A Comparative Analysis of Sport and Business Organizations: Factors Perceived Critical for Organizational Success

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The purpose of the present investigation was to compare and contrast sport and business leaders’ perceptions regarding what makes for a successful organization. Twenty sport (N = 10) and business (N = 10) leaders were interviewed and asked about their perceptions of organizational effectiveness in the area of group dynamics including (a) leadership, (b) group cohesion, and (c) communication. Using qualitative methods, results revealed more similarities than differences, with most sport and business leaders in agreement on the factors relating to organizational success. Specifically, all higher- and lower-order themes were identified by leaders in both areas, the emphasis simply being a matter of degree. Some of the more notable differences included business leaders putting more emphasis on being honest and being a reflective listener, whereas sport leaders emphasize interactions with others and having positive reinforcement in their communications. These similarities and differences are discussed in terms of the extant literature, and future directions for research are offered, such as investigating how to specifically enhance the transfer of skills and principles between sport and business settings.

There appears to be no doubt that a body of literature revolving around the psychology of excellence in sports has grown immensely in the past 10 years or so (e.g., Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Jackson & Csikzentimahalyi, 1999; Starkes, Helsen, & Jack, 2001). This has resulted in performers (across different domains) striving for peak performance. For example, after carefully studying Olympic athletes for many years, Gould and colleagues (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medberry, & Peterson, 1999; Greenleaf, Gould, & Diffenback, 2001) have developed a pyramid model of peak athletic performance. This includes personality (e.g., optimism, locus of control) and motivational (e.g., reinforcements, goal-setting) factors at the base, peak performance strategies on one side (e.g., visualization, mental plans, positive self-talk), and coping with adversity skills (e.g., anxiety management, distraction control) on the other side. All three of these factors are surrounded by the physical, psychological, and organizational environment in which the athlete has to perform. Thus, an interactional perspective should be taken in preparing for optimal performance.

Similarly, a psychology of excellence orientation also has emerged within the business community, popularized by the best-selling book of Peters and Waterman (1982), as well
as more recent books by Frierson and Johnson (1995), Waterman (1994), Rollins and Roberts (1998), and Spitzer and Evans (1997). Initially, Peters and Waterman observed a number of companies and interviewed many corporate people who had managerial or higher positions within business organizations. They found eight basic attributes that helped make companies successful: a bias for action, staying close to the customer, encouragement of autonomy, treating employees with respect and dignity, a hands-on approach from upper management, staying close to what they know best, a lean staff, and having both centralized and decentralized aspects. In addition, empirical studies in the business sector (e.g., Kotter & Heslett, 1992; Moorman, 1993; Oliver, 1994; Rollins, 1993; Strenski & Luer, 1991) have been consistently trying to understand what factors contribute to an effective organization.

This focus on what makes for a successful business has expanded in recent years. Specifically, there has been a proliferation of anecdotal reports regarding the connections and similarities between successful leaders and organizations in the sport and business arenas. High-visibility, successful coaches—such as Pat Riley, Rick Pitino, Lou Holtz, Pat Summitt, Tommy Lasorda, and Mike Ditka—receive enormous fees to address the rank and file of large corporations such as General Motors, IBM, AT&T, and Ford. The implied expectation is that the principles of success that these famous coaches used to be successful in sport would be applicable and transferable to the world of business. Similarly, a number of popular books have been written by coaches, in which they often cite principles of success they feel are transferable between the sport and business worlds (e.g., Holtz, 1998; Jackson, 1995; Packer, 1999; Parcells, 1995; Pitino, 1997; Shanahan, 1999). Interestingly, business leaders think sport is important (which may or may not mean they apply principles from sport to business), as a recent survey indicated that about 30% of business executives turn first to the sports pages and only 2% start with the business section (Noble, 1994). In addition, business leaders often employ sport terminology to describe different aspects of their business. For example, the term coaching is now very popular in the business sector to describe help and mentoring that a more experienced individual might give to another worker. Along these lines, Rollins and Roberts (1997) noted that businesses have taken many analogies from American football in that it is very hierarchical (like many businesses). So the coaches (executive team) call the plays and the quarterback (middle management) is responsible for making sure they are executed by the rest of the team (employees).

Sport psychologists also have written popular books focusing on the links between sport and business. This is best represented in a book by Shane Murphy (1996), in which he took the lessons learned from being the first sport psychologist at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs and working extensively with elite athletes and coaches to work in the business community. Murphy believed that the psychological skills and abilities that are necessary for elite athletes to perform consistently at high levels are transferable to the business world. Getting in “the zone” is something, he argued, that all elite performers can do on a fairly regular basis, whether in the sport or corporate arena. Murphy reported that his clients (sport and nonsport) tell him that the skills they are taught help them to achieve their best under pressure, allow them to stay focused during difficult tasks, and enable them to enjoy even the most challenging assignments.

