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Aspirant Sport Professionals' Perceptions of Leader Political Stances in the Workplace: An Exploratory Investigation

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to better understand how political behaviors by a sport organization's leader impact aspirant sport professionals. This qualitative study utilized criterion-based and snowball sampling methods to gather data from 202 aspirant sport professionals (46.5% male, 53.5% female). Participants were given a hypothetical employment scenario and responded to four questions regarding how a leader's political behavior might impact their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward the sport employer. Utilizing thematic analysis, the following themes were discovered: Discomfort and Indifference (Question 1), Expectancy Violation and Power Divide (Question 2), Visceral Thinking and Calculated Thinking (Question 3), as well as Reconciliation and Balance and Withdrawal (Question 4). Although sport leagues and sport leaders taking political stances has become more commonplace in recent years, the current results provide evidence that this shift may not be beneficial to sport employers as they look to recruit and retain high-quality personnel.

Keywords: job seekers, personnel management, organizational politics, recruiting, thematic analysis

From gun control and elections to the geopolitics of the United States and countries such as China and Russia, matters across the political spectrum have become increasingly commonplace in contemporary sport. Steve Kerr, Head Coach of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Golden State Warriors, has made frequent political statements during his press conferences, especially as an advocate for gun control (Thomas, 2022). Major League Baseball (MLB) made a political statement by pulling its 2021 All-Star Game out of Georgia over ID requirements to vote (Shirek, 2023). Disney CEO Bob Iger even remarked that ESPN, a leader in cable sports, had become too political in their sport programming (Flood, 2019). Interestingly, although attention has been given to how politics impacts consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward brands, less attention has been directed to how politics affect job seekers and employees (Roth et al., 2017), especially in sport contexts where this area has been largely overlooked. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to better understand how political behaviors by a sport organization's leader impact aspirant sport professionals.

Politics in the Workplace

Organizations in general, not just sport teams and leagues, have increasingly entered the political fray, taking stances on potentially divisive issues like abortion and policing policies (Pacheco & Stamm, 2020; Shapero, 2022). Although growing in frequency, it may not be beneficial to the current workforce or even the recruitment efforts of organizations as they seek to recruit and retain motivated and talented individuals. In a study by Roth et al. (2022), for example, the researchers reported that the political positions of a company could negatively affect more than a third of job seekers, deterring them from even applying to the organization. Making a political stance as a leader or organization may also have a demotivating effect depending on whether the employee agrees or disagrees with leadership (Burbano, 2020). Indeed, employee perceptions of political behavior can lead to a sense of psychological contract violation with their employer and directly impact their levels of job and supervisor satisfaction (Fedor et al., 2007). Politics in the workplace, both in and outside the realm of sports, is clearly a relevant and important avenue for research consideration. Thus, the knowledge gained from the current results should have value for sport scholars as well as sport professionals interested in better understanding the impact of political expressions in the workplace.

Methodology

Procedure and Participants

Qualitative data were gathered using a combination of criterion-based sampling and snowball sampling. The participants were sport management students. Participant networks were utilized to recruit additional participants who were interested in working in sport but who had yet to work in college or professional sports as either a full-time employee or as an intern/graduate assistant (i.e., the criterion). The aim was to gather exploratory information from aspirant sport professionals, individuals who likely watched and played sports and who were very interested in sports, but who had never worked or interned for a sport employer, such as a college athletic department or professional sport team.

Each participant received a short survey with a hypothetical sport employment scenario that was followed by several open-ended questions. The scenario required the participant to consider an employ-

ment context (e.g., college, professional) and job segment within that sport industry in which the participant most desired to work. For example, one scenario involved working sponsorships for a team in the NBA. With that context and job segment in mind, participants were given a scenario in which the leader of the hypothetical organization mixes personal political beliefs with his/her official duties as the top executive and leader of the sport entity. Specifically:

You just got hired. Your job is an entry-level job. Now, consider the top executive at your new employer. This individual is the organizational leader, figurehead, key decision-maker, etc. Imagine the top executive of your sport employer uses a sport-related press conference to vocally express his/her strong support of a political issue that is wholly unconnected to the leadership and management of the organization. Your position on the political issue is the exact opposite of the sport organization's leader. That is, you oppose the political issue whereas the organizational leader has made vocal his/her support of the issue.

