Hostility, Distrust and Interference in Professional Football: The Relationship between Football Managers and Boardrooms.

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Abstract

Introduction

Professional football has become a large, high profile industry that has experienced an outstanding growth of interest in the past twenty-five years. More recently, English professional football, with its increased media obsession (Buckley, 2004), has witnessed the emergence of a new breed of entrepreneurial directors and owners (King, 1999). With experience of the non-football business world and a new attitude to the financing of the game, club directors with wealth and ownership rights, make many of the critical decisions at football clubs (Malcolm, 2000). Many professional football clubs continue to be characterised by financial instability, misconduct and self-interest in the boardroom (Holt, 2003). The role of both directors and owners in professional football is currently attracting considerable media debate where numerous concerns have been identified (Jaquiss, 2000). These concerns revolve around accusations of fraud by senior club officials (Emery & Weed, 2006), conflicting elements within director-owners objectives functions (McMaster, 1997) and hostility towards directors from both players and managers (Wagg, 1998, Gwyther & Saunders, 2005). In addition, numerous concerns surround wealth extraction, a prevailing amateur tradition (Cannon & Hamil, 2000) and poor management practices at boardroom level (Ozawa, et al., 2004, Hamil et al., 1999, Hamil et al., 2000).

The role of directors in professional soccer is one aspect of a broader ongoing study into management in soccer. This broader study also investigates several other aspects of soccer management, including the recruitment and retention of managers, the ways in which managers recruit and retain players, club loyalty, establishment and maintenance of discipline, and the competitive, media and other pressures on professional soccer club managers.

Research Methods

The research reported here was based on semi-structured interviews with managers who were either currently, or who had previously been employed as professionals within the league structure in England and/or Ireland. Eighteen managers were interviewed during the 2004-05 season. Of the eighteen managers who were interviewed, eight had managed clubs in England and three of these were managing English clubs at the time of the interviews. Several interviewees had managed clubs in both England and Ireland and two interviewees had managed a national side.

Discussion

The role of trust is central to understanding the relationship between managers and club owners in professional football. While the concept of trust has attracted considerable academic attention (Barber, 1983, Gambetta, 1988, Mayer et al., 1995), Kramer (1999) identifies trust as a state of perceived vulnerability or risk that is derived from individuals' uncertainty regarding the motives, intentions, and prospective actions of others on whom they depend. All of the managers interviewed identified increased levels of insecurity in recent years. This, it is argued, is a result of the recent influx of a new breed of owner and their future intentions, which in many cases may involve the appointment of a new manager. Green (2002) argues that the relationship between managers and boardrooms are not working, where the high turnover of managers is a reflection of the boardroom incompetence at professional football clubs.

While distrust and suspicion are common and recurring problems within many organisations (Fox, 1974, Sitkin & Roth, 1993) the data reported in this paper identifies distrust and hostility towards club owners, and more worryingly, their interference in the manager's role. It is hoped that this paper will help to fill this gap by providing data concerning distrust, interference and illegal practices employed at boardroom level in professional football.

Conclusion

The emergence of a new breed of entrepreneurial director and owner in professional football has resulted in accusations of fraud, mismanagement, and self-interest at boardroom level. More worryingly, is the level of distrust, interference and increased levels of insecurity experienced by football managers? While Conn, (1997) concludes the practice of many Football League directors is deeply disturbing, it is argued that greater accountability needs to be adopted in the recruitment and appointment of this new breed of director and owner (Cannon & Hamil, 2000).

The Football Task Force (1999a, 1999b) makes recommendations that the Football Association of England introduce a 'fit and proper person' requirement, which would apply to shareholders, directors, or employees of football clubs. While Holt (2003) provides a detailed overview of the fit and proper person test, it is interesting to note that the initial response from clubs was to reject this, denying the need for any new rules and regulations (Emery & Weed, 2006).

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