Finally, in a similar vein, Jim Loehr attempted to blend the business and sport worlds. Specifically, Loehr and Schwartz (2001) discussed the similarities of high performers, whether they are elite athletes or CEOs for a Fortune 500 company. Loehr and his colleagues developed their approach after working with world-class athletes for over two decades. They now use these techniques and have developed a more comprehensive version of their program for executives facing unprecedented demands in the workplace. What they have found is that
top performers in any field need to reach what they called the ideal performance state. (This state is similar to the flow state popularized by Csikzentimahalyi in his 30-year research program in basically nonsport settings). Achieving flow in sport obviously is important, as seen in the recent book by Jackson and Csikzentimalyi (1999) focusing on achieving flow in sports. According to research in the area of flow (Williams & Krane, 2001), the characteristics performers cite include focused concentration, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, matching of skills and challenges, merging of action and awareness, loss of self-consciousness, intrinsic motivation, a sense of control, and a transformation of time. The ideal performance state is similar to the flow state, although somewhat different in its conceptualization. Specifically, this state is represented by a high-performance pyramid that includes (from bottom to top) physical capacity, emotional capacity, mental capacity, and spiritual capacity. The rhythmic expenditure and recovery of energy link the levels of the pyramid. For example, vigorous physical activity can produce a sense of emotional well-being, clearing the way for peak mental performance.

The above anecdotes and applied research suggest that there is a link between being successful in sport and being successful in business. However, the empirical evidence directly comparing the factors critical for sport success versus those critical for business success generally is lacking (Rollins & Roberts, 1997). Despite this fact, a number of authors have written on the importance of certain factors for successful organizations, regardless of whether they are in sport or business. The present investigation will attempt to determine if corporate and athletic leaders feel a common set of factors are needed for success in these two domains. If this is found to be the case, programs can be developed to maximize transfer between these two domains. In addition, these domains can then be studied more carefully and extensively to determine which factors are most transferable. Finally, theories of performance excellence and organizational success can be developed using data from these two fields.

There probably are many different reasons why organizations are successful. To provide some focus and depth to this initial exploratory study, the area of group dynamics was targeted (i.e., leadership, group cohesion, and communication), because both anecdotal reports and empirical research point to these factors as being critical for perceived success in sport and business (e.g., Chelladurai, 1999; Frierson & Johnson, 1995). These data and anecdotal reports will be highlighted briefly throughout the rest of the review of literature to provide a rationale for inclusion of these areas in the present investigation.

Leadership

For example, effective leadership is consistently discussed as important for success by both corporate and athletic leaders. Specifically, in the business world leaders must exhibit trust, vision, and communication skills and have the ability to handle pressure (Covey, 1990). In addition, developing relationships between employer and employee is seen as essential to success (Beattie, 1994). Similarly, speaking from a sport context, Jackson (1995) noted that value-based leaders enlist the hearts of their employees through inclusion and participation. Along these lines, Holtz (1998) noted the importance of consideration as a leader behavior and highlighted the importance of solid relationships within organizations. Finally, Chelladurai (1999) provided empirical evidence regarding the importance of leadership behavior to sport success. Thus, the type of leadership style and behaviors of leaders are seen as crucial to organizational success.

Not all leaders, however, feel that the comparison between sport and business is appropriate. Spitzer and Evans (1997), for example, discussed the futility of comparing sport and business leaders. Specifically, they stated,
[B]est selling books by Don Shula, Pat Riley and others trumpet the characteristics that make
winners in sport and—so say the authors—will also make winners in business. Today’s man-
agers, however, rarely find a similar dynamic because, unlike sports, business for the most part
has left the command and control model. (p. 64)

Thus, the whole notion of effective leadership crossing over between sport and business
needs further elaboration and study.

Group Cohesion

Another consistent concept that has emerged when describing effective organizations is
team (group) cohesion. High-profile coaches such as Pat Summitt, Mike Krzyzewski, Pat Riley,
and Mike Shanahan all refer to team chemistry and cohesion as being critical to their champi-
onship teams and, on a more scientific level, research has shown the importance of cohesion
(task or social) in effective teams (Carron & Hausenblaus, 1998). Sport psychologists have
been interested in building cohesive teams (Carron, Spink, & Prapavessis, 1997; Hardy &
Crace, 1997); in fact, an entire special issue of the Journal of Applied Sport Psychology
was dedicated to cohesion and team building. Similarly, cohesion in the workplace has been viewed
as critical to productivity, going back to the original work of Lott and Lott (1965) and
Golembieski (1965), and has been reiterated by more recent approaches (e.g., Covey, 1990).
Furthermore, Waterman (1994) provided numerous examples from different companies (e.g.,
Proctor & Gamble, Levi Strauss, Federal Express, Merck, and Motorola) of how working
together effectively in groups (cohesion) has a positive impact on organizational climate as
well as bottom line balance sheet results.

