Sound Check: Are Women's Voices Undervalued in the Sport Workplace?

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While the number of women in the sport industry has increased (Siang, 2012), proportional representation has not yet been attained (O’Conor, 2014). For example, sport media organizations provide important outlets for voices and opinions on critical matters within sport, but women are severely under-represented in both print and web-based sport journalism (Lapchick, Burnett, et al., 2013) as well as in sports talk radio (Hardin, Antunovic, Bien-Aimé, & Li, 2013). Despite increases in female participation in the sport industry, it remains to be seen whether these women are being valued. Employee perceptions of the value attributed to their contributions in the workplace matter (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). If women’s voices are not being valued in the sport workplace then organizations will not be maximizing their gains from gender diversity initiatives. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to conduct a sound check to determine if women’s voices are undervalued in the sport industry.

Gender diversity in professional sport organizations lags even though racial diversity has made gains (Lapchick, Costa, Sherrod, & Anjorin, 2012; Lapchick, Bernstine, et al., 2013). In addition, while racial diversity in boards of directors has been linked to increased organizational performance, this relationship has not held for gender diversity at this level (Miller & Triana, 2009) and is inconclusive across other levels of the organization (Kochan et al., 2003). A possible explanation for this missing relationship is that women’s professional offerings are not given the same weight as those of their male counterparts. Women in sport media use their colleagues and peers as referents when determining their satisfaction in the sport workplace (Whisenant, Pedersen, & Smucker, 2004) so it would stand to reason that male and female co-workers would be used to determine the relative value attributed to their contributions and workers would take note of this information. Combined with the relative dearth of women in influential leadership positions in sport organizations (Hardin et al., 2013; O’Conor, 2014), undervaluing prevents the sport industry from maximizing the contributions of its female employees. If sport organizations are merely responding to isomorphic pressures (Washington & Patterson, 2011), imitators will not reap the full advantage of women in the sport workplace.

Recent research of women in leadership positions in sport suggests gender differences in the way organizations structure leadership positions and select individuals to fill them. Women face challenges due to the implicitly gendered job descriptions and requirements in senior level sport leadership positions (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2007). In addition, leadership differences seem to be in part linked to pre-career experiences and differences in the ways in which men and women accumulate social and business-related capital (Brown & Light, 2012; Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014). Female executives in Australia reported they required many more lateral moves and industry changes to reach executive positions than did their male colleagues, faced increased scrutiny due to their gender, and took riskier leadership positions (such as taking control of a failing business) in order to advance (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014).

Power and impression management serve as the theoretical framework for this study. Power is the authority to make substantive decisions within an organization and it demonstrably affects the literal voices of those who have it. While men with high power levels speak more, women with high levels of power will not and, additionally, will be rated more harshly if they do speak more (Brescoll, 2012). Impression management is the use of behavior to create or alter impressions in a target audience (Bolino, Kaemar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). In some cases where women are employed for sport organizations, female employees may feel obligated to utilize impression management (e.g., masking offense at sexist comments, altering the way they dress) in order to remain or advance within sport organizations (Jessop, 2013; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2007). These impression management tactics force women to manage their opinions, voices, and behavior within the workplace and thereby withhold their full authentic self from organization.
Recruitment of participants will begin using sport organizations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), espnW, and other similar sport organizations and include both male and female mid-level employees. Data collection will continue until saturation is achieved. This study adheres to qualitative inquiry by using semi-structured interviews. An instrument has been developed rooted in the tenets of power and impression management. Examples of items include: “Do you feel as though you have the power to influence decisions in your organization?” “Are your opinions valued by your colleagues?” “Are your opinions valued by your immediate supervisors?” and “Are the opinions of men and women valued differently?” Interview questions focus on the experiences of the subjects and their perceptions of the value attributed by their organizations and peers to their own contributions, the contributions of female colleagues, and the contributions of male colleagues. Mid-level sport industry employees were chosen as the homogeneous population of interest as they will likely have some power and influence in their roles but will not be considered critical decision makers in most situations. Choosing subjects from this organization level and the inclusion of both male and female participants is expected to aid the exploration of the relationship between gender and contribution value. For the purposes of this study, gender will be explored as a dichotomous variable. The data gathered will be rigorously analyzed in the style of Gioia (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) and results will report themes and aggregate dimensions.

This study will be a significant contribution to the literature on gender diversity and inclusion in the sport workplace as it will provide a novel approach to measuring the seriousness of integration efforts and the degree to which female contributions are sought and valued. This lens is expected to provide valuable insights suitable to provoke additional research questions. Sport management practitioners will be particularly interested in this study because it will provide a window into the experiences of individuals who are at the center of gender diversity efforts. If the voices of women in sport are being undervalued then sport management practitioners who want the maximum benefit from their gender diversity programs will need to re-evaluate their approaches to increase women’s integration into sport workplaces.

Finalized results will be included in the presentation along with conclusive themes and a model linking gender, contributions, and the value ascribed to those contributions. The limitations of this study will be noted and future research directions will be explored.