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Malaysian volunteer coaches' motivation through psychological contract theory: Implications for lifelong sport coaching volunteering

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Abstract

This study examines how sport administrator manages sports volunteer coaches (VCs) using Psychological Contract (PC) theory as framework. Using qualitative methodology, five participants were chosen and they are an executive, a chief coach, and three active volunteer coaches. The findings revealed that sport administrator expects VCs to produce good results. VCs perceived intrinsic job characteristics, good faith and fair dealing, and works conditions as important motivation factors in volunteerism. The study showed a lack of good HRM practices in sport organisations. VCs look forward for professional structure and operation organisation that can assist them in promoting youth athletics development. Suggestions on the development of lifelong volunteering for sport coaches are also presented.

Keywords: Volunteer coach, psychological contract, sport association management

1. Introduction

Volunteerism refers to people who out of free choice contribute his time, effort, skills, knowledge, and expertise for the benefit of community without any financial gain (Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye & Darcy, 2006, Government of Western Australia, 2002)^[1, 20, 2]. Volunteers are crucial to the sport industry in general (Kim, Zhang & Connaughton, 2010)^[3] especially in amateur sports (Catano, Pond & Kelloway, 2001)^[4]. Volunteer position such as a coach is critical in providing a foundation for youth sport development and enjoyment (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004) and enhances its participation and performance (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004)^[6]. Coaches in schools are teachers that teach specific sport skills, compound knowledge, lead and discipline, guide psychosocially and groom young athletes to release their potential through sport (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004, Raedeke, 2004)^[7,8,9]. In order to fulfil these multiple-roles, these coaches need to acquire multiple-competencies such as knowledge (specific sport and sport science), skills, pedagogy, philosophy, communication, reflexion and feedback. Therefore, quality coaches need to develop their skills and experience in coach management and administration (Busser & Carruthers, 2010)^[6]. The competence level of youth sport coaches as acknowledged by O'Connor & Bennie (2006)^[10] was within the range of inexperienced parent-volunteer to a highly skilled and paid coach of an elite youth programme. Volunteer coaches (VCs) are motivated by factors such as pure altruism (values), personal growth (learn and develop competence), and co-production (child in the team) (Busser and Carruthers, 2010)^[6]. In addition, coaches who are satisfied with their coaching efficacy, experience and social support developed a habit of volunteering that leads to lifelong volunteering (Paiement, 2007)^[11]. VCs are scarce resources; they are not easy to be replaced and need to be trained and guided by full-time qualified coaches before they can provide effective volunteer coaching services.

In Malaysia, sport volunteerism is on the decline, increasingly so in the number of teachers serving as VCs. In line with this, there must be an effective and active developmental volunteer programme in Malaysian sports associations. Systems must be developed to create a sustainable volunteer force in Malaysian sports and the success of Malaysian sports relies on its capability to face challenges of recruiting, retention, and training of quality youth sport coaches. Sports organisations always aim for sufficient supply of compatible, qualified, well prepared, and life-long committed volunteers to serve (Liao-Troth, 2008)^[12].

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Effective management becomes an important consideration for volunteer organisations to achieve a sustainable rate. To develop volunteering as a lifelong habit, sport administrators need to understand VCs' needs, motive, psychology and how to deal with them in order to balance up the volunteers' satisfaction and minimise retention problems.

The Psychological Contract (PC) refers to an unwritten exchange relationship agreement between an individual and his organization that forms by the organization (Rousseau, 1995)^[13]. Thus, it is intangible and subjective. The concept of Psychological Contract (PC) was introduced by Macneil (1985)^[14] on relational-transactional continuum. Transactional focuses on monetary or economic short term exchange while relational constitutes socio-emotional and economic exchange which are relation-oriented based on trust-loyalty, long term, and rewards based on performance. Rousseau (2000)^[15] has developed a PC scale to measure transactional (narrow and short term), relational (stability and loyalty), balanced (external employability, internal advancement and dynamic performance), and transitional (mistrust, uncertainty and erosion) contract. Understanding and application of PC is crucial for managing personal deal to improve organizational effectiveness leadership and organizational culture (Wellin, 2007)^[16]. Consequently, managers have to be cautious in making and keeping promise for retaining employees (Rodwell & Gulyas, 2013)^[17]. In this study, the focus is on PC's theoretical framework adapted from Rousseau (2000)^[15], Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1998)^[18], volunteers setting by Liao-Troth (2001)^[19], Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, and Cuskelly (2006)^[20, 1], and Nichols and Ojala (2009)^[21]. It consists of four types of promises: (1) adhere to professional standard (2) good faith and fair dealings; (3) intrinsic job characteristics; and (4) working condition.

