A case study: the AFL as a positive institution

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- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
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Abstract

The Australian Football League (AFL) is a leading professional sports organization within the multi-billion-dollar entertainment industry. This case study uses publicly available information to investigate the AFL in terms of its credentials as a positive institution using the good work model developed by Stansbury and Sonenshein (2012). The AFL has taken advantage of the economic rationalism and developed a corporate structure able to deliver a range of good work activities. For example, developmental programs that help players exceeding high community expectations. This study suggests that the good work model is beneficial for cognitive resources, normal functioning, regulatory focus, and impression formation. The AFL appears to answer Cameron et al. (2004) call to identify and enable flourishing and life-giving aspects of their organisation and, thus, represents a kind of positive institution. Finally, the study recognizes positive institutions as worthwhile but raises concerns about the uniqueness and lack of cultural research.

Key words: Australian Football League, positive institution, good work model, flourishing

Introduction

This case study investigates a professional sports organization as a positive institution. Positive Institutions represent organizational and structural practices that outwardly elevate, magnify, and refract to the world our highest human strengths (Cooperrider, 2012). Recognition of this institution type has evolved from the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and represents one of its three pillars. The other pillars being positive subjective feelings and individual traits. Peterson (2006) suggests that such positive institutions exist among families, schools, businesses, communities, and societies that promote human flourishing. Positive institutions emphasize responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethics. The organizational and social benefits of positive institutions are gaining support and recognition from the business world (Laszlo, Cooperrider, & Fry, 2020). However, this third pillar of positive psychology remains under-researched (Budzińska, 2018), rarely, if at all, examined within the professional sports industry. We aim to overcome this deficit by examining the Australian Football League (AFL) using the good work model developed by Stansbury and Sonenshein (2012) and augments our understanding of ethics.

The good work model theorizes specific positive counterparts to unethical behavior and introduces concepts such as discretionary, praiseworthy, and positively deviant aspects to the ethical debate (Stansbury & Sonenshein, 2012). As

a result, this model (a) expands the decision criteria and process, and draws on additional cognitive resources (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), (b) enables normal functioning to move from problematic (i.e., deficit gap) to virtuous (i.e., abundance gap) issues (Cameron, 2003), (c) encourages a regulatory focus that moves from prevention (i.e., safety and danger) to promotion (i.e., achievement and accomplishment) concerns (Higgins, 1998), and finally (d) facilitate cognitive categories and heuristic from system one to system two impression formation processes (Brewer, 1988). Previously normative behavioral ethic literature primarily focuses on the processes that either lead or prevent unethical behaviors or decisions (Stansbury & Sonenshein, 2012). For example, the moral philosophy of utilitarianism/consequentialism investigates ethical decisions from the best overall outcome perspective (Scheffler, 1988). Unfortunately, such philosophies tend to disproportionately concentrate on the adverse human behavior and morality aspects (Spreitzer, Cameron, Stansbury, & Sonenshein, 2012). This focus encourages a fight or flight (flee) mentality (Wright & Cropanzano, 2004). Such a negative bias limits thinking and ignoring positive aspects of ethics, such as moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage (May, Luth, & Schwoerer, 2014). We argue that the good work model overcomes this limitation by expands our understanding of cognitive resources, normal functioning, regulatory focus, and impression formation. Such expansion can empower leaders to increase their behavioral repertoire.

Professional sports industry and the AFL?

Over the last four decades, the professional sports industry has emerged from suburban grassroots clubs into a multi-billion-dollar entertainment business. It enables talented players to earn millions of dollars for their skills in ensuring on-field success that translates into off-field financial prosperity (Duncan, 2018b). The Australian Football League is one of the most successful organizations within the professional sports industry. In 2019, this league accumulated a gross national audience during the ‘home and away’ season exceeded 91 million (Auld, 2019). The AFL employs 700 people, has nearly seven million attendees every season, 1055 elite athletes, 18 clubs, 1.4 million participants, 2755 community clubs, and reach 122 million people through our television viewership (The AFL, 2019). The Australian Football League (AFL) is headed by ten commissioners, who appoint the senior leader (i.e., the chief executive). The AFL appoints a general manager to their ten departments, who directly reports to the chief executive and are members of the AFL executive committee (The Australian Football League, n.d.). The AFL Chairman highlights their significant commitment to ensuring women and men have equal opportunity to advance and participate in the AFL fully as players, employees, volunteers, and supporters. They expect all who engage with our code to observe the terms of this Respect and Responsibility policy (The AFL, 2005). The AFL negotiates the overall pay and conditions for players (Niall, 2020).

