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Viewing University Leadership Transition Through a Socialization Lens: A Qualitative Case Study

by Pete Miller

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the organizational socialization process of a university football team that had a new coach. This qualitative examination, rooted in the socialization work of Van Maanen and Schein (1979), lends insight into the personal and organizational characteristics that universities must consider when hiring new leaders.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the organizational socialization process of a university football team that has a new coach. Organizational socialization, defined by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) as, "the process through which one is taught and learns the particular knowledge and skills of an organizational role in a specific work setting," (p.211) is a broad process that can be composed of various forms and accomplished with various tactics (Van Maanen & Schein). The nature of organizational socialization that takes place in a group environment can have a great influence on the members of the group, both individually and collectively (Heck, 1995; Van Maanen & Schein). While Van Maanen and Schein state that socialization is a never-ending process, they state that it is most influential on individuals when new experiences are being undertaken. Therefore, the socialization of an athletic team with a new coach seems to present such an example of a situation where the socialization process will be particularly influential on the members of the team.

It is often the goal of a coach to change the norms, values, and routines of her or his new team so that the players will be motivated to achieve greater success than they had previously experienced. Athletes who had been living out a distinct set of norms, values, and routines under their former coach are challenged to adapt to a new system. This socialization is an ongoing process that affects both the leader and those whom the leader directs. The initial stages of adjustment often present the greatest tension for all involved (Heck, 1995; Van Maanen 1984). The research that has been reviewed for this study suggests that the socialization process is indeed mutually affective for coaches and players, but it is beyond the scope of this project to examine socialization from the perspective of coaches. Furthermore, though there are many areas within the realm of organizational socialization that could be examined on a team with a new coach, this study will predominantly focus on the tactics of socialization that are utilized.

Overview of Relevant Literature

This study is theoretically rooted in socialization literature. Therefore, while examining the related studies that have been done on specific instances of socialization, it is necessary to describe some basic concepts from socialization theory that will be examined in this study. Much of this study relies on ideas proposed in Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) classic article entitled, "Toward a Theory of Organizational Socialization." This article is cited in most of the other articles and studies that are reviewed in this paper and it is recognized as an important work in socialization literature (Heck, 1995). The other two articles that contributed most significantly to the theoretical base of this study are "Doing New Things in Old Ways: The Chains of Socialization" by John Van Maanen (1984) and "Organizational and Professional Socialization: Its Impact on the Performance of New Administrators" by Ronald H. Heck (1995). The studies that were examined address the socialization process in various contexts and several themes emerging from the studies appear to be particularly relevant to this study of the socialization tactics used on a football team with a new coach. These themes are:

1. the social identities and experiences of individual group members influence the socialization process and outcomes;
2. the nature of the environment influences the socialization process and outcomes;
3. there are several potential outcomes of the group socialization processes; and 4) the type of socialization tactics that are used by leaders influence the environment that is created.

Identities and Experiences

The identities and experiences of group members and the degree to which these identities and experiences are accepted influence the socialization tactics and outcomes of a group with a new leader. Pratt, Rock, and Kaufmann's (2001) longitudinal study examining the socialization of medical residents indicated that social identities (of both leaders and followers) may serve as powerful lenses for understanding organizational socialization processes. The authors assert that these social identities can play roles in the effectiveness of the socialization process of leaders and the groups that they lead. Supporting this finding, Heck (1995) states, "The new administrator is likely to be more effective in a situation where the context of the school fits his or her personal qualities" (p. 34). These identities and personal qualities are largely formed by the past experiences of individuals in the group and play active roles in both the way in which each individual is influenced by the group and the way in which the group is influenced by each individual (Van Maanen, 1984). As Van Maanen and Schein (1979) state, socialization does not occur in a vacuum; the identities and experiences of group members play important roles in the process.

Imbedded in the identities of group members are their values. These values and the perceived values held by the leader can have a strong influence on the socialization of a group. In "The Athletic, Academic, and Social Experiences of Intercollegiate Student-

Athletes," Miller and Kerr (2002) identify three major components in the lives of Canadian college athletes: athletics, academics, and the social life. Resulting from in-depth interviews that were conducted with nine college student-athletes over the course of four months, these components were found to be competing against each other in the lives of the student-athletes. In other words, students felt that they could not devote adequate time to all of these components, so they had to choose where their values truly rested. The interviews revealed that athletics were often the most valued aspect of the students' lives and that their coaches played a major role in the development of such value systems. On their teams, athletes were socialized to have unquestioned commitment to their sport—even if it was to the detriment to their academic or social lives. Hence, the authors assert that the tactics used by coaches can indeed play a major role in both the individual and the collective socialization outcomes of their athletes. Depending on the degree to which the leader allows members of the group to draw from personal skills and past experiences to contribute to the group, individuals often rely upon lessons learned in the past to prosper in the present. Van Maanen (1984) writes: Given a degree of similarity between an old and a new activity, the new will be approached in much the same way as the old. Lessons learned in the past are sure to have value in the future if the recruit is conscious of a similarity between the two, and no concentrated efforts are made by others to destroy or make irrelevant such cognitive ties. (p. 238)

