Developing and Managing Sport Team Captains as Formal Leaders: Perspectives from Collegiate Coaches

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Human capital is a critical resource contributing to organizational performance (Boon et al., 2018). From an organizational lens (Cranmer & Myers, 2015), sport teams can strategically utilize human resource management (HRM) strategies to enhance team performance (Cuskelly et al., 2006). However, within collegiate athletics, empirical research on HRM practices has focused on athletic administrators and coaches (Won et al., 2013), without consideration for the influence of student-athletes’ human capital on team performance (Won & Chelladuria, 2016). Sport team captains fulfill an important multi-faceted leadership role (Fransen et al., 2017), contributing to the dynamics, collective action, and performance of a sport team (Crozier et al., 2013; Gould et al., 2013). Given the potential impact captains can have on team performance, the purpose of the study was to explore how collegiate coaches develop and manage their captains. The Developing Sport Team Captains as Formal Leaders (DSTCFL) model provided a guiding framework for the study (Newman et al., 2019), accounting for the multi-faceted, interrelated process of developing and managing captains. The DSTCFL model outlines five iterative processes that reflect HRM practices for coaches, including: foster a team culture of leadership; determine the role(s) of the team captains; identify and select team captains; develop and support team captains; and evaluate and reinforce team captains.

Grounded in social constructivism (Kim, 2010), the researchers conducted interviews with coaches from a public university in the Midwest United States. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to invite all full-time and part-time coaches at the university to participate (n=53). Six full-time and five part-time coaches participated, representing four women’s and three men’s teams. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, reflecting the DSTCFL processes, with interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. Data were analyzed using an inductive-deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), with peer debriefing conducted throughout.

Findings indicated that to foster team culture, coaches sought characteristics in athletes they felt were integral to maintaining a supportive atmosphere (e.g., hard work, high standards, accountability, respect, positivity). While coaches noted the importance of developing a team of leaders, there was greater expectation on captains to embody these characteristics. Coaches also discussed the roles of captains, who were responsible for providing leadership and maintaining integrity of team expectations. Other roles included being a liaison between team members and coaches, managing technical tasks for the team, and promoting team unity. Further, coaches revealed some athletes are recruited for their potential to fulfill a leadership position - based on personal characteristics displayed during recruitment - while others naturally emerged as leaders when on the team. While teams employed an official process for selecting captains, a formal process for developing and evaluating captains was not as common. Specifically, coaches expressed awareness of the importance of development and evaluation but acknowledged support was more reactive than proactive. Ultimately, the findings identified areas of strength and opportunity for coaches as they maximize the influence of student-athletes’ human capital. Implications for the effective management of sport team captains will be discussed.