Communication

Effective communication is another common thread identified when discussing effective
organizations. Rinke (1997) argued that clear channels of communication are essential for
organizational success, although this is not a unique idea in the business community (Scott &
Mitchell, 1976). Many top executives have repeatedly stated that clear lines of communication
and open-door policies are important for organizational success (Waterman, 1994). Coaches
routinely speak about the importance of communication (e.g., Parcells, 1995; Pitino, 1997;
Shanahan, 1999), with all agreeing that communication is one of the most important skills to
master if one wants an effective organization. In addition, sport psychologists (e.g., Yukelson,
1997) have emphasized that having clear lines of communication between players and man-
agement is critical to the effective running of a team.

To date, no studies have been found that have directly compared business and sport leaders’
views of what it takes to make a successful organization. However, it has been assumed
that successful organizations in sport and business are similar, as evidenced by the many coaches
speaking to corporate leaders and employees. Thus, the purpose of the present investigation is
to investigate the perceived factors that are critical to organizational success, as seen by leaders
in both the business and sport communities (based on the empirical/anecdotal literature in
these three separate areas). In essence, this study will examine sport and business leaders’
perceptions of whether these psychological characteristics are needed or are crucial for suc-
cess. Specifically, the areas discussed above formed the basis for the interview guide that was
designed to have leaders in both sport and business settings compare and contrast aspects of
group dynamics (e.g., leadership, cohesion, and communication) as factors related to organi-
zational success.
METHODS

Participants

Twenty individuals (10 sport and 10 business) were selected through personal contacts (who subsequently volunteered) to participate in the interview. But this was not totally a convenience sample, because participants were chosen so that personal characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender, years of experience) were approximately equal among the two groups (simple t tests revealed no differences on these attributes). The mean age and years of experience of the leaders were 43.2 and 17.4, respectively. In addition, there were 9 Caucasians and 1 African American in each group, as well as 7 male and 3 female sport leaders and 8 male and 2 female business leaders. None of the coaches had his or her own business (currently or prior to starting coaching) or worked part-time in a business setting. However, all but one of the business executives had at least some participation in competitive sport or exercise, either currently or in the past. Participants from business were employed in a variety of business organizations in the Midwestern United States, ranging in size from approximately 40 to 250 employees. Each person was employed in an executive or upper-level management position, which included general managers, vice-presidents, and chief executive officers. This selection process was conducted so as to get representation from a relatively large cross-section of companies and positions (although executives from very large companies were not included because sport teams usually are on the smaller side).

Participants from the field of sport consisted of athletic directors, head coaches, and assistant coaches from both the collegiate (N = 7) and high school (N = 3) levels (the high school coaches did not teach but were specifically hired to coach—their other jobs were in the business world working in sales and marketing. The coaches represented individual and team sports from both private and public institutions. The individual sports were seen as appropriate because coaches still needed athletes to work together (and support each other), either through relays or team scoring systems. Therefore, coaches stated that these athletes were treated as teams, not as groups of individuals, because coaches were interested in collective performance. Finally, there was no attempt to get coaches who were successful (in terms of win–loss records) or business leaders who were successful (based on their job titles) because we wanted to include leaders in the sample who had experienced both success and failure. Therefore, the sample was heterogeneous in this regard.

Interviews

All participants were interviewed for approximately 60 minutes using a semistructured approach. Participants were informed that all data would be confidential and study procedures were passed by the University Institutional Review Board. Participants were asked to comment only on their specific field (sport or business) and to refrain from making direct comparisons without actual experience in both domains. This was done so that the researchers would not be biased when analyzing the interviews for commonalities (and differences) between sport and business. In addition, it was felt that the participants would know what is considered success in their domain via personal experience and observation, whereas generalizing outside their domain might be speculative in nature, and it was felt that this speculation should be minimized. All interviewees were provided with an explanation of the scope of the project and were given a chance to ask questions about the study before the interview started.

1A complete copy of the interview guide can be obtained by contacting the first author.
All interviews were tape recorded and conducted by the same individual, who was knowledgeable regarding sport and business comparisons of effectiveness as well as trained in interview techniques. Eighteen of the 20 semistructured interviews were conducted in person, with 2 over the phone. Previous research (Weinberg, Butt, & Knight, 2000) revealed no difference between face-to-face and phone interviews. Interview questions were developed to address the areas noted earlier which included (a) leadership, (b) group cohesion, and (c) communication. A perusal of the literature from sport and business domains had indicated that these factors generally were seen as important to organizational effectiveness. Participants were asked to comment on these different areas regarding their relationship to organizational success. Then, appropriate probes were asked depending on the specific responses of the individual. In addition, demographic information (e.g., age, years of experience, present position) was obtained at the outset of the interview. To start the interview, all participants were given a common definition of organizational success to ensure that they were responding to the same construct. Therefore, organizational success was defined as “both the process and outcome of meeting one’s objectives. This would include both how people get along and interact as well as if they accomplished what they set out to do.”

