

REFEREES: RUGBY'S FRONTLINE MANAGERS

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Context

Over the past decade Rugby Union Football has made great advances in positioning the code as a global sport. This occurred through strategic international developments, like successful World Cup competitions. The number of nations playing the sport and entering the World Cup or the World 7s Competition places the sport second in global participation. The advent of the Super 12 (soon to be the Super 14) in the Southern Hemisphere and the Heineken Cup and other national competitions in the Northern Hemisphere, puts more attention and focus on the sport.

This expansion resulted in the code becoming a professional sport at elite level and in greater media attention, fan support, and public scrutiny. Whilst players and coaches were poised to enter the professional era, other facets of the sport were not. In particular the professionalisation of game officials is uneven. Game officials now form "teams" in their own right, of 10-15 personnel. Little research or insight in this key factor of rugby exists.

New levels of professionalism are happening to the officials' teams - developing standardised protocols, professional development interventions and educating game management personnel. This paper starts by examining developments after the 1996 watershed, to identify the issues, pressures, and responses to the demand for more professional management. Next we report a structural analysis of the official teams, including discussion of education and coaching developments. Finally, the paper discusses quality management, from Deming's (2000) perspective, and the future developments required. It originated through work undertaken with International Rugby Board (IRB) panel referees and their immediate supervisors in Australia and is based on the Australian Rugby Union's (ARU) developments to increase the quality and professional development of its game officials.

Methods

The referees studied officiate at Super 12, Tri-Nations, and IRB competitions. Their supervisors include selectors, a match assessor, and their nationally appointed coach. The nexus of national, supra-national, and international officials' panels is evident here – i.e. several closely coupled organizations are involved in developing, selecting, and assessing officials. Initially, our method was to observe individual referees and feedback to them after a match. We were able to listen to the referee through his microphone, observe his actions, and then discuss them with the match assessor and the referee's coach.

Whilst the initial contact focussed on improvements in the individual referees' communication skills, the study moved beyond this to centre on the overall quality management of the officials teams. Rather than simply generating lists of competencies and skills to reduce variation of judgments and decisions during matches, toward standardisation and consistency, we took a holistic approach. We sought ways to improve the quality of the game, understanding it as an integrated whole, and to develop management models that address the quality issues for improving the learning and skills of referees.

Then, we carried out intensive interviews to ascertain the organisational structure and understand how individuals are integrated. In-depth interviews (n=15) were completed with ARU game officials, referees' coaches, selectors, and game official managers. Using a semi-structured schedule, the period from 1996 to the present was mapped to identify how officials, and teams had evolved. Parallel to this, content analyses of policy, education programme, and minutes of ARU and IRB officials' meetings and workshops were completed. Finally, we employed a mapping exercise to locate the goals of the officials' panel in terms of structures and systems in place to develop them.

Results

The development of RU game officials was found to be moving rapidly at ARU level, but developments were contingent at the IRB level. Uneven developments were identified within and

between RU organizations, the ARU having a currently unique, cutting edge system. Its programmes seek to ensure the overall development internal and international competitions, but also to place Australian game officials at the forefront of exposure in global matches. Other national Rugby Unions are seeking to mimic them.

The study shows significant gaps in the notion of game officials being a team in their own right, and that not only the teams of players and their retinues comprise the game. Whilst the focus might be on the particular game referee, it is the support and integration of the overall retinue (team) that needs more study and organisational development. This development, however, must proceed in conjunction with developing individual officials, through tailored education programmes.

Discussion and Implications

Our approach is based on a participative perspective to organisational development with a focus on quality (Gapp, 2003). Its outcome sees referees not only as managers within a complex system (the game), but also places them in a broader team context of officials, coaches, selectors, and the public. Deming's system of profound knowledge was the specific aspect of the quality literature used. This framework first examines the quality assurance versus quality improvement argument. While supporting the current focus on developing protocols and international standards to smooth the evident national differences in refereeing decisions and interpretations, we argue for guarding against an overemphasis on standardisation and targeting, via an integrated systems approach.

This approach requires referees to understand and develop essential behavioural and communication strategies; these personal skills then having to be fused to a management development framework based on system-wide quality principles. In doing this, referees also need to see themselves a part of a team of game officials which includes line and video officials, refereeing coaches and selectors, and the viewing public. Within this context, the system goes beyond the playing season to incorporate pre-season and post-season debate and analysis. The management skills and the development processes required for referees to improve quality, learn from their experiences, and develop the interpersonal skills required meet the challenges of their critical and demanding work environment were evident.

The ongoing professionalisation of rugby union demands a holistic approach to developing game official teams qua teams. This becomes particularly salient during events like the Rugby World Cup tournaments when officials are in teams that cross national, linguistic, and stylistic approaches to the sport. This research seeks, with further work, to benchmark best practices in the game official management team structures, processes, education, and management outcomes.

References

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