

Integrating sport psychology within a high-performance team: Potential stakeholders, micropolitics, and culture

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ABSTRACT

High-performance teams of various sport science professionals working together to enhance performance are becoming commonplace in elite sport. Sport psychology professionals who desire to work within these groups, often referred to as high-performance teams, need to be prepared for the demands of a team-based performance enhancement setting. This article addresses the important factors to consider when integrating sport psychology within a high-performance team. The potential stakeholders are discussed, as are micropolitics and culture. The article closes with implications to assist in the ease of integrating sport psychology within a high-performance team.

KEYWORDS

Applied sport psychology; culture; high-performance culture; high-performance team; micropolitics

In his 1997 article titled, *Sport Psychology Service to the United States Olympic Festival: An Experiential Account*, Dr. Andrew Meyers relayed:

At an organizational level, there exists little respect for what we do. Recently, I was told a story that (true or not) illustrates all too well this sad point. An influential owner of a professional sports team asked the Olympic Training Center Sports Science people to put together a team of consultants to work with his team during the preseason. At the last minute, the owner canceled the psychologist member of the consulting team and said, “I’ll handle that part myself.” This is the same burden that applied sport psychologists have carried for generations—most people seem to believe that anyone can offer helpful counsel to those in need. So why should anyone, or any organization, expend precious financial resources on sport psychology? In some sense, this is a turf battle; we are the new kid on the block and all the houses seem to be occupied. (p. 466)

Nearly 20 years have passed since that passage was written, and it is important to reflect and ask ourselves, has anything changed? It is not a question that can be merely answered with a yes or no; nor can it be truly quantified and explained in black and white terms. Many professionals prior to and after 1997 have experienced a situation much like Meyers described (Owton, Bondy, & Tod, 2014). Sport has grown into a multibillion dollar industry and with this growth comes additional pressure for athletes, teams, and organizations to perform. With the goal of

achieving the highest levels of performance, organizations and teams are hiring a growing number of professionals to work with their athletes. It is not an uncommon sight when watching a college or professional basketball game to see just as many staff members wearing suits and ties on a bench as there are players. Along with what are often considered traditional roles, such as strength coaches, nutritionists, and specialized positional coaches, professionals from other fields are increasingly finding employment in sport—for instance, biomechanical specialists, sleep experts, and statisticians. These various professionals often work together as part of a high-performance team (HPT). Sport psychology professionals (SPPs) who desire to work at the highest levels of sport are finding they need to learn to work as a part of these HPTs (Gustafsson, Holmberg, & Hassman, 2008; Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004). If SPPs cannot make their value known, then it is very possible the experience Dr. Meyers had nearly two decades ago will persist—the potential role of the SPP will be ignored, or filled by members of other disciplines.

The value of a working on a HPT is that it lends to the benefit of the client by having experts from multiple disciplines working collectively to create an action plan that mirrors the desire of the client, whether that client is an individual athlete, a team, or an organization. Ideally, the various professionals work within their competency and do not venture outside of their respective scopes of practice. When done well, a synergy exists among the various professionals as they work together to aid the client in reaching his or her potential: communication is clear, goals are known and shared by all parties, and the parties believe in the value of not only their own services, but the services of their colleagues as well.

Work within such HPTs has been discussed previously, often in regards to injury recovery (e.g., Wiese-Bjornstal & Smith, 1999). Injury recovery is an ideal setting for collaborative work, as the experiences and needs of the athlete—be they physical needs, emotional needs, or logistical needs—require the competencies of many professionals (e.g., athletic trainers, medical doctors, and specialists, as well as SPPs). Along these lines, Gustafsson, Holmberg, and Hassman (2008) discussed a successful experience of working as a HPT for an athlete recovering from underperformance. In this case, using psychological measurements administered by the SPP on the HPT proved to be effective for measuring overtraining and led to the suggestion of using the psychological measures as an indication of maladaptive training.

Working within a HPT is not without its challenges. Developing a shared vision and working model, developing trust, creating an atmosphere in which change is expected and viewed as necessary, encouraging open communication, and clarifying roles are a few of the many challenges that may exist (Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004). Implicit and explicit pressure may exist among the members of a HPT to differentiate oneself, or one's profession, from other service providers. This can become an issue because by trying to differentiate oneself professional boundaries become blurred and discomfort, anxiety, and anger can arise within the HPT (Frost, Robinson, & Anning, 2005). Organizational or structural issues might also be present (Meyers, 1997). It is crucial SPPs understand the various levels of organizational culture, the culture of the entire organization they are working for (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) as

well as the culture, or subculture, of the HPT itself (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012b). Understanding these important constructs helps to ensure that the strengths of the HPT are utilized, and protects from potential negative outcomes such as role ambiguity and role conflict.

