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Institutional Leadership that Disrupts

A Case of the National Football League

Calvin Nite
Briton Hagan

Abstract

This research draws upon the concepts of institutional leadership to understand how institutional leaders may work to destabilize the contexts they are trying to maintain. We examined the discourse surrounding the recent controversies with the National Football League (NFL). Our findings suggest that the actions of NFL executives, including problematic decision-making and inconsistent practices, likely led to dissension among executives and an alienated workforce. We theorize that this could be destabilizing and lead to institutional disruption. The implications of this for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: *Institutional leadership, NFL, institutional disruption*

Calvin Nite is an assistant professor of Sport Management in the Department of Kinesiology, Health Promotion, and Recreation at the University of North Texas.

Briton Hagan is a lecturer of Sport Management in the Department of Kinesiology, Health Promotion, and Recreation at the University of North Texas.

Please send correspondence to Calvin Nite, calvin.nite@unt.edu

Introduction

Institutional work has been a burgeoning topic of research within the sport management literature (see Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Nite, 2017a; Nite, Ige, & Washington, 2018; Nite & Washington, 2017; Woolf, Berg, Newland, & Green, 2016). That is, scholars have paid increasing attention to the actions that build, reinforce, and tear down ingrained structures within various sport settings (see Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Institutional work shifts the focus of institutional studies from examining self-reproducing social structures to the actions of interested entities (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). As such, some of the classic institutional concepts have become particularly relevant again. Specifically, we are concerned with institutional leadership. The tenets of institutional leadership were first outlined by Selznick (1957; see Washington, Boal, & Davis 2008 for an extensive review), and scholars have called for renewed attention institutional leadership as it is instrumental in shaping the organizational environments (Kraatz & Block, 2017).

From Selznick's (1957) classic work came the concept of institutional leadership. The definition and understandings of institutions have developed and evolved since Selznick's (1957) original conception that an institution is "an organization infused with value" (p. 17). As outlined in Washington and Patterson's (2011) review, neo-institutionalists have theorized that institutions exist beyond the domains of organizations. They are seen in patterns of structures and behaviors within society that constrain and provide meaning to social interactions (Giddens, 1984). Simply, institutions could be thought of as the taken-for-granted "way things are done." Institutional leadership entails "the promotion and protection of [institutional] values" (Selznick, 1957, p. 28). Institutional leadership is different from other constructs of leadership that focus on technical aspects of managing people and work environments (Washington et al., 2008). As such, Washington and colleagues (2008) outlined the actions of institutional leaders. First, institutional leaders are tasked with maintaining the internal consistency of institutional values. This entails preserving organizational identities, roles of members, and aligning practices within institutional norms. Second, institutional leaders develop external supporting mechanisms that aid in perceptions of legitimacy, which is a key aspect of organizational survival (Suchman, 1995). Third, institutional leaders work to overcome external enemies by defending institutional values and practices, addressing attempts to fragment institutional members, and managing the potential for competing practices within the institution. In sum, institutional leadership is meant to maintain the values and justify the rationales of the way things are done within their contexts (e.g., organizations, fields, associations).

Despite the efforts of institutional leaders to maintain norms, institutions can become disrupted and changed. Institutional instability and change have been attributed to competing interests among stakeholders and inconsistency among the underlying logics of institutions (Seo & Creed, 2002), as well as conflicts between

internal and external stakeholders (Nite & Washington, 2017; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). However, there has been minimal discussion in sport management regarding the destabilizing effects of institutional leadership. It is likely, and research has shown (e.g., Nite & Bopp, 2017), that there could be conflicting values and ideals within institutional leadership that could damage institutional stability. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine how institutional leadership may, in fact, promote instability. To address this purpose, we examine the National Football League (NFL) and the manner in which institutional leadership has addressed high-profile issues such as player protests, player safety, and labor issues. Our research suggests that the inconsistencies within the institutional leadership of the NFL may indeed be a source of instability.

Research Context: The NFL

To investigate the destabilizing effects of institutional leadership, we examined relevant discourse surrounding recent issues within the NFL. The NFL is an interesting case as it has positioned itself as one of the most profitable sporting leagues in the world (Kutz, 2016). The NFL's popularity and dominance in the U.S. professional sport market could be deemed a taken-for-granted social structure (see Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). However, the league has been embroiled in numerous high-profile controversies that have resulted in extensive media coverage documenting the actions and discourse of many of the league's stakeholders. While it is certainly common for sport leagues to receive extensive media coverage of controversial events, the issues with the NFL are seemingly magnified due to the leagues popularity.

