Strategic Middle Management in North American Professional Sport

Matthew Juravich, University of Akron
Steven Salaga, University of Georgia

Management - Strategic Management (Professional Sport) virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Session: Strategic Management/Governance
Abstract 2020-122

The study of middle management has occupied a niche within the greater strategic management literature since Mintzberg (1978) first articulated the idea of realized (i.e., actual not ideal) strategy in the context of managerial dynamics in organizations. Within this niche, one predominant focus has been on examining the link between middle management, strategy development and implementation and organizational performance (e.g., Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). A review of the role of middle managers in the strategy process synthesized this literature while calling attention to areas requiring additional focus (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). Specifically, these authors identified an opportunity related to investigating the level of influence (i.e., impact) made by managers at different hierarchical levels on middle manager decision making. As such, the present study is focused on examining top-down and bottom-up contingencies impacting middle managers in the context of the National Basketball Association (NBA).

Floyd and Lane (2000) first delineated managerial roles in terms of top, middle, and operational managers. Thus, we adopt this convention as we explore the interplay between ownership (i.e., top), the general (middle) manager (GM), and the head coach (i.e., operational manager) in the NBA. As middle managers are typically expected to act as change agents (Balogun, 2003) while serving as conduits between organizational levels (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), we feel this categorization is appropriate to examine levels of influence across the organizational hierarchy in the NBA.

As a research context, the NBA provides robust data on organizational performance statistics and personal characteristics for managers across multiple levels. This allows us the ability to assess the impact of management on performance outcomes across an entire industry for approximately two decades – something that is difficult to replicate in the majority of other industries. Further, utilizing this context, we can inform the previously identified lack of research examining contingencies impacting the relationship between middle management and organizational performance (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008).

Our data set is comprised of demographic, experiential, and performance data for all NBA owners/ownership groups, GMs, and head coaches as well as team and market-level data from 1997 to 2018. Potential contingencies in the GM-organizational performance relationship related to the owner/ownership group (e.g., tenure, educational & industry background) and head coach (e.g., educational background & administrative tacit knowledge) as well as team constraints (i.e., payroll) will be empirically tested for potential moderation through the use of panel modeling. The nature of the data necessitates the use of panel modeling as each manager observation is at the seasonal level. Further, managers almost always remain employed for multiple seasons which results in repeated observations for each. Overall, this research in progress aims to inform the literature examining managerial contributions to shaping organizational performance in North American professional sport (e.g., Juravich, Salaga, & Babiak, 2017; Peeters, Salaga, & Juravich, in press). In addition, we hope to gain insights into how differing opinions and interests in the formulation of strategy manifest themselves across the managerial hierarchy (Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018).