

Creating opportunities for diverse populations: An action research study

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Abstract 154**

Despite the many diversity-related gains in the sport industry, prejudice and discrimination are still prevalent in that context (see Cunningham, 2007; Lapchick, 2005; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Consequently, several researchers have proposed diversity management frameworks (Chelladurai, 2005; DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999).

A common theme among all of the aforementioned models is the emphasis on the desired end state: an organizational culture that values diversity and capitalizes on the benefits such differences can bring to the workplace. Unfortunately, sport organizations today typically do not embody these characteristics (Cunningham & Fink, 2006). What's more, the existing models provide little guidance as to the specific dynamics and processes for creating and sustaining that state.

There is considerable evidence that cultures of similarity are institutionalized within sport organizations (Shaw & Frisby, 2006; see also Meyerson & Kolb, 2000); that is, there are informal processes and taken-for-granted norms, values, and assumptions that are perpetuated over time. Thus, the cultures are continually reinforced. If this is the case, then creating diverse organizational cultures entails substantial change and the deinstitutionalization of organizational practices. Given these foundations, the organizational change and development literature can inform (a) how diversity-related changes takes place, and (b) the specific strategies sport managers can use to create and sustain diversity.

The organizational change and development literature points to several mechanisms managers can use to implement diversity-related change, including educational initiatives, top management support, and systemic integration. Educational activities are also needed in order to ensure that organizational members understand what the change means for the organization and to allay any fears and anxieties concerning the change (Robbins, 2003). Additionally, research has shown that diversity initiatives receiving strong, reliable support from top management continually out-perform efforts that lack such support (Gilbert & Ivancevich, 2000). In providing support, top managers model the attitudes and behaviors needed to ensure the initiative's success (Bandura, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Finally, one of the most important steps a manager can take to bring about employee commitment to diversity is to integrate diversity efforts into the broader organizational landscape (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Myerson & Kolb, 2000; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). By their very nature, organizations are systems (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), and as such, making a change in one part of the system necessitates changes in other parts as well.

In drawing from this framework, the purpose of this action research project was to work with a university department of intercollegiate athletics (DIA) that was seeking to implement several diversity-related initiatives. The stated goal of this initiative was to expose "students of color to the many campus opportunities to support _____ athletics." At the time I was approached to aid with this process, the department was nearing the end of the second year of the diversity program, and the goals had been met with mixed success. I was asked to evaluate the diversity initiatives in place and recommend steps for improvement.

In order to accomplish these objectives, I visited the campus to conduct an organizational diagnosis, or the process where a researcher enters a system, such as the DIA, collects data about people's experiences in that system, and provides feedback with the aim of increasing the understanding of the system by its members (Alderfer, 1980). The purpose of such activities is to "establish a widely shared understanding of the system and, based on that understanding, to determine whether change is desirable" (Alderfer, 1980, p. 459). In this spirit, I conducted interviews with DIA personnel as well as members of various culture houses on the university's campus. I also examined organizational documents, websites from the DIA and the different culture houses, and various outside sources, such as Associated Press releases. Based on this information, I provided (a) an assessment of the current state of diversity initiative, (b) identified barriers to the program, and (c) offered recommendations for change.

In terms of the current assessment, even though the initiative is entering its third year, all parties indicated that the diversity initiative was in the beginning stages, and DIA members appeared very cognizant of the difficult nature of the task. Further, educational activities aimed at promoting the positive aspects of the DIA to people of color on campus had been met with skepticism. Several barriers were identified that had to be overcome for the diversity program to realize its full potential. These include cultural differences, concerns with the Native American mascot, and perceptions of the DIA specifically, and the university in general, as a racist entity. Based on the research, several recommendations for change were offered: broaden the scope of the diversity campaign, severing ties with Native American mascot, and systemically integrating diversity into the DIA's operations.

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A formalized report was presented to the DIA and met with mixed reactions. For some members of the department (and all members of the university community), the conclusions and recommendations were met with agreement and enthusiasm. However, some members of the DIA, in particular the athletic director, were more pessimistic in their interpretation of the report and expressed a reluctance to move away from the institutionalized activities that had alienated people of color from the department in the first place. Thus, in drawing from the previously articulated organizational change framework, although educational activities were implemented, the lack of top management support and systemic integration served to impede the ultimate success of the diversity program in place. In short, in the case of this action research project, the organizational change framework proved useful in helping to understand the factors that both contributed to and impeded the ultimate success of the diversity initiatives.