Van Maanen is describing the terms "investiture" and "divestiture," which address the degree to which a leader values and accepts the personal identities and abilities of his or her followers. (These terms will be described in greater depth later in this review.) Thus, depending on the make-up of individuals' identities and their past experiences, the socialization tactics that are used by the new coach will be responded to in different ways.

Potential Outcomes

Denis, Langley, and Pineault's (2000) in-depth study uses ideas from socialization literature to view the integration of a new leader into an organization as a mutual adjustment process between the leader and the organization. The study proposes that when a new leader arrives at an organization, there are four possible types of integration outcomes: assimilation (the leader adopts the existing dominant beliefs of the organization), transformation (the leader successfully persuades the members of the organization to adopt his or her own values and beliefs), accommodation (the outcome ends up somewhere between assimilation and transformation), or parallelism (there is persistent divergence between the two parties).

While this present study focused on the socialization tactics that were used by new coaches, it is apparent that these tactics have a strong influence on which of these types of outcomes is achieved. For example, leaders who seek to establish hierarchical organizations that are characterized by strong control at the top with minimal input received from those at the bottom will probably not assimilate to the existing dominant beliefs of the organization, but will more likely try to

transform the members of his or her organization to adopt his or her own values and beliefs.

Nature of the Environment

Denis, Langley, and Pineault's (2000) study, referenced earlier, states that a key element in determining what type of integration outcome will result is the context into which the new leader enters. Situations that are characterized by organizational success and considerable cohesion among the employees are less likely to be transformed by a new leader than are situations with little success and greater employee discord. In this particular study, the leader came to the organization with intentions to transform it, but the prior success that the hospital had enjoyed and the relatively strong cohesion among its employees made it a difficult context in which to bring about great change. As a result, the authors concluded that the eventual integration outcome was one of accommodation, as both the CEO and the members of the organization had to "give some ground." Thus, it is evident that identities, environment, and potential outcomes are all active components of the socialization process and, depending upon the nature of each of these components, the socialization tactics that are used will be responded to in different ways.

Socialization Tactics

All of the qualitative studies that were reviewed describe the ways in which socialization took place in a given environment. For example, Johnson (2001) describes the socialization of faculty at urban black colleges as a process that occurs through both formal (meetings and publications) and informal (casual advice and observations) methods. Miller and Kerr (2002) state that the socialization of college athletes occurs in both individual and collective ways. Van Maanen (1984) writes that some leaders invest in the talents of their group members while others strip them of what they have learned and then build them back up. All of these studies address different types of socialization tactics that are used by leaders.

Because this is a study of socialization tactics, the six dimensions of socialization tactics that are identified by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) will be used as a theoretical framework for this study. These six continuums can serve as an instrument with which the coach's actions can be better understood. This list of tactics appears to be the most appropriate tool from socialization literature to use for this study. The brief summaries below are provided to help clarify each of the six dimensions and their relevance to this study.

Collective vs. Individual Socialization Processes. Collective socialization refers to, "the tactic of taking a group of recruits who are facing a given boundary passage and putting them through a common set of experiences together" while individual socialization refers to "the tactic of processing recruits singly and in isolation from one another through a more or less unique set of experiences" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Formal vs. Informal Socialization Processes. Formal socialization refers to "those processes in which a newcomer is more

or less segregated from regular organizational members while being put through a set of experiences tailored explicitly for the newcomer" and informal socialization "does not distinguish the newcomer's role specifically, nor is there an effort made in such programs to rigidly differentiate the recruit from the other more experienced organizational members" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Sequential vs. Random Steps in the Socialization Process. Sequential socialization refers to "the degree to which the organization or occupation specifies a given sequence of discrete and identifiable steps leading to the target role. Random socialization occurs when the sequence of steps leading to the target role is unknown, ambiguous, or continually changing" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Fixed vs. Variable Socialization Processes. Referring to the degree to which steps in the socialization process have a timetable associated with them, "Fixed socialization processes provide a recruit with the precise knowledge of the time it will take to complete a given passage" while variable processes "give a recruit few clues as to when to expect a given boundary passage" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Serial vs. Disjunctive Socialization Processes. A serial socialization process "is one in which experienced members of the organization groom newcomers who are about to assume similar kinds of positions in the organization," whereas with disjunctive processes "no role models are available to recruits to inform them as to how they are to proceed in the new role" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Investiture vs. Divestiture Socialization Processes. Referring to the degree to which a socialization process is constructed to either confirm or disconfirm the entering identity of the individuals, "Investiture socialization processes ratify and document for recruits the viability and usefulness of those personal characteristics they bring with them to the organization," and divestiture processes "seek to deny and strip away certain personal characteristics of a recruit" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Whether leaders tend to utilize tactics based on investiture or divestiture was addressed earlier in this paper as playing a major role in the nature of the socialization process. T

