Mentoring in Professional Sport: An Investigation of the Most Prolific General Managers in the History of the National Hockey League

Stephen Kirzinger, University of Windsor
Jess Dixon (Advisor), University of Windsor

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Mentoring has become an extensive domain of inquiry for researchers and practitioners, due to the array of benefits that a mentoring relationship can yield. A mentor, often a higher-ranking individual who has advanced knowledge and experience, can play a positive role in the development of another individual’s career (Singh, Ragins, & Tharenou, 2009). Although scholars have generally agreed upon what a mentor is, defining the mentoring relationship and the nuances that accompany such a relationship has been an ongoing investigation. A contributing factor to the elusiveness of understanding mentoring relationships in their entirety, is the reality that these interactions are highly dependent upon a variety of contextual factors. Thus, clarification of different aspects of this dyadic relationship has proven to be an evolving journey.

As many researchers have demonstrated (e.g., Chao, 1997; Ghosh & Reio Jr., 2013; Kram, 1983; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002), garnering an understanding of the factors that contribute to a successful mentoring relationship is important, as the benefits for the protégé, mentor, and organization can be substantial. Although sport management scholars have studied mentoring in a variety of contexts, professional sport, as a context to study management theories and concepts, has not been fully realized (Devine & Foster, 2006). Thus, a gap in the literature exists regarding the study of how mentoring impacts the career development of executives in professional sport. This research emphasizes the need for a deepened understanding of the factors that contribute to successful mentoring within organizations.

In the realm of professional sport, General Managers (GMs), in consultation with their team operations staffs, are primarily responsible for establishing policies and making decisions regarding player personnel (Farris, 2011; Gamson & Scotch, 1964; Wong & Deubert, 2010). Therefore, there is an opportunity for mentoring relationships to develop between GMs (mentors) and members of their hockey operations staffs (protégés). In an interview with Dan Rosen, Senior Writer for NHL.com, Dean Lombardi, GM of the National Hockey League’s (NHL) Los Angeles Kings, demonstrated the positive impact that his previous mentors, Lou Lamoriello and Bobby Clarke, have had on his career success. Lamoriello and Clarke have a combined 3,740 games (the equivalent of 45.6 regular seasons) of experience as NHL GMs. Lombardi stated that without the help of these two mentors he “might be back in Massachusetts right now, putting his Tulane University Law degree toward something far more safer, but far less rewarding than he is right now as the general manager of the Los Angeles Kings” (Rosen, 2012, ¶ 1). Although this quote acknowledges the impact mentoring can have on the career success of young NHL executives, minimal research has been conducted to discover who the most prolific GMs, as mentors, have been in the history of the league and what factors contributed to their success.

The goals of this research study are to: 1) identify who the most prolific NHL GMs are, in terms of their ability to mentor future GMs; 2) provide insight regarding how mentoring has impacted the career development of NHL GMs; 3) illuminate the mentoring functions that have aided those protégés who later became NHL GMs; 4) contribute to literature that acknowledges the positive outcomes of mentoring as a form of leader development in professional environments (e.g., Day, 2001; Kram, 1983), and; 5) serve as a foundation for future research of mentoring in professional sport and other areas of sport management.

This study utilizes an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2014). The purpose of the quantitative method was to determine who the most prolific NHL GMs have been in their roles as mentors since the inception of the NHL. For the purpose of this study, a GM (i.e., mentor) was considered to be successful when a member of his hockey operations staff (i.e., protégé) became a NHL GM later in his career. Determining a GM’s success as a mentor was accomplished through the use of two measures. First, effectiveness was measured by tallying the total number of protégés who have gone on to become GMs later in their respective careers. Second, efficiency
was measured in terms of the total number of protégés who have gone on to become GMs later in their respective careers, divided by the total number of years that the GM-mentor has been active in this role. After these two measures were calculated for each GM-mentor, a K-means cluster analysis was used to identify who the most prolific GM-mentors have been in the history of the league. Data for this phase of the study were obtained from NHL team media guides dating back to 1917, which were accessed from the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, ON.

Once the most prolific GM-mentors were identified through the K-means cluster analysis, the qualitative inquiry began. The purpose of the qualitative method is to uncover the factors that contributed to the success of the most prolific GM-mentors that were identified in the previous phase. This is being accomplished through document and audiovisual analyses (Creswell, 2014), using the following sources: published biographies, autobiographies, recorded interviews with the GMs, protégés, and/or others in the GMs’ hockey operations staffs, newspaper and/or magazine articles, and the use of the book, Behind the Moves (Farris, 2011). These sources provide the researcher with a variety of viewpoints and opinions regarding the factors that contributed to GMs’ successes as mentors. Kram’s (1983) career and psychosocial mentoring functions are being used as predetermined codes throughout the qualitative analysis. These functions were selected as codes because the general purpose of this study is to illuminate the factors that led to GMs’ success as mentors. Determining which functions prolific GM-mentors provided to their protégés offers insight into the factors that have led to their protégés’ career success.

As of the date of this submission, the quantitative phase of the study has been completed. The results of the K-means cluster analysis revealed that the most appropriate number of significantly different clusters was five (p < .05), with three GM-mentors included in the most prolific cluster. The scores for these GM-mentors ranged from 4 to 5 successful protégés and 0.455 to 0.625 successful protégés per year. The qualitative phase of the project is currently ongoing, and should be completed in December 2015. During this presentation, the most prolific GM-mentors will be identified, as will the mentoring functions that they relied upon in helping their protégés to become GMs later in their respective careers. Ultimately, the results of this research will add to our understanding of the impact mentoring can have on the career success of executives in professional sport.