Although the NFL remains one of the most profitable and popular sport leagues in the world, evidence has emerged that suggests that the NFL's market strength and popularity may be waning. The NFL's television ratings decreased for the second straight year (Deitsch, 2018). There was an 8% decrease in viewership from 2015 to 2016 and a 9% drop from 2016 to 2017 (Pallotta, 2018). Conversely, the National Basketball Association's (NBA) average viewership increased between 18% and 25% from 2016 to 2017 (Morgan, 2017). Major League Baseball (MLB) enjoyed a 25% increase in viewership during the 2017 conference championships and a 95% increase during the World Series (Rocco, 2017). NCAA football rating also increased in 2017, by 50% in some time slots (Kilgore, 2017). In addition, NFL-licensed product sales declined for the first time since the recession in 2008 (Lefton, 2017). Some licensees reported a sales decline of 20% or more (Gainer, 2017). Finally, a recent survey found a nine percent decline since 2014 in the number of adults that follow the NFL closely; even worse, there was a 24% decline from the NFL's core audience (men aged 18 to 49) over that time period (Bonesteel, 2018).

Certainly, the declines in traditional measures of popularity may be attributed to numerous factors such as changing market dynamics and practices such as

“cord-cutting.” However, the NFL’s decline in the previous measures has coincided with numerous scandals and dramatic events that have been well documented. These have included the NFL’s management of player concussions, numerous domestic violence and player discipline issues, and the discourse of player protests during the national anthem. The responses from NFL executives have seemingly exacerbated tensions and have led to questions regarding the values of the NFL and its leadership. As such, the NFL provides a relevant and fruitful context for examining how institutional leadership can be destabilizing and destructive to institutional arrangements. This research sought to answer the broad question: How might institutional leadership contribute to the institutional instability?

Method

To investigate the exploratory research question of this research, discourse analysis methods were employed. Discourse analysis entails the study of texts and the contexts in which they are produced to develop a theoretical understanding of a particular issue or context (Phillips & Domenico, 2009). These methods are particularly useful when there are extensive narratives surrounding organizational innerworkings and responses to events. Considering the high-profile media coverage of the NFL, discourse analytic methods are well-suited for the purpose of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study included publicly available forms of media, including: press articles, editorials, press releases from the NFL and the NFL Players Association (NFLPA), video or audio interviews with relevant parties (i.e., NFL commissioner, owners, players), and other video or audio media coverage of events. The events and subsequent narratives of interest included: NFL player concussions, player discipline and domestic violence issues, and the national anthem player demonstrations. In sum, 120 articles and media clips were compiled.

Data were analyzed following Thomas’ (2006) inductive approach to analysis. Initially, each article was read and audio clip was consumed in order to extract the relevant portions of data addressing the purpose of this study. Each researcher then independently coded these portions of data. Data coding was guided by the concepts of institutional leadership and institutional disruption. In this regard, the coding procedure was both *a priori* and emergent. We were particularly attuned to data that pointed to institutional leadership. As themes emerged in the data, our interpretations were shaped by extant theory. The coding and emergent themes were then subjected to external scrutiny from colleagues who had extensive training in qualitative research or were attuned to NFL inner-workings and narratives. This process yielded themes that addressed the broad research question of this research.

Discussion of Findings

To address the purpose and research questions of our study, we recognized two general themes in our data. First, we noted “inconsistent values” within our data. Particularly, NFL executives were inconsistent in their approaches to managing issues of player conduct and player demonstrations. Second, we noticed the theme of “alienation.” We found instances of dissension among NFL executives and between executives and players. The themes and their placement within the constructs of institutional leadership are discussed subsequently.

Inconsistent Values

The first theme of our findings outlines observed variations in the NFL’s handling of numerous controversial issues that have occurred within the past decade. The NFL’s actions seem to portray arbitrary values that are reflected in questionable decision-making with issues of player conduct and management of player safety. In 2014, the NFL suspended Ray Rice for two games for domestic violence (Milligan, 2014). Once video footage of the assault became public, this relatively light punishment resulted in substantial criticisms from the media and general public. Ultimately the NFL issued an indefinite suspension to Rice (Tomik, 2014). Around that same time period, Greg Hardy was embroiled in a similar scandal that was heavily scrutinized (Gregory, 2014). Hardy, who had previous discipline issues with the NFL, received a 10-game suspension that was ultimately reduced to four games. Despite alarming photographic evidence, Hardy was reinstated when the charges were eventually dropped due to the failure of the victim to appear as a witness in court. In fact, only two players out of a possible 18 have served the baseline six-game suspension for domestic violence since the NFL implemented its new Personal Conduct Policy in 2014 (Pilon, 2017). The NFL continues to face controversy regarding domestic violence. At the 2017 NFL draft, about a half-dozen players were drafted who had been accused of either physical or sexual assaults (Armour, 2017).