Upon reading the scenario, participants were tasked with answering several questions. These questions were designed to probe how sport job seekers would react to a political stance taken by a sport leader heading a sport organization the participants desired to work for as an employee. The first question (i.e., "How would the behavior of the sport leader make you feel?") sought to understand how participants would feel upon hearing the political statements. The second question (i.e., "What about the leader behavior would make you feel that way?") was given to gain insights into why exactly the leader's political behaviors would make participants feel a certain way. The third question (i.e., "If given the opportunity, would you consider expressing your opposing opinion on the matter in a work context?") focused on the thought processes of participants and whether they would voice their opinions. The fourth question (i.e., "How would the political stance of the sport leader influence your behaviors toward the sport employer?") directed participants to think about how they might engage with their employer considering the sport leader's political stance.

The study was designed to capture the subjective views of participants and secure detailed answers to the posed questions. Single answers to open-ended questions can provide rich, descriptive information while also benefiting from greater anonymity than can be provided with face-to-face interviews (Braun & Clark, 2012). Anonymity was valued in this study because participants were required to think about and share potentially sensitive insights into how they would react to a political stance that diverged with their own stances. The approach is also less time consuming than individualized interviews, offers participants greater flexibility in when and how they choose to respond, and provides for a wider range of perspectives to be shared on the focal topic.

In total, 202 participants (coded as P1–P202) were involved with the study. The average age of the participants was 21.4 years. Male participants made up 46.5% of respondents whereas 53.5% were female participants. Most of the participants identified as Caucasian (77.2%), with African American (12.4%) and Hispanic (8%) representing the next two largest ethnic groups.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed via thematic analysis. This approach allows researchers to detect patterns in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a useful approach for evaluating qualitative data

because it requires the researchers to first code the data to identify meaningful units and then organize the created codes into categories and themes (Grbich, 2013). Analysis was divided into three steps based on the work of Braun and Clarke (2012): (a) analyze the data, code the data, and identify themes; (b) review the themes in light of the aggregate data set; and (c) label the themes and criterion for inclusion within each group. The researchers worked independently as well as collectively to generate the final themes. Any disagreements were resolved with discussions until a consensus could be reached. Confirmatory coding was also undertaken with an independent qualitative researcher who was not involved with the data collection or research project. This process yielded agreement with the themes.

Results

Themes were identified for each of the questions. Figure 1 provides an illustrated representation of themes. For the first question, the themes that emerged were Discomfort and Indifference. For the second question, the emergent themes were Expectancy Violation and Power Divide. Visceral Thinking and Calculated Thinking were the themes for the third question. For the final question, the themes were Reconciliation and Balance as well as Withdrawal.

Figure 1

Themes From the Hypothetical Sport Leader Political Stance Scenario

Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
• Discomfort • Indifference	• Expectancy Violation • Power Divide	• Visceral Thinking • Calculated Thinking	• Reconciliation and Balance • Withdrawal

Question 1 Themes

Discomfort

Participants indicated that the political stance expressed by the sport leader would make them feel discomfort. There was a sense of uneasiness caused by the leader's behavior. Although confusion, irritation, frustration, and isolation were often used as descriptors of the discomfort, the overarching theme was a strong feeling of being uncomfortable in the workplace environment because of the political stance. Illustrative examples of this theme include:

The behavior of the leader would make me feel extremely uncomfortable. (P11)

It would be frustrating and confusing. I'd feel very uncomfortable. (P2)

I'd feel weird. It would definitely be conflicted and uncomfortable. (P30)

Indifference

In addition to feeling uncomfortable, a second theme that emerged for the first question was a clear lack of interest in the situation. Indifference was identified as a theme because a collection of participants demonstrated a clear lack of interest and concern for the leader's political stance. For example:

The behavior of the sport organization leader would not bother me at all. (P22)

I wouldn't care. I'd just want to do my work. (P117)

Question 2 Themes

Expectancy Violation

A key driver influencing how participants felt about the sport leader taking a political stance on an issue while in their official role was the apparent violation of perceived expectations for the leader and the social norms for the sport employer. Expressing political viewpoints while in an official capacity as a leader was not viewed as normal by participants. There was a sense expressed by participants that it violated an unwritten rule of the workplace. Hence, the feelings they experienced appeared to stem in part from the violation of what they inherently expected a leader to say and do and what the leader in the hypothetical scenario did. This disconnect led participants to describe how it would make them feel uncomfortable. Consider the following participant responses:

I wouldn't expect that behavior to be normal in an organization. It would catch me off guard.

