Examining the Political Skill of Sport Leaders: The Effects of Social Astuteness on Employee Job Engagement and Identification

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The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of sport leaders’ political skill in the form of social astuteness and its effect on sport employees’ job engagement and organizational identification (in the form of sport employee identification; SEI), as mediated by person-organization fit (P-O Fit). Sport employees are a relevant constituency given their involvement with the production of sport and connection to organizational performance (Winand et al., 2010). As sport organizations develop their managerial strategies and workplace designs (Kleiber, 2020), a constant feature of such prospects remains the influence of leadership (Welty Peachey et al., 2015).

As a dimension of political skill, social astuteness is the ability to better diagnose social interactions and behaviors (Ferris et al., 2005), and when a leader is perceived to be able to navigate social situations with the appropriate tone they are likely to spur their subordinates’ engagement as they are more likely to feel understood and supported.

Similarly, a sport leader that demonstrates social astuteness is likely to engender a stronger sense of organizational identification among their subordinates in that supportive leadership will allow for a feeling of belongingness (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). However, P-O Fit is hypothesized to explain these relationships (i.e., serve as a mediator; Hayes, 2018) as the connections could be predicated on the sense of connection between employee and organization. This study proposes a model that signifies that a sport employees’ perception of P-O Fit will indirectly effect the relationship between their leaders’ social astuteness and both their own job engagement and identification with their sport organization.

The sample consisted of American collegiate sport employees (N=312). A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate the measurement model, and a subsequent structural model was built to test the relationships between social astuteness, job engagement, SEI, and P-O Fit. The measurement model had acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 264.01$, df = 162, p < .001, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05 [.035-.055], SRMR = .06). The structural model retained acceptable model fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 310.98$, df = 162, p < .001, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .05 [.045-.063], SRMR = .06). Within the model, P-O Fit was found to indirectly effect the relationship between social astuteness and engagement ($\beta = .16$, 99% CI [.03, .35]), as well as between social astuteness and SEI ($\beta = .33$, 99% CI [.17, .49]), confirming the viability of the model.

The results revealed the positive influence of social astuteness on job engagement and organizational identification when mediated by P-O Fit. Two significant benefits of this study are brought forth: (a) the value of sport leaders’ political skill, specifically social astuteness, within the sport workplace and (b) the significance of P-O Fit in facilitating the positive influence of sport leaders’ social astuteness on sport employee outcomes. The findings illustrate that sport managers who utilize the social astuteness aspect of political skill are able to produce positive employee-based outcomes when there is an alignment between sport employee and organization.