

The Role Of Management in Controlling Unethical and Illegal Behavior in Sport Organizations

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Introduction

Recently numerous professional, amateur, and university-based sport organizations in the United States have come under severe criticism and scrutiny due to revelations of widespread unethical and, in some cases, illegal behavior. Many of these behaviors have been attributed to individual managers, coaches, assistant coaches, trainers, and players. Although these acts may be attributed to individuals, their deviance is often facilitated, if not engendered, by the culture of the organization. A sociological consideration of unethical and illegal behaviors in sport, as acts of organizations (organizational deviance) rather than as acts of individuals, may facilitate a more systematic analysis and a more comprehensive understanding of patterned social deviance within sport organizations. (1,2,3) Sport, as well as other public and private sector organizations, adheres to the means-ends rationality that is increasingly penetrating all spheres of social life. (4) Sport, imbued with the “performance principle”, has adopted rationalized procedures (technological and bureaucratic) which are facilitated by commercialization and professionalization. (5)

Deviance within sport organizations such as the U.S. Olympic Committee, various professional sport franchises and leagues, and university-based athletic programs often come to light through the efforts of other formal sport organizations with responsibility for controlling deviance. For example, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has responsibility for controlling deviance in intercollegiate athletics and Major League Baseball (MLB) is responsible for controlling deviance within the league. An organizational deviance perspective can provide sport managers and those individuals with the responsibility of supervising behavior in sport with a framework for understanding the nature of deviance and a sound basis for controlling that deviance. The purposes of this presentation are: 1) to examine the nature of organizational deviance; 2) to identify key factors contributing to organizational deviance; and 3) to provide guidelines that sport managers may use to control unethical and illegal behavior in sport organizations.

Organizational deviance should be viewed as a complex issue related to overall organizational effectiveness and requiring specific management attention and, in some cases, intervention. There are four conditions that may characterize organizational deviance: 1) the deviant act must be contrary to norms outside of the organization; 2) the deviant act must find support in norms of a given level or division of the organization; 3) the deviant behavior must be known to the dominant coalition of the organization; and 4) new members must be socialized to participate in the deviant action (6).

More specifically, individuals within an organization become deviant through differential association with peers and exposure to opportunities to engage in deviant behaviors. Whether or not the socialization process results in unethical or deviant behavior depends on the ratio of contacts with unethical patterns of behavior to ethical patterns. When individuals perceive the behavior of their peers as unethical, they are more likely to consider the behavior as acceptable. This is more significant when there exists little interaction between those individuals and top management, and when peer interaction is frequent, as is the case with most formal sport organizations. Organizational deviance may be regulated by an informally established normative consensus of the informal system or work group. Thus deviance in formal sport organizations may be more constrained by informal social control present in the primary work group relationship than by the formal reactions to deviance by those in positions of authority within the formal organization. (7)

Method

A meta-analysis of salient research related to organizational deviance and unethical behavior in sport organizations was conducted, and recurring themes and concepts were developed and further investigated. Information also was gathered via interviews with selected sport managers.

Results and Discussion

Research concerning organizational deviance in formal sport organizations is generally sparse, which suggests the need on the part of sport managers for heightened awareness of the nature of organizational deviance and the ability to develop appropriate strategies to control it within their organizations. If organizational deviance is regulated by informally established normative consensus of the informal system or work group, and if sport managers are going to control deviance in their organizations effectively, they must realize that the primary source of social control comes through the internalization of group norms. The secondary source of social control comes from external pressure in the form of sanctions in order to encourage conformity with its regulations and/or code of ethics. It was concluded that much of the unethical and deviant behavior in sport organizations is related to achieving organizational goals, i.e., winning sport contests and generating revenue. In addition, the rationalized actions required to achieve these goals violate the normative expectations surrounding the organization but these actions are peer and elite supported. (8)

Therefore, if unethical and deviant behavior in sport organizations is to be controlled effectively, it is incumbent upon sport managers to take an active role in raising ethical standards. Based on the nature of organizational deviance, and empirical literature to date, a strong argument can be made that controlling organizational deviance has the potential to improve organizational effectiveness in sport organizations.

Strategies for Controlling Unethical and Illegal Behavior

In order to prevent unethical and illegal behavior sport managers at all levels must take an active role. The following strategies, adapted from Rein (9), for controlling unethical and illegal behavior in sport organizations, may be implemented at all levels of management. Sport managers should:

1. Identify specific ethical/legal standards that have been compromised and determine why they occurred. For example, does the organization's culture support unethical behavior?
2. Identify and analyze their specific responsibilities and management decisions and determine if they would feel comfortable telling their superiors, or other sport managers about their actions and decisions. If they would not feel comfortable in doing that, then they should reevaluate those actions and decisions in light of ethical/legal and more considerations.
3. Take an active role in discussing ethical/legal and moral considerations in sport. They should not assume that reinforcing ethical behavior should be someone else's responsibility, but should assert their organization's concerns and policies in all matters related to unethical and deviant behavior, and address the critical issues facing sport generally and their organization specifically.
4. Assure all constituencies (community, faculty, fans, etc.) that ethical considerations are important to the way that their sport organizations are managed. However, sport managers must be committed to ensure that the conduct of the entire organization reflects high standards.
5. Evaluate policies and operating procedures in terms of ethics. Are the established goals of the organization realistic? Sport managers should avoid establishing goals that are unrealistic because they may engender the attitude that "anything goes- the end justifies the means."
6. Promote the concept of honesty over expediency. They should encourage an accurate representation of their organization by all members.
7. Involve all levels of the organization in ethical concerns. Delegate authority to establish ethical guidelines for various dimensions of the organization and, if feasible, "establish quality circles on codes of conduct and ethical behavior" (9).
8. Hold "ethics workshops" for personnel, management, and athletes and determine if there is a need for a comprehensive code of ethics for the organization to help reduce unethical and deviant behavior and to develop a culture of integrity. According to Eitzen (1), "codes of conduct are required that are strictly monitored and administered at all levels of sport to keep the actions of those involved as close to the ethical high road as possible."

9. Send representatives from the organization to speak publicly about ethical questions and topics. Sport managers should reinforce ethical values that relate to matters vital to the welfare and success of their organizations.

10. Publicize and reinforce positive examples of ethical conduct. They should consider holding seminars with media to inform the organization's constituencies of the appropriate and ethical behaviors within their organizations.

11. Coordinate the organization's efforts to speak out and to answer false or unjust media or public criticism of the organization's ethical conduct.

12. Include ethical behavior, conduct, and goals as an integral part of the organization's management-by-objectives and/or performance appraisal system.

In addition, it is quite clear from the literature that if unethical and deviant behavior is going to be reduced in sport organizations, responsible action must start at the top. Those in high level management positions must set the moral tone of the organization. In summary, if sport managers are going to control unethical and deviant behavior, they cannot depend upon increased regulations, enforcement, or legislation. They must implement strategies designed to reinforce ethical values within all levels of the sport organization.

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