Exploring Organizational Climate and College Coaches' Intent to Leave: A Human Resource Development Perspective

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Intercollegiate athletics are embedded in the higher-education system in the United States, and have emerged as an outlet for commercialization (broadcasting contracts, sponsorships, and lucrative facilities). While most college athletic departments do not generate millions in revenue, some do. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which is the non-profit governing body for college athletics, had generated a revenue of $981 million for fiscal 2013 (Berkowitz, 2014). Similarly, in 2012, the number of college athletic departments exceeding $100 million in revenue had increased (Berkowitz, Upton, & Brady, 2013). Aside from finances, college athletics may provide indirect benefits to universities, including an increase in national exposure, giving, enrollment, and applications (Goff, 2000). Irrespective of the direct or indirect benefits produced, “collegiate sports have changed from being a feature of a university to, in some cases, being the defining aspects of that institution” (Hoffman, 2012, para. 1).

Head coaches are the employees expected to lead their sports programs to success both on and off the playing field. Coaching at the college ranks has its set of advantages (e.g., affiliation with the university, notoriety, community connection, and coach-student-athlete relationship). Athletic departments are in an arms race for the best coaches on the market, so in an attempt to gain an advantage, many athletic departments are willing to pay a heavy price for their head coaches. For example, in an investigation using revenue theory of cost and resource dependency theory as the study's framework, Hirko, Suggs, and Orleans (2013) compared the growth rate of salaries (i.e., NCAA Division I college coaches and football coaches versus instructional salaries and tuition rates). Results suggested the total athletic coaching salaries and football coaches’ salaries greatly surpassed the equivalent growth rate for instructional salaries and tuition rates.

Regardless of the benefits of coaching at the college level, the profession as whole also presents employees with challenges and pressures that may contribute to coaches opting to leave their organizations and the profession. Due to advances in technology, coaches are available year-round, to answer e-mails, phone calls, and the demanding schedule forces coaches to keep long, nontraditional hours (i.e., nights and weekends) with extensive travel (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). For example, the number of NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) head football coaches leaving their jobs has increased over the past six years. The turnover rate for these coaches is around 25% and the coaches’ shelf-life is 5 years and trending downwards (Daughters, 2013).

Literature on collegiate coaches’ intent to leave has been studied from an organization commitment (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002), work experiences (Cunningham & Sagas, 2003), gender differences (Sagas & Ashley, 2001), and racial differences (Cunningham et al., 2001) perspective. However, the sport literature has failed to address organizational climate as a potential factor impacting college coaches’ intent to leave their organization and the profession. It is suggested college athletic departments adopt a climate which focuses on the development of its employees. The intense pressure to win and compete in the arms race of college athletics may be a contributing factor to why coaches choose to leave the organizations and the profession, and consequently has developed a need to understand the climate within college athletic departments.

Thumin and Thumin (2011) suggested that “climate is the most important single measure of the broader concept called “culture” and that without measuring the aggregate perceptions of stakeholder groups, it would be difficult, probably impossible, to obtain a meaningful, realistic picture of an organization’s culture” (p. 106). As such, organizational climate is described as the total reflection of employees’ perceptions and descriptions of their work environment, and has been found to impact employees' satisfaction, commitment, and performance. There are varying types of climates (i.e., ethical, safety, diversity), and those organizations focused on the development of its human resources, an integral part of the organization’s success, are said to have a human resource development
climate. Mishra and Bharwaj (2002) described this climate as employees’ perceptions of the policies, procedures, practices, and conditions of the working environment. The human resource development practices associated with a human resource development climate include: performance appraisals, potential appraisals, feedback and performance coaching, career planning, organizational development, training, rewards, employee welfare, and human resource systems (Mohanty & Sahoo, 2012).

It is proposed that the presence and implementation of the aforementioned human resource development practices in organizations is related to coaches’ intent to leave (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003). The conceptual model created recommends human resource development climate serves as a mediating variable between human resource development practices and coaches’ intent to leave, indicating that human resource development climate strengthens the relationship between the two constructs. In other words, those athletic departments that implement the suggested practices, which coaches perceive to create a human resource development climate, reduces coaches’ intent to leave the organization. Furthermore, the conceptual model implies that human resource development climate as a mediator can change the relationship between human resource development practices and intent to leave. It is not enough for athletic departments to have the human resource development practices, but employees must collectively perceive these practices and the work environment as dedicated to the development of its employees, creating a human resource development climate.

A human resource development climate may best suit the context of college athletics, because regardless of the complexities of the coaching profession, coaches may appreciate the athletic department’s dedication to their growth and development. If this type of climate does in fact impact a coach’s decision to stay or leave the organization and/or profession, athletic administrators and human resource managers should make appropriate implementations to navigate closer to a human resource development climate to encourage longevity within the organization and profession.

Therefore, the purpose of this poster is to (a) share the completed research on human resource development climate, (b) propose a model which may best examine the bridge between human resource development climate and coaches’ intent to leave, and (c) offer implications for college athletic departments and future directions for research.