Positive Organizational Behavior in Sport: The Left and Right of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in Sport Organizations

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One’s work life is very impactful on personal well-being, so there have been attempts to utilize a positive approach in the organizational behavioral sciences for employee’s satisfactory life. While previous scholars have focused on the ways to decrease job stress, the present study uses a positive approach to occupational health as Buckingham and Vosburg (2001) once said "weakness-fixing prevents failure. Only strength-building leads to success" (p. 22). One of the most modern competitive environments is sport industry, and it is imperative to investigate the relatively new research area of Positive organizational behavior (POB; Luthans, 2002) in the sport organizations. Especially in the competitive environment, POB brings substantial impacts on organizational effectiveness through employees’ positively-oriented capacities (Youssef & Luthans, 2010).

POB is “the study and application of positively-oriented capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (p. 59). In transferring the idea of POB to the practice of human resource management, the concept of psychological capital (Luthans & Youssef, 2004) or simply PsyCap was proposed. PsyCap is a high-order construct of self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency, and is considered as state-like, having a synergistic impact on individual and organizational outcomes. As a first step of applying POB toward sport organizations, this current study explores the constructs possibly pertaining to the formation of PsyCap (i.e., authentic leadership, meaningful work, and supportive organizational climate). This study also concerns employees’ job satisfaction and psychological well-being (PWB) as potential outcomes of PsyCap in sport organizations. Additionally, this study examines the role of PsyCap to explicate how each predictor of PsyCap influence employees’ job satisfaction and PWB through PsyCap. In summary, the purposes of this study are to: (1) empirically test various predictors (left) and outcomes (right) of PsyCap, and (2) examine the mediating role of PsyCap for sport employees’ job satisfaction and PWB in sport organizations.

The present research model will focus on intercollegiate athletics, facing numerous problems such as abuse and cheating (Hums & MacLean, 2004). For success in athletic departments, recognizing POB and enhancing employees’ PsyCap are critical in not only avoiding the obvious negative aspects, but also lead to more progressive outcomes. A testable research model, targeting employees in athletic departments, consists of five direct effects (authentic leadership → PsyCap, meaningful work → PsyCap, supportive organizational climate → PsyCap, PsyCap → job satisfaction, and PsyCap → PWB) and six indirect effects by using PsyCap as a mediator (e.g., authentic leadership → PsyCap → job satisfaction).

To create a reliable and valid scale to test the research hypotheses, an initial set of items was developed in a pilot test by collecting data form employees in athletic departments of Division II and III institutions (n = 289). In the main study, the target population was employees who work in athletic departments in Division I collegiate institutions in 2014. The data were collected through an online survey by utilizing Qualtrics survey software. Among 4,116 employees who successfully received the survey link, a final data set included 708 employees (17.20%). By evaluating the full measurement model (S-B $\chi^2 = 4153.192$, df = 1952, p < .001, robust CFI = .913, TLI = .901, RMSEA = .040, SRMR = .039), 13 items for authentic leadership, 10 items of meaningful work, 8 items for supportive organizational climate, 15 items for PsyCap, and 18 items for PWB remained for further data analysis.

For testing direct effects, the fit statistics of the hypothesized model indicated reasonable fit (robust S-B $\chi^2 = 4541.949$, df = 2106, p < .001, CFI = .903, TLI = .900, RMSEA = .041, SRMR = .051). Except for a path from authentic leadership to PsyCap (H1, standardized $\gamma = -.12$, SE = .07, p = .088), other direct paths (H2 through H5)
were positive and significant at the alpha level of .05. In assessing the mediating role of PsyCap, the hypothesized research model also provided reasonable model fit (robust S-B $\chi^2 = 4495.517$, df = 2102, p < .001, CFI = .905, TLI = .900, RMSEA = .041, SRMR = .048). In paths from meaningful work and supportive organizational climate to job satisfaction, PsyCap was partially mediated (H7: standardized $\gamma = .19$, SE = .05, p < .01; H8: standardized $\gamma = .20$, SE = .06, p < .01). In terms of paths from meaningful work and supportive organizational climate to PWB, PsyCap was fully mediated (H10: standardized $\gamma = .50$, SE = .07, p < .01; H11: standardized $\gamma = .51$, SE = .14, p < .01).

The results are as follows. First, whereas AD’s authentic leadership was not the main factor positively influencing employees’ PsyCap levels, meaningful work and supportive organizational climate contributed to higher levels of employee PsyCap. The plausible explanation for the inconsistent finding in regards to the AD’s leadership influence is that most employees in athletic departments do not work with their ADs directly. On the other hand, when employees clearly understand the value of their work and receive their senior staffs’ and coworkers’ support, they could generate alternative paths for achieving goals and quickly bounce back after setbacks.

Second, employees in collegiate athletic departments who have high level of PsyCap showed a higher level of satisfaction with their job and perceive more optimal psychological functioning in their lives. An employee’s positive psychological state is one of the most important components for job satisfaction because hopeful employees who have internalized determination are more likely to be satisfied with their job tasks and accomplishments (Luthans et al., 2015). Because employees with high levels of PsyCap have more positive appraisals in the workplace through various events and circumstances, they tend to achieve personal growth and positive relationships with others.

Third, PsyCap played important roles between predictors and outcomes. By partially mediated, PsyCap specifically articulate how meaningful work and supportive organizational climate influence job satisfaction. It also showed that meaningful work and supportive organizational climate are pivotal factors in increasing both PsyCap and job satisfaction in sport organizations. The full mediating role of PsyCap completely explained the processes by which meaningful work and supportive organizational climate influence their PWB. The most important founding is that employees’ PWB levels are increased by meaningful work and supportive organizational climate only when having high levels of PsyCap.

From a theoretical standpoint, it broadens the perspective of POB by focusing on the mediating role of PsyCap and adding PWB as an outcome of PsyCap. This study is one of the first attempts to examine the PsyCap level of employees in sport organizations, so it will provide empirical evidence for a better understanding of POB in sport organizations. For practitioners, it is not only directly beneficial for athletic departments, but also useful for managers in sport organizations to build internal management strategies for increasing employees’ PsyCap and PWB. For follow-up studies, Post-hoc analyses are required for better understanding of the relationships among sub-constructs in terms of significant direct paths. Due to the insignificant relationship between the AD’s authentic leadership and employees’ PsyCap level, in-depth interviews with employees are needed to describe how their leaders’ attitude and behavior influence their PsyCap levels. Furthermore, examining the role of PsyCap in different contexts of sport would show different results from this study. Even in the same context of collegiate sport, it is possible to adapt the concept of PsyCap toward student-athletes for their PWB levels through their daily training.