

SPORTS CONTRIBUTION TO OPEN COMMUNICATION IN A WORKPLACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This study explored employees' perceptions of the contribution that conversations about sport have on workplace social bonding. Participants were 63 sport participants from nine different financial organisations in the Gauteng region of South Africa (33% were female and 67% were male). The ages of participants ranged from 21 years to 43 years. Data regarding the contribution that sport has on open communication in the workplace were collected from the participants using focus group discussions and individual interviews. The results indicate that conversations about sport facilitated organisation social bonding and quality of service.

Keywords: common ground, communication, connection point, icebreaker, organisational team sport

Sport is a worldwide language that everybody understands, and people have to communicate in a sports team. It brings people together, irrespective of their differences in economic status, culture, backgrounds or religious beliefs. It breaks down barriers which is essential in an organisation to incorporate different cultures and norms (Carrigg, 2007). Participation in organisational team sport improves effective and open communication because sport connects people, and, in order to be successful, participants have to communicate (Carrigg, 2007). For instance, conversations about sport break down the social barriers between colleagues (Chandler, 2006). It increases peer acceptance and positive work-related conversations. About 18% of the male respondents and 8% of the female respondents were of the opinion that hierarchical barriers between their managers and CEO's were broken down through sport conversations. Sport conversations helped them to communicate more effectively with their colleagues. For instance, participants listened more attentively when others engaged in sports conversation. However, sports contestation potentially could be adversarial and spoil the work climate where there were committed sport club fans not tolerant of others with different following. This study sought to investigate the contribution that sport has on open communication in the workplace. The research question was therefore: what contribution does sport has on open communication in the workplace?

Method

Participants and setting

A convenience sample (Liamputtong, 2009) of 63 culturally diverse employees from nine different financial organisations in Gauteng, South Africa (33% were female and 67% were male). Regarding race, 44% were white, 29% were black, 22% were Indian and 5% were coloured. Employees were employed in the sales department, client service department, IT department, marketing department, accounting department and human resource management department.

Data collection

Participants were engaged in focus group discussion and individual interviews on their views with regard to the contribution that sport makes towards communication in an organisation. Focus was on identifying the indicators of the contributions that sport has towards communication in an organisation. The use of open-ended and guiding questions gave the participants the opportunity to freely express themselves (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The researcher used a reliable digital recorder for data capturing (Douglas, 2003). Field notes were also collected about the participants' feelings, the participants' impressions, the interview itself and the interview setting, which added to the trustworthiness of the data (Caine, Davidson, & Stewart, 2009; Flick, 2009).

Procedure

Permission for the study was granted by the sport coordinators of the different financial institutions. Participants individually consented (Silverman, 2009). Focus group interviews were conducted in a private boardroom, which ensured privacy and comfort of the participants and minimal disturbances.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed using Tesch's (1990) content analysis method. The data were coded and categorised, and themes were developed from the interview transcripts.

Results

Workplace benefits from sport conversations Improvements in interpersonal communication were raised by 11 participants (17% of the participants). Other benefits included learning about one another (17% of the participants), knowing one another (25% of the participants), forming new friendships (19% of the participants),

trust and respect (11% of the participants), team work feeling (19% of the participants), improved client service (14% of the participants) and overcoming hierarchical barriers (11% of the participants) (see Table 1).

Other views were that sporting encouraged common ground (8% of the participants), is an ice-breaker (11% of the participants), and socially connected people (5% of the participants).

Discussion and conclusion

Conversations about sports in general enhance two-way communication between employees because sport participants get to know one another at an interpersonal level. There is evidence in the literature to suggest that employees who are familiar with one another are inclined to share information and to discuss issues (Cramm, Tebra, & Finkenflugel, 2008).

Table 1. Benefits in the workplace when participating in organisational team sport

Benefits in the workplace when participating in organisational team sport: Illustrated verbatim evidence

Learn about one another

Participant 6: I am more accommodative and understanding and accepting of other people's differences.

Participant 1: It basically helps people to understand each other and to be more tolerant. In our company we have currently action cricket, action netball, action soccer, action rugby, touch rugby and volleyball and in that we realise that if there is a manager who does not necessarily work with you every day and who doesn't make the effort to get to know you because you are from a different race and you are different from him obviously; but because you see him on the sport ground and you see him somewhere else in the workplace, the guys do get together because there is something we have in common and something we both enjoy and we make the effort to say "hey, how do you do".

