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G. Matthew Robinson

Schreiner University, mrobinson@schreiner.edu

Marshall J. Magnusen

Baylor University

Glenn Miller

Baylor University

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Political Skill for Sport Professionals

Theory, Research, and Career Success Implications

G. Matthew Robinson
Marshall J. Magnusen
Glenn Miller

Abstract

Motivated by an increasing interpersonal aspect to the profession of sport coaching, the importance of being socially effective as a coach has multiplied in significance. This review specifically considers the social effectiveness construct, political skill, as a crucial aspect to career success through the perspective of a sport coaching lens. Political skill refers to the ability to effectually understand others at work, and to then use that information to influence others to behave in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objective. Political skill is a means through which sport coaches may be able to build and maintain important and influential relationships with key stakeholders (e.g., athletic directors), thus improving the possibility of a successful coaching career. This article presents a review of theoretical foundations for the association between political skill and career success as well as practical applications (e.g., active listening, empowerment, volunteerism) for sport coaches when managing important stakeholder relationships. Research suggestions for the continued advancement of political skill research are also provided.

Keywords: *Coaching, influence, management, organizational behavior, politics, social exchange*

G. Matthew Robinson is an assistant professor in the Department of Exercise Science and Sport Management at Schreiner University.

Marshall J. Magnusen is an associate professor of Sport Management at Baylor University.

Glenn Miller is a professor in the Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences at Baylor University.

Please send correspondence to Matt Robinson, MRobinson@schreiner.edu

Introduction

The term “organizational politics” may at first glance be confusing to sport professionals. Mention of politics likely conjures ideas of laws, elected officials, and government institutions, but politics in an organizational context is very different. Organizational politics is about influence. Whether the activity is formal or informal, public or private, politics in the workplace consists of the interactive ingredients of people, resources, and power (Leftwich, 2005). As a result, sport industry jobs can be thought of as investments and the sport workplace can be thought of as a marketplace (Cropanzano et al., 1997). For sport personnel to not only survive, but thrive and achieve the greatest return on their investments, they must be able to effectively navigate the intermingling of personal agendas, power, and competition for finite resources (Ferris et al., 2005a; Magnusen & Perrewé, 2016).

The presence of organizational politics in sport is also neither inherently good nor bad; politics are simply an organizational reality stemming from interpersonal exchanges and resource competition (Ferris et al., 2005a). Love it or hate it, politics are part of sport organizations. The presence of politics within sport organizations is not going to change, and so it is important for sport professionals, such as coaches at the interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional levels, to understand how they can best handle the multitude of social interactions and influential relationships they will experience while working in sport. Indeed, because of the interpersonal nature of sport and the numerous, diverse relationships coaches will experience throughout their careers, success in the arena of sport may stem from more than on-field performance. Success stems in part from the ability of coaches to successfully manage organizational politics via successful social exchanges with key, contextual power brokers such as athletes, administrators, and coaching staff (Jones et al., 1993; Magnusen et al., 2011).

Coaching is oftentimes an arena for struggle that is dynamic and unstable, where an everyday pursuit of power through relationship management with key stakeholders is necessary and has become a main coaching responsibility (Potrac & Jones, 2009; Potrac et al., 2006). Consider how a 2006 national study on the nonrenewal of high school sport coaches pointed to poor coach-administrator and coach-parent relationships as one of three major reasons for dismissal, along with other key reasons such as misconduct and having undisciplined athletes (Miller et al., 2006). An effective coach manages relationships by participating in political strategies and influencing others’ impressions of them to generate the necessary support to carry out the desired program agenda. Specifically, it is necessary for coaches to possess and execute appropriate social effectiveness characteristics (Ferris et al., 2000).

Figure 1 provides a visual guide for the relationship between political skill and career success. Political skill equips coaches with the ability to identify and form meaningful relationships with key stakeholders (e.g., athletic directors). Meaningful relationships with key stakeholders should increase the prospects of coaches

achieving their desired career success outcomes. Further, political skill not only leads to the identification and formation of relationships with key stakeholders, it also can be used to best leverage the created stakeholder relationships to achieve career success.

The interpersonal nature involved in leading sport programs and the numerous relationships a coach must navigate are all part of the political sports arena. Knowledge and application of a specific social effectiveness characteristic known as political skill appears to be especially crucial for success in this arena (Magnusen et al., 2011; Magnusen & Kim, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the concept of political skill and consider its relationship to career success in the field of sport coaching.

Figure 1

Model of Coach Career Success via Political Skill and Stakeholder Relationships

Defining and Conceptualizing Political Skill

Social effectiveness is a broad concept that describes an individual's ability to self-monitor, evaluate (read) social situations, and adapt to the specific requirements accordingly. It also describes the ability of an individual to understand the motivations of others, inspire trust, and forge strong relationships, resulting in favorable career and life outcomes (Ferris et al., 2002). Political skill shares domain space with other social effectiveness constructs (e.g., emotional intelligence, self-regulation, self-monitoring), but two major considerations set apart political skill as a distinct construct. Political skill considers the specific context of work and it includes influence and the ability to affect change in others (e.g., peers and superiors) (Ferris et al., 2005a; Magnusen & Perrewé, 2016; Treadway et al., 2005).

