Relational Risk Management: Next Steps to Promote Athlete Safety

Michael Van Bussel, Brock University

Law - Other (Sport Clubs)  virtual asynchronous
Poster
Abstract 2020-071  Session: Poster Session I

The abuse of athletes by coaches, and the lack of administrative action, has been highlighted in recent cases in the media and the courts (BC Skiing, South Korean Speed Skating, and USA Gymnastics). This study seeks to analyze the impact of Relational Risk Management (Van Bussel, 2010) on policy development, coaching and athlete communication, and administrative processes to address and reduce instances of harassment and abuse in sport.

Relational Risk is “a harmful action or destructive form of communication, from a coach to an athlete, which adversely affects the athlete’s self-perception and confidence. Examples of relational risk include aggressive and demeaning verbal and non-verbal communication, the threat of physical actions toward athletes, inappropriate sexual comments, contact, gestures and a lack of appropriate feedback” (Van Bussel, 2010, p. 2). Utilizing Kirby, Greaves, and Hankivsky’s (2000) athlete-centred care model, upon which Relational Risk Management is built, provided a means to promote a caring environment that encourages reciprocal communication between administrators, coaches and athletes. In addition, positive methods of communication, in a sport coaching context, are utilized to promote this reciprocal communication between all parties (Lyle, 2019).

Utilizing an athlete-centred care model as the focal point, this research looks to examine the implications of applying Relational Risk Management to policy and code of conduct development and seeks to understand if it can be employed as a framework to aid the communication process between athletes, coaches and administrators. This study contributes to sport management, as research regarding care-driven-athlete-centred influencers on policy and practice addresses gaps in the literature. In addition, positive communication, which focuses on the coach-athlete relationship, enhances the athlete’s sense of social connection, safety and may ultimately improve their performance (Jowett, 2005). Relational Risk Management include three elements that influence decision making and reflective practice for sport managers: Contextual Sensitivity, Responsiveness and Trust, and Consequences of Choice. These three elements form the basis of a new care-driven policy framework for sport organizations.

Applying ethnographic and interpretivist approaches the researcher examined the impact of Relational Risk Management on policy and practice in sport organizations. Utilizing an action research method and a sample of convenience, three sport organizations (local soccer clubs), who were reviewing and revising their policies, were introduced to Relational Risk Management and this process was examined as to its perceived effectiveness in practice. Action research allows theories to be applied and tested as to their utility and efficacy in the field (Carr, 2006). With the assistance of the Relational Risk Management process these organizations were able to modernize their codes of conduct, change their philosophy regarding athlete communication, and renew their coaching education programs. Data was collected utilizing document/policy analysis, interviews, and participant observations of athletes, coaches, and administrators from these three sport organizations.

Ultimately, Relational Risk Management provides sport management practitioners with a framework to build constructive relationships between athletes, coaches and administrators. While promoting a positive environment for athletes, Relational Risk Management also empowers all parties to participate in a process that reduces harassment and abuse in sport.