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Styles of Managing Team Conflict in Professional Sports: The Case of Greece

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Abstract

Coaches as leaders of sports teams should identify the causes of conflict between the athletes and handle conflict effectively. The aim of this study was to examine the methods and ways coaches use to handle conflict in professional teams in Greece. The sample consisted of 42 professional football-soccer, basketball and volleyball coaches, which were surveyed using questionnaires. Using the descriptive statistics and the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), it was found that: a) coaches are using five styles in order to manage conflict, and b) the most effective styles that can resolve team conflicts are the collaborating style, the compromising style and the avoiding style and the least effective styles from those suggested are the competing style and the accommodating style.

Keywords: conflict styles, managing conflict, coaches, and professional sports.

Introduction

Cohesiveness is very crucial especially for team sports where the final score, a win or a loss, depends to a large degree on the relationship and understanding between athletes. Whenever people such as players and coaches work together in teams some conflict is inevitable. Even the most supportive communication climate will not guarantee complete harmony (Adler, Rodman, 1994).

Conflict exists when two or more people have incompatible goals, and one or both believe that the behaviour of the other will prevent his or her own goal attainment. Conflict does not occur until the behaviour of one of the parties interferes with the efforts of the other (Dunham, Pierce, 1989). Conflict is the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals (Folger, Poole, Stuman, 1997). Conflict can arise among the members of the sports team and negatively influence final individual and team performance. Although it is impossible for the coaches to eliminate conflict completely, there are ways to manage it effectively. Managing conflict skillfully can open the door to healthier, stronger, and more satisfying relationships. Clearly, conflict often produces negative effects, such as decreased performance, lower satisfaction, aggression, and anxiety. In some situations however, it can be beneficial. Conflict within a group such as a professional sports team, can

help the members resolve underlying problems so the team can move on to a more effective stage of development.

Coaches of professional teams must consider conflicts as an inevitable constant force and deal with it in the most productive way. Conflict management is the attempt to exert influence on the way a conflict is acted out, so as to regulate it, prevent violence and put an end to any existing violence. Conflict management aims to achieve contractive solutions, which benefit all participants (Mehler, Ribaux, 2000).

Athletes involved in top class sports face issues of role conflict as they attempt to balance their athletic involvement with the desire to have a normal social life (Adler & Adler, 1991; Eitzen, 1999; Sack & Thief, 1985) and accomplish their personal goals.

Styles of Managing Conflict

According to Daft (2000), Terry (1996) and Adler and Rodman (1994), the most important causes of conflicts are the following: a) financial reasons, b) responsibilities, c) communication, d) personal reasons, e) use of power and authority, and f) different objectives.

Since conflicts are inevitable in teamwork, usually the leader of the team should know how to deal with them. The actions they engage in, of course, influence the reactions and behaviour of the others involved in the conflict. Various combinations of cooperativeness and assertiveness create different distinct styles of conflict behaviour. According to Thomas (1977), Bartol & Martin (1991), Dunham & Pierce (1989), Terry (1996), Robbins (1974) and Robey, Farrow & Franz (1989), there are five styles as mentioned below:

- (a) The competing style, which reflects assertiveness to get one's own way, should be used when quick, decisive action is vital on important issues, such as discipline, performance, and regulations. High levels of assertiveness but little cooperation mark the competing conflict style. The conflict is solved very quickly and the deeper causes of conflict are not examined. The coach that has the power solves the conflict and gives direct solutions in any disagreements that may arise.
- (b) The avoiding style, which reflects neither assertiveness nor cooperativeness, is appropriate when an issue is trivial, when there is no chance of winning, when a delay to gather more information is needed. A person who chooses to be both uncooperative and unassertive in conflict uses an avoiding style. He attempts to withdraw from conflict rather than resolve it. The way of avoidance is used many times by coaches when one party intentionally ignores the other and can result in limited communication between opposing sides.

