectations to coaches through orientation meetings and documents, while previous research found that coaches identified several influences external to their sport club as predominately shaping their contract/expectations with the club (Authors, 2014). Sport clubs should be aware of the differing perceptions of expectations between themselves and their volunteer coaches, as well as the different mechanisms that exist to manage the psychological contract to create an effective volunteer coaching environment.

Selected References