Participant 7: Although we are the same, you pick up different words and slang that you don't know in your own culture. Like we picked up "gees" and I didn't know what they were talking about. I learned different words in a different language and you are able to use it in a conversation and you are able to understand it. You feel comfortable within the environment. In every language we all have our own language and slang and now integrated in a team we all pick up on different things. Like when I play with white people I would say we "pick up gees", but if I play with black people I would say "Heita my friend". You learn about each other's culture and how they speak.

Participant 29: One of the advantages is that we learn more about the other culture's background.

Participant 38: I have learned a lot about other cultures because I play in a diverse team.

Participant 42: You may drop your boundaries because you learn more about the person's culture.

Improved communication

Participant 1: It overcomes communication, respect issues, tolerance. It just makes you more at ease with other people and with yourself

Participant 3: And of course, now that we pass each other at work, we will not only pass but we will actually have something to say.

Participant 24: When you know the person at sport you are more relaxed and you always have something to say for that person. It helps with communication.

Participant 30: ... And in that way, when you come to work it is easier to speak with them on another level not so formal and you are more confident with them.

Know one another

Participant 3: Well, it is basically breaching the gap, because if you are not certain about a certain type of person you would not know how to approach that type of person but by doing sports and actually having been with them on a different level, it help you to know that person socially or even on a business level.

Participant 9: You have fun and you start to know the people around you. You are not just working in your own department. You also learn the other people from the other departments.

Participant 9: ... And it was through the interdepartmental challenge that I got to know my colleagues better.

Participant 22: We learn more about the other person's preferences.

Participant 29: You get that some people are temperamental, like myself and the people know how to handle me in the sports team as well as in the organisation.

Friends

Participant 7: We also became friends. We socialise before and after the game with the team players, so it is not just the game and go home, we spend time together.

Participant 8: We receive more funny e-mails from our team members because we are now friends.

Participant 18: You are more intimate with your team players, because you become friends. When I receive a call and I need to transfer it to someone else then you might think "oh, I know someone from that department".

Participant 20: You can actually make jokes with people that you play sport with, whereas if you make the same joke to someone else he will feel offended, because you make a joke and he knows where it is coming from, because we are friends.

Participant 59: We became friends in this team – it doesn't matter whether we are Indian or black.

Participant 63: If a new member comes and plays for our team, he will become one of our "brothers" after he is part of the team for a while because we became friends and are able to communicate.

Trust and respect

Participant 4: We trust the goal shooter when she has the ball. We know that she will score a goal. Sometimes when she has the ball, we just turn around and walk back to our position. We know it is a done deal.

Participant 17: If something goes wrong you accept it and just go on because you respect them. Participant 30: For me, when I see you can play, I just have more respect for you.

Participant 50: Over time, during the season that we are playing, you build relationship to a point that what I expect from the guys is what I will also be willing to give to the team. If they give a 100% I must also give a 100%. That means that we have mutual respect for each other.

Participant 61: There is interaction between the team players and that creates more respect for the team because we know each other. Participant 62: We have the same goal and that is to win. But if the opposite team scores a goal, we will not blame the goal keeper because he has done his best because each and every one of us has our own role to play and there is respect between the players because we know that all the members are doing their best.

This study confirmed that organisations can use sport as an icebreaker or a connection point, especially when there is no other common ground among employees themselves or even between employees and customers. The limitations of this research study are that the sports codes (netball, soccer, volleyball and cricket) investigated in this study excluded employees older than 35 years of age. This study was conducted only among financial organisations in Gauteng, therefore the findings cannot be generalised to other South African work settings. Future research should include a larger sample of organisations to seek to replicate or extend the findings. Nonetheless, conversations about sport had a positive effect on employees' sense of workplace belongingness or bonding.

Table 1. (Continued) Benefits in the workplace when participating in organisational team sport Benefits in the workplace when participating in organisational team sport: Illustrated verbatim evidence **Work together as a team/same goal**

Participant 2: You know how to work as a team with someone else.

Participant 3: The fact that we are all equal in the sports team, we bring it back to the workplace. We are all here for the same goal which is to win. We work together towards the same goal. We are all the same if we are on the court.

Participant 6: In sport we are the entire same, have the same goal and we work towards a common goal regardless of our differences. Participant 5: I like playing in a diverse team because it shows that all colours can work together and make it fun too.

Participant 17: The teamwork is so much better because you understand one another better ... Participant 23: In sport we are focused on a goal and we become one in a team.

Participant 26: The team works towards one goal and therefore you know how to work together towards a goal in the organisation. Participant 30: And everyone works together because there is a common goal and that is to win.