This sort of thing should be made very clear in the values and vision of an organization, which I doubt is often the case anyway. (P94)

It would shock me. Maybe it happens a lot, but it would be very weird for me to have the leader who is supposed to be leading us all make a statement that will be obviously divisive to many in the workplace. Doing that doesn't make sense. (P3)

Power Divide

Another theme that emerged when exploring how the leader's political stance made participants feel a certain way was the divide between the entry-level employee and the sport leader. The participants were positioned as entry-level employees and tasked with reacting to a scenario involving the leader of their sport employer. Thus, in the scenario, the participants were responding to a situation with an individual who possessed the ability to control resources, people, and both directly and indirectly impact the futures of the employees within the organization. This divide emerged as a key influence in how participants reacted to the political stance taken by the leader, eliciting responses of discomfort as well as indifference.

Discomfort was experienced in part by the separation in power because participants believed it meant there was minimal recourse available to them to address the discomfort, either now or in the future. For example:

It'd make uncomfortable because the leader is supposed to lead and statements made in the capacity of the job should reflect the mindset of the organization, not the [sic] oneself. The leader is at the top making statements that then make it seem like everyone is in agreement when they

can't do much to challenge the leader's opinions. (P16)

The perceived divide in power also contributed to feelings of indifference toward the scenario, with the common thread through these responses being persons at the top can speak how they want even if not everyone else in the organization could speak that way. Examples of this line of thinking include:

Leaders can speak their mind. They have a right to free speech just like me, but no one cares what I think because I'm new and at the bottom. It is what it is. Certain advantages come when you're at the top. It's not worth getting annoyed over it. (P7)

Nothing I do or say is going to matter given my spot compared to the leader's job. It's the nature of the workplace. There are differences from the top to the bottom. (P148)

Question 3 Themes

Visceral Thinking

Visceral Thinking, in the current context, describes participants who reacted without consideration for professional advancement. When asked about whether they would consider expressing their political stance in a work context, the responses showed an impulse to be heard and express themselves. No consideration was provided as to how it would impact them personally or professionally. One participant (P129) even went so far as to want to confront the leader directly: "If the leader was going to make comments like that then I would too. I'd want a meeting so I could tell him what I think and how it made me feel." Additional examples along that line of thinking include:

If the leader can do it, then I can do. (P51)

I would share my stance because the precedent was set. (P193)

Calculated Thinking

These participants contrasted sharply with participants who indicated their career goals, aspirations, and future advancement opportunities were first on their minds when thinking about sharing their political stance at work. Calculated Thinking describes participants who reacted with clear consideration for strategic self-presentation and future career advancement. For these participants, it was not a matter of the leader speaking out, so they should also get to speak. Instead, the participants reasoned that even if the leader expressed a political stance, it may not be in the best interests of their careers to express their political opinions at work. Two examples that illustrate this theme are:

No. I think my job would be in jeopardy. If the leader is vocal and my opinion is different, then the leader wouldn't like it. I'd want to keep my job and not create a controversy when I'm brand new. (P101)

Definitely not if I'm an entry-level employee. Even if I wasn't happy in this organization, I'd need the opportunity to move onto the next one. I can't do that if I get fired or receive poor feedback from my supervisor. (P66)

Question 4 Themes

Reconciliation and Balance

Study participants were asked how they might behave toward the sport employer in light of the leader's political stance. Reconciliation and Balance was a theme that emerged as participants shared adaptation to the scenario. Participants indicated they would still work for the sport organization but would have to resolve the leadership of the employer with their own expectations and workplace identity to create a sense of balance that working for the sport employer, despite the differences the participant might have with it, was still acceptable. In other words, the participants reconciled leader behavior in a way that created balance so there could be coexistence in the workplace. Several examples illustrate this theme:

I'd adapt. The behavior of the leader would have caught me off guard, but then again, the leader is only one person. Teams change, and that person may not always be in that role. I'd adjust my expectations for the job and continue to do my work. (P111)

I wouldn't let one person change how I do my job. I may not identify with the sport organization as much, but if I was doing my job and it was something I loved doing, I'd focus on that and continue to do it. (P182)

Withdrawal

Withdrawal emerged as an additional theme, representing the decision by participants that either in the short- or long-term they would remove themselves from the employer. Whereas some of the participants indicated they would adapt and reconcile the behaviors of the leader to justify staying with the organization, other participants indicated the employer would not be suitable for them and that they would leave. For example:

I just don't think I could stay. That wouldn't be the sort of place I'd want to work. (P16)

I'd quit. It'd be isolating at work. That's not a healthy work environment. (P76)