Pfeffer (1981) first articulated the concept of political skill and maintained that such ability is one of the most essential components for organizational success. Shortly after, Mintzberg (1983) considered political skill necessary for effective personal involvement in organizations, describing it as an effective inter-

personal style that contributes to adeptness in persuading and negotiating. More recently, political skill has been described as the ability to be effective in informal interactions and to effectively understand others at work, using such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objective (Ferris et al., 2005a).

In terms of measurement, the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) was developed to measure political skill; it is an 18-item scale comprised of four dimensions, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity (Ferris et al., 2005b). Social astuteness is the ability to accurately understand social interactions and interpret one's own behavior as well as that of others, and to be keenly attuned to diverse social situations. Interpersonal influence is the ability to exert a powerful influence and appropriately adapt and calibrate one's own behavior to each situation to elicit desirable responses from others. The capability to develop and use diverse networks of people to secure assets that are valuable and necessary for personal and organizational success is known as networking ability. The final dimension is apparent sincerity, which is the capacity to appear to others as possessing high levels of integrity, authenticity, sincerity, and genuineness (Ferris et al., 2005a).

How Political Skill Benefits Sport Professionals

Political skill is associated with a multitude of positive outcomes. These positive outcomes include higher job performance ratings from supervisors, increase in team performance, and diminished experienced stress, and career success (Douglas & Ammeter, 2004; Kimura, 2015; Magnusen & Kim, 2016; Magnusen et al., 2014; Perrewé et al., 2004). Political skill is also linked to salient outcomes such as self-efficacy, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work productivity, career success, and personal reputation enhancement (Munyon et al., 2015; Todd et al., 2009).

Of note is the connection between political skill and career success, which represents the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements that a person has accumulated through work experience (Judge et al., 1995). Conceptually, career success includes both extrinsic (e.g., salary) and intrinsic (e.g., personal fulfillment) components. The concept of career success has also been measured using objective measures such as pay and promotions as well as subjective measures such as career or life satisfaction (Seibert et al., 1999; Ng et al., 2005).

It would be odd to find a coach who pursues career failure. Most, if not all, coaches seek to have a successful career. Thus, the particular importance of political skill to coaches seeking success in the coaching profession is that organizational politics has a large influence on individual career success (Chen & Fang, 2008; Ferris et al. 2002; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Wayne et al., 1997). Politics are part of career success, and political skill provides means through which politics can be navigated successfully and success can be achieved. Inkson (2004) even went so far as to describe a career as a political campaign, based on the idea that self-pro-

motion, impression management, reputation building, and contact-hunting are keys to improving one's career outcomes, and that social effectiveness characteristics that enable the acquisition of resources and a positive image from a supervisor or organizational leader (e.g., athletic director) are critical.

Already noted are the multitude of studies (e.g., Blickle et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2010; Munyon et al., 2015; Todd et al., 2009) in traditional business contexts that have reported positive outcomes between political skill and career success. Specific to sports, political skill has just begun receiving attention, with most studies (e.g., Magnusen et al., 2011) dating to less than a decade. What attention has been given to political skill in sports has mostly focused on intercollegiate athletics and college coaches. For instance, in separate studies about head football coaches and women's soccer coaches, those coaches who were found to be politically skilled were linked to greater success in recruiting highly rated student-athletes than their less politically skilled counterparts (Magnusen et al., 2014; Treadway et al., 2014).

Additional research on political skill in sport contexts has examined leadership effectiveness and career success. Intern political skill, for example, has been linked to enhanced career and life satisfaction, perceived external marketability (i.e., one's perceived competitiveness on the open job market), and perceived effectiveness (Magnusen & Kim, 2016). Head coach political skill has also been shown to increase subordinates' perceptions of their reputation and leadership effectiveness (Kim et al., 2016). Further, in a study of interscholastic athletic administrators, leader (AD) political skill enhanced subordinates' levels of commitment and job satisfaction (Robinson et al., 2018). Overall, the prevailing data on political skill in sports points to a positive relationship between political skill and career success for coaches.

How Theory Explains the Political Skill–Career Success Relationship

Numerous theories have been used to explain the impact of political skill on career-related outcomes such as career success. Social capital theory, for example, is a term from sociology that focuses on the complex and often intangible values associated with human social relationships. This theory has been a customary explanation for the impact of political skill on career success (Burt, 1997; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Specifically, the keys to explaining career success using social capital theory are networking ability and the resulting network structures (Seibert et al., 2001), which determine the value of information and influence inputs critical for career success (Fugate et al., 2004). Regarding sport coach career success, effective development of network structures may influence financial backers to contribute to the monetary needs of the organization or motivate an administrator to give a higher evaluation of coach performance. Further, social capital established with others working in the profession may impact a coach's perceived marketability, thus aiding the coach in obtaining jobs and contract negotiations.