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using hierarchical content analysis similar to the procedure outlined by Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1993), with one important difference: In Gould et al.’s research, lower-order themes identified by the athletes within each section of the interview were logged and then grouped into high-order themes, thus establishing a hierarchy of response moving from the specific to general levels. However, in the present investigation, following the procedure of Weinberg et al. (2000), general content areas of organizational success were already established by the nature of the questions making up the interview format (i.e., leadership, communication, and group cohesion). However, within these content areas, the initial questions were more general and open-ended, asking leaders to simply discuss the importance (or lack of importance) of the specific area within successful organizations (so as not to bias participants). Individual responses within each of these were then logged and grouped into common themes, where appropriate. These raw data themes consisted of quotes or paraphrased quotes that captured the major ideas conveyed, which were then grouped into higher-order themes if they logically fit together. Thus, instead of moving solely from the specific to the general, as done by Gould et al. (1993), the present study started with the general dimensions (organizational effectiveness categories) being identified and then moved in an inductive manner from the specific (raw data themes) to more general lower- and higher-order themes. The specific step-by-step procedure to analyze and reduce the data is described below. This procedure generally attempted to provide reliability, credibility, and trustworthiness to the data by employing previous qualitative methodologies (e.g., Cote, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Gadamer, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Strauss, 1987; Tesch, 1990). For example, triangular consensus was employed using three independent researchers to review the transcripts and reach agreement on the categories and themes gleaned from the interviews. In addition, participants had a chance to review the summaries of their interviews to make sure that the researchers were accurate in interpreting their comments.

1. All tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in more than 200 pages of double-spaced text.
2. Three investigators read and reread all transcripts until they became completely familiar with them. The investigators all had background and knowledge in sport psychology and
the specific areas that constitute organizational success.

3. Independently, each investigator identified raw data themes characterizing each athlete’s responses within each subsection of the interview. Using recommendations from Cote et al. (1993), the data were appropriately tagged to produce a set of concepts that adequately represented the information included in the interview transcripts. In addition, this open coding (Tesch, 1990) helped define the appropriate content taken from the interviews. Subsequently, through extensive discussion, consensus was obtained. In essence, agreement or triangular consensus was obtained on all raw data themes; all three investigators engaged in didactic exchanges or discussions to make explicit the reasoning guiding content and thematic analysis (Gadamer, 1989). It is important to note that, when disagreements among investigators emerged, the investigators restudied the original transcripts and rediscussed the points under contention. Finally, the viewpoint of the interviewer (who was also one of the investigators) was considered especially salient in settling interpretive disputes, because he conducted the actual interviews and had the advantage of talking directly to the coaches in the study. These procedures—along with those developed by Cote et al., (1993), Eklund, (1996), Strauss (1987), Tesch (1990), and Miles and Huberman, (1994)—were incorporated into the data analysis to ensure reliable, trustworthy, and credible data.

4. After establishing raw data themes (under the different organizational success content areas/categories specified by the interview format) for all interviewees through the extensive discussion noted above, the investigators attempted to group the raw data themes into higher-order themes or categories that seemed to fit together. In this regard, following the general procedures first outlined by Scanlan, Stein, and Ravizza (1989), and subsequently followed by other researchers employing a qualitative methodology (e.g., Bianco et al., 1999; Eklund, 1996; Gould et al., 1993), an inductive analysis was conducted to identify common themes of greater generality emanating from the raw data themes. Similar to Step 3, triangular consensus was reached for these higher-order themes.

5. Finally, in addition to identifying these common themes, a tally was conducted across all participants to determine the consistency with which the different themes were noted by the different interviewees. In essence, the more frequently a specific theme was mentioned across the participants, the more universal that particular theme would likely be across sport and business.

