

HR in the NHL – A Power Play Between an Injured Player and Team Management

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Abstract. Conflict between management and an employee can have a ripple effect on an organization. The impact is felt by those who are directly and indirectly involved. Can this be changed using concepts from human resource management, communication and workplace negotiations? This case study focuses on a conflict between a men's professional ice hockey player and his team's management. The case starts with a serious neck injury to the team's star player on March 7, 2021. The result is eight months of wrangling over choice of medical treatment. The case uses a progressive disclosure format. Students are asked to read and analyze the issues at three specific points in time: player injury and initial treatment; differences over medical treatment; and resolution of the impasse. The case frames the issues confronted with discussion questions for each point in time. Students are also asked to provide recommendations for dealing with these issues.

Keywords: human resource management, National Hockey League (NHL), player/team management relations, workplace conflict resolution strategies, negotiation process with injured professional athletes, constituencies communication.

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1. Focus of HR Conflict

During a men's professional ice hockey game on March 7, 2021, between the Buffalo Sabres and New York Islanders, the 24-year-old captain of the Sabres, Jack Eichel, was hit from behind and driven head first into the ice rink's enclosure. A videotape of the game showed Eichel sitting on the bench wincing in pain and flexing his neck.¹ Team physicians and trainers confirmed that Eichel had sustained a serious injury. The question among teammates, coaches, managers, owners, and fans was: How soon will Eichel be able to play again? The

1. See March 7, 2021 video of collision. *Twitter*. <http://tinyurl.com/4hn2nj2>

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case helps students understand how Eichel's injury led to a troublesome relationship between a player and team management.

2. Context: NHL, Team, Contracts, and Player

NHL (National Hockey League). The league was formed in 1917. Today there are 32 teams, 25 in the US and 7 in Canada. The league's ruling body is a board of governors representing the franchise owners of the 32 teams. The yearly revenue for the NHL is US\$5 billion, generated from television rights, gate receipts, concessions, and royalties from licensing. Costs include salaries for players (cap at US\$81.5 million per team), coaches, trainers, and other personnel plus arena, travel, and other expenses. League revenues are divided 50/50 among the team owners and the players based on a revenue sharing agreement.

The NHL is a highly competitive men's sport league. Ice hockey is played at high speeds on a low friction hard surface that poses a risk to players of collisions, falls and injuries from pucks, sticks and fights. Approximately one third of the players will be injured each year, missing one or more games. Some injuries will be serious; some players will suffer more than one injury in a year. This contributes to the average tenure of a player in the NHL of 4.5 years. Even with protective gear and helmet it ranks with American football (NFL) as one of the most injury-prone sport leagues. NHL teams play 82 games in a 21-week regular season compared to the NFL teams that play only 17 games in an 18-week regular season. One longitudinal study of NHL injuries found that 38% were considered serious, putting the player out for an indefinite period of time. Some of the most common injuries include concussions, fractures, foot sprains and shoulder dislocations (Mueller Sports Medicine, 2016).² Like players in many other professional sport leagues, ice hockey players are compensated well. The NHL set the minimum salary for the 2020-2021 season at US\$700,000. The average player salary is US\$2,554,463 with a team salary cap of US\$81.5 million (O'Brien, 2020). The highest paid player was Auston Matthews of the Toronto Maple Leafs at US\$15,910,000.³

TEAM. The Buffalo Sabres are an NHL team in Buffalo, New York formed in 1970. Since that time the Sabres have made the Stanley Cup playoffs only 29 times. In commenting on the COVID cut short 2019-2020 season and for the ninth straight time not qualifying for playoffs, team co-owners Kim and Terry Pegula⁴ stated any major changes would come at the player level during the off-season. That General Manager Jason Botterill would return for a fourth season and head

2. Mueller Sports Medicine (2016, February 7), Most common NHL injuries players suffer. <https://builtinsport.com/most-common-nhl-injuries-players-suffer/>

3. Gaimday (n.d.), What is the average NHL salary? <http://tinyurl.com/3hckx973>

4. The Pegulas purchased the Sabres franchise in 2011. They also own the National Football League (NFL) Buffalo Bills franchise which they purchased in September 2014.