he tactics used in the socialization process of a team with a new coach can be analyzed along each of these dimensions, just as can the socialization tactics used by corporations and educational institutions (as reviewed in some of these studies). Once again, the nature of the environment, the individual identities of group members, and the potential and/or desired outcomes of the socialization process can both have an influence on the tactics that are used and be influenced by the tactics that are used. Though these studies and other studies have examined the socialization processes of groups with new leaders, there is no research of note that has addressed the nature of the socialization tactics that are used by a new coach of a college sports team. Therefore, the research question to be explored

in this study is: From the perspective of members of a college football team with a new coach, what is the nature of the socialization tactics that have been employed by the new coach?

Design and Methods

Case Study Design

In an effort to gain understanding of the socialization tactics that are used by a new football coach at a university in the United States, a case study was an appropriate research design to utilize. The rationale for carrying out an in-depth examination of one case was to provide insight into the issue of the socialization of teams with new coaches. Stake (1998) labels this as an instrumental case study. The rich data gathered from this team is essentially serving as an instrument to learn about, refine, and/or build socialization theory.

In case study research, the selection of the case is crucial (Stake, 1998; Patton, 2002). It is generally not the aim of case studies to make broad generalizations, but it is important that the case that is chosen offers an opportunity to learn about the particular theory or phenomenon that is being examined (Stake). The team at State University was chosen for this study for several reasons:

1. it had a new coach;
2. the new coach appeared to be a leader who sought to socialize the group to his own norms and values (based on observations and discussions in which I have partaken); and
3. the members of the team were accessible to me to be interviewed and observed.

That the coach was new to State University and was attempting to socialize his team were both necessary for this to be a credible instrumental case study. Equally vital to this study was the extended time that I was able to spend with players and coaches. When determining which case offers the best learning opportunity, Stake writes, "That may mean taking the one that we can spend the most time with" (p. 101).

Data Collection

Interviews. Data was collected through interviews with members of the football team and observations of team practice sessions and study halls. The selection of participants for the interviews was influenced by my relationship to the team. I served as an academic mentor for the team and had gotten to know many of the team members quite well. This personal knowledge of team members allowed me to select participants who I believed would provide rich and reliable data about the new coach.

Though it is possible that my relationship with these participants could have biased their responses, Wolcott (1990) states that the researcher does not need to be neutral to be objective. It is my belief that our relationships benefited the data collection process because it

provided me access to data that another researcher might not have been granted and it contributed to the comfort and trust that the participants had in both me and the interview process. Fontana and Frey (1998) support this belief when they write, "Gaining trust is essential to an interviewer's success" (p. 59).

Furthermore, my familiarity with the team and the rhetoric of college sports (which was also aided by my own experiences as a college athlete) granted me an understanding of important tacit knowledge (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). For example, when the participant repeatedly noted that with the new coach, "Everything is balls to the wall," I understood this to mean that the new coach always requires maximum effort out of his players. Without this tacit knowledge, I would not have understood what he was talking about.

Although some of the (more than 30) interviews with participants were unstructured, most were semi-structured, meaning that I prepared specific questions for the participants, but also utilized unplanned clarifying questions throughout the interview (Creswell, 1998). What essentially materialized were casual conversations between participants and me that were centered around the socialization tactics that were used by his new coach. The semi-structured format ensured that the dialogue remained relevant to the topic and at the same time allowed a degree of flexibility to insert follow-up questions. The interviews lasted approximately one hour.