Signaling theory (Spence, 1974) is another prominent theory used to explain the relationship between political skill and career success. To influence observers'

beliefs and to reduce ambiguity, signaling theory assumes that an individual sends signals to others as a means of transmitting information about their abilities, intentions, and actions (Spence, 1974). Consider how politically skilled assistant coaches may signal their effective work performance and personal character by developing strong relationships with head coaches. Further, in terms of recruiting success, coaches may be able to leverage the signals about themselves and their programs that are present in the sport marketplace to achieve recruiting success (Magnusen et al., 2011; Magnusen et al., 2017; Treadway et al., 2014).

Lastly, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) posits that a process of negotiated exchanges forms human relationships through using a cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. In sum, relationships form and persist between individuals because of mutual responsibilities and varying levels of relational linkage (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The pros and cons (benefits and costs) of the relational interdependence ultimately form the foundation for satisfaction with the relationship and whether it will endure. Social exchange theory provides a useful underpinning to understanding political skill because politically skilled individuals tend to foster and develop high quality work relationships with their superiors, and when beneficial to their superiors, these relationships are reciprocated with positive personal reputation assessments and favorable career outcomes (Blickle et al., 2011).

Practical Implications of Political Skill

The positive effects of political skill on career success in business and sport combined with the heightened interpersonal aspects of sport coaching mandates that coaches be aware of and utilize political skill. This must be done if they are to appropriately manage social interactions, build necessary stakeholder relationships, and position themselves for the best opportunity of having a prolonged and successful coaching career. Fortunately, each aspect of political skill can be developed and enhanced through a variety of means. Figure 2 offers several strategies sport coaches can employ to improve their political skills. For example, empowerment can lead to influence. In a meta-analytic examination of over 30,000 employees, empowering leadership was linked to leaders being more effective at influencing employee performance as well as influencing employees to be more creative and engage in citizenship behaviors (i.e., work behavior that goes above and beyond what is formally required) (Lee et al., 2018). Thus, for coaches seeking to enhance the interpersonal influence aspect of political skill, they should consider ways in which they can empower their coaches, support staff, and student-athletes.

Next Steps for Political Skill Research

Though political skill benefits from a growing body of scholarship, avenues for inquiry are far from exhausted. Indeed, one the best ways in which to help sport coaches become more politically skilled, is to continue to study the benefits

Figure 2

Recommendations for Improving Political Skill

(and possible pitfalls) of political skill and devise actionable training strategies. To that end, future studies should expand investigations into stakeholder relationships that are important to head coach career success as well as explore how head coach political skill might influence positive outcomes from the perspective of the stakeholder. Accordingly, Table 1 outlines ideas for studying stakeholder groups and head coach relationships by addressing: (a) theory, (b) relevant dimensions of political skill, and (c) expected outcomes of the relationship between stakeholders and head coaches.

Conclusion

Political skill is a social effectiveness construct that describes how an individual understands social situations in the workplace and practices effective influence over others. In a sense, political skill represents empowerment in the workplace. Given that politics (e.g., social exchanges, competition for finite resources) are part of every workplace, feeling comfortable and confident in the political arena should be empowering. Indeed, to manage politics effectively, coaches need to be adept at surveying and understanding their environments, managing and influencing situations and people at opportune times, and connecting with key stakeholders to form professional networks and workplace coalitions. Thus, upon completion

Table 1
Ideas for Future Research of Head Coach Political Skill

Relationship	Supporting Theory	Dimensions of PS	Outcomes
Staff	Social exchange	Interpersonal influence	Utilize surveys to evaluate head coach political skill and assistant coach job satisfaction, commitment
Industry	Social capital	Networking ability	Assess head coach political skill and perceived marketability and investigate how focused networking practice accentuates career success
Administration	Signaling	Apparent sincerity	Compare head coach political skill with job performance assessment by supervisors, as well as metrics such as total salary, contract extensions, and number of promotions.
Players	Social exchange	Interpersonal influence	Assess head coach political skill in relation to player satisfaction with coach, player trust, and player commitment
Parents	Signaling Social exchange	Apparent sincerity Social astuteness	Investigate head coach political skill and parent perceptions of job performance, trust, and communication skills.
Media	Signaling Social exchange	Apparent sincerity Social astuteness	Evaluation of job performance, trust Measure head coach political skill and compare with an analysis of positive/negative media coverage on said coach.

of this review, coaches and other sport professionals should feel more empowered because they both have key background information on political skill and ways in which to increase their own political skill levels.

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