Searching for a Voice. Women and Leadership Development in Sport Organizations

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There has been growing interest in gender diversity and the leadership development of women in recent years within the broader field of management studies (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008). Understanding leadership development processes is important for the sport industry, where organizations are becoming increasingly professional and commercially focused. Despite the increased focus on gender diversity and leadership development within the sport industry, to date, the scope and application of organizational gender theory within an Australian sport context has been limited (Adriannse & Schofield, 2014). As such, the purpose of this study was to explore gendered processes within stakeholders of the Australian sports industry, and to uncover its impact on the leadership development of women. Specifically, the research investigated the practices of three organizations that have a major stake in Australian professional sport.

These organizations included a major sponsor of sport, a market leading sport media business, and a sport governing body. The sponsor chosen for this study not only has a long history in sponsoring sport it is also one of Australia’s largest publicly listed companies. The sponsor is a financial institution that has also been known for its focus over the past decade on diversity and inclusion in addition to award winning corporate social responsibility strategies. The sport media organization is one of Australia’s biggest media firms and was selected for this study due to its dominance within the national sport media market. The sport governing body chosen for the study is responsible for a major professional league and has one of the biggest participation bases in Australian sport. Unlike many of the major Australian-based sport governing bodies, the selected organization caters mainly to a female fan and participation base. (The above description of the three organizations involved in the study has been written in a manner that protects their identity).

As outlined above, the interaction between gender and leadership development remains an under-explored body of research (Day et al., 2014). The focus of early theorists was on measuring developmental opportunities available to both men and women in an attempt to quantify gender bias. More recently there has been a shift in focus towards understanding subtle or “second generation” forms of bias (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). This may take the form of entrenched cultural and organizational beliefs as well as “structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favour men” (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011, p. 4). However, despite this shift in focus Ely et al., (2011) argue that there is an absence of a “coherent, theoretically-based and actionable framework for designing and delivering leadership programs for women” (p. 5). As organizations have attempted to diversify their staffing arrangements, the demand for leadership development strategies has not been met by a growth in academic assessment of gender and leadership development (Ely et al., 2011).

The findings presented in this paper are part of a broader study that has explored leadership development across professional sport organizations and stakeholders in Australia, with 30 senior executives interviewed over the past three years. For this paper we draw on in-depth interview data collected from 15 senior executives based at the three listed organizations (five interviews at each organization). The interview data used in this analysis that was collected in the second half of 2015. In addition to interview data internal and public documents (such as annual reports) were examined and assisted in the identification of key theoretical themes. A researcher was also able to spend time at one of the organizations to observe internal practices.

The study found that the sport media organization and sport governing body had a greater reliance on informal, experience-based approaches to leadership development when compared to the sport sponsor. The three core leadership development strategies to emerge were education, mentoring and feedback processes. Furthermore, the sport sponsor was the only organization out of the three to engage in discussions regarding the importance of gender-specific development. Overall, the sport sponsor was found to be the most advanced organization with its
leadership development practices, including having a clear and effective strategy for the successful development and promotion of women.

The research highlighted the interconnectedness between gender organizational theory and the reality of operating in corporate Australia. It was found that the results of the research were consistent with findings of prominent gender theorists on issues such as skewed gender ratios as the norm, the importance of critical mass and the desirability of gender metrics (Connell, 2002; Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014). The research demonstrated that there has been insufficient discussion about gender equality and the leadership development of women particularly within the sport industry. The lack of discussion has been caused by organizational cultures that have not problematized gender imbalance but rather allowed for the implicit acceptance of gender norms (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007).

It was also found that the organizational gender ratio was a structural determinant of gendered organizational behavior within all three organizations. This satisfies Kanter's (1977) research, which emphasized that the greater the skew of a group, the greater the emphasis on gender differences. The findings also emphasized a strong correlation between the gender composition of the leadership team of all three organizations and the reinforcement of gender norms determined by the level of gender equality discussions and the progression of women within the organization. These findings extend our knowledge of the current gender strategies and leadership development practices within sport industry stakeholders located in Australia. The research has implications for current practice, highlighting the potential for cross-organizational knowledge sharing and learning between sport industry stakeholders.