Macro-system

Ethical pressure on the AFL can be understood from the macro-system (i.e., society and sectorial context) perspective. We argue elements within this system enables or inhibits an organization from being a “positive” institution. This ecological perspective allows the individual and contextual systems to be considered and interrelated simultaneously (Stokols, 1996). It improves our understanding of how the degree of globalization, urbanization, and environmental trends influence individuals’ attributes and behaviors (McLaren & Hawe, 2005). Other influences are apparent in chronosystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, and microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), but beyond this case study’s scope. ‘Economic rationalism’ is a crucial influence within the AFL’s political and economic setting, which positions market principles and imperatives as driving forces that underpin operations (Pusey, 1991). These macro forces place the accumulation of money (i.e., economic capital) as a primary objective for the league, clubs, sponsors, players, coaches, and support staff, enabling participation beyond the sporting field (Duncan, 2018a). Income generated enables positive operations, such as empowering diversity programs but inhibits size and duration. A range of macro-system elements influences decisions throughout the organization, such as the economy and competition with other football codes (e.g., rugby, soccer, & basketball).

Unfortunately, the recent pandemic and community health issues are becoming regular on-going influences and not just one-off events. The CEO Gillian McLachlan of the AFL described the pandemic or virus as their greatest threat ever (Walsh & Read, 2020). They are arguably the most apparent and high impact macro-system that has inhibited the AFL from being a positive institution. After all, community health concerns have shut down the AFL and cause a massive cash crisis that will last for years (Ralph, 2020). Also, the need to reduce concussion risks among AFL players who do not wear helmets threatens the game’s very nature (Ractilffe, 2021). However, typically, the community health trends, such as the need to exercise, encourage fans to improve physical and mental health, which are enablers for the AFL within the macrosystem. Such trends provide opportunities for the AFL to promote its credential as a positive organization in the media and community. While arguably, elite or spectator sports are no

guarantee for improving health in the community, the AFL's full spectrum of children to elite games has an extensive health footprint in the community. Finally, the extensive AFL promotional and advertising activities emphasize positive subjective feelings and traits. For example, a spectacular slow-motion vision of players leaping and kicking to the cheers of loving fans are effective positive role models in the community. Such images promote subjective feelings and desirable traits for players and spectators, which are positive psychology pillars. However, the AFL's reach relies on the interest their communities show in on and off-field activities.

Over the last 150 years, dramatic changes to the AFL have occurred. A once local, community-held, grassroots endeavor evolved into a multi-billion national dollar entertainment industry (Duncan, 2017). Such a trend has seen the disappearance of teams consisting of merely a coach and group of players and enabled the emergence of assistant coaches, line-coaches, managers, sports scientists, nutritionists, and fitness advisors (Duncan, 2016). These professions enable evidence-based knowledge communication to the greater community, which has significant benefits for the community served. As a significant part of the entertainment sector, the AFL transformation is influenced by the Media more than any other industry (Duncan, 2018b). This trend is unlikely to abate. The Media's influence on all of the AFL's corporate structure encourages them to play a leading role in issues that impact the broader community, such as equality and racism (see The AFL, 2005). This therefore capitalizes on Australian rules football's inherent position in the fabric of Australian society (Nauright, 2020) and reflects democratic principles (Warren, 2003). Such ideas represent what is good, right, and worthy of cultivation (McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Peterson, 2003) and are associated with moral goodness or virtuousness (Cameron, 2003). The AFL's equality and racism promotions and policies exist for their own sake and have inherent value (see Cameron, 2011). Thus, they are more compatible with Aristotle's (1999, as cited in Cameron, 2003) label of good. This label emphasizes such things as externally necessary and brings meaning to life (i.e., first intent); rather than moving things towards what is essential (i.e., second intent).

The AFL within the good work model

Traditionally, behavioral business ethics seize readers' attention by referring to scandals and suggesting how to prevent them (Spreitzer et al., 2012). Such an agenda reinforces the negative tendency or lens when examining behaviors (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and assumes that organizations will be more ethical by reducing or eliminating these aspects. In contrast, positive organizational scholarship addresses this innate virtuousness within organizations (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) and uses a positive lens to understand better and promote ethical behaviors (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Such a positive lens draws our attention to how organizations and their people engage in positive behaviors (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This case study examines the AFL's reaction to 'drink driving' player scandals by providing developmental programs in terms of the good work model lens.

