

The effectiveness of ethical codes in football organizations: a longitudinal analysis

Authors: Bram Constandt, Els De Waegeneer, Annick Willem

Institution: Department of Movement and Sports Sciences
Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghent University,
Watersportlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent

E-mail: bram.constandt@ugent.be

Aim of the research

Unethical behavior in football is a challenging and widespread issue. The records of morally inappropriate behavior in football are omnipresent, ranging from aggression towards opponents and the referee, over doping to match fixing scandals. Unethical behavior can be deeply rooted in the characteristics and the structures of both professional and non-professional football clubs. Academics broadly acknowledge that there are several ways to address ethical problems in sports. Informal methods, such as training and ethical leadership are known instruments, but sport organizations also turn to formal ethical codes as a way to deal with moral controversies (De Waegeneer, 2015). Drawing on Kaptein and Schwartz (2008) and De Waegeneer (2015), we define an ethical code as 'a distinct and formal document containing a set of prescriptions developed by and for a football organization to guide present and future ethical behavior on multiple issues for at least its players toward one another, the organization, external stakeholders and/or society in general'. Although the adaptation of an ethical code is often encouraged by authorities, its effectiveness remains unclear (Kaptein and Schwartz, 2008; Helin and Sandström, 2007). Some studies label ethical codes as helpful in reducing unethical behavior, whereas others perceive them as ineffective or even counterproductive. A longitudinal study on ethical codes' effectiveness is largely requested, as it may help to reduce this unclarity (Kaptein and Schwartz, 2008; Singh et al., 2011). By studying the long term effect of ethical codes in football organizations, this research responds to the call for longitudinal research on ethical codes. Furthermore, it focuses on a highly actual and an in sport management largely neglected research theme (De Waegeneer, 2015).

Theoretical background

Evaluating the effectiveness of ethical codes within organizations is a challenging task (Kaptein and Schwartz, 2008; Singh et al., 2011). Scholars often turn to the assessment of perceptions instead of using observation or analyzing reports to measure the ethical character in organizations. Thereby, these perceptions function as some kind of stand in for the actual behavior within the organization. A validated way to measure these perceptions in an organization, is assessing the so-called 'Ethical Climate'. This study uses Arnaud's (2006, 2010) ethical climate conceptualization ('The Ethical Climate Index' (ECI)) to measure the effectiveness of ethical codes in football organizations, as it is theoretically strongly elaborated (Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh, 2013). Drawing on Rests' (1984, 1986) moral behavior theory, Arnaud (2006) considers the different steps that are needed for ethical behavior, i.e. moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character (Schminke, Arnaud and Kuenzi, 2007).

Methodology

The data collection of this study consisted of two phases, with in between a three years' time gap (December 2012-March 2013 and December 2015-March 2016). In cooperation with the Football Federation Flanders, all associated football clubs (N= 1402) were mapped. At the beginning of the first phase, these clubs were asked to fill in a questionnaire regarding the existence and the nature of an ethical code in their club. Additionally, all adult members of these clubs were requested to complete the 'Ethical Climate Index' (ECI) by Arnaud (2006). To reduce common method variance, only validated scales were used and possible confounding factors were included in the design of the questionnaire. We aggregated the individual responses on the organizational level of analysis, as ethical climate is a group measure. After this first phase, 73 clubs that completed the 'Ethical Climate Index', were retained. After three years, the same procedure was executed with these 73 clubs, minus three clubs that ceased to exist. At the end of the second phase, we were able to calculate the ECI of 47 of the remaining 70 clubs. The data of these 47 clubs are currently analyzed by regression analyses with SPSS software. Hereby, a residual gain approach is used, as it is a common way to analyze longitudinal data (Menard, 2002).

Results

As the data were collected until March 2016, data analysis is still ongoing. Preliminary results show a positive influence of the existence of ethical codes on the ethical climate of football organizations. The final results and implications for research and practice will be ready for presentation at EASM 2016.

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