In Malaysia there is a lack of institutional and legal framework for volunteering in sports. All sports associations in Malaysia run their own programme without proper guidance or support from the government. With this in mind, the purpose of this study is twofold: Firstly, to explore how the amateur athletics association in Malaysia manages its VCs with reference to Human Resource Management (HRM); secondly, to understand the current experiences of various personnel in this association by individually interviewing the administrator and the youth sport VCs' mutual expectation based on PC theory. The study aims to identify weaknesses in the existing management system and provide possibly positive solutions to a better management platform for volunteer coaching in sport management with reference to proven case studies of effective management in an amateur athletics association at state level in Malaysia. A vivid understanding of youth sport VCs and the amateur sport association's mutual expectation is a crucial research domain in youth sports development due to its tremendous impact to general sports, social well-being, national goodwill and economic growth. An effective management of youth sport VCs will improve the quality of volunteer sport coaching and enhance sports development. In addition, it will encourage more people to be VCs and make volunteering a lifelong habit. With this in mind, the study aimed to adopt the PC theory as a basis to develop an effective management system for the subject matter. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the motivation factors of youth sports VCs?
- (2) What are the expectations of youth sports VCs from the sport association administrator?

- (3) What are the sport association administrator's expectations toward the youth sports VCs?
- (4) What is the HRM practices used to manage youth sports VCs in the local context?

2. Material & methods

This study only chose one of the amateur sport associations, which is athletics association within one of the most active states that produces high performance athletes out of 15 states in Malaysia. Five participants of a state level amateur athletics association from Malaysia being selected for this study. They held positions as an executive, a chief coach, and three active volunteer coaches.

This paper applied Taylor *et al.* (2006)^[1, 20] PC theoretical framework to explore the mutual exchange, expectations, and perceptions of a state level amateur athletics association's volunteering HRM practices and its youth sport VCs. HRM adopted in this study were based on general practices because the organisation has not applied any Total Quality Management (TQM). This study adopted the qualitative method to gain a flexible, rich and in-depth understanding with subjective qualities from the participants' views of their natural settings (Holliday, 2007; Merriam, 2009)^[22, 23]. Thus, this research process was inductive in nature. Semi-structured interview guides were prepared before conducting interviews based on the tenet of HRM practices and PC theoretical framework. Each interview took between 30 to 45 minutes, but there were two interviews, which extended the planned timing due to external interruptions. Since this research was a small-scale case study, member checks with respondents were used to achieve internal validity, credibility and trustworthiness of the data collection (Maxwell, 2005)^[24]. Each of the audio recordings from the interview sessions was replayed for manually transcribed verbatim convenience. The transcripts were then being read and reduced into coding, categories and theme by relating to the PC and HRM theories. The data analysis was based on research questions focused for forming the categories, theme and conclusions.

3. Results and Discussion

This section addresses the key themes from the interviewed data. Each extracted data was indented with italic, and source of reference was denoted by volunteer coach (VC) one, two and three (i.e. VC1, VC2, and VC3); while chief coach was denoted as CC. Each presentation of findings was followed with a discussion.

3.1 Youth Sport Volunteer Coaches' Motivation

A number of points on motivation were asked and the VCs responded as follows:

All athletic volunteer coaches coach the youths out of sheer passion and love for the respective sport.

VC3 expressed his points of view:

... because of the passion for the sports. I think because eh ... love the school, our children win ... they are perform well, I am satisfied.

When discussing about a decline trend of teachers' involvement as coaches was raised, the following statements were recorded:

We (VC1 and VC2) are the dying breed, yes, yes, dinosaur already – we all exactly.

We are not doing for anyone. We are just doing for the kids, just for the love of the sport, is the passion.

We are the few men, have passion, that is it.

The VCs were asked about challenges and VC2 responded:

You ask me why I don't go there (National Sport Council), I don't know. It is like too easy for me there. I want difficult life. I want to train an athlete from zero. The satisfaction is much better than you already have talented athlete. How far can they improve?

VC3 illustrated:

Here, I develop an athlete from zero until he becomes a champion. I go there (sport school), they are already very good. So, I am not much interested in that kind of job. I love to develop an athlete from zero until become a champion. I think it will satisfy me more.