Observation. Observations were conducted for the purposes of gaining additional data and triangulating the data that was gathered from the interviews. It took place on a Saturday morning at one of the team's practice sessions. To observe the players and coaches in action, I sat in some bleachers that were near enough to the field to hear and see the words and expressions of all who were involved. I described what I was observing into a recorder. Because I have consistently worked with the team for the past two years, I had taken on what Adler and Adler (1998) have identified as a "peripheral-member-researcher" role:

> Researchers in peripheral membership roles feel that an
> insider's perspective is vital to forming an accurate
> appraisal of human group life, so they observe and
> interact closely enough with members to establish an
> insider's identity without participating in those activities
> constituting the core of group membership. (p. 85)

Because all of the team's practices are open to the public (there are usually at least 15-20 casual observers present at each practice), the coaches and players are accustomed to people watching them. Therefore, it is unlikely that my presence at practice influenced the actions of the team in any way.

Data Analysis

Coding. To identify convergence (Patton, 2002) in the data, the transcripts of the interview and notes from the observation were coded. From this coding process (Patton) emerged several common

themes that could be compared to existing socialization theory. This theme generation is evidence of the constructivist approach that is being used with this study (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Theory Comparisons. The main theoretical framework that was utilized was Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) previously referenced tactics of socialization. Where appropriate, the themes identified in the coding process were compared to the continuums presented in this model.

Trustworthiness

Several efforts were made in this study to ensure its trustworthiness, including using multiple methods of data collection, taking accurate and immediate notes, and member checking. The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, is a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, and depth to the investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). By observing the team in action as well as conducting the interviews, I was able to personally observe the tactics that players had described and others that they had not mentioned.

Though I had recorded both the interviews and the observations, I believed that the trustworthiness of the study was also dependent upon the notes that I took throughout the process. Writing down quotes and reflections during and immediately after the data collection process contributes to the richness and accuracy of the findings (Briggs, 1986; Wolcott, 1990).

Finally, to confirm that the meanings I had constructed in the analysis process were accurate, I reviewed the themes that resulted from the coding process with participants.

Findings

The findings of this study are manifested in the common themes that have been identified as characteristic of the new coach's tactics of socialization. These common themes are: 1) the tactics are group-oriented; 2) the tactics demand discipline and intensity; 3) the tactics are organized and planned out; 4) the tactics are utilized in an authoritarian manner; 5) the tactics seek to divest the group of its prior habits.

Group-Oriented Tactics

Most of the socialization tactics employed by the new coach require collaboration between the players. When the team is at practice, all of their drills and activities are done in groups. After practice, the coach requires that the team members eat dinner together. When they finish dinner, the players report to mandatory evening study hall sessions as members of one of three groups. Even the punishments are carried out collectively. If one member of a team is late for a practice or meeting, all of his teammates are reprimanded. Each of these tactics is evidence of the coach's value of teamwork and cooperation.

Discipline and Intensity

The interview and observation suggest that the socialization of the team is characterized by discipline and intensity. In describing the ways of the new coach, a player named Hank made statements like, "Everything is 'balls to the wall,' do it the right way or hit the highway," and "It's all business." Additionally, he said that the methods used by the coach exert a great deal of pressure on the players, the coach accepts no excuses, and he does not tolerate behavioral infractions. This discipline and intensity were further witnessed in the practice setting, where the coaches do a great deal of yelling, clapping, and whistle-blowing. The new coach insists that the players (and his assistant coaches) do everything the way he tells them to do it and if they do not, they must repeat it until he is satisfied.

Organization

All of the new coach's methods and procedures of socialization are highly organized. Players reported that from the day the new coach set foot on campus, he possessed a plan that was ready to be implemented and executed. This plan has athletic, academic, and social components, each of which had detailed orders in which they are to be carried out. The team's practice sessions that I observed exemplified the new coach's value for organization. He followed his written agenda for the highly-structured two hour sessions and had each of the drills and activities timed. The team was even organized spatially, as various groups of players were instructed at previously established locations on the practice field. This organized system allowed simultaneous position-specific instruction of offensive and defensive players to take place throughout the practice.

Authoritarian Leadership

The new coach at State University utilizes an authoritarian style of leadership with the team. Rather than a mutual sharing of norms, values, and routines, his tactics of socialization reach the team through a series of demands. Players are required to "do what's right." When asked what is right, Hank quickly responded, "Whatever Coach says." Indeed, the coach makes all the rules himself. According to Hank, the coach made the statement, "This is how you gotta do it or you won't like me." Hank stated that the coach's influence is so strong and his rules are so rigid that several players who did not "fit in" quit or were forced out of the program.

From the observations, the coach's authoritarian style of leadership was quite apparent. Most of the communication and obstruction that was directed at the players from the coach was sternly and loudly delivered. On several occasions, coaches got within several inches of players' faces and administered profanity-laced scoldings. With military-like precision, the players responded. No outward signs of disrespect or discontent were evident among the players.

