Corporate Social Responsibility During COVID-19: An Initial Review of the NBA Response to the Global Pandemic

Manuela Picariello, Texas Woman's University
Richard Henry, Texas Woman's University
Gwendolyn Weatherford, Texas Woman's University
Sylvia Trendafilova, University of Tennessee
Vassilios Ziakas, Independent Scholar

Management - Corporate Social Responsibility (Professional Sport)

Numerous sport organizations have devoted a significant amount of resources to a variety of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and community outreach programs. This is due to the mutual dependencies between sport and society, interwoven rather than distinct entities because sport organizations do not operate in a close system, secluded from society (Porter & Kramer, 2002; Wood, 1991). The Covid-19 pandemic has brought this consideration to a new level. CSR has been defined as an organization’s commitment to obey the law and perform activities that go beyond expectations in providing social good outside of the organization's self-interests (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Carrol (1991) suggests that four distinctive responsibilities make up CSR, including economic responsibilities, legal responsibilities, ethical responsibilities, and philanthropic responsibilities. The National Basketball Association (NBA) appears to be one of the sport industry leaders in the CSR crisis response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Smith & Casper, 2020). The purpose of this research was to investigate the nature of CSR activities carried out by the NBA during the Covid-19 emergency. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a website content analysis was utilized as the method of data collection. The NBA’s official website was then utilized to gather data about the specific CSR initiatives that were adopted. These data provide an initial look at how the league used its new CSR platform (e.g., NBA Together) to support the community through the pandemic. Based on the research findings, we namely identify five distinct types of CSR initiatives: access to cash, access to food, bridge digital divide, healthcare emergency response, and access to facilities. The target of the initiatives was the arena's workers, frontline medical workers, vulnerable populations in many communities in the United States and abroad. Money was donated to make sure arena employees losing income would receive some assistance for a variety of expenses, including health care, rent/mortgage, food, and other necessities. The meals and groceries were delivered by either team or through non-profit organizations to help people in need across the country. Laptops were donated to help make distance learning possible for all students. In order to help with the global shortage of medical equipment, players and teams donated or funded medical equipment such as masks, gloves, gowns, cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, eye protection, and ventilators. Teams also opened their facilities to the community as emergency field hospitals or logistics hubs where they assisted with food storage for hunger relief, first responder staging, and the collection of critically needed medical supplies. This study confirms that CSR activities are "context-dependent and ever-evolving, based on community needs and resource availability" (Trendafilova et al., 2017, p. 948). The NBA seems to have recognized and embraced the dynamic nature of CSR. Adopting this view, based on a new CSR platform, the NBA was able to pivot the efforts to address the community needs during an unprecedented crisis. The findings of this research have practical implications for sport managers and other stakeholders who are interested in adopting CSR programs and initiatives within their organizations.