Examining the Community Practices of Professional Sport Teams: Strategic Rationales and Design Choices

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Professional sport team organizations (PSTOs) are increasingly engaging in activities designed to contribute to community development agendas in areas including, but not limited to, health, youth development, education and social cohesion (Levermore, 2011; Trendafilova et al., 2016). Research on these approaches suggest delivery of community-oriented activities vary in nature, exhibiting diverse objectives and structures and utilising different funding or resourcing models (Cobourn, 2014). This is supported in practice when observing community-oriented functions in teams globally, where diversity exists in approaches and organization design decisions made within organizational structures.

Perhaps influencing these differentiated models of design and delivery, research has highlighted diverse rationales and proposed organizational benefits for why PSTOs engage in community activities, with many stemming from a corporate social responsibility (CSR) perspectives (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Despite this, little more is known about the strategic rationales of professional teams and how they impact the design and implementation of community-focused strategies and activities. Adding to this research need, much investigation into reasons why PSTOs engage in community work (and the impact of such work) has been undertaken in North American contexts, with a need to understand how rationales and design structures differ in other global regions and league contexts. This research focuses on a number of teams in the Australian context and specifically examines the practices which underpin strategy and design decisions of PSTOs.

Conceptually, this research builds on broader strategy-as-practice concepts in general management and adapts it to the community-oriented setting within PSTOs. That is, community-orientated programs are something that sport managers do (i.e., a social practice) rather than something the organizations own (e.g., an organizational property) (Whittington, 1996). Strategy-as-practice in general management looks to link intra-organizational levels of managerial activity to the aggregated effects of these actions (i.e., the shared understanding of community-orientated practice between actors within an organizational field such as a sport league). Broadly, this approach is based on Whittington’s (2006) integrative framework which, applied to the research context, includes community orientated praxis (i.e., what managers actually do when implementing community engagement programs); community-orientated practices (i.e., the behaviors, norms and procedures shared by managers responsible for delivering community programs); and, community orientated practitioners (i.e. the actual actors who implement these activities). Specific to this research setting, community-orientated practices consider rationales, philosophies and actions taken by the practitioners.

In examining this research issue, we developed cases of PSTOs (n=12) from the same large, Australian, professional sporting league. Data collection was structured in multiple stages. Initially, public information (from documents and websites) was collated to develop detailed case summaries with respect to community-oriented practices. Following this, interviews were conducted with one community-oriented practitioner (e.g., senior manager) per case to explore justifications and structural characteristics of community activities in each PTSO. Following the interviews, within-case and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) was used to identify similarities and differences between the approaches taken by PTSoS and various models were developed to represent variant community-oriented practices in professional sport. Findings are presented in two areas; firstly how community-oriented practices influence a PTSoS structural design choices for their community activities; and secondly the three design configurations observed across the twelve cases.

From a strategic standpoint, PTSoS adopted specific organizational designs based on their practices. Practices here
were identified as their strategic rationale for engaging in community-oriented praxis and the emphasis the organization placed on the role of community in the broader organizational mission, vision and strategy. Some teams saw their community-oriented practices as having distinct customer growth or commercial benefits, which could be translated into KPIs impacting differing areas of the team’s business. This differed from teams who had a standalone community function or legal community entity who articulated important distinctions between community and commercial outcomes and KPIs in their organizations. Typical of those teams with community departments, or a separate entity, was a strong commitment from leadership around the role professional teams should play in developing communities. Common across teams – at least as a secondary rationale - was the view that community-oriented practices provided brand visibility, and a form of ‘insurance’ against poor on-field performance, or even off-field player indiscretions. Here, teams could focus attention of fans and other stakeholders on the good things they are doing in the community, rather than the team performance or individual behavior. While this arguably links back to a consumer mindset, it also more broadly appears to align with CSR frameworks and rationales for engaging in CSR activities.

Emerging from results were three distinct organizational designs used to deliver community-oriented strategies. Each was underpinned by unique practices dictating the degree of emphasis it received within broader organizational strategies, its level of focus and structural specificity, and its development as an internal function within the organization or external legal entity separate to the teams. Design one saw the team set up a separate legal entity from which community-oriented operations took place. This was often designed both to bring in resources from diverse channels and run community programs, with its structural separation from other team operations ensuring this could occur most efficiently. The second structural design involved the community function remaining as a functional unit of the team’s existing legal entity and organizational structure, but as a distinct, stand-alone community entity. Operations of this department focused entirely on the delivery of community-oriented initiatives. The final identified design involved a multi-purpose functional department in which the community function was situated. This meant the community function was integrated into activities spanning a range of stakeholder engagement, people and culture, fan development or engagement activities as part of a diverse functional remit. We note in our findings a period of change for teams in this league, where movement towards a larger and more distinct role for community practices was communicated, directed towards its establishment as a separate entity or as sole department in the organization structure. Managers provided detailed examples of recent or emergent changes to team structures as well as reported benefits and limitations of each structural design.

Results support organizational design perspectives, where in this context, PTSOs make strategic decisions about the division of work that result in diