

Developing talented footballers: Making talent a strategic priority

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Aim of paper and research questions

The aim of the workshop is to explore critical moments encountered within top-level professional football. Specifically, issues associated with player identity (i.e., through youth and professional environments) and associated personal meaning that emerges from the 'real' and 'lived' experiences of talented players will be addressed. The presentation explores organisational structure and culture with respect to the strategic and operational working mechanisms that impact player identity and personal meaning. The workshop encourages participants to reflect on their own practice and/or experiences to identify and define critical moments. Furthermore, participants will be encouraged to discuss and/or suggest strategic and/or operational approaches that may better facilitate the successful progression of talented players.

Literature review

Top-level football clubs are big business enterprises, with English Premiership clubs spending in excess of £600m in reported gross transfer fees in the summer 2007 and January 2008 transfer windows. Player wages alone reportedly exceeded £1 billion in 2007/08 (averaging out at £50m per club) with the wages/turnover ratio at 63% (Deloitte, 2008). Professional football clubs need to be extremely competitive on both a sporting and a financial level, in order to be effective and successful within the growing sports industry (Slack & Parent, 2006). Management literature indicates that the combined work of strategic and operational stakeholders plays a key role in the effectiveness of the organisation (De Knop, Van Hoecke & De Bosscher, 2004) and that organisations benefit from the enhanced performance of their stakeholders through better and more effective management practices (e.g., organisational structure, quality systems, job/role satisfaction, commitment) (De Knop et al., 2004). In football, it is often wrongly assumed that the development of talent is, and should be, the preserve of the youth environment. Within a business context the development of future talented employees may prove to be the biggest source of competitive advantage for any organisation. Most top-level organisations are as unprepared for the challenge of finding, developing and retaining capable workers as they were a decade ago. Such a situation highlights the importance of encouraging top-level professional football clubs to adopt more effective strategic and operational practices aimed at developing and facilitating talent.

Research design and data analysis

The workshop draws on the personal, applied and professional experiences of the authors within the world of elite professional football. The authors have typically adopted a range of qualitative methodologies to collate their data, including ethnographic engagement, participant observation, action research, phenomenology, informal interviews and existential counselling. Our work with a selection of Premiership football clubs (including youth and first team environments) will be presented through a series of case studies that include specific vignettes and narrative excerpts. Workshop participants will be encouraged to consider the organisational and cultural issues that

may influence the various identity challenges and critical moments that permeate the player's transitional journey.

Results

Not applicable.

Discussion and conclusion

The authors will contend and offer ways that football organisations can create an environment that is more conducive to developing and supporting talented individuals through the inevitable identity challenges and critical moments that they will experience. Specifically, the authors will attend to the importance of a coherent match between strategic and operational practices and the requirement to make effective use of all staff that are associated with developing talented players.

References

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- Slack, T., & Parent, M. (2006). *Understanding Sport Organizations: The Application of Organization Theory* (2nd ed.). Champaign: Human Kinetics.