Supporting the Case for Values: Utilizing the 4-I Values Framework to Explore Management by Values (MBV) in a Professional Sport Organization

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Purpose-based management has been proposed as a method for professional sport leaders to increase organizational effectiveness (Gwartz & Spence, 2020), with the need for this approach heightened by the commercialization and massification of the industry that have left leaders vulnerable to ‘dark leadership’ tendencies (Welty Peachy et al., 2015). While scholars have recognized values as a preeminent leadership tool to guide organizational efforts towards a shared purpose (Dolan & Garcia, 2002), sport management scholars have yet to empirically study leaders’ utilization of values to strategically guide professional sport organizations toward such a purpose. The Management by Values (MBV) framework is helpful to demonstrate how leaders may align their values with managerial behaviors to allow them to simplify direction and guide strategic planning towards a shared purpose (Dolan & Garcia, 2002).

Sport management scholars studying non-profit sport leaders’ MBV recognized “the value of values for strategic management of sport organizations” (Kerwin et al., 2014, p. 43) toward increased effectiveness. Further, Bell-Laroche et al. (2014) developed the 4-I Values Framework of four successively progressive MBV levels, including: Inactive Values (i.e., undeveloped or dormant); Intuitive Values (i.e., awareness through leader-dependent communication); Institutional Values (i.e., embedded within policy and procedures); and Inspirational Values (i.e., managed to inspire stakeholders toward common objectives). Kerwin et al. (2014) found that non-profit sport leaders utilized values at various levels of the 4-I Values Framework and their degree of engagement in MBV mediated the influence of values on organizational performance.

The 4-I Values Framework served as the theoretical framework for this qualitative, single-site case study research of a professional sport organization, of which the primary purpose was to explore professional sport employees’ perceptions of their leaders’ MBV utilization. This work is both contributory and timely to the sport industry, as professional sport leaders have strategically refocused corporate social responsibility initiatives to include values such as equality and inclusivity (i.e., Black Lives Matter). Data collected included semi-structured interviews (n=13), observation of physical artifacts in office spaces and various organizational documents. Data were analyzed using a 2-stage coding process to first reduce data into descriptive codes and then organize data into the 4-I Values Framework typography to represent leaders’ behaviors.

While participants did not perceive leaders as formally communicating values (Inactive Level), they did acknowledge leaders’ MBV through behaviors characteristic of both the Intuitive (e.g., pep talks) and Institutional levels (e.g., team social events). Findings extended previous research with the finding of a fifth MBV level termed “Indefinite Values,” which represents employees’ intermediate experience of perceiving organizational values, despite those values being ambiguous, not commonly shared and difficult to act upon. Practically, this research creates awareness for professional sport leaders regarding the utility of MBV toward organizational effectiveness. Moreover, findings contribute to sport management theory through the possible integration of a fifth level to the 4-I Values Framework, thereby creating a fulsome picture of the spectrum of engagement of sport leaders’ MBV in organizations.