Measuring Ethical Work Climate in Intercollegiate Athletic Administrations: A Structural Analysis

Eddie Walker II, University of Minnesota Crookston

Friday, June 4, 2016

Poster

Abstract 2016-232

8:30 AM

Ethics

The sport industry deals with a variety of unique ethical dilemmas at all levels. Whether it is recent attention on domestic violence in the NFL or violating NCAA regulations related to improper benefits (such as buying lunch for a student athlete), there is a decision-making process involved in choosing a course of action. Kohlberg (1976) developed a model discussing this decision-making process still used today. Past research has been conducted in an effort to develop methods of detecting unethical behaviors in sport, like point shaving (Bernhardt & Heston, 2010) and performance enhancing drug use (Carolan, 2006). What we don’t know is how prone different positions in an organization are to ethical failures (Pritchard & Barton, 2014). The purpose of this study is twofold. First, determine the perceived ethical climate within a variety of intercollegiate athletic administrations. Second, compare the ethical climate to recent NCAA violations as evidence of proven “ethical failures”.

The reasoning behind the behavior can be as important as the behavior itself. Kohlberg (1976) identified three levels, each consisting of two stages, as a way of identifying how a person determines: what is right, reasons for doing right, and the social perspective taken by the individual. We know that reasoning does not occur in a vacuum, which is why it is critical that we do not ignore the social perspective taken by the actor of the behavior (as evidenced by Kohlberg’s model). Kohlberg’s model relates to organizations in that ethical (or unethical) behaviors may result from the policies in place governing the organizations as well as other societal factors (such as “what do others expect”, “what universal principles exist”, or “what is the greater good?”).

Ethical climate is one way we can observe and describe this social component of moral reasoning. Early work by Victor and Cullen (1988) discuss how at the time, there was “a growing belief that organizations are social actors responsible for the ethical or unethical behaviors of their employees”. In the world of intercollegiate athletics, this can translate to NCAA violations committed by staff. NCAA violations are separated into major and minor violations as an indicator of infraction severity. They found five dimensions of ethical work climate: independence, rules, instrumental, law/code, and caring. There have been expansions upon this work of ethical climate resulting in slightly different dimensions.

Ethical work climate in business has been measured using the Ethical Climate Index (ECI) developed by Arnaud (2010). The ECI includes 36 items measuring four dimensions of ethical work climate: collective moral sensitivity (12 items), collective moral judgement (10 items), collective moral motivation (8 items), and collective moral character (6 items). To ensure participants do not confuse the question with other structural components of the university, items and instructions limit responses to their respective athletic departments. Each item uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1-“describes my athletic department very well” to 5-“does not describe my athletic department at all”. In addition to the ECI, participants will be asked demographic questions: age, sex, race/ethnicity, position held, university, number of years with current university, role (i.e., supervisory or not), and how many people directly report to them.

Participants will be obtained from intercollegiate athletics administrations within the Midwestern United States. Participants will include people from all levels of the athletic administration: athletic directors, assistant athletic directors, coaches, assistant coaches, graduate assistants, training staff, and any other level of employees in the athletic departments. Student-athletes are not a focus of this particular study, so they will not be included in this present study. As a result, outcomes observed are also limited to NCAA violations as these type of violations are likely to be indicative of the ethical work climate of the university employees and, by extension, people identified by the NCAA as those with interest in the athletics department administration (i.e., boosters).

Data is still being collected for this study, however, the expectation is that ethical climate will be predictive of ethical behavior (lack of NCAA violations). To determine if the data indicates a significant impact of ethical climate within intercollegiate athletic administrations, a multiple linear regression will be used. Items from the ECI will be included as predictors of the number and severity of NCAA violations. Additional analyses will include the ethical climate
perceptions of the different levels of intercollegiate athletic administrations. While this study limits ethical work climate to only those employed by the universities, the ethical climate will inevitably be a factor on the behavior of student-athletes. Future research could extend the results of this study to include the ethical behaviors of student-athletes and include punishments handed down to student-athletes (such as suspensions, arrests, and dismissals).