Participant 33: In sport the goal is to win and everyone is aware of the goal and works hard to get that goal. In the workplace there are also goals that you need to get and through sport you know how to work together to reach the goal.

Participant 44: It brings everyone together and you might dislike them in the workplace, but on the field you need that person to help the team achieve the goal.

Participant 45: Sport brings people together because we have a common goal – our common goal is to play cricket together. The commonness between guys brings people together.

Participant 51: A positive thing is that when you make a mistake in the team you want to improve. We work towards a common goal and when a problem happens we know how to deal with it. We all make mistakes and we learn from each other.

Improved client service

Participant 3: I am working in the sales department and participant 2 is working in the client care department and if I want to speak to someone or need some advice from the client care department I will definitely first call participant 1 because I know her.

Participant 9: You actually make friends with people in other departments because you know them and that creates better client service.

Participant 8: I work in a call centre so it is easier for me to make my queries because I can go to the person that I play sport with, with more confidence to help me with something. My client service is better.

Participant 24: We know the people from other departments and because of that it will speed up the process because we know who to contact if we need help.

Participant 40: It is much easier for me to phone someone that is playing in the same sports team to go to that person and ask for help. Participant 46: It is basically establishing a network base in the company – if you want something to be done quickly you can go to your sport buddy in any department.

Participant 52: I know, if I have a problem with finance, I know I can phone participant 49 and 50 because I know that they are in that division and we have built that relationship on the field as well as in the work environment.

Overcome hierarchical barriers

Participant 1: When you are on the court, whether I am playing next to the manager or the CEO of the company, when he is there, he is on the same level than me and it makes him approachable to me and makes me approachable to him – we will have a basis point of communication the next time we see each other because he will remember me as the one that played with him on the court... In short, you overcome the hierarchical barriers and become friends.

Participant 2: To add on to what participant 1 has said – sometimes you are so scared of the managers and when you come together in the game you start to realise that "ok, he is not that bad"; he is also just a person.

Participant 3: When it comes to sport, colour or race does not matter. We are all the same and we are all equal. That court does not see colour, culture, nothing.

Participant 20: It also helps us to have a relationship with different levels for instance management because in sport we all play in the same team. It doesn't matter if you are a junior or a senior.

Participant 50: In the company he may be higher on the hierarchy than you but if you have something like sport you will see that they are also human, the same as you.

Participant 49: At the end of the day, work is work. And if a team leader is above you, he is above you, but if you play together in a team you will not go to work the next day and think "I'm scared of him and I'm not going to ask him because he is higher than me". You will feel comfortable to approach him.

Participant 60: The other day I had to phone Finance, a certain guy whose name sounded very familiar. When I phoned him we chatted like old friends, only because I met him through sport. He is a CEO. The relationship is much more relaxed.

Table 2. Conversations about sport

Advantages of conversations about sport in the workplace: Illustrative verbatim evidence

Common ground

Participant 1: Sport is a common ground.

Participant 6: Sport becomes a common ground where we can come together since all parties love the same thing.

Participant 34: Sport is a common ground – if you don't know what to say to clients or colleagues, then you talk about sport.

Participant 38: Even after the soccer world cup – I am not that into soccer, but when the games started it was all that I and my colleagues could talk about because it was a common ground. Participant 45: Sport is a perfect common ground.

Icebreaker

Participant 1: Sport is an icebreaker. If I am with a client on the phone and we don't really know what to say to each other, I can always say: "Oh sir, did you watch the soccer this weekend?" It doesn't matter what colour I am, if we talk about sport the client is already smiling – he will be on my side.

Participant 19: I was never a sporty person but now I use sport as an icebreaker and you can learn about other sports like rugby, soccer or action cricket.

Participant 35: Sport is an icebreaker.

Participant 36: ... I think we talk about sport the whole time just to break the ice. Participant 44: Sport is an icebreaker if you both like the same sport.

Participant 45: If you want to talk about cricket with someone and that person does not want to talk about cricket, then you have already broken the ice, because you have learned something about that guy.

Participant 48: Sport is the biggest icebreaker.

Connection point

Participant 7: It is good, like when I am speaking to black clients' I'm talking about the Pirates and when I am talking to white clients I'll talk about rugby. It definitely will start a conversation and it will put the client at ease. With Indian clients I mostly talk about cricket.

Participant 16: One advantage is that it is a nice connection point with the client because you start talking about sport and then you can take it from there.

Participant 33: Conversations about sport are good because people can connect with something they both like.

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