RESULTS

In organizing the results, it seemed that presenting the findings in terms of how the interview was formatted (i.e., categories chosen) would allow for the greatest ease of interpretation. Thus, each of the major categories are presented with higher-order and lower-order themes enumerated as they emanated from the raw data themes. Overall, as might be expected, sometimes there was consistency across sport and business, whereas at other times, the characteristics representing a successful organization appeared to vary across these two domains (see Table 1). However, these tended to be more a matter of degree than actually different factors being identified as important for success in sport versus business organizations. Overall, leaders in sport and business organizations had similar things to say regarding group dynamic factors perceived as important for organizational success. This was congruent with some of the anecdotal reports linking these two domains together. It is important to note that, although the present investigation tried to uncover the factors perceived as critical for organizational
| **Table 1**
| Higher and Lower Order Themes for Categories of Successful Organizations |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Sport Leaders</strong></th>
<th><strong>Business Leaders</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leader Characteristics ($N = 41$)</td>
<td>Leader Characteristics ($N = 37$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty ($n = 3$)</td>
<td>Honesty ($n = 7$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency ($n = 9$)</td>
<td>Consistency ($n = 4$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisiveness ($n = 8$)</td>
<td>Decisiveness ($n = 7$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized ($n = 5$)</td>
<td>Organized ($n = 4$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills ($N = 26$)</td>
<td>Interpersonal Skills ($N = 21$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathize with employees ($n = 4$)</td>
<td>Empathize with employees ($n = 5$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interact with others ($n = 7$)</td>
<td>Interact with others ($n = 3$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good listener ($n = 4$)</td>
<td>Good listener ($n = 8$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthy ($n = 4$)</td>
<td>Trustworthy ($n = 3$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership Style ($N = 31$)</td>
<td>Leadership Style ($N = 28$)</td>
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<td>Democratic ($n = 7$)</td>
<td>Democratic ($n = 7$)</td>
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<td>Autocratic ($n = 3$)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Situational ($n = 7$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benefits of Cohesion ($N = 18$)</td>
<td>Benefits of Cohesion ($N = 22$)</td>
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<td>Working together as team ($n = 5$)</td>
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<td>Common goals ($n = 6$)</td>
<td>Common goals ($n = 7$)</td>
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<td>Positive working environment ($n = 4$)</td>
<td>Positive working environment ($n = 6$)</td>
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<td>Types of Cohesion ($N = 12$)</td>
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<td>Task cohesion ($n = 5$)</td>
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<td>People Enhancing Cohesion ($N = 12$)</td>
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<td>Communication Barriers ($N = 15$)</td>
<td>Communication Barriers ($N = 13$)</td>
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<td>Ambiguity ($n = 4$)</td>
<td>Ambiguity ($n = 3$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor listening skills ($n = 4$)</td>
<td>Poor listening skills ($n = 3$)</td>
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<td>Lack of time ($n = 7$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal barriers ($n = 4$)</td>
<td>Personal barriers ($n = 3$)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Only the most often given themes are in the table, so not all lower-order themes add up to their respective higher-order themes.
success, it did not attempt to determine exactly how to implement procedures to enhance success. In addition, although frequency of response does not necessarily equal importance, how often different factors were mentioned is shown in parenthesis in Table 1, and thus these exact numbers are not repeated in the text.

**Leadership**

After obtaining demographic information and providing a common definition of organizational success, the interviewer started by asking if the participants felt that leadership was related to the effectiveness of organizations. First of all, every person interviewed agreed that leadership is extremely important for organizational success. They noted that effective organizations always had effective leaders, although leadership traits and styles might sometimes be different. More specifically, three higher-order themes emerged from the interviews regarding different aspects of leadership critical to organizational effectiveness. The first higher-order theme was identified as Leader Characteristics, with the characteristics of honesty, consistency, decisiveness, and organized (lower-order themes) reported most frequently. Honesty tended to be noted more often by business executives than by sport leaders, as noted by the comments of executives: “I think honesty is critical, both to yourself and coworkers. I think that a good leader emphasizes trust and honesty between the people that he [sic] leads.” Similarly, another executive said that “being honest with people you are dealing with is a big thing for me. If you deal with people honestly and give them respect, then you’ll get that in return.”

Conversely, coaches tended to focus on the importance of consistency, with one coach stating that “you need to be consistent. What happens to trust on a team if I treat one person differently from another? You need to be consistent across individuals.” Coaches often struggle between keeping everything consistent across players while at the same time recognizing individual differences. As another coach noted, “I try to be consistent across all my players. However, players are different and it’s sometimes difficult to always remain consistent across players.” Thus, although both groups noted the importance of leader dispositions, the specific dispositions enumerated that were related to organizational effectiveness appeared to vary somewhat between groups.

A second higher-order theme that emerged within leadership was termed Interpersonal Skills, with lower-order themes including ability to empathize with customer/employee, ability to interact with a variety of people, listening skills, and trusting others’ abilities. For example, the ability to empathize with others is captured by this business executive:

> The core interpersonal skill of leaders I believe is absolutely critical to organizational success is relating well to others and being able to put oneself in the other person’s shoes. Without this empathy, people would just go on and do their own thing.

More coaches than business people noted the importance of interacting with a variety of people, as seen by this quote: “A coach needs to be sensitive to all different people within a team in order to get the most out of them.” As teams become more diverse and multicultural, the importance of being able to effectively interact with a wide range of individuals is likely to continue to become more and more important in the future. However, once again, although similar themes were identified, the emphasis tended to vary across sport and business domains. When looking at different styles of leadership (third higher-order theme), both sport and business leaders seemed to favor a democratic style over a more autocratic style. As one business executive noted:

> I definitely think democratic is the way to go. I believe my job is to give people the tools to do
their job and get out of their way and let them do it. So I really believe I work for people here and they don’t work for me.

Within a democratic style, there was consistency in responses to include the employees/players in the decision-making process. In essence, leadership should involve everyone (at least in terms of hearing opinions and receiving input into decision making). However, it should be noted that the majority of sport and business leaders preferred more of a situational leadership style, which made up the third lower-order theme under Leadership Style. Specifically, situational leadership was seen as the ability to differentiate between situations that may require a more autocratic approach to those requiring a more democratic approach. In essence, most leaders discussed a blending of leadership styles or knowing when to be hard and when to be soft. As one coach stated, “Sometimes you need to be the hammer, and sometimes the cushion. It’s important that you have a feel for that.” Similarly, a business vice-president noted the following:

Leadership style often depends on the circumstances that the leader faces within the company. I think that for every situation there is a different leadership style that is effective. If a company needs to be put on track, then a more autocratic leader is needed. However, when a company is doing well, a democratic style usually works better.

