“There’s Really Gotta Be a Genuine Attraction”: The Organic Nature of Mentoring of Female Upper Managers in the NBA

Manuela Picariello, Texas Woman’s University  
Sylvia Trendafilova, University of Tennessee  
Steven Waller, University of Tennessee

Management - HRM (Professional Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2019-369  
Saturday, June 1, 2019  
10:35 AM  
Room: Napoleon D3

Empirical research on the career benefits associated with mentoring has found that mentored groups have greater career outcomes, such as compensation, the number of promotions, jobs and career satisfaction than those who have not been mentored (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Scholarship recognizes two categories of mentoring: formal and informal relationships (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), reporting more positive job and career attitudes by mentees with informal mentors than mentees with formal mentors (Allen, Eby, O’Brien, & Lentz, 2008; Sosik, Lee & Bouquillon, 2006). Women, in particular, face more challenges in establishing a mentoring relationship in the sport industry (Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002). Barriers such as availability, proximity, networking, stereotyping, sexual connotation, and tokenism still prevent mentoring relationships from blossoming (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999). Bower (2009) identified key elements of an effective mentoring relationship that can help women advance to leadership positions in sport. An effective mentoring relationship includes a competent mentor who not only works hard and serves as a role model but also has a personal and professional interest in developing the mentee’s potential (Bower, 2009; Bower & Hums, 2014). The opportunities to meet people, demonstrate potential, be coached, and receive challenging tasks make the difference in an effective mentoring relationship (Bower, 2009). Equally important are the psychosocial functions, the idea of the mentor’s nurturing behavior through friendship, acceptance, and role-modeling (Bower & Hums, 2009). To date there has not been a study with a focus on mentoring and female upper managers in professional sport. The purpose of this study was to understand key elements of an effective mentoring relationship for female upper managers in the NBA. Considering the exploratory nature, we used a phenomenology design to explore female top managers’ mentoring experience. Phenomenological research sheds lights on how people perceive and experience the world in which they live (Jones, Brown, & Holloway, 2013). Through purposive snowball sampling, participants were contacted and invited to participate in the study. The study sample consisted of 10 female managers working in the upper management of the National Basketball Association teams. Individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. Follow up questions were asked in order to grasp deeper understanding of the participants’ mentoring experience. Data were thematically analyzed following the procedure by Braun and Clarke (2009). Participants reported that mentoring relationship should not be forced through formal mentoring programs. The aspects that were reported to be important in an effective mentoring relationship were categorized into the following themes: (a) genuine attraction; (b) individual characteristics; and (c) access to mentoring. This study provides insight into specific characteristics of mentoring relationships. Accordingly, the findings presented could be used for consideration in improving existing programs and developing new strategies related to mentoring relationships in professional sport organizations by offering a greater support for female upper managers and for women who are interested in pursuing a career in the sport industry.