Team Cohesion with Collegiate Athletics: Bonding or Isolation?

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Management - Organizational Behavior (College Sport)  Thursday, June 1, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  8:55 AM
Abstract 2017-009  Room: Harvard

The over 460,000 student-athletes competing in college athletics across the United States do so in a team environment, which undoubtedly impacts their individual experience in and out of sport. In the name of “team bonding,” college coaches work very hard to build stronger cohesion within their teams with the hopes of improving athletic performance, since it is generally accepted that higher levels of team cohesion generate improved athletic performance, athlete satisfaction, and overall well-being (Carron et al., 2002; Mullen & Copper, 1994). However, these coaches do not always understand the unintended consequences of strong cohesion. One such unintended consequence of overly cohesive teams may be that athletes are isolated from other people, groups, or experiences on campus (Hardy, Eys, & Carron, 2005). In fact, it is well documented that athletes can be academically, geographically, temporally, and culturally isolated from the larger student body and overall campus community (Adler & Adler, 1985; Gragg, 2000). This isolation, which may be exacerbated by attempts at increasing team cohesion, may impact athletes’ sport performance, overall collegiate experience, and quality of life.

The current approaches to this problem are limited in at least three significant ways: (1) flawed assumptions about team cohesion in relation to performance, (2) breadth of contexts studied, and (3) narrowed expert approaches. First, it is generally accepted within the team cohesion literature that higher levels of team cohesion are associated with improved athletic performance (Mullen & Copper, 1994). However, recent evidence suggests the relationship between cohesion and performance may not be additive but curvilinear. That is, there likely is an optimal level of cohesion at which performance is maximized – too little cohesion produces separation among team members and too much cohesion leads to groupthink – both of which decrease team performance (Wise, 2014). Thus, the current actions taken by administrators, coaches, and players to increase cohesion amongst their teams may in fact be more harmful than helpful. Second, the majority of research in this area of cohesion and isolation has focused on African American athletes (Hyatt, 2003), especially in revenue sports. These same practices are likely impacting other athletes as well, yet these athletes have received little to no attention. Third, research has typically taken an expert approach (Carron, Prapavessis, & Grove, 1994; Prapavessis & Carron, 1996), rather than utilizing a participant-driven approach. Therefore, this study will employ insight from a variety of collegiate athletes as active agents in their own performance to gain greater insight into the cohesion-performance-well-being relationship.

So, researchers must explore the potential implications of overly high team cohesion in order to best inform practice within college athletics and improve the college athlete experience (which may also inform other student groups’ experiences). By exploring the experiences and perspectives of the athletes themselves (not coaches or experts), researchers in concert with practitioners can inform the ideal “look” of team cohesion so that it works to improve performance without the accompanying social isolation. Further investigation is necessary to identify potential differences in the experiences of athletes based on sport, gender, and race. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the role of team cohesion and isolation of college student-athletes and the impact on athletes’ performance, overall collegiate experience, and well-being.

In order to fulfill this purpose, the research design will employ a collective case study approach. In keeping with this approach, purposeful, snowball sampling using personal networks will be utilized to ensure potential participants represent both positive and negative college experiences (Creswell, 2013). It is projected the final sample will include approximately 30 athletes in their 3rd or 4th year of eligibility and former college athletes who are within one-year post-graduation from Division I and II institutions. Using similar protocol to Dixon and Bruening (2007), the researcher will conduct semi-structured, in-person and phone interviews focused on eliciting the nature and quality of their college experience inside and outside of sport as well as factors, particularly team cohesion, that contribute to that experience using specific probes. After coding the transcripts, the researcher will follow the recommendation of Creswell (2013) to analyze themes within each case (i.e., within-case analysis) followed by a thematic analysis across
cases (i.e., cross-case analysis). Data analysis will be conducted using open and closed coding with the aid of NVIVO software.

It is expected that athletes will identify ways in which they have felt both cohesive and isolated and how this has impacted their lives in and out of sport. Understanding athlete experiences will help practitioners manage team cohesion in a way that optimizes performance and minimizes isolation. Moreover, it will help inform policy and practice for better integrating college athletes (and perhaps other student groups) into the breadth of the higher education experience. Ultimately, this research will be able to contribute to the conversation of how to effectively manage teams and individuals within teams to achieve optimal outcomes for both.