The Effects of Deviance and a Personal Conduct Policy on Head Coach Dismissals

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Top leadership changes are important events for sport organizations and their effects have garnered substantial interest among Sport Management scholars (e.g., Karg et al., 2015; Maxcy, 2013; Soebbing et al., 2015). The effects of these leadership changes, however, are not always clear. For example, studies regarding performance following head coaching changes found leader successions to be beneficial (Maxcy, 2013), detrimental (Soebbing & Washington, 2011), or inconsequential, depending on the circumstances of the succession (Dohrn et al., 2015). One circumstance affecting post-succession performance involves the reason for succession (e.g., dismissal, retirement) (Fee et al., 2006; Maxcy, 2013). Fredrickson, Hambrick, and Baumrin (1988) further added “a true understanding of the effects of such succession must begin with an understanding of its causes” (p. 269).

While other factors contribute to executive dismissals (Fredrickson et al., 1988), one key factor is deviance (Ertugrul & Krishnan, 2011; Ferrell & Ferrell, 2011; Kidwell, 2004; Wiersema & Zhang, 2013). Within head coach dismissal models, deviance as a determinant of dismissals has either been neglected or only examined in a single-faceted context (e.g., Holmes, 2011). The lack of research regarding the effects of deviance on head coach dismissals is striking given the substantial media attention devoted to head coach dismissals resulting from indiscretions committed by head coaches and their subordinates (Russo, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of various levels of transgressions committed by coaching staffs and their players on head coach dismissals before and after a personal conduct policy modification. The empirical setting of this study is the National Football League (NFL) from the 2000-2001 season through the 2015-2016 season which is centered around 2007 when the league modified its conduct policy to deter league employee misconduct (Mahone, 2008).

Since NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell was appointed in 2006, he placed an increased emphasis on league employees conducting themselves properly by strengthening the personal conduct policy in April 2007 (Ambrose, 2007). While much of the research directly examining the NFL’s Personal Conduct Policy looks at the policy and commissioner role from a legal perspective (e.g., Mahone, 2008), recent research begins to examine the policy’s impact on team decisions (Allen, 2015; Palmer et al., 2016). Given the increased emphasis on holding personnel accountable in the NFL, dismissal decisions based on head coach and player deviance may be more prevalent starting in the 2007-2008 season than in seasons prior.

Football coaches engage in deviant acts including violations of public trust and the promotion of dangerous behavior (Ambrose, 2007; Coakley, 2015; Harary, 2002; Kidwell, 2004). To examine the effect of executive and employee deviance on head coach dismissals, the present research uses survival analysis to examine NFL head coach dismissals from the 2000-2001 season through the 2015-2016 season. The unit of observation is a coaching stint whereby a head coach of a given team is observed to the end of the head coach’s tenure or the end of the sample period, whichever occurs first. Within this 16-season sample period, 133 coaching stints occurred. The dependent variable is a dichotomous variable indicative of head coach dismissal. The independent variables measure deviance committed by the coaching staff in terms of fines and deviance committed by players on a team in terms of fines, suspensions, and off-field legal incidents. Data regarding fines and suspensions is obtained from JustFines (see http://www.justfines.com) and Spotrac (see http://www.spotrac.com). Data regarding off-field legal incidents is acquired from the San Diego Union Tribune (see http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/sports/nfl/arrests.html). Additionally, each measure of deviance is interacted with a dichotomous variable indicative of whether the personal conduct policy was modified under the Goodell regime. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Foreman & Soebbing, 2015; Holmes, 2011), control variables are included to account for organizational performance and socio-
political forces of dismissals (e.g., expectations and experience).

Preliminary findings indicate deviance does affect dismissals and its effect is contingent upon the type of deviant behavior and an organizational emphasis on personal conduct as represented by the implementation of a more stringent personal conduct policy. Specifically, coaching staffs that accrue fines increases the risk of head coach dismissal, however, when the coaching staff fines are accrued after the implementation of the personal conduct policy change, the effect is largely negated. The positive relationship between coaching staff fines and head coach dismissals prior to Goodell’s personal conduct policy and negative relationship after could be explained by the increased regulatory rules satisfying the organization in terms of adequate punishment being taken against the coaching staff. Thus, the decision-makers responsible for dismissing the coach may be satisfied in terms of the actions already taken.

In contrast, head coach dismissal risk decreases with player fines and suspensions, but increases when those fines and suspensions are incurred during the Goodell era. A possible explanation for the job retention for head coaches of teams with suspended players is the suspensions may have been used as an excuse for poor on-field performance (Palmer et al., 2015); however, with the increased emphasis on personal conduct, coaches may be held accountable for disciplining players (Harary, 2002; Seifried, 2008; Statz et al., 2007), or perhaps even signing deviant players (Palmer et al., 2015). Furthermore, NFL team owners and general managers may not have been as concerned about, or even encouraged, player deviance resulting in fines prior to the personal conduct policy modification (Ambrose, 2007; Statz et al., 2007).

The findings in the present study are important for practitioners and scholars. For practitioners, the findings of the present research are important as they make succession decisions or navigate their careers and consider what decisions will allow them to retain their position in the presence of deviant behavior within their organization. There are also important implications for coaches to be discussed. For instance, this work will highlight the type of transgressions that impact their employment and identify which personal characteristics or qualities impact coach retention. Additionally, league administrators may use the findings from the present study to determine how to best implement a personal conduct policy to get desired results (e.g., personnel held accountable for their actions). Scholars and practitioners can benefit of the present study when considering the effects, whether intended or unintended, of implementing a policy emphasizing personal conduct. Finally, scholars of dismissals and leader successions can use the proposed study to better understand successions, and more specifically, the socio-political (i.e., non-performance related) forces which contribute to dismissals.