**The Micro-Politics of Implementing, Supporting and Coping with Organisational Change in the Academy of a Professional Football Club**

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**Aim:** To investigate the experiences of individuals employed within the academy of a professional football club during a period of organisational change.

**Key Research Questions:**

RQ1: How does organisational change impact individual’s day-to-day working practices?

RQ2: How do individuals make sense of their actions and behaviours and the actions and behaviours of others during organisational change, and why?

RQ3: What impact does organisational change have on the professional working relationships between individuals?

**Theoretical Background & Literature Review:** Investigations into organisational change in sport have only recently received scholarly attention (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012). Indeed, professional football, in particular, is dependent on consistent success, with the environment in which employees have to practice characterised by significant change (Wagstaff, Gilmore & Thelwell, 2016). Consequently, investigations into understanding organisational change within professional football appear warranted. From a theoretical perspective, micro-politics has been advocated as a useful framework to understand organisational life within a variety of domains (Gibson & Groom, 2018). Furthermore, previous research (i.e. Munyon et al., 2015) has portrayed the political nature of organisational life and the political skill required by employees to effectively work within and survive in such environments. However, investigations into the micro-political nature of implementing, managing and coping with organisational change in professional football is lacking (Gibson & Groom, 2018).

**Methodology:** Gibson and Groom (2018) have called for in-depth, contextually sensitive methodological approaches to understand organisational change. Such methodological approaches may provide a comparative, relational understanding of interactions within the football environment. In light of the above, an interpretivist approach was adopted to allow for a platform to explore and understand how individuals interpret and make sense of the interrelated, micro-political nature of organisational change in the academy of a professional football club.

**Data Collection:** Following institutional ethical approval, data were collected at the case study site (Alder Football Club) using semi-structured interviews (n=16) with a recently employed Head of Professional Development Phase, a recently promoted Academy Manager, a Head of Foundation Phase, and an Academy Coach, ranging from 60-90 minutes each in length. In addition, ethnographic observational data were collected over three seasons by the primary researcher who was employed as the Under 16’s Academy Coach at Alder Football Club. Ethnographic observational data consisted of field notes, informal and formal meetings, in-house coach development sessions, player assessment evenings, academy training sessions and academy fixtures.

**Data Analysis:** All interview and ethnographic data were subject to a process of thematic analysis using QSR NVIVO 11. A micro-political theoretical framework was used to guide the analysis of all data sets through an iterative process. Specifically, notions of *vulnerability, professional self-interests, micro-political literacy* (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2005) and *social group identity* were included in the framework.

**Findings:** Findings highlighted the micro-political nature of changes being made to the image, branding and identity of Alder FC following the appointment of a new Chairman, Board of Directors and 1st Team Manager. Specifically, the creation of a new vision and strategy for Alder FC, aimed at portraying the club’s commitment to developing young players through the academy, evidenced the vulnerable nature of implementing and coping with the changes being made and the micro-political nature of successfully responding to the changes being made. Specifically, issues around increased scrutiny from senior colleagues, both increased and decreased feelings of vulnerability (dependent on the individual’s place within the organisational structure), staff turnover, moral conflict, the construction and destruction of professional working relationships, and the creation of a social group identity designed to support the successful implementation of change became pertinent during the change process at Alder FC.

**Conclusion:** This study is the first to provide novel empirical and theoretical insights into the role that micro-political literacy, micro-political action and employment vulnerability play during periods of organisational change. In considering the applied nature of the findings; individuals tasked with implementing organisational change should consider the role that ‘identity’ plays from an *organisational* (identity of the football club) and a *group* (identity of the department i.e. 1st team or academy) perspective. From a departmental perspective, the construction of a social group identity can enhance collaboration, inform decision-making and decrease the potential for conflict amongst employees. However, it must be noted that *individual* identities of employees must also be congruent with the social group identity of the department. Such findings may be utilised to inform the education and development of practitioners tasked with both implementing and supporting organisational change in professional football.

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