The purpose of this article is to further explore the elements of a HPT. Keeping the opening statement in consideration, first the potential stakeholders found on a HPT will be examined with a focus on an often overlooked HPT member. Secondly, the concept of micropolitics will be defined and discussed. Thirdly, the importance and influence of culture will be taken into account, and finally, future implications for applied SPPs entering into a working environment with a HPT will be addressed.

Potential stakeholders

With the ever changing dynamics in sport, professionals involved in a HPT are changing as well. The inclusion of potential stakeholders of a HPT can vary based on the sport, competition level, and available resources. Common professions whose roles are generally well understood include: coach, physician, exercise physiologist, athletic trainer, physical therapist, strength coach, and dietician/nutritionist (Gustafsson, Holmberg, & Hassman, 2008; Wiese-Bjornstal & Smith, 1999). Increasingly, other professionals are being included. Collins, Moore, Mitchell, and Alpress (1999) mentioned the presence of biomechanists, match analysts, and lifestyle consultants. In addition, the inclusion of technology professionals who are responsible with handling biofeedback devices or other technologies being used to promote performance is becoming more common. Within many sporting environments, there is one member not often considered but of utmost importance, and that member is the agent. The use of the term agent within this article is used as a generic title to represent persons with titles ranging from agent, team manager, marketing manager, or handler. The agent can be a person involved internally within an organization on behalf of an athlete, or someone representing the athlete separate from the organization. With the exponential growth in the value of contracts, agents are continuously aware of where and what their client (in this case, an athlete) is doing.

Contact and discussion with an agent is often done through a head coach or other leadership role. However, the growing visibility of, and athletes' reliance on the agent, increases the likelihood SPPs and other members of the HPT will need to interact with the agent. It may simply be to schedule appointments, or, the agent may desire or even insist on being present during various training activities. I (the first author), experienced such an occurrence working with an elite sport organization. The agent was the primary contact person for any discussion or planning regarding an athlete. If an athlete came by the organization's headquarters to train in the gym, the agent had arranged it or was notified upon the athlete's arrival. The agent also frequently observed training. If an athlete was to be invited for a performance camp, the approval of the agent was needed. The agent made arrangements for specific event participation and would travel to meet the athlete at such events. I also discovered the agent frequently suggested the use of sport psychology services to an

athlete and then arranged these important sessions. It was important the agent not only understood my role, but also understood my value and knew how to convey that value to the athletes. Given the common acceptance of agents within training settings, SPPs may find the agent expects to be present during sessions with an athlete. In these cases, it is imperative the athlete, agent, and SPP discuss and come to a mutual agreement on when the agent's presence is appropriate or not appropriate.

Micropolitics

Whenever two or more human beings are involved in some form of collective activity, public, private, formal, or informal, politics are involved (Potrac & Jones, 2009). Burns (1961) argued that politics is the exploitation of both physical and human resources to achieve more control over others, and thus creating a safer, more comfortable experience for the individual. The relevance of politics exists within a sport organization as it consists of an intricate system of historically and socially constructed hierarchies (Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Neil, 2012) and interactions in such a complex organization determine system behavior in which relationships between people become vital (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a). In one of his most famous publications, Dr. Ken Ravizza (1988) discussed the need to pay careful attention to the political organization as one of his three barriers to gaining entry with a sport organization.

Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten (2013) also echoed Ravizza's sentiment stating that to work successfully within a HPT there is a need to possess both a role-focused and department-focused understanding of politics. With various organizational positions and stakeholders continually interacting, political structures develop within, and around, a HPT. There is a need to not only understand political structures, but also the concept of micropolitics. Micropolitics are the political interactions that take place between social actors in organizational settings, such as a sporting organization (Potrac & Jones, 2009). It is through the constant micro-political interactions that political structures develop. A more in-depth definition is described by Blase (1991):

Micro-politics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals. In large part, political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with a motivation to use power and influence and/or to protect ... Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are part of the realm. (p. 11)

Within a HPT, micropolitics affect the setting and achievement of goals. There is an ultimate goal and purpose of improving the performance of clients, but each professional has their own shared and private goals which often includes securing and keeping one's position. It is imperative SPPs consider micropolitics with regards to keeping their job; however, it does not take precedence over the primary objective to facilitate performance for the client.