This lens helps conceptually distinguishes good works from other constructs (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility) that emphasize positive behaviors descriptively (Stansbury & Sonenshein, 2012). Positively deviant represents intentional behaviors that positively deviate from norms (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004) and recognizes what 'ought or ought not to occur' (Clinard & Meier, 2001). The normative approach of positive deviance views such behavior as a departure from a referent group's norm in honorable ways (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). A reference group can exist in general principles of business norms (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). In terms of the AFL, economic rationalism is a dominant influence in their political and economic operating setting (Pusey, 1991). The AFL brand is a significant revenue-generating entity. Thus, the norm is for most organizations to avoid damaging the brand at all costs. The drink driving scandal (see Tiernan, 2020) directly damages the marketability of the AFL brand. Sacking the players would be an appropriate decision, from a rational economic perspective; after all, the world is not short of people wanting to be a professional and well-paid AFL player. People resigning for damaging their employers' brand is quite common or the norm in various industries. Banking scandals are a widely published example where CEOs resign for their poor behaviors (Butler, 2019). Sacking players could reduce revenue. However, spending money on these players via drink driving and personal development courses and paying players while suspended, on balance, represents positive deviant behaviors.

Morally praiseworthy is the second lens of Stansbury and Sonenshein's (2012) good work model. Such behaviors are above and beyond a moral duty or obligation that attaches no blame if not provided (Mellema, 1991) and recognizes a vision of a good life (Stansbury & Sonenshein, 2012). Duncan (2017) suggests the AFL promotes the vision of active participation, reaching one's full potential, and working towards shared and common goals. These positive images are inherent to Australian Rules Football and project visions of a good life. The AFL voluntary drink driving, managing finance, and diversity courses not only promotes this good life vision but provide players with the means to achieve them. Such programs demonstrate a degree of being morally praiseworthy, as they promote the individual

and collective well-being of players (Stansbury & Sonenshein, 2012) and take on the extraordinary responsibility for developing players that goes above and beyond what is required, that is supererogatory (see Heyd, 1982).

The third lens of Stansbury and Sonenshein's (2012) good work model is discretionary instead of obligatory behavior. AFL not only meet their obligations to reward their players adequately (i.e., obligatory behavior) but pays well compared to the average worker in terms of risk to their physical health (Morris, 2020). While market forces influence the amounts paid to players and their conditions, the provision of additional development programs is ultimately discretionary. Barnett (2007) could characterize it as improving the social welfare of players and enhancing stakeholder relationships. In summary, the AFL's bad behavior reduction programs represent good work. Their activities are (a) positively deviant, in terms of not sacking the player, and instead investing in them, (b) morally praiseworthy, in terms of helping players achieve a good life through improving their well-being, and (c) discretionary, in terms of going beyond payment for services (i.e., playing, and training) to one that encourages commitment, professionalism, and responsibility.

How worthwhile are positive institutions?

The current case study demonstrates how discussions, debates, and arguments about a positive institution's pros and cons are worthwhile and expand understanding of ethical issues beyond the negative. Simply avoiding negative and challenging interactions can ultimately be detrimental to a good life in organizations. Put simply, ignorance and silence about values such as virtue promote the negative bias that inhibits ethical behaviors. Researchers and policymakers gain from evidence-based and scientifically informed results (Duan, Chen, & Ho, 2020). The positive psychology movement is rapidly building this capacity. Further, Donaldson and Ko (2010) suggest that an essential benefit of the positive psychology field is the stimulus of new research and application. However, the critical question is, does the theory genuinely enable the leaders to enable their organizations to flourish. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Donaldson and colleagues (2019) support the conclusion that positive psychology interventions improved well-being and engagement but not overall performance indicators. Unfortunately, disconnects between organization and policy level reforms exist and challenge positive institutions' applicability (Rusk & Waters, 2013; White, 2016). Also, the unique and somewhat clumsy terminology is a significant inhibitor for implementation. More recent terminology, such as moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage (May et al., 2014), appears more popular within the positive organization ethics field. A systematic review and critique of healthy leadership research identified many similar issues (Cort, Murphy, & Zacher, 2020). Also, the impact assessment of cultural values and beliefs appears limited, despite positive psychology issues being more cultural-bound than other psychology sub-disciplines (Wong, 2013) and focusing on the self rather than the collective. Seligman (2019) sees that the range of positive topics (e.g., positive education) continues to expand and gather steam. However, the positive institution's critical challenge is to establish unique ideas beyond established research streams, such as organizational development. Finally, the idea that good work produced in positive institutions helps communities flourish remains an attractive vehicle for professional sports and business organizations. Moreover, it is compatible with the positive psychology objective "to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5).

Ethics approval and informed consent

This manuscript adheres to the university's ethical requirements. It uses only published secondary sources, which do not require formal approval from the established ethics committees.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interest in any commercial associations or financial interests

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