



Institutions of higher commitment: A case study of de-escalation and American football's decisive role in intercollegiate athletics



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 May 2014

Received in revised form 3 September 2014

Accepted 5 September 2014

Available online 7 October 2014

Keywords:

De-escalation of commitment

Organisational commitment

Management

Intercollegiate athletics

Athletic administration

Sport policy

ABSTRACT

This case study presents a common challenge among many sport organisations facing the decision to maintain, increase, or decrease commitment to failing projects or courses of action. Using escalation of commitment theory as a framework, this case highlights the organisational processes for reversing former commitment decisions, underscoring seldom pursued de-escalation behaviour. This case uses fictional East University to illustrate the circumstances confronting most National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletic departments in the United States. Amidst inadequate revenue to cover increasing expenses, university decision makers are often responsible for determining the most suitable commitment to intercollegiate athletics, with a specific focus on costly football programs. Given extensive stakeholder involvement and pressure, commitment decisions are further complicated by the complex economic, social, and political challenges of balancing often competing groups and their interests. In response to a university-wide initiative emphasising successful programs and critically scrutinising underperforming programs, East's athletic director Steve Barnes is charged with determining the most appropriate course of action in de-escalating athletics (notably football) commitment. Consequently, the situation presented provides students with an opportunity to critically evaluate the multifaceted nature of de-escalating commitment to an existing course of action. This case is useful for both undergraduate and graduate courses in strategic management, organisational behaviour, athletic administration, and policy and governance.

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Teaching note

Sport organisations often commit to projects and courses of action exceeding financial feasibility. Although the potential return for high risk, high reward endeavours may be enticing, the greater likelihood of failure can result in a cycle of escalating commitment in a failing course of action. While several international sport entities exhibit such behaviour (see

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Clarke, 2012; Fujita, 2009; Sanburn, 2012; Scott, 2012), this escalation of commitment manifests prominently in the United States of America (USA) among National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) university athletic departments (Fulks, 2013; Gragreen, 2012). Amidst increasing expenses for most collegiate sport programs and profitability among only 7% of Division I athletic departments (Fulks, 2013), university decision makers regularly consider the most suitable commitment to intercollegiate athletics, specifically facing challenges in determining the most efficient and effective means for managing costly football programs. This matter is further complicated by extensive stakeholder involvement and pressure, as decision makers must account for numerous, often competing groups and their interests. Given the current and projected challenges for participation in big-time college athletics, this case study is designed to facilitate the consideration of alternative avenues for de-escalating the overextended commitment of athletic departments that operate amidst complex economic, social, and political environments within higher learning institutions.

Steve Barnes is the athletic director at East University, a mid-sized Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institution located along the eastern seaboard of the USA. Following university implementation of a management philosophy known as selective excellence, Steve is faced with a de-escalation decision to East's current athletic department operations by considering alternative courses of action. While several alternatives may exist, the case presents three scenarios that would allow East to maintain its current Division I association amidst a reduced commitment to athletics. This case study is appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate sport management courses, with specific application to strategic management, organisational behaviour, athletic administration, and policy and governance topics. The application of escalation of commitment theory provides students with a relevant example of the capability for theory to inform industry practice. While the case has a specific context of intercollegiate athletics in the USA, it presents a challenge that managers encounter in a variety of sport organisations, including international professional sport leagues (Fujita, 2009; Scott, 2012), community sport programs (Cohen, 2013), and Olympic Games host cities (Clarke, 2012; Sanburn, 2012). This case offers students the opportunity to critically evaluate different courses of action and then set the policy for the athletic department. Although the characters presented are fictional, the case utilises facts and data from various Division I athletic departments that have been confronted with similar issues as those presented to the students. Thus, students are provided with a realistic scenario to consider the consequences of the potential solutions to the presented situation. This case also demonstrates the relevance and value of sport management research that has used many theoretical perspectives (e.g., stakeholder theory, institutional theory, social identity theory, critical theory) to advance our understanding of intercollegiate athletics. For instance, stakeholder theory has informed research on how intercollegiate athletic goals and priorities can be influenced by administrators' personal values. This research has been measured using a variety of goals- and processes-based scales, including the Scale of Athletic Priorities, Scale of Athletic Department Goals, and Scale of Athletic Department Processes (see Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). While this case study directly and indirectly implicates several theoretical perspectives, it underscores scholars' lack of consideration for sport's potential to both further advance and apply escalation of commitment theory.

1. Escalation of commitment theory and sport

Escalation of commitment theory posits that there is potential for individuals and organisations to become entrapped in pursuing a failing course(s) of action despite the presence of objective negative feedback (Sleesman, Conlon, McNamara, & Miles, 2012; Staw, 1976; Staw & Ross, 1987, 1989). While contextual environments differ, escalation scenarios typically produce similar characteristics (Brockner, 1992). Conventional escalation behaviour begins with an actor(s) committing considerable resources to a course of action with the intent of achieving a planned goal. Following a period of unproductive or ineffective operation, involved actors receive ambiguous or negative feedback indicating the venture is not achieving the desired objective(s). Yet, amidst such feedback, involved actors continue investing resources into the course of action in hopes of eventually achieving the original expectations of success. This behaviour has the likelihood to substantially impact the long-term viability of an organisation, as this cycle can produce what many organisational theorists term a permanently failing organisation (Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Montealegre & Keil, 2000; Ross & Staw, 1993).

Investigation of escalation behaviour has broadly identified four determinants—project, psychological, social, structural—prompting commitment to a failing course of action (Staw & Ross, 1987). These determinants account for the influence of several factors in organisational commitment decisions, including finances and economics (project determinants such as closing costs, opportunity costs, salvage value), actor information processing (psychological determinants such as individual motivations, biases, errors), actor behaviour as the result of internal and external feedback (social determinants such as impression management, modelling, societal leadership norms), and non-individual level forces (structural determinants such as institutionalisation, administrative inertia, politics, side-bets) (see Ross & Staw, 1993; Sleesman et al., 2012). While escalation circumstances maintain grounds for additional examination, less explored de-escalation of commitment provides worthwhile theoretical and practical implications for the sport environment. Defined by Keil and Robey (1999), de-escalation of commitment is “the reversal of escalating commitment to failing courses of action, either through project termination or redirection” (p. 65). As a historical example of de-escalation in intercollegiate athletics, consider the circumstances of the once prominent athletics department at the University of Chicago.

Beginning in the 1890s, University of Chicago founding President William R. Harper was one of the initial academic administrators to use intercollegiate athletics (specifically football) for generating university exposure. Under the leadership of Harper's former student Amos A. Stagg, the football program competed as one of the founding members of the nation's

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