Organizational Citizenship Behaviors in Sport: A Perspective from Athletes

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Management - Organizational Behavior (College Sport)
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Researchers in the fields of sport management and sport psychology have focused substantial attention on investigating factors that impact athletic performance. Specifically, sport management scholars have focused on organizational-level elements (e.g., policies, facilities, organizational support), while sport psychologists have often focused on individual-level elements (e.g., motivation, personality, emotions, beliefs) related to the development of elite athletes (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Wagstaff, Fletcher, and Hanton (2011) emphasized the necessity of organizational function in the achievement of organizational goals in elite sports and highlighted the important role of organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) for effective organizational performance. Organ (1998) introduced the concept of OCB, defining it as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (p.4). There are two key points in this definition. First, citizenship behaviors are voluntary. Second, although the behaviors may be minor, the cumulative effect of such behaviors can have a profound impact on organizational effectiveness. In the context of athletics, for example, a veteran pitcher on a baseball team may share pitching techniques, training methods, and offer advice to young players about how to handle pressure in their careers, despite the fact that sharing such information with teammates is not an official requirement of the veteran’s job. In turn, these prosocial, voluntary behaviors to help other players learn can result in improved organizational effectiveness and team performance (Chelladuari, 2006).

Organizational behavior scholars have suggested several taxonomies of OCB: (a) a two-factor model—altruism and generalized compliance (Smith et al. (1983), (b) a two-dimension model—interpersonal facilitation and job dedication (Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996), and (c) a five-dimension model—altruism, sportsmanship, civic virtue, courtesy, and conscientiousness (Organ, 1988). In addition, Williams and Anderson (1991) proposed a target-based distinction of OCB, consisting of individual targeted OCBs (OCBI) and organizational targeted OCBs (OCBO). The concept of OCB has received substantial attention during the past two decades due to the assumption that utilizing the concept can positively influence individual or organizational effectiveness (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). A number of studies have been conducted to identify ways to increase the level of employees’ OCBs (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) by examining the influence of variables, including (a) employees’ characteristics, such as demographics (e.g., tenure and gender), attitudinal variables (e.g., job satisfaction and organizational justice), and dispositional variables (e.g., personality and affectivity); (b) leaders’ characteristics (e.g., transformational leadership and leader-member exchange); and (c) other work-related characteristics (e.g., characteristics of task and organization).

However, despite its potential impact on team performance, there has been little research conducted regarding OCB and its relationship with other variables in elite sport. The limited studies in this area (Andrew, Kim, Mahony, & Hums, 2009; Aoyagi, Cox, & McGuire, 2008) applied OCB to sport settings by using existing scales that were developed for organizations in other areas of business, which may fail to fully capture the unique nature of organizational culture, climate, and environment in sport. Therefore, as an initial effort in this area, the current study asked two research questions: (1) What types of organizational citizenship behaviors do athletes engage in? (2) What are athletes’ perceptions about the nature of organizational citizenship behaviors in sport?

The current study employed a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory. Fifteen current or former athletes (11 women, 4 men) participated in interviews for this study. All participants had competed in college sport at the NCAA Division-I level—five of the participants had competed in softball, two in baseball, two in basketball, two in track and field, one in golf, one in swimming, one in volleyball, and one participant had competed in both baseball and American football. Interviews entailed a semi-structured format, which involved a pre-planned interview guide to give direction to the interactions, while posing open-ended questions to give participants to opportunity to report
their own thoughts and feelings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Data collection ended when data saturation had occurred (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), meaning that new codes or categories were no longer being generated from additional interviews, and the main themes to be discussed in the research findings were robustly developed. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, data collection and data analysis were overlapping; the analysis of data from initial interviews helped the researchers engage in theoretical sampling in which further data collection was guided by ideas meaningful to the emerging theory (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). After an interview, the first step in our data analysis involved a search for meaning within a particular interview transcript. This involved open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which the researchers independently studied each passage of an interview, associating each line of the interview with potentially relevant codes and categories. In the second stage of data analysis, we sought to put the data “back together” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) by making comparisons between interviews and engaging in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, the third stage of data analysis involved selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which the researchers refined and integrated major categories into a cohesive theory.

With respect to RQ#1, primary themes regarding the types of OCB in which athletes engaged included extra practice, encouraging teammates, challenging teammates, helping teammates, having a teammate’s back (outside of sport), team bonding, community service, having a good attitude, academic performance, recruiting, and socializing with supporters. Overall, athletes perceived a wide range of activities to be potential examples of OCB.

With respect to RQ#2, primary themes regarding the nature of OCB in sports included the existence of a “gray area” between written and unwritten expectations, the need to demonstrate internal motivation, the need to demonstrate leadership, and the desire for a positive public image. Given the “gray area” that surrounds OCB in the context of sport, combined with the need to make a positive impression on coaches, some athletes questioned whether any of their actions were truly voluntary. In other words, due to the continual and often intense scrutiny that athletes perceive themselves to be under, not only from coaches but also trainers, counselors, administrators, and fans, some athletes were unsure if it would be accurate to fully classify any sport-related activities as OCB (given the voluntary nature of OCB). In this presentation, we will discuss the theoretical implications of these findings for sport managers as well as practical implications for practitioners in sport.