An Inferiority Complex: Managing Semi-Professional Clubs

Elsa Kristiansen, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences
Simon T. Day, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences
Milena Parent, University of Ottawa/Norwegian School of Sport Sciences

Management/leadership Saturday, June 4, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-313 2:20 PM (Forum West 3)

Professional sports are a major industry in terms of revenues, as well as constituting a career for athletes. However, there are more amateur and semi-professional clubs than professional clubs. The realities of these latter clubs include fewer resources and athletes needing to balance sport with work or studies. The EU Guidelines on dual careers for athletes (EU, 2012) clearly states that the success often "depends on the goodwill of persons in key positions of an organisation or institute, while in fact a systematic approach based on general and sustainable financial and legal arrangements is needed" (2012, p. 4). Thus, club success depends on both managerial/organizational and athletic/individual success. By exploring the interaction between the club management and semi-professional players over a season, specifically a women’s semi-professional football (soccer) club in Norway, we aimed to identify organizational factors and elaborate on the experiences of semi-professional athletes that can affect organizational and athletic performance.

Theoretical framework

We used an interdisciplinary approach, given the focus on organizational and individual elements. The theoretical framework for this study included stakeholder theory as described by Donaldson and Preston (1995), Clarkson (1995) and Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), for the organizational perspective, and the organizational stress literature (e.g., Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006) for the athlete perspective. Organizational stressors (e.g., sport organization politics and team selection criteria) are an expansive category of stressors significant for sport managers of semi-professional clubs as the players are a key resource for the club.

Method

We used a qualitative approach in this investigation of a semi-professional club. Observations (on the training field and travelling with the team to competitions) over a season combined with interviews with nine players, two coaches and the general manager after the season were conducted. Two different interview guides were created, one for the players and one for the club representatives. These guides were created on the basis of the theoretical background and observations conducted. In addition to these, a control interview was conducted with one player in another club. Interviews lasted between 50 and 120 minutes. Data were compared through manual content analysis, a process for systematically analyzing all types of messages, and specifically pattern matching was used. Consistent with previous research approaches, quotes were included to add rich texture in the data presentation (Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012).

Results and Discussion

When mapping the different stakeholders to understand the managerial context of semi-professional clubs, we found two primary (partners and players) and seven secondary (Coaching staff, women’s football, media, volunteers, Norwegian Football Association, fans, board) stakeholders.

Participants reported 34 organizational stressors, and the data analysis procedure revealed ten second order themes and four general dimensions. The four general dimensions were environment (player group and surrounding), coach (style and communication), personal (goals and health), and finally administration (match, internal, external and non-sport issues), demonstrating both organizational- and individual-level factors affecting club/athlete performance. There exists a lack of research addressing performance management in elite sport (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009), notably in amateur/semi-professional sport. The results revealed that many of the perceived stressors are directly related to boardroom decision-making. Due to the limited economic resources, organizational stress seems to be an important factor to consider when managing semi-professional clubs. The Norwegian female football players found
the total strain of having a job and/or school as well as being a fulltime footballer to be the one factor that affects them the most. Other factors such as travel, injury, facilities, economy, media, teammates and practices, had little effect on the players in creating negative strain. However, the coach and leaders have some effect on the players. Indications show that lack of feedback is the most common source of stress.

Conclusions and Implications

Though there are some similarities between professional and semi-professional teams (e.g., coach and leader impacts), the dual career of semi-professional athletes seems to be an added element in this managerial context. Thus, researchers should not equate all for-profit sports teams as being the same. Further research is needed to better understand professional/semi-professional club differences. This study also demonstrated the benefit of using an interdisciplinary approach, here organizational stressors from the psychology literature, to understand the world of semi-professional sport management.

References


