

Exploring Leadership and Cultural Training Experiences of Ice Hockey Coaches: Lessons Learned from Nova Scotia

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Abstract. Within the competitive sport of ice hockey, coaches are instrumental in motivating, communicating with and supporting players to reach their full potential. To enhance coaching skills and training to meet the needs of an evolving sport, many minor and professional associations examine various professional development types necessary to respond to culture and diversity. This study examined ice hockey coaches' coaching leadership and cultural training experiences in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada. Leadership is a fundamental factor influencing the performance of sports teams. Leadership can be provided by coaches, assistant coaches or other staff on sports teams. This leadership capability is essential for hockey coaches who are tasked with providing cohesion and effective communications within the team unit, thus impacting overall performance. In many cases, this team unit may comprise players representing two or three languages, various skill abilities, and interest or motivation to play hockey. This qualitative study (n=25) included 19 male and 6 female coaches. Participants coached youth aged 5 to 18 years. The study aimed to investigate the leadership and cultural training experiences of minor hockey coaches who volunteered with Hockey Nova Scotia, a member of the national association, Hockey Canada. Participants completed semi-structured, in-person and/or online interviews, consisting of 5 open-ended questions. The findings indicated that participants did not recall receiving professional training specific to leadership and cultural development. Results demonstrated specific areas of training need, such as supports for behaviour, communication and disability may enhance performance. Additionally, results indicated that a preferred format of leadership and cultural training would be in-person sessions compared to online delivery. These interventions could potentially support overall team performance, communication and engagement. Findings were analyzed using a thematic approach, and the research team assisted in developing gaps in training to prepare and implement future professional development opportunities for coaches with Hockey Nova Scotia.

Keywords: Leadership, coaching, ice hockey, culture, professional development training, performance

1 Introduction

Youth sports participation such as hockey has been shown to correlate with many developmental assets in youth, including physical, cognitive and social competencies (Hansen et al., 2003). In addition, research within the participation in youth sports has documented such benefits as healthy self-esteem, higher rates of pro-social engagement and academic achievement, and the development of character and life skills (Horn, 2008).

2 Related work

Professional development training is necessary to maintain skillsets, enhance personal growth, continuous learning and involves expanding one's expertise within their field. However, evidence indicates that very few training programs teach staff to integrate cultural assets, beliefs or values (Gomez-Hurtado, 2021). Furthermore, managing cultural diversity is therefore both a necessary and an essential task, particularly for management and coaches who must oversee a greater number of tasks, roles, and responsibilities (Rönnström & Scott, 2019). Youth program staff have the potential to have a positive and lasting impact on youth. As such, high-quality professional development for staff is vital to youth programs' success (Rana et al., 2013). Hockey Canada explained that coaches are caring & enthusiastic, and that a well-trained coach can be a positive influence on the experience of players, parents and other coaches (Hockey Canada, 2025). Hockey coaches play a pivotal role within youth ice hockey players and can impact players and overall team performance.

Exploring the terminology of leadership and coaching several common elements exist, such as a one-on-one relationship, raising self-awareness, performance, learning and development, and behavioural change (Grant et al., 2019). Additionally, research conducted by Jones et al. (2016), revealed core features of coaching, which included providing a supporting relationship, setting personal development objectives, achievement of these objectives through focusing on inter- and intra-personal issues, and helping the player develop and be more effective by providing the player with the tools, skills and opportunities they need (de Haan et al., 2023).

3 Methods

A qualitative research design was deliberately chosen with the aim of facilitating open and engaged discussion through semi-structured interviews. This methodological structure involves qualitative methods that are accommodating

and flexible, allowing for the combination and adjustment of different qualitative approaches to fit the sample, phenomenon, context, and epistemological paradigm of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Number of Interviews: 25; Youngest Participant: 20; Oldest Participant: 63,
Average Age of Participants: 40.4, Minimum Number of Coaching Years: 1,
Maximum Number of Coaching Years: 50, Average Number of Years Coaching: 11.35

4 Findings

The preliminary findings are categorized within a thematic analysis approach. Using Atlas Ti, several themes emerged from the data and are summarized to represent common ideals within ice hockey coaching leadership and cultural diversity. The themes were identified as coach training, coaching barriers to professional development for cultural diversity and leadership, mentoring opportunities, and formats for leadership training and hockey performance.

The topic of mentorship was another emerging theme from our data. The critical importance of obtaining leadership development skills, communication skills, growing personal coaching abilities and understanding the impact of coach-player relationships are vital for team performance. As participant 10 explained: “For me personally, a leadership piece maybe like a mentorship program, and that would be great. . . here you can have like a like a senior hockey Nova Scotia Rep come around and, you know, once a month or whatever and, go through the with the individual coaches and maybe give them some kind of like tips on what they can change”.

5 Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine the leadership and cultural training experiences of ice hockey coaches in Nova Scotia, Canada. Results revealed that some coaches utilized a mentoring process with experienced coaches to support additional informal training practices, many faced challenges or barriers regarding accessibility in receiving formalized training programs to support cultural diversity or leadership and the lack of access to training may have impacted player and team performance. Coaches noted that communication with players about personal issues could support how they played and how their confidence was impacted by the communication. These results compliment findings from research conducted by Athletic Insight Research (2025) who determined that “effective communication is crucial in team sports. It directly impacts performance, morale, and cohesion” (p.1). The current study strengthens previous literature within coaching, communication and leadership training needs.

6 Conclusion

The aim of the present research study was to explore cultural leadership training experiences of minor hockey coaches. This study was limited by gender, as 19 of 25 participants were male, thus providing disproportionate numbers of male responses, the study also was limited as it was conducted within a smaller province in Atlantic Canada. Suggestions for future study within the realm of culture and diversity training for hockey coaches and delivery of training types would be recommended. Embracing leadership opportunities to support diversity can assist minor hockey coaches to create a more equitable mindset and environment which can foster deep connections and relationships with players, families and caregivers. Finally, the current study reinforces the need to provide support for volunteer coaches who require additional training to improve knowledge of culture, diversity and leadership within hockey.

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