Toward an Institutional Theory of Escalation of Commitment Within Sport Management: A Review and Future Research Directions

Calvin Nite, University of North Texas
Michael Hutchinson, University of Memphis
Adrien Bouchet, University of Tulsa

Management - Organizational Behavior (Other) Thursday, May 30, 2019
Poster Room: Napoleon CD corridor
Abstract 2019-118 2:35 PM

Escalation of commitment (EoC) entails those situations wherein relevant entities persist in a course of action that repeatedly fails to accomplish a desired outcome such as increased financial or economic gains (Staw, 1976). Within sport management, the overarching threat of EoC behavior pertains to the efficient operation of sport organizations and sustainability of sport programs (Berg, Hutchinson, & Irwin, 2016; Hutchinson, Nite, & Bouchet, 2015). While often overlooked due to the cultural significance of sport (e.g., Beyer & Hannah, 2000), EoC is a prevalent behavior in a variety of global sport settings including the operating models of select professional sport leagues (e.g., relegated clubs in the English Football League System; Yueh, 2014), community sport programs (e.g., Salvation Army Kroc Centers initial operating model; Cohen, 2013), and intercollegiate athletic departments (e.g., underperforming non-Power 5 conference universities in NCAA Division I; Hutchinson et al., 2015).

Perhaps more important is the often unfortunate societal spillover effects of EoC behavior involving sport enterprises such as hosting sport mega events (e.g., the negative socioeconomic spillover effects for host cities of the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup; Kesenne, 2012; Ross & Staw, 1986) and the funding of professional sport facilities (e.g., using scarce public funds—occasionally against public vote—for facility construction and maintenance; Hutchinson, Berg, & Kellison, 2018). These examples not only reference the prevalence of EoC behavior in various sport settings, but also how EoC in sport can negatively impact society in general. As evidenced, this burgeoning stream of research has provided valuable insights for sport managers while also yielded extensions to EoC theoretical underpinnings.

The purpose of this presentation is to review the current progress of escalation of commitment research within sport management and provide a new perspective for evaluating and researching potential cases of escalation within sport contexts. To these ends, we propose a model for researching EoC within sport contexts that accounts for the multiple institutional logics and structures that likely impact decision-making as well as evaluations of success. Previous research has shown that scholars should account for institutional tenets such as perceptions of legitimate behavior when assessing scenarios of escalation (see Hutchinson et al., 2015; Nite et al., 2018). Indeed, research within sport management provides evidence that EoC should likely be evaluated in a manner that accounts for institutional factors. We contend that perceptions and attached meanings to courses of action should be considered when examining EoC. The implications of this approach and how it addresses shortcomings of previous research will be discussed. Finally, we provide suggestions for future research of EoC within sport context.