An Exploration of Engagement in Creativity-Related Processes within Coaching Management

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Creativity is fundamental to increasing an organization’s competitive advantage. The sport industry though is known for a hierarchical structure and conservative, traditional culture (Wolfe et al., 2006). For those who play sports, Memmert et al. (2010) found players’ experiences with unstructured sport positively influenced their creativity within the sport setting. While sport coaches regularly seek to build creative players, there has been little research on how to build creative coaches, or how creativity is connected to coaching in general (Memmert et al., 2010). Sport coaching is a key element to any team-based sport organization, such as college athletics or youth sport. As well, as a powerful influence in the culture of sport, coaches have the potential for substantial creative problem-solving impact and agents of change opportunities in the sport industry more broadly.

Therefore, a better understanding of creativity in coaching is needed. The processes of engagement in creativity have been theorized as problem identification (e.g. framing and reframing of problem), information searching & encoding (e.g. consulting and combing information from different sources), and idea generation (e.g. producing better alternative solutions to problems) (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). By engaging in these processes, individuals produce more creative ideas (To, Herman, & Ashkanasy, 2015). As an unexplored area of research, an exploratory study (N=12) was conducted during the Women’s World Cup in France in summer of 2019. Self-identified female coaches of soccer who attend the event were interviewed about their creative process. These coaches ranged from elite youth level, collegiate level and lower level professional, and had between 9 years and 37 years of coaching experience. Interviews lasted between 20-45 minutes. The research was coded a priori considering the theoretical underpinnings of creative processes engagement. As the researcher was running this project alone, they enlisted a colleague to conduct a secondary coding and compare findings to come to an agreed upon set of themes (Creswell, 2012).

The findings revealed confirmation of previous literature that the engagement in creativity processes are distinctly different (Smith & Green, 2020). Additionally, significant differences between experienced and more junior coaches in their time spent in the problem identification process. This interaction of domain-relevant skills (i.e. experience) and processes has been theorized but under-explored (To et al., 2015). An interesting addition to the management literature is the findings revealed differences identified between on-field and off-field problem identification. This dichotomy as managers is similar to those in front office staff through game-day/non-game day experiences, and is worthy of further exploration. Also, across all coaches, networks of support were critical in their information searching & encoding and utilized at the Women’s World Cup. Finally, coaches felt more comfortable exploring new ideas in the idea generation stage if they felt stability in their employment. This exploratory research will begin to unpack the creative processes engagement for coaches and connect these experiences to the larger sport industry as well as previous creativity research, both in and out of sport management.