Discussion

For sport scholars, the results open the doors for further research in what appears to be a promising avenue for academic inquiry. Comparative examinations can be made between aspirant sport professionals and experienced sport professionals who've spent several years in the industry. Consideration of political affiliation as well as propensity toward political activism (which could be assessed using the Activism Orientation Scale [Corning & Myers, 2002]) could also prove to be valuable variables to examine in the future. Additionally, certain participants were calculated and willing to balance the political stances of a leader to stay employed whereas other participants were uncomfortable and wanted to withdraw from the employer. Such results could be explored in connection to the kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

Central to the kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) are authenticity, balance, and challenge. The metaphor of a kaleidoscope is used by the authors to explain how an individual's ca-

reers change in response to alternating needs for these three areas. The authenticity component is especially interesting in light of the current results because it represents the ability to be faithful to oneself while navigating the constant interplay between personal career development and work and nonwork matters. Ignoring or tolerating certain political positions in the workplace to maintain employment or advance up the organizational hierarchy could compromise employees' integrity and pursuits of authenticity. This could then lead to a crisis of identity and negative career outcomes because of the inconsistency between their behaviors and central identities. Accordingly, sport scholars should explore moderators of the relationship between leader political behaviors and employee authenticity. A social effectiveness characteristic such as political skill, for example, might explain why certain individuals are better able to manage political behaviors in the workplace and not compromise their desired sense of authenticity (Douglas et al., 2005; Magnusen & Perrewé, 2016).

Political skill, which can be measured with the 18-item Political Skill Inventory (PSI; Ferris et al., 2005), is "the ability to understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (p. 127). It consists of four dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Individuals possessing political skill have been shown to experience greater career success (Todd et al., 2009) and diminished levels of stress when confronted with conflict in the workplace (Perrewé et al., 2004). Politically skilled individuals should be able to better regulate their self-presentation and interactions with others in the workplace. Thus, when confronted with political scenarios, high political skill individuals are expected to be more comfortable tactfully navigating the scenarios in ways that don't lead to conflict in the workplace while also not compromising their natural, true selves. Moving forward, sport scholars might examine the self-awareness, self-regulatory, and political skills of sport job seekers (as well as a seasoned sport professionals) and explore the extent to which a construct such as political skill moderates the relationship between authenticity (perceived and felt) and outcomes such as work attitudes (e.g., engagement, job satisfaction) and work behaviors (e.g., task performance, citizenship behaviors).

For sport professionals, particularly those in leadership roles, the results should lead them to understand that voicing their political convictions may cause conflict with staff, which could negatively impact the workplace environment. Political divisiveness can lead to an unproductive, if not toxic, work environment that can have a deleterious effect on employees (Burbano, 2020; Fedor et al., 2007; Roth et al., 2022). Moreover, given the participants were aspirant sport professionals (individuals who soon may be sport job seekers), it can also be taken from the results that an organization whose leadership is politically vocal may deter qualified job seekers from even applying for a vacancy because working for such an organization would make them feel uncomfortable. In the long-term, this could also negatively impact organizational intellectual diversity because individuals with similar viewpoints will be attracted to the sport employers whereas individuals with divergent viewpoints may be hesitant to pursue employment for fear of being isolated and potentially ostracized at work.

Exploring intellectual diversity alongside a concept such as receptiveness, which represent a motivational tendency characterized by the willingness to consider and weigh opposing opinions in a balanced, impartial manner (Minson & Chen, 2022), is also ripe for consideration in the realm of sports. Setting aside the matter of whether political comments should (or should not) be espoused by sport organizational

leaders, there is the issue of organizational composition. Receptive individuals will be more welcoming of intellectual diversity. They will seek out and evaluate information with less biased processing than individuals with less receptiveness and be less likely to only surround themselves with individuals possessing similar attitudes and beliefs. Thus, the role of and value of receptiveness amongst leaders, sport employees, and aspirant sport professionals in creating intellectual diverse and welcoming sport organizations should be pursued in future studies and possibly screened for by sport employers.

Conclusion

Employees are key stakeholders for sport organizations, and an impactful individual such as an organizational leader (e.g., athletic director, team president) can have both positive direct and indirect effects on the current as well as future workforce. Political stances by organizations can be highly risky, serving as a double-edged sword for organizations that can be counterproductive rather than helpful. Thus, the value of this study is that it offers an initial attempt to grow awareness and understanding of how taking a political stance can impact the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of aspirant sport professionals. The themes that emerged from this research should help sport organizations, regardless of the competitive level, better understand how political stances may impact their potential and current workforce.

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