Divestiture

The findings indicate that the new coach attempted to divest the team of its existing habits and tendencies both on and off the football field. In fact, players stated that the team is "starting from scratch." When asked what this meant, they explained that the coaches are teaching the players how to execute the most fundamental techniques and movements. Even though most members of the team have been playing football for many years, Hank stated that the coaches want to re-teach the team how to do these basic things in new ways.

This philosophy of divestiture is also evident in the way the new coach wants the players to study. Not only has he made it mandatory for many of the players to come to multiple study halls each week, he has also forced them to alter the way they study. Some of the new rules that players were forced to follow at study hall, included:

- they could not have any food or drinks with them;
- they could not wear hats;
- they could not socialize with each other; and
- they could not lean back in their chairs.

These are all things that were permissible before the new coach arrived.

Finally, the coach attempted to change the way the players interact with each other socially by not allowing them to eat or "hang out" exclusively with their previously established cliques. He ordered them to have dinner with other members of the team and even non-football-playing members of the student body. To hold them accountable for these new patterns of interaction, the coach regularly quizzed the players on personal information about their teammates. When someone did not know where one of his teammates was from or how many siblings he had, the whole team was punished.

Conclusions

Interpretations and Discussion

The five major findings from this study indicate that the players on State University's football team had to undergo a large adjustment process with the arrival of their new coach. Because the team was not successful in recent years, the coach consciously changed the climate in which the players studied, competed, and interacted with each other on a daily basis. It was apparent that the coach was true to his "my way or the highway" mentality as several players who chose not to "fit in" are no longer with the team.

Several of the major themes that emerged in the literature review are consistent with the findings from this study. First of all, just as previous studies suggested that coaches can influence the identities of their student-athletes (whether they place highest priority in athletic, academic, or social arenas), this study indicated that the new coach at State University played a large role in determining the way his players view themselves both on and off the field. His "all business" and "no excuses" mentality challenged the players to focus

their time and energy on football and forced them to sacrifice other aspects of their social identities.

Second, this case study reaffirms the findings in Denis, Langley, and Pineault's (2000) study stating that the nature of the environment into which a new leader enters affects the way the leader and her or his policies are accepted. Because the new coach at State University entered a situation where the team had not lived up to its potential, the radical changes that he implemented were readily accepted. To contrast, if the team had previously been very successful and cohesive, Denis, Langley, and Pineault's study would suggest that such radical change would not have been greeted as well.

Relating to the previous research that stated that there are four potential integration outcomes when a new leader enters an environment (Denis, Langley, & Pineault, 2000), it is apparent that the new coach at State brought about transformation. His authoritarian style was not conducive to accommodating the needs of others and he certainly appeared to have no intentions of assimilating into the previously established climate on the team. Rather, with each demand that he made, the new coach attempted to instill his own values into the minds and hearts of his players.

Comparing the findings from this study to the continuums of Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) tactics of socialization also lends more insight into the nature of socialization that occurred at State University. The findings indicate that the tactics used with the football team were collective (socialization was experienced together), formal (members were put through experiences that were distinctly tailored to newcomers), sequential (socialization occurred in discrete and identifiable steps), fixed (members were given precise knowledge of the time it would take to make it to a new passage), and divesting (members were stripped of their previous knowledge and experiences to learn in new ways). It is likely not coincidental that a coach who utilizes tactics that are so rigid and transformational was hired to lead a team that was previously considered to be undisciplined and unorganized.

Implications

Because this is a descriptive case study, its findings are not intended to be generalized to other cases where new coaches take over teams. However, the study does have implications for those in other situations. This study could be particularly insightful for those who are responsible for hiring new leaders in university contexts. The socialization that occurs on a team with a new coach is strongly influenced by the personal characteristics of the coach. As mentioned, it appeared that the new coach at State University was hired to transform the team from its previous ways into a cohesive unit. The existing circumstances of this football program (fragmented and losing often) necessitated the hiring of a coach who would forcefully socialize the players to his own ways. While the long-term success of this new coach is yet to be determined, it is apparent that the tactics he used created greater organization, better execution of duties, and increased unity among the team. Therefore, this case suggests that

those who hire new university coaches should consider the leadership styles of potential coaches and attempt to determine if they are appropriate for their given situations.

Future research could be done that examines the reactions of university employees to the socialization processes occurring under new leaders. Specifically, when a new leadership regime is installed, why do some thrive while others move on to other places? Additionally, a study could be done that compares the motivational climate that is established by new leaders to the climates that were present under the former leaders. Such a study might specifically address the differences between leaders who emphasize process-oriented climates and those who emphasize achievement-oriented climates.

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