The inconsistency of values was noticed in the NFL executives’ decision-making regarding player health. A 91-page congressional report showed that the NFL tried to influence a National Institute of Health (NIH) study on football concussions and brain disease (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2016). This was even the topic of a major motion picture (*Concussion*). Evidence suggests that the NFL executives knew and withheld information regarding the lasting impacts of head trauma. Expectedly, there has been significant backlash and outcry over these actions. In fact, the NFL Players Association sued the NFL and ultimately received an estimated \$1 billion settlement for players who had been diagnosed with brain injuries (Tribune news services, 2016). As evidence of head trauma has become more public, the NFL has instituted stiff penalties for excessive and dangerous contact within games. In-game penalties have been a source of controversy among players, former players, and media pundits as many scrutinize the NFL’s sudden shift toward

player protection protocols despite decades of promoting violent physicality on the field (ESPN, 2010).

Alienation

The second theme we recognized in our data indicates alienation with the NFL. This entailed discord between the players and league executives as well as in-fighting among executives. Specifically, the players expressed distrust of Roger Goodell and the NFL executive office. A key point of contention was the commissioner's ability to serve as judge, jury, and executioner in player discipline issues (Triplett, 2016). Interestingly, the NFLPA agreed to this arrangement in the most recent collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Players recognized that their CBA has been less favorable to their interests when compared to other professional sport league CBAs (Volin, 2013). However, their leverage in the 2011 negotiations was weak considering the owners imposed a lockout (Shefter, 2011). Beyond these labor issues, the reactions from league executives to player protests has served to alienate players. In particular, Colin Kaepernick initiated a silent, peaceful protest of kneeling during the National Anthem to draw attention to escalating police shootings (Stites, 2017). This drew the ire of numerous fans and of the president of the U.S. While this was disconcerting, the primary issues of concern stemmed from the reactions of some owners. In an interview with the *Dallas Morning News*, Jerry Jones' declared, "If there is anything disrespecting the flag, then we will not play. Period." (Middlehurst-Schwartz, 2017). This was a divisive stance to take on this issue considering some of Jones' own players were sympathetic to Kaepernick's stated cause. In sum, this issue served to alienate players further.

Finally, our data showed numerous occasions of dissension between NFL executives. Some of the dissension was between NFL owners and Roger Goodell. Jerry Jones was angry with Goodell over the suspension of Ezekiel Elliot and even tried to stop Goodell's contract extension (Curtis, 2017). Other instances of dissension were between NFL owners, such as how the NFL should handle the players kneeling for the national anthem. Several owners argued that taking a combative stance against players was unproductive, whereas other owners discussed changing rules to force players to stand (Futterman, 2017). This type of dissension was problematic because it suggests discord within the social structure of the ownership and other NFL executives.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this research provide interesting insights into how institutional leadership may contribute to the institutional disruption. We theorize from our findings that the portrayal of inconsistent values seemingly contributed to alienation among different constituencies. We suggest that these factors contribute to institutional instability that could eventually result in institutional change. This theorization offers interesting implications for both scholars and practitioners.

Our research offers a counter narrative to previous theorizations regarding the actions of institutional leadership (see Washington et al., 2008). Institutional leaders are tasked with maintaining internal consistency of values to preserve institutional structures. In the case of the NFL, the institutional leadership portrayed inconsistent values that seemed to result in excessive scrutiny from both internal and external stakeholders. The inconsistencies of practices and troublesome decision-making seemed to have destabilizing effects. This offers important implications to sport managers. Notably, institutional leadership that portrays discrepant values may risk institutional disruption (see also Seo & Creed, 2002). It is important for institutional leadership to be a source of consistency to avoid the negative consequences of instability. Institutional leaders who perpetuate instability may provide situations that can be leveraged for change.

Our findings suggested that alienation may have a destabilizing effect for the NFL's popularity and brand dominance in the U.S. sport market. Our research is consistent with previous studies that noted similar alienating circumstances in other sport settings such as college athletics. Nite and colleagues (see Nite, Ige, & Washington, 2018; Nite & Washington, 2017) found that the NCAA governance structures were changed when members' interests no longer aligned with NCAA regulations. To alleviate tensions from alienating circumstances and to strengthen its governance, the NCAA learned to adjust its regulations and structures to be more responsive to its membership, athletes' needs, and public concerns (Nite et al., 2018). Although structurally dissimilar, the NFL and other leagues would benefit by approaching its governance with a degree of flexibility to avoid unnecessary destabilizing conflicts (see also Nite 2017b).

Finally, it is important to note the limitations of this research. The data for this study was confined to mediated accounts of the NFL's management of controversial issues. Whereas we contend that media outlets are reflective of the league's popularity, it is important to acknowledge our sources were secondary accounts. Additionally, our research was confined to a relatively short period of time. Lastly, our research was exploratory in nature. Scholars should consider longitudinal studies of institutional leadership and league trends. Additionally, future studies could seek to test our theorizations to determine statistical causality.

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