Expert Leadership and the Impact of NBA Head Coaches on Team Performance

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Finance/Economics - Economics (Professional Sport)  Abstract 2021-257
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  Mode: Asynchronous
Session: Live Q&A for Finance/Economics (Asynchronous)  Saturday June 5, 2021, 1:40 PM - 2:40 PM

The study of the impact of management on team performance is relevant to both the academic study of sport management and to sport organizations. This topic has been studied across many contexts, both inside and outside of sport. One strain of this research has examined the expert leadership hypothesis and the theory that individuals with a high level of technical experience and expertise lead their organizations to perform more optimally. This has been studied in contexts including higher education (Goodall, 2008), Formula One racing (Goodall & Pogrebna, 2015), and professional basketball (Goodall, Kahn, & Oswald, 2011).

The veracity of the expert leadership hypothesis has again come to the forefront in the NBA given the Brooklyn Nets hiring of former player Steve Nash in September 2020. Nash possesses zero formal coaching experience at any level, but brings the experience of a Hall-of-Fame quality playing career. This suggests decision making at the ownership level may value technical experience over functional experience for managers who deal directly with frontline workers. The literature, however, has yet to examine how variation in head coach technical and functional experience may be related to team performance.

As such, this study seeks to assess whether NBA head coaches with a) longer playing careers (i.e., greater accumulated technical experience) or b) a greater level of success as a professional player (i.e., a higher level of technical experience quality), lead teams to perform better. We posit that the expert leadership hypothesis would hold if it is found that NBA coaches are more successful when they have accumulated quality technical experience via success at the professional level as a player.

Data were collected on team performance and head coach and general manager demographic characteristics for all NBA teams from the 1997-98 through 2019-20 seasons. We utilize a two-stage panel regression approach to estimate our model. Our dependent variables are team performance measures: wins and winning efficiency. Data collected on individual head coaches include age, race, tenure with current team, head coach/assistant coach experience at both the NBA and collegiate level, general manager experience, other front office experience, NBA playing experience, international playing experience, NBA VORP (Value over Replacement Player), win shares produced as a player, basketball position played, and rank of university attended. Similar data regarding demographics, tenure, experience, and level of education were collected for general managers during the same time period to control for any effects the general manager has on team performance.

This study adds to the growing body of knowledge examining the expert leadership hypothesis in the context of the NBA. Unlike other industries, we are able to collect comprehensive organizational performance data as well as manager demographics over a period of two decades. In addition to the academic implications, the study has the ability to inform organizations on the relative importance of which manager characteristics are most integral to team success in the hiring process of potential managers.