The above responses were consistent with one of the construct in Taylor *et al.*'s (2006) [1,20] PC theory of "Intrinsic job characteristics", where these VCs portrayed strong interest and great passion in their work; they nurture the future of these young athletes whom they taught from nothing to become a champion with a balanced personality development (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004, Raedeke, 2004) [7, 8, 9]. The job is very meaningful to them, despite the high challenges and responsibilities that wait for them (Busser & Carruthers, 2010) [6]. However, over the years of hard work, they have begun to consider ceasing from being a coach. This will be a loss to future aspiring young athletes specifically, and for the state and nation in general as a champion is developed and nurture from grassroots. The VC2 was quoted:

We keep asking ourselves, asking how long you want to do it. I thought I want to stop. What will happen?

What happens to the kids in this state if they want to run? See, both of us sit down like oh! Yeah eh, then you stop first. Then I say never mind, I got few years then will stop.

The aforementioned data have shown that the VCs are seriously keen to develop aspiring young athletics. Therefore, how to retain them to continue to serve further is a priority that sport associations must undertake.

3.2 Youth Sport Volunteer Coaches Expectations towards the Administrator

From the individual interview, the interviewees revealed that they wish to have fair and professional treatment because sport association is perceived to be professional and organised. In addition, these VCs are professional coaches and teachers that cultivate, develop and grow these young athletes. In the process of coaching for excellence, these coaches require professional assistance. The follow data revealed the actual scenarios of these VCs' experiences on fair treatment:

VC2 commented:

Ah!! Career? What career development? They sent the coaches for seminars, and all that. They sent their friends for courses and all that.

VC3 critiqued that:

I asked them several times to send me to Level 2 but until now... because they got their cronies, cronies means their former athletes. So, they sent them. But, they are not in school.

VC2 expressed his frustration that:

By the time you go through the Association, one, I know I will be shot down; two, they will never listen; three, the money they see there they think we are making money ... this budget is for this purpose, that's it. We want it for the kids.

These VCs require professional assistance in coaching along their career paths. On the other hand, the Chief Coach (CC) claimed that he is always open to offering assistance to coaches, especially the novice coaches, such as:

Ok, let's say you have no result. May be we will ask what is your problem. If you said because no facility, then, we see if we can arrange place like this one, open ground (track), you can bring your athletes here. This is one option. If you are not knowledgeable enough, may be you can share with us ... join us ... may be learn at the same time. Of course as a coach, you have to make sure that whenever competitions available send them for exposure.

Perhaps the CC has played his role, however, the VC2 responded differently towards the organisation:

IAAF can recognise me for my work ... we correspond through email you know, technology. So any professional, you know, once you tell what you doing, even they are busy, they know. Not like our people – go and tell them, they are busy, cannot see them, today cannot, tomorrow difficult.

Sport specific coaching and sport science is crucial knowledge and skills for coaching application. Particularly, the sport sciences approach like "biopsy testing" of lab testing instead of just "field-testing" that has brought up by VC2. As an ordinary volunteer-run sport association, it needs to have networking and help from the National Sport Council for these applications, if there is any. Notwithstanding the above, the VCs did praise the association for their expertise in organising competitions that enable their athletes to participate. The praise from VC2 was:

Association is good at that. They are fantastic at organising. Organising, marvellous! They do a good job.

3.3 Working Conditions

The athletic coaches' career (training and skill) development path under this study is restricted by the domination of the administrator on who to attend available coaching qualified courses, which are normally organised by NSC. In addition, they faced difficulties in seeking professional assistance. VC2 spoke of such frustration as follow:

I am so lucky to have diploma. I have recognition from the International Athletic Federation (IAF). So it is, RM600 is the maximum for volunteer coaches. Right, I am still stagnant at RM500 because I haven't gone to second and third. I always keep telling them I can never go 2 & 3 (sport science course) because the national, the local state will never nominate my name! There was once I suppose to go, I couldn't go, the time clashed and all that.

VC3 also spoke of the need for advancement in coaching careers:

I have several times asked them to send me to Level 2 but until now... because I have done my Level 1 since 1998, long long time already, more than ten years. So, I am interested to go to Level 2.

All these respondents and athletes are very serious in their career training and improvement. On average, a VCs provides training sessions 5 days per week as reported in the demographic section. The setback was an over emphasis on victory without providing much assistance in the long-term course of systematic and scientific training and preparing athletes. VC2 retrieved memories on how the administrators' responded to him:

They say they will support – go and ask them. Oh! They say yeah, yeah, we did support, we go to schools, we give them money, we give them that and this. Is there support? You tell me, what support?