Thus, regarding the appropriate leadership style, sport and business leaders agreed that an interactional style is best, but they leaned toward a more democratic style if possible. The interactional style focuses on both personal and situational factors as they are jointly considered to be codeterminants of behavior. In this case, matching the leadership style to the situation is favored by leaders from both domains.

*Group (Team) Cohesion*

Five different higher-order themes emerged from the data in the area of group cohesion when leaders were asked if cohesion was related to the effectiveness of organizations. These included Benefits of Cohesion, Types of Cohesion, Prerequisites for Cohesion, Techniques to Foster Cohesion, and Barriers to Cohesion. It should be noted that most leaders in sport and business felt that group cohesion was critical to a successful organization, although it was not always easy to achieve (hence, the barriers listed below).

The Benefits of Cohesion were noted by both business and sport leaders. There was a wide range of benefits noted, as group cohesion was definitely seen as a positive force and as integral to organizational success. These benefits (lower-order themes) included working together as a team, common goals, a positive working environment, and people sacrificing for other people. Although some of these might be seen as leading to cohesion rather than being a benefit of cohesion, the leaders from both sport and business perceived them as benefits that were related to organizational success. As one business vice-president noted, “If you can get everyone working together as a cohesive unit, then good things are going to happen within the organization over the long haul.”

As noted in the literature, leaders cited the two different Types of Cohesion, task and social, as being important for organizational success. Interestingly, these individuals focused on the importance of social cohesion and how this type of cohesion can lead to success in organizations. As one executive stated, “When you have people who become friends and get close to each other in both work and social settings, they tend to become a cohesive group that probably will perform better at work.” This same type of social cohesion was seen in sport settings, as many coaches noted the importance of “locker room bonding” in the building of cohesion.
Although research emphasizes the importance of task cohesion to success (especially in terms of winning and achieving the “bottom line”), most leaders spoke of cohesion in terms of the social aspects.

Important Prerequisites of Cohesion were noted by both sport and business leaders. Specifically, the critical aspect that role acceptance and mutual respect by players and employees played in the cultivation of cohesion was consistently found in the comments of leaders. This is seen in the following comment by a coach: “It’s critical that every player understands his [sic] role on the team. Not everyone is going to be a superstar. But each little cog in the wheel is important for the ultimate success of the team.” Business executives also underscored the importance of role, as seen in the following comment: “Everyone has a role to play in getting the job done. It’s important for leaders to make every person feel that his or her contribution is important and unique to the success of the organization.”

Both sport and business leaders noted a variety of techniques that were important to enhancing cohesion. But the most common way of achieving cohesion emanating from this group was the development of a shared vision. The importance of people within an organization believing in the final objective (whether that is winning a championship, making a business profitable, or improving skills) was constantly emphasized in the creation of group cohesion. An effective leader was seen as the prime person to communicate this vision to employees and players on a regular basis. This is highlighted by the following quote from a business executive:

> Every organization needs to know where they are going. Someone has to set out the big picture, and this might be in the form of a mission statement or series of goals and objectives. But the leader must have a clear vision of where the organization is heading and communicate that vision to the employees. When everyone understands the vision, they all can get on the same page in trying to get it done.

Finally, both sport and business leaders noted a variety of Barriers to Cohesion, including personality differences (see Table 1), social pressure, communication failures, and environmental factors. The most consistent barrier to cohesion identified was personality differences between employees and players. The general comment of people having “bad attitudes” was seen as getting in the way of achieving cohesion. As one coach noted,

> Bad attitudes and personality differences can really undermine cohesion. There is an old saying, a knife can kill you once, but a word can kill you a thousand times. We’ve had people in a practice situation, and never again are they friends, because one person makes a critical comment, and they have ruined the situation.

Despite the persistence of personality differences as a barrier to cohesion, leaders also regularly identified communication failures as another problem area. These included things such as poor listening skills, unspecified roles, and ambiguity regarding the vision of the organization. In addition, environmental barriers also were identified as potentially getting in the way of achieving group cohesion. Competition among group members, different agendas, and organizational politics were identified as prominent environmental barriers. As one business executive stated,

> There are different specialties within companies and thus we often have different agendas to follow (e.g., marketing vs. sales). Therefore, it’s difficult for everyone to have a common goal. In addition, civility and trust are hard to cultivate in some organizations due to the pressures of competition and politics.
Communication

Although the idea of effective communication filtered through a variety of the sections of the interview, a separate section was dedicated to the notion of communication in effective organizations. Overall, effective communication was seen as essential to organizational success, with leaders citing numerous examples of how communication could “make or break” an organization’s effectiveness. The most prevalent higher-order theme identified was termed Message Characteristics, with most business and sport leaders identifying several characteristics of effective communication. For example, it was generally agreed that messages should be concise and to the point, clear and easily understandable, frequent, and honest. A business executive summed these points up nicely in the following comment:

Communication needs to be frequent, clear, and concise. When you communicate a message, you must be able to articulate exactly what you want the other person to know and understand. It’s a two-way process, with the other side of it being the importance of being a good listener.

