An Evaluation of Leadership Change and Hiring Profiles in NCAA Division I Men's Basketball

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Entering the 2015-16 season there were 40 new NCAA Division I (DI) head coaches accounting for more than 11% of the 351 teams (Goodman, 2015). Large amount of coaching turnover for the highest level of college basketball is not a surprise considering its size and scope. Division I Men's basketball coaching salaries are often in the millions (USA Today, 2015) with large buyouts for underperforming coaches who have not reached the end of their contracts. Given the relative financial and public relations impact of DI men's basketball, stakeholders routinely monitor the performance of their teams, and often have input into the evaluation of coaches. Whether it is pressure from athletic personnel, university administration, alumni, or fans, a coach who struggles to fulfill expectations can find themselves out of a job.

Review of Literature

Change in leadership has been studied extensively for the last half century to determine what degree leadership matters (Giambatista, Rowe, & Riaz, 2005). Early work in leadership succession was focused on the business environment where CEOs were examined to determine both causes and results of high-level leadership change (Lauterback, Vu, & Weisberg, 1999; Huson, Malatesta, & Parrino, 2004). Unpredictability of market conditions, as well as the size of firms, rendered much of this research contextually dependent (Shen & Cannella, 2002), and led to the conclusion that sport contexts were somewhat stable environments to study leadership succession in the form of coaching or manager change (Cannella & Rowe, 1995). Various studies in professional and college sport have led to three theories that explain coaching succession. Vicious Circle Theory (Grusky, 1960) posits that changes in leadership occur too often and will disrupt current performance due to a destabilization of the work environment. Common Sense Theory (Grusky, 1963) suggests that coaching changes for struggling teams will improve performance due to renewed vision and enthusiasm. Ritual Scapegoating Theory (Gamson & Scotch, 1964) indicates that leadership is often overstated and that leaders are scapegoats for success or failures of their teams. All three theories have support in the literature, suggesting that each may be correct depending on different contexts (Dorhn, Lopez, & Reinhardt, 2015; Fizel & D'Itri, 1997; Giambatista et al., 2005; Soebbing & Washington, 2011). Thus, the environment, cognitive factors, and behavioral characteristics all influence the success of a new coach. These three areas make up reciprocal determinism, a key element of social learning theory that suggests learning takes place over the course of one's life (Bandura, 1977; Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones, 1976). However, only a handful of studies with a limited number of variables have been used to study coaching succession - making this line of research ripe for continued examination.

Purpose

Given the inconclusive and multicontextual settings of coaching, as well as the limited information about sport-related variables used in the hiring process, Giambatista et al., (2005) encouraged additional investigation of new factors, definitions of success, time frames, and theoretical contributions. This study answers that call. Specifically, the current study makes two important contributions to the existing sport leadership literature. First, the study adds to coaching succession literature by examining pre and post succession experiences relative to conference winning differential within the highest level of intercollegiate basketball. Second, this study provides empirical evidence for variety of demographic, experiential, personal, and environmental variables that would potentially influence men's Division I basketball head coach success based on social learning theory and reciprocal determinism.

Method
A total of 736 individual NCAA DI men's basketball head coaching changes were examined from 1999-2000 to 2013-2014. This time frame was chosen due to availability of information and the capacity to examine changes post coaching succession. Data were collected from online archival sources that included intercollegiate athletic department websites, institution websites, team media guides, media articles, and the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act database. The sample included all coaching changes across the time period examined, even if coaching changes happened at an institution more than once. Each coaching change was evaluated as its own case. A total of 17 individual variables among 7 factors were assessed to determine their impact on conference coaching win differential following a coaching change. A mixed models procedure was implemented to employ restricted maximum likelihood algorithms to account for asymptotic models and to allow the integration of both nominal and scale variables into the same model (SPSS Guide, 2012). Additionally, it was necessary to reduce the number of variables prior to conducting additional analysis. Due to the inclusion of both continuous and categorical data, this study used a procedure known as Latent Class Analysis to reduce the data to one item per factor (similar to factor analysis with continuous data; Geiser, 2013). Latent Class Analysis not only allows the analysis of data with a large number of variables with a smaller sample size, but the resulting groups mirror real life when describing a group of items.

Results

A total of 6 out of the 17 individual items were found to be significantly related to conference win differential. Those items included previous coach wins per season, number of NBA draft picks, vacancy situation (interaction of performance and positive/negative type of change), career win differential, race, and number of years as head coach. When combined into latent classes, three group factors were significant (program's previous success, vacancy situation, and coach ability), and four groups were not significant (coach experience, demographic characteristics, hiring factors, institution characteristics).

Discussion

The results indicated that much of coaching success is contextually dependent and based on the past success of existing programs. It is critical to note that although individual variables appear to be related to success, it may be that these factors are the natural result of a regression to the mean where successful programs tend to do worse after a coaching change (vicious circle theory) and unsuccessful programs tend to improve (common sense theory). Regression to the mean is also supported by the vacancy situation factor which suggests that coaches taking over for previously successful coaches who move on to more prestigious positions tend to do worse, and vice versa. Practically, however, the difference in conference winning percentage for any variable is less than one game per year - arguably not worth the trouble to replace a coach. Perhaps one of the most interesting findings is that coaching experience, other than number of years specifically as a head coach, was not significant. This finding contradicts much of what social learning theory would imply, and emphasizes the importance of program success and coaching ability. These findings, and other practical considerations for sport managers, will be discussed in more detail throughout the presentation.