3.4 Welfare Support

3.4.1 Volunteer Coaches' Welfare Support

Even though they are volunteers, the VCs bear similar legal liabilities like full-time coaches. In addition, there is no legal support to safeguard the VCs if anything happens to them. Therefore, it is suggested that sports organisations take considerable risk management measures to protect these VCs from any unforeseen circumstances. The CC has shown concerned on this matter:

All the VCs have no insurance coverage by the association ...

3.4.2 Athletes' Welfare Support

Youth are growing and developing in all aspects of life. They require basic physiological, psychological and materialistic support for a balanced and wholesome development. The coaches revealed that:

Every day, after training I feed them you know. They go to canteen. The canteen caterer after recess, they sell cheaper food. I make sure they eat, eat a little bit, so they don't have empty stomach ...because my kids are mainly from average to poor children ... I have been doing that for many many years.

VC2 expressed that:

So we know, sports works overall, it is not just on the field, off the field as well, personal growth development, everything, all comes in. We have to look after them. Yah! We tell association, he will never know. He will tell you A to Z about the 'peraturan', the Law and the Law and Regulations which is irrelevant. For whom? For your own benefit, you want to run the thing. What about the athletes, the welfare of the athletes?

3.5 Monetary Support

On monetary support provided by the associations VC 2 reported:

Yes, they do, two years once for the Malaysian Games. Exactly, no! If you are reading, listening to what I am saying, every once in two years, only for the Malaysian Games. They give you all that, that's it. Why? Because they want the association to produce how many gold medals, that's it. Prior to that, actually, they don't consider the hours you must do the work earlier.

VC3 suggested:

At least pay the athletes, not the coach. Even though not very much, let say RM1.00 per day for attending training. One month – RM30. Young school children this is enough for them to buy drinks and food. We do not ask them give much money. No, just RM1.00 - RM2.00 per session ...give them some allowance and so the athletes will be interested to come for training ... sometime we got some very potential athletes, but no money is the problem.

3.6 Recognition and Appreciation

The association gives incentive to the athletes and coaches based on their performance in national meets like Malaysian Games and junior meets. Besides that, the association also

conducts "Family Day" (recognition day) as a gesture of recognition and appreciation to the athletes and coaches based on their performance. However, these approaches actually focus on few coaches and athletes that excel without taking into consideration the other coaches and athletes who worked hard the whole year round. CC reported:

If your (VC) athlete does well, we take him somewhere and we take you along as well.

3.7 Exemption of Competition Enrolment Fee

VC3 claimed:

The associations are not help. They help but not in a proper way. You just imaging, I have to pay RM4.00 to participate Talent Identification Competition (TID). They ask us to pay. What kind of sport development is this? Finally they reduce it to RM1.00. They have to, change! No entry free.

3.8 Facility and Equipment for Training

VC1 elaborated on the problems faced by coaches due to lack of facilities:

We do not have a track. We have a very bad field, wet and soggy almost the whole year round.

VC3 responded:

Regarding sport equipment for training, I brought this issue several times but they always said got no money. What can we do? We can do nothing! In Malaysia, every state's association is the same.

On the issue of athletes' personal sport equipment VC2 commented:

Money comes to us by one bulk. It goes back to the kids. We buy spikes for them, this, that everything. National eh State gives them? No, you can ask the authorities, don't ask me!

In short, the administrators lack the understanding and knowledge on the overall contribution of coaching in sport development. This underlying ignorance and misconception is reflected on poor VCs' management practices and is consistent with the literature (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004, Raedeke, 2004).

3.9 Close Collaboration among Relevant Sports Units

These VCs strongly agreed that and look forward to the Sport Council, Ministry of Education, and Athletic Association from national to state levels collaborating closely towards one goal, one target of developing athletics from nurturing, participation and to high performance. For example, VC2 responded:

Of course, we will love until the day comes. I think Malaysia can get gold medals in Commonwealth Games.

With a sound VC management from government bodies' in the form of cooperation, assistance and guidelines, even these VCs will be geared to train and motivate athletes to perform at international competitive levels.

3.10 Administrator Expectations towards the Youth Sport Volunteer Coaches

The administration and CC evaluate the VCs based on their athletes' performance. In fact, the volunteer coaches are also very much aware that the organisation's expectation is solely on winnings, good performance, and good results. CC said:

Evaluation only based on performance of the athletes.

Yes, based on performance of the athletes.

The administrator and CC have good faith and trust in VCs. CC revealed that:

So of course, this is based on good faith. We trust you. You will do a good job. This is kind of voluntary. Without trust how can I ask you to do this and do that.