A coach also noted the importance of clear, concise communication in enhancing effective organizations:

Everything starts with communication. You want players to communicate to each other and to the coaches. But most importantly, the entire coaching staff needs to communicate with the players in an honest, frank, and clear manner. But you also have to listen to players. You can’t just talk at them.

Another part of the message that was highlighted was the positive information contained in the communication. Specifically, sport leaders identified positive reinforcement and feedback as being motivating to athletes, as this enhances their pride and sense of competence. The different focus between sport and business is aptly summed up in the following quote by a coach:

I was talking with a salesman and told him that I felt the major difference between sport and business is the immediacy of what we do in sport. In essence, our feedback is constantly occurring and it’s more apparent and revealed every time we play a game. We are always offering positive advice and I think a salesman trying to complete a sale does not have such a clear-cut situation in which to operate.

The focus on positive reinforcement in sport is further elaborated in the following quote by a coach:

The more positive things you can say to people, the more you’re going to get out of people. If I see a player doing something well on the field, I provide that player with the positive feedback. Even if there is a mistake, I try to provide corrective feedback. This opens the player’s eyes and makes her [sic] want to try harder. Positive feedback, in my opinion, is the key to success.

Besides characteristics of the message, leaders also identified Benefits of Effective Communication and Communication Techniques as additional higher-order themes, although these both contained some of points highlighted in the characteristics of the message. The most often identified technique mentioned (especially by business leaders) had to do with listening skills and a leader’s ability to provide an environment in which employees feel comfortable
stating their opinions and feel that their supervisor will listen to their concerns. Some executives mentioned specific listening techniques, such as reflective listening, paying close attention to the message (e.g., head nod, “uh huh”), and paraphrasing the message.

Barriers to Effective Communication was a final higher-order theme identified by sport and business leaders, although their focus sometimes was different. For example, mostly business leaders noted ambiguity as a potential barrier to effective communication. As one business executive noted, “barriers are not being clear about what you want to communicate, not being attentive, and just not doing the little basics right.” Both sport and business leaders cited poor listening skills as a barrier, which goes back to listening skills being an important part of effective communication. In addition, time (or lack of it) was seen as a barrier, mostly by sport leaders. As one athletic director stated,

Time can be a barrier to effective communication; sometimes you just can’t get in all the information that you need to convey or get as much done as you’d like given time constraints. Not being alert and ready to absorb mentally is a barrier between coaches and athletes, at times, in their communications.

Finally, personal barriers to effective communication were identified, as people themselves were identified as sometimes having qualities that get in the way of effective communication. For example, some people are uncooperative, have big egos, or do not try to listen, and any of these can undermine communication.

**DISCUSSION**

The primary purpose of the present investigation was to provide exploratory data regarding perceived factors (focusing on group dynamics) critical to organizational success from the viewpoints of leaders in the fields of sport and business. Although there have been numerous popular books written about generic principles applicable to any organization (and even life in general), there has been little empirical study of the overlap or crossover of these principles across different achievement domains. Based on a thorough literature search as well as anecdotal reports, the broad areas of leadership, group cohesion, and communication (making up group dynamics) were identified as potential factors critical to organizational success across business and sport domains. Due to the large amount of qualitative data obtained through 20 semistructured in-depth interviews, this discussion will focus on the most important findings that relate directly to the information obtained in the interviews.

**Similarities and Differences in Perceived Organizational Success**

As noted above, the primary purpose of the present investigation was to provide initial data on the perceived similarities and differences among sport and business organizations (as noted by leaders in both of these fields), regarding group dynamics factors associated with successful organizations. The most consistent finding was that there were many more similarities than differences among these two types of organizations regarding factors associated with success. In fact, the emphasis was more a matter of degree (i.e., number of times a specific factor was cited) than of finding totally different factors associated with success across different organizational domains. Of course there were individual differences (or organizational differences) among leaders’ perceptions, but the firm trend was that these types of organizations were more similar than different.

For example, the empirical and theoretical literature on leadership suggests that effective
leaders must have a constellation of traits and skills to help make them effective, although no particular trait is necessary for success (Chelladurai, 1999; DePree, 1992; Yukl, 1994; Zimmerman, 1997). The data obtained in the present study appear to support the notion that there are some traits and approaches that are related to success (or seen as more desirable), although differences also were evidenced. Specifically, the dispositions of consistency and decisiveness were characteristic of leaders from both domains, whereas honesty was seen as more important in business than in sport (possibly because businesses deal more directly with money, and being honest financially is, therefore, particularly important), and interacting with a variety of people was seen as more important by sport than by business leaders. Regarding leadership style, both sets of leaders felt an interactional approach is best, and most leaders preferred a democratic style whenever possible (although more leaders in business than in sport preferred this style), which involved participants in the decision-making process (Rollins & Roberts, 1998). Basically, leaders felt that the situation would dictate which type of leadership style would be more effective, regardless of what type of organization was involved, which is consistent with much contemporary leadership theory being more situationally oriented (Chelladurai, 1999; Waterman, 1994).

