Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Justice: Examining Responses to Environmental Disruption in Professional Sport Leagues

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Management - Corporate Social Responsibility (Professional Sport)
Session: Corporate Social Responsibility

Social responsibility has become an integral feature of professional sport league strategy (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017; Francois, Bayle, & Gond, 2019; Walzel et al., 2018). Sport organizations must balance external pressures with internal resources and capabilities in order to position social responsibility efforts for maximum impact. Recent environmental events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests have led to shifts in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) focus and strategy of professional sport leagues and teams. These changes range from the explicit reinforcement of organizational values to announcements of the emergence of new programs, initiatives, and organizational structures. Protests around social justice in particular have also necessitated greater social dialogue and interactions to make professional sport league positions clear on the salient issues present in the public discourse. Some scholarship suggests that organizations are slow to adapt and respond to disruptive changes in their institutional context in particular related to their CSR practices (Ingham & Harvard, 2017; Mazutis, 2018; Yuan, Bao, & Verbeke, 2011), however, it appears that these recent environmental disruptions have been a catalyst for rapid and strategic CSR change in the professional sport setting. Research has yet to account for how organizations adapt to turbulence in their environments in managing CSR change, and how they frame their shifting strategies related to CSR in times of crisis (Angus-Leppan, Metcalf & Benn, 2010; Ziek, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to examine how five professional U.S. sports leagues responded to recent environmental disruptions with new or revised CSR strategies and how those strategies were implemented and communicated to stakeholders. Using a multi-theoretical perspective integrating stakeholder theory, institutional change, and the resource based view, we examine the nature (issue focus, scope [league and team]), intensity (amount and type of resource investment) of the strategic changes in CSR focus of professional leagues, as well as the messaging and communication of those changes to key stakeholders to understand the variation in responses across leagues. We use qualitative data including media articles (top US news and sport publications), official organizational communications (press releases and CSR related documents), as well as social media posts (Twitter) to chronicle, categorize, and compare league responses to stakeholder pressures for social change from the time period March to December 2020.

The causation of differences in CSR focus and communication is likely a multivariate issue that involves pre-existing socially responsible practices, priorities, organization values, willingness to change, and stakeholder influence. This research will pave the way for a deeper understanding of how sport organizations can strategically navigate and adapt their CSR efforts to disruptive institutional environments.