The Dark Side of Cohesion: Examining the Influence of Team Cohesion on Team Performance in the Korean Basketball League

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Team cohesion represents the extent to which members of a team are connected to each other and enthused to stay in the group (Bettenhausen, 1991). This concept holds great importance to the management of sport because central to sport organizational success is the extent to which groups of individuals work together to achieve individual and collective goals (Lusher, Robin, & Kremer, 2010). Though important, and assumedly positive, the impact of team cohesion on organizational performance may not be entirely constructive. Indeed, team cohesion may act as a double-edged sword. On the one edge, a positive relationship between team cohesion and team performance has been demonstrated (e.g., Macher & Mowery, 2009). Team ties create familiarity and trust amongst group members, which then can be leveraged to achieve shared goals (Kossinet & Watts, 2006). On the other edge, high levels of team cohesion may negatively influence team performance. Team cohesion can increase team rigidity, which makes it difficult for new and diverse individuals to join a work group (Duran et al., 2005). Therefore, this study analyzed the potential positive and negative effects of team cohesion on team performance in a sport organization context.

Two theories inform this study. According to similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971), the similarity of person-centered variables in a group may influence job satisfaction and performance. Correspondingly, based on the dark side of social capital theory (Lechner et al., 2010), strong social ties may be beneficial to certain individuals within a group, but they may be detrimental to other individuals in a group.

Data were collected from the Korean Basketball League (KBL). This data included information for the past 22 years (1997 season through the 2017-2018 season). Team performance was measured using the winning rate for each season. To measure team cohesion, a social network analysis approach was employed. Specifically, network density was used as a proxy variable to measure team cohesion (Reagans et al., 2003). This study also included 15 control variables (e.g., major rule changes for foreign players, manager replacement). Generalized least square (GLS) regression was used to examine how team cohesion within a sport organization impacts team performance.

Team cohesion was shown to have a positive influence on team performance in the linear model as well as a negative influence on team performance in the quadratic model. Additionally of note was that the interaction effect of manager-player density did not influence team performance. However, the interaction effect of manager cumulative wins on team performance was significant. Overall, a key contribution of this research to the study and practice of sport management is that the pattern of the relationship between team cohesion and performance was an inverted U-shape. What this result means is that the density of a player’s school network could negatively influence team performance when it exceeds an optimal level where the effect is maximized. This also means that in future research on sport teams, exploring the density of school networks may prove to be a useful approach for measuring team cohesiveness.