Fans As Stakeowners? An Analysis Of Their Perceptions On Organizational Ethical Leadership In Professional Football

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Aim of the research

Today, professional football clubs face a diverse set of challenges, of which many bear an inherent ethical dimension (e.g. sexual harassment, match fixing, and hooliganism). A striking element in this regard is the rather dual role played by the fans. Whilst many fans desire a say in the governance of the football club they support, a substantial part of the fan population remains to be associated with prevailing ethical challenges, such as violence and racism.

This finding illustrates that fans are an inherent part of the ethical challenges facing football, but the question if their involvement may also be a part of the solution remains largely open. Therefore, the aim of this study is twofold. First, it addresses if fans can be seen as genuine, responsible stakeholders (or stakeowners) in professional football clubs. Despite the acknowledgment of a potential influence of fans on sport leadership, little is known about their perceptions on this influence (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Subsequently, second, this study analyses the perceived link between football fans and organizational ethical leadership in professional football clubs.

Theoretical background

Our study integrates insights from ethical leadership and stakeholder management within a sport management perspective. Ethical leadership can be conceptualized as 'the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct to followers through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making' (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). Despite its academic popularity, this ethical leadership conceptualization is also criticised in terms of its vagueness (Heres, 2014). Scholars argue that the content of 'normatively appropriate conduct' is context dependent, and perceived differently according to the judging (stakeholder) group (Heres, 2014).

Furthermore, a stakeholder perspective on ethical leadership can be advocated, as leadership implicates a two-way relationship, in which the meaning of leadership is largely shaped by the expectations of the various stakeholders (Kihl, Leberman, & Schull, 2010). However, although the value of a stakeholder perspective on organizational ethical leadership, which goes further than only the perceptions of the employees, is clearly stretched, such research approach is currently scarcely adopted (Heres, 2014).

As fans can be seen as an important stakeholder group within professional football clubs (Garcia & Welford, 2015), this study argues that their perceptions regarding football club organizational leadership are at least to be called meaningful. Nevertheless, the extent to which football clubs should actually incorporate these perceptions into their own actions and beliefs, partly depends on how much importance and responsibilities can be ascribed to fans in their role as stakeholders. In this regard, Ferkins and Shilbury (2015) elaborate the stakeholder literature within sport management, by introducing the notion of stakeowner. A stakeowner is a person or group with a legitimate claim in the organization, but also with a certain responsibility towards the organization (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015).

In sum, the following research questions are addressed:

1. (To what extent) do professional football club fans consider themselves as stakeowners?
2. What do fans perceive to be ethical leadership on behalf of the board of directors and management of their professional football club?

Methodology, research design, and data analysis

A qualitative mixed-method based case-study was executed in one of Belgium's five most wealthy and successful football clubs. Next to the analysis of the club's policy documents and a preliminary interview with the head of the community working of the club, a random sample of fans (n = 17) was interviewed. On match day, fans were randomly approached in and around the stadium. They were informed about the research project, and asked to leave their contact data if they were interested to cooperate. Afterwards, we contacted the obliging fans to schedule a semi-structured interview. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and are analysed using NVIVO software.

Results

All fan interviews (n = 17) were recently finalized. Preliminary results show a nuanced fan view on stake-ownership and ethical leadership. Most fans desire increased fan participation, but also realize that this participation should be limited to certain themes. When it comes to football club ethical leadership, fans strongly value reliability, honesty, transparent communication, and zero tolerance against hooliganism. In general, perceptions differ according to the type of fans. Final results, and implications for theory and practice will be ready for presentation at EASM 2017.

References

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