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- (c) The compromising style reflects a moderate amount of both assertiveness and cooperativeness. It is appropriate when the goals on both sides are equally important, when opponents have equal power and both sides want to split the difference, or when people need to arrive at temporary solutions given time pressures. The compromising style produces a mutually acceptable but less than optimal solution for both parties. Each makes concessions, and disagreements are often resolved through sacrifice by one or both parties.
- (d) The accommodating style reflects a high degree of cooperativeness, which works best for people who realise that they are wrong, when an issue is more important to others than to oneself, and when maintaining harmony is especially important. The accommodating style tries to satisfy the interests of the other party at his or her own expense. This is a passive approach to conflict management. The accommodating individual tries to discover what the other party wants and then tries to meet those needs. In this style emphasis is placed on harmonious and peaceful relations among the members of a team and the conflict is covered up.
- (e) The collaborating style reflects both a high degree of assertiveness and cooperativeness. This style enables both parties to win, although it may require substantial bargaining and negotiation. The collaborating style is important when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised and when the commitment of both sides is needed for a consensus. The collaborating conflict resolution style involves attempts by the participants to satisfy both their interests.

Method-Sample

The sample used in this study was 42 professional coaches who worked in Division I professional teams for the time period of 2004-2005 from the three most popular sports in Greece. There were 18 coaches (42.85%), 13 basketball coaches (30.95%) and nine volleyball coaches (26.20%). All coaches responded to a questionnaire, which measured the methods-styles coaches use in order to effectively manage team conflict.

Procedure

All coaches responded to a questionnaire that consisted of five styles regarding handling conflict: a) competing style, b) avoiding style, c) compromising style, d) accommodating style, and e) collaborating style. A questionnaire was sent to them and they were asked on a 1-7 Likert scale (1 – not at all, 7 – very much) if they considered that these coaching styles are the most effective.

tive in their job. A follow-up call assured they would complete the questionnaire and all of them responded in the end.

Results

The responses of the coaches from professional teams were analysed and ranked to investigate the most common ways-methods that coaches use to resolve team conflict. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Styles	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	S.D.	Ranking
Competing	42	1	7	2.86	1.92	4
Avoiding	42	1	7	3.69	1.97	3
Compromising	42	2	7	3.74	1.67	2
Accommodating	42	2	7	2.02	1.22	5
Collaborating	42	1	7	4.83	2.19	1

It was found that all coaches agreed that the most effective styles that can resolve team conflicts are the collaborating style, the compromising style and the avoiding style and the least effective styles from those suggested are the competing style and the accommodating style.

Discussion

This study attempted to evaluate the opinions of coaches on the most effective styles that they think resolve the problems of their teams. Coaches have to deal with different causes of conflict and they have to react differently according to the conflict behaviour (Draft, 2000; Terry, 1996; Adler & Rodman, 1994). Identification of the most effective coaching styles that can resolve the job problems and the differences among different sports can constitute useful information that could help coaches deal with the problems and adopt different conflict behaviours to resolve them. Although team cohesiveness is a very important factor for motivating athletes and the success of sports teams there are very few studies on this in Greece.

From the results of this study it was found that there are certain styles that are more important than others for the coaches of different professional sports. It was also found that coaches believe that the collaborating style, the compromising style and the avoiding style were the most effective ones, and the least effective were the competing style and the accommodating style. The most effective style as coaches reported was the collaborating style. This is reasonable because both parties – coaches and athletes – should cooperate effectively together since they share the same common objective. Both sets

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of concerns (those of coaches and athletes) are too important to be compromised when the commitment of both sides is needed for a consensus.

The compromising style was also very important since the coach and the players are equally important. Coaches and players have in some way equal power and both sides want to split any kind of difference. In a case of conflict each makes concessions, and disagreements are often resolved through sacrifice by one or both parties.

The avoiding style was important for coaches, because in many circumstances coaches either ignore or refuse to engage in conflict, especially when they have to deal with “star” players. While some theorists present avoidance as a negative style that shows low concern for both one’s own and the other party’s interests, there are sometimes strategic reasons to avoid conflict.

The competing style was less important for coaches because competition or win/lose situations is a style that maximises reaching one’s own goals or getting the problem solved at the cost of the other party’s goals or feelings. Choosing competition has negative repercussions on relationships.

The accommodating style was also less important for coaches because this is a passive approach to conflict management. The accommodating individual tries to discover what the other party wants and then tries to meet those needs. Accommodation involves giving in to the other’s wishes (those of players) or smoothing the choppy waves of a conflict. Where coaches do not sacrifice their own goals for the sake of others (players), they use this style of managing team conflict.