Potrac and Jones (2009) discussed how understanding micropolitics can lead to avoiding conflicts with existing staff members. SPPs who preview how they might develop a reputation, who can forge effective alliances (Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004) that aid not only their goals but the goals of the entire HPT, and understand the importance of being aware of the utility of micropolitics will be best prepared for effective work within a HPT setting. The needs of the client(s) are paramount for all SPPs, and the engagement in any political activities cannot interfere with, nor take precedence over, the various ethical obligations such as confidentiality. Thus, perhaps more so than many of the other members of the HPT, SPPs must balance making sure their work is valued and understood by their fellow HPT members while also ensuring they are adhering to their professional (American Psychological Association, 2010; Whelan, 2015) and personal ethics. SPPs who can effectively communicate their value can become an integral part of the day-to-day functioning of a HPT (Neff, 1990).

Culture

High-performance culture

When orientating with, or currently working within a HPT, it is invaluable for a SPP to understand how culture plays an integral part in how the HPT functions. Cruickshank and Collins (2012b) define a high-performing culture as:

Shared values, beliefs, expectations, and practices across the members and generations for a defined group ...[and] prevail when the shared perception and action of elite team environment members (a) support sustained optimal performance; (b) persists across time in the face of variable results ... and most importantly; (c) leads to consistent high performance. (p. 340)

Keeping the above definition in mind will assist a SPP's awareness of essential components and illuminate how internal and external elements can impact high-performing culture.

Internal elements can be broken down into three categories: artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions (Schien, 2004). Artifacts are the most transparent component, referencing what can be seen, heard, or felt. Though artifacts can be easily identified, the meaning is not always clear, therefore, many artifacts do not give a complete picture. Espoused values show wants and desires of the organization and their importance. Finally, at the deepest level of culture are basic assumptions—the subconscious, almost thoughtless guides for members that produce a mental map of what to pay attention to and how to react.

External elements in a high-performance culture need to be considered as well. The leaders within an organization, because of their control and ultimate ability to make decisions, are a critical external element of culture. Fans can have a significant impact on team culture as their position is relative to generating financial, social, and psychological capital. A final element is the media, with their ability to mediate (or create) perceptions of the leader(s), fans, staff, and the performers (Cruickshank

& Collins, 2012b, 2013). These external influences can have an impact on the perception and functioning of not only the HPT, but the client. A SPP can be proactive in educating all personnel in understanding how that impact can occur and how to block out the distractions.

Culture change

With a HPT being a complex system, the continual process of interpretation, conflict, and activity produces ever-changing patterns of rule (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2013). When change happens, it needs to be managed so that the optimization of performance can remain paramount. Cruickshank and Collins (2012a) described the idea of change management as a process that involves constantly renewing an organization's structure, direction, and capabilities to meet the internal and external customers' ever-changing needs. This idea is evident in the longitudinal work of Gilmore and Sillince (2014) as they discussed institutional change and ultimate deinstitutionalization of a HPT within an English Premier League club. Their findings suggested that particular stakeholders can be responsible for how high-performing culture is comprised. However, it is not necessarily in those stakeholders' interests to keep that culture alive upon their departure, thus creating turmoil and deinstitutionalization. It is during such change that members of a HPT can experience emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal responses in various, distinct stages (Wagstaff, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2015).

During times of change in a high-performance culture, maintaining optimal performance is not an easy task and will unlikely be smooth and uncontested—as exemplified above (Gilmore & Sillince, 2014). Effective professionals need to not only know the systems and structures of within a culture, but also which ones to apply, modify, or terminate, when to do so, and they need to be able to decipher why one direction is more valuable than another (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013).

Implications

To be successful working within a HPT, students of sport psychology and neophyte SPPs need to become versed in more than just sport psychology theory. For this to occur, it is essential to have more exposure and training in other organizational dynamics. Doing so can have multiple positive effects. It can help to increase the SPP's competence in other domains. It can also help the SPP become more comfortable with other fields' terminology, methods, and assumptions. Doing so increases a SPP's ability to interact effectively with other professionals. Graduate school is often done in discipline isolation where many graduate students spend the majority of their time around other students of their own discipline (Newswander & Borrego, 2009). Inherently, these individuals understand and value sport psychology work. By increasing their exposure to students and professionals of other fields, students will grow comfortable with learning to translate what it is they do, and why it is important, to members of other professions—a needed and potentially not often practiced skill.