The area of cohesion was seen as critical to organizational success across business and sport domains. Cohesion generally was seen as a shared vision between interrelated organizational elements (i.e., across managers and employees and players and coaches). Furthermore, both sets of leaders saw task and social cohesion as being important to success, although the literature notes that task cohesion generally is seen as more related to performance than social cohesion (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Paskevich, Estabrooks, Brawley, & Carron, 2001). A number of similar techniques to promote cohesion (e.g., role acceptance, shared vision, goal setting) were offered across domains, and a variety of barriers were noted. Many of the barriers cited—such as personality differences, social pressures, and communication failures—support the anecdotal observation of coaches (e.g., Pitino, 1997). However, business leaders (more than sport leaders) felt that a barrier undermining the development of cohesion was the difficulty of bringing departments who have different functions together as a cohesive group, because many of these departments have different priorities (Spitzer & Evans, 1997). This difficulty is seen in the following quote by a business executive:

I think cohesion is important; however, I also think it is difficult to achieve. . . . It is hard to coordinate an overall team mentality between different departments. Even though we are part of the same company, there are times when there is competition and even different agendas between departments and regional offices. This makes a cohesive policy often difficult to implement.

Effective communication skills also were seen as essential to success in both organizational domains. Although a variety of effective communication techniques were cited, such as sending clear and concise messages that were honest and frequent, business leaders (more than sport leaders) noted the importance of having good listening skills, such as reflective listening, paraphrasing the message, and giving consistent nonverbal cues. This is interesting, because several high-visibility coaches—such as Bill Parcells (1995) and Mike Shanahan (1999)—have stressed the importance of listening skills to effective leadership in sport. But it appears that business leaders as a whole see this as more critical to success than do sport leaders, which is consistent with some of the observations of DePree (1992), Drucker (1992), and Waterman (1994). Possibly coaches and athletic directors need more specific training on listening skills, so that they can be implemented more consistently and effectively. Conversely, it is possible that coaches tend to be a little more autocratic in their orientation (e.g., Carron & Hausenblas,
1997; Chelladurai, 1999), which would not make listening skills quite as important. This issue needs further investigation before more definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Both business and sport leaders cited a number of barriers that get in the way of effective communication, although a couple of these differed in emphasis across the two domains. Specifically, sport leaders felt that lack of time was a particular problem relating to effective communication. Many coaches complain of all the paperwork and organizational tasks they have to perform, which takes them away from their main job of coaching athletes. Thus, they have less time to spend directly interacting with athletes, and this may lead to a problem effectively communicating with them. Sometimes this might lead them to become more autocratic than they would like, just to get things done (Chelladurai, 1999). If little can be done regarding the myriad of tasks that coaches and athletic directors are asked to perform, then possibly learning more effective communication skills (which might involve time management skills) would be useful for coaches. Some new programs (e.g., the NFL/National Football League Foundation Coaching Academy Program) working on a variety of psychological skills (including communication) have recently been established and it is hoped they will help improve communication and listening skills among coaches (Gould, 2001).

For business leaders, ambiguity in the message sent is one of the more significant problems undermining effective communication. They emphasize that messages must be clear and to the point. A problem occurs when a message gets filtered down from upper to lower management; often, the message is not exactly what it started out to be or includes wording that is not precise. Therefore, precision and clarity are important as well as direct communication between levels of management so there is no misunderstanding in exactly what is communicated (Rinke, 1997).

**SUMMARY**

In summary, this initial exploratory study has provided some evidence to the close (although not perfect) relationship between success in the business and sport worlds. There have been many anecdotes about the transfer of skills between these two domains (especially from sport to the corporate environment, with the success of many books by high-visibility coaches) but, unfortunately, little empirical data are available regarding how close these two areas are in the skills necessary to build an effective and successful organization. In fact, programs are now being set up to apply sport psychology principles to the training of business executives (e.g., Loehr & Schwartz, 2001) More empirical data are needed to substantiate the links between the sport and business environments. From these preliminary findings—which focused on the factors of leadership, cohesion, and communication—it appears that, from the perception of leaders, there is a good deal of similarity between success in sport and business. Of course, the qualitative data from this study do not show any cause and effect or directionality (i.e., from sport to business or business to sport), but they do indicate that there appears to be some consistency across domains in terms of the factors perceived to be related to success. It will be the task of future researchers and practitioners to tease out what these relationships are, and what the real transfer is between sport and business. There likely will be a lot of situation specificity, because teams and businesses differ widely in their size, specific tasks, and personalities of leaders and individual members. So transfer might be more likely in some situations than others. Where the transfer is greatest (and how to achieve maximum transfer) still needs to be determined through a series of research studies. In addition, the present investigation focused on only three aspects of organizational success, and other areas—such as motivation (extrinsic vs. intrinsic), goal setting, and organizational culture—would appear to be fruitful areas for future research.
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