3.11 Managing Youth Sport Volunteer Coaches

The organisation is more concerned with organising events or competitions. This means its management tends to handle short term or a one-off type of the volunteer official functions rather than the long-term service of VCs. Secondly, these VCs were getting scant attention and being neglected by the management despite their professional working ethics and independency that keeps them producing good results. The administrator and CC believed that these VCs are professional, but as volunteers have no right to demand from them. CC responded:

No, actually is no job description. This is volunteerism. We expect you to do some training and of course, your results will be seen when we have competition.

Administrator explained:

Coaches are teachers taken from schools ... because they are grassroots. Athletes come from the school ... the teacher is the best person to link the students ... train him up to a higher level.

The administrator organised VCs' meeting as and when required especially for selection purposes. With regards to coaching courses being organised by NSC, letters to these coaches were sent through the parent association. Furthermore, these coaching courses were conducted once only in "two or three years". Hence, there were time gaps in producing long-term qualified coaches. It is evident that there is an acute lack of co-ordination, communication and management of youth VCs in the chosen state, and is not wrong to state that it is happening nation-wide. In this local context, volunteerism has been taken for granted because there is no written contract and thus, PC has been neglected. The administrators have used this autonomy as an excuse and put a stop to the growth and advancement of youth sports development.

To be successful, effective and efficient, be it full-time, part-time or non-paid volunteer, grassroots development in any field of sports, all of these are essential for a nation. In Malaysia, we have talented youth VCs as we have efficient school system. What is required is a proper and effective management system to recruit, retain and train new replacements. In today's world, "money talks"; therefore, taking full advantage of the passion, interest and love for the specific sports, some form of PC between administrators and VCs must be practically formulated to ensure a sustaining healthy growing sport talent at all position and levels for the country to excel and be competitive internationally. Empirically, PC is a useful tool of personal deal to improve leadership performance and organizational culture change for effective management (Wellin (2007) ^[16] and continue volunteering intention (Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009) ^[25].

4. Conclusion

"In a free and democratic society, volunteering and civic participation are fundamental acts of citizenship essential to the well-being of a caring society" Taylor *et al.* (2006) ^[1,20]. Based on this study, more needs to be done in the Malaysian context to motivate people to develop a habit of volunteering that leads to lifelong volunteering as a coach. It is highly recommended that sports organisations should seriously

appoint full-time sport-related qualified HR personnel to act as an intermediary between VCs and the chief coach together with various government bodies. This would immediately resolve the issue of the lack of communication between the two parties concerned. The HR person will act as a spokesman and informer for the VCs and, for the state and national governing bodies. Of course, he must be fully supported and assisted by the IAAF for guidance through research and development exercises or studies conducted internationally. With his presence, other pertinent issues can be resolved such as purchasing new equipment and tools, organising periodical seminars or courses on coaching excellence, incentive or recognition schemes, insurance coverage, coaching career development, and networking through meetings. Administrative functions such as correspondence, reporting, various techniques application and evaluation, sport clinics, sports school programmes, educational and career needs of athletes and many more can be organised, co-ordinated and managed more efficiently. All these VCs must be given recognition and get full support from these state and national level associations. This suggestion falls within the ambit of PC theory. Case studies highlighted earlier are a clear indication of the success of athletes in countries that are, one way or another, adopting and applying the PC theory.

This study has explored the expectations of VCs in Malaysian sports and the current inefficient HRM practices in managing them. The enthusiastic and active VCs need sports association to be professional in providing, facilitating and assisting them in developing youth athletics. Undeniably, they identified themselves as volunteers but there is a lack of a sense of belonging and sincere appreciation showed by state and national level sports organisations. By identifying the mutual expectations, especially these VCs' expectations, Malaysian sports organisation can adopt realistic HRM practices to improve VCs' management. Programmes can also be developed to encourage a healthy habit of volunteering among people that may lead to lifelong volunteering. Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are suggested to develop lifelong volunteering:

1. Provide volunteer opportunities that meet the basic needs (such as benefits, protection, recognition, professional HRM personnel, training benefits and sincere support) of making a contribution and developing skills of each aspiring sport individual.
2. Provide greater awareness to potential volunteers about volunteering and the benefits it brings to volunteers, communities and organisations
3. Provide alternative ways to recognise volunteers' contribution in sports associations besides giving monetary allowances.
4. Explore varied roles for people to volunteer in sports besides coaching.
5. Identify and remove barriers to volunteering in sports.

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