Along these lines, Cruickshank and Collins (2013) expressed concern and asked whether current programs are helping to produce SPPs that are equipped for the challenges surrounding a HPT. Fletcher and Arnold (2011) further discussed the need for SPPs to gain exposure and training in other academic disciplines and broaden their competencies by studying areas such as occupational psychology, organizational behavior, operations management, human resources management, and team performance management. In gaining more exposure in different competencies, SPPs can discover areas outside of traditional sport in which they can facilitate performance, an idea that dates back nearly fifteen years to Gould (2002a; 2002b). A prime example is the work done by Jones (2002) whereby he reflected upon his experience working in sport and the many commonalities that exist when applying sport psychology principles to the business world. He mentioned the most significant conclusion he found was organizational issues have the largest impact on performance in both sport and business; an issue many SPPs may not have significant training in. By seeking training and experience with culture and culture change, professionals cannot only potentially unlock additional career pathways, they will be better able to function within complex performance environments such as a HPT.

When joining a HPT, there are often considerations to take into account regarding confidentiality (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; McCann, 2000), role clarity (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009), and the referral process (Heaney, 2006). Certain teams and organizations may possess different expectations of the three above mentioned aspects and it can cause confusion for a newly hired SPP. In these cases, the SPP has three potential responses: try to change the team's or organization's expectations, change their own expectations, or decide that the team or organization is not a fit and seek employment elsewhere. Through education and well developed rational, the first option might be attainable. All SPPs entering into a high-performance environment should reflect on the second option. For instance, in regards to confidentiality, professionals should preview the arrangements in which they would feel comfortable and uncomfortable. Many sporting organizations expect the various professionals of the HPT to collaborate and be open about the knowledge of the athletes they possess. It is very likely in these environments that SPPs would be asked to share their perceptions of, and even their conversations with, the athletes. If this is the case, and the SPP has prepared for this setting, they can modify their work with athletes accordingly. They must ensure to not promise confidentiality when it cannot be delivered. Alternatively, they could position themselves in an evaluative role for the organization as opposed to a role of consultant for the athlete. In these situations the client becomes not the athlete, but the organization; an arrangement many professionals would not be comfortable with. If this is the case, everyone is better served if this is decided upon prior to the SPP beginning to do work. The SPP will be saved the stress of wrestling with the situation, and the organization will be saved the potential frustration of having a HPT member whose behavior does not align with its expectations.

Another potential avenue for leveraging a HPT is to create private HPTs to assist teams and organizations. These created and private HPTs can be used to bring

high-performance approaches to a wider audience. Athletes at lower levels of sport, including many colleges, do not have access to the various professionals and services a HPT can provide. Hiring and developing a HPT can prove to be too costly for these organizations. If these organizations could instead contract with an existing HPT, the cost could drop considerably. The HPT can afford to offer their services at a rate less than the organization would face with an in-house HPT because they can sign contracts with multiple organizations. Prior to the formation of such a HPT, an athlete charter (Collins, Moore, Mitchell, & Alpress, 1999) can be created by the professionals to address potential issues surrounding confidentiality, ethical dilemmas, role clarity, and referral processes. In doing so, many of the concerns SPPs have experienced in joining a HPT can be eradicated. An athlete charter addressing role clarity within a HPT is of particular importance. Not only establishing who is in charge of certain processes, but also designating a specific member to be a lead role and distributor of information to an athlete. Gustafsson, Holmberg, and Hassman (2008) acknowledged and successfully integrated this point within their HPT by designating the SPP, who is uniquely qualified to fulfill such a role knowing the emotional distress athletes can experience (Mankad, Gordon, & Wallman, 2009). Such a charter can then be presented to teams and organizations as a means of exhibiting philosophy, value, and the HPT's conceptualization of performance.

The world of elite-level sport and performance is ever changing. The value of organizations continue to rise, and with this rise in value comes an increased desire to identify means to increase performance. The search of enhanced HPTs have become a common model of practice. Without developing means to become part of such trans-disciplinary groups, and without knowledge on how to leverage the benefits of a HPT, current and future SPPs may continue to find themselves in the same predicament as Dr. Meyers (1997) described—sitting on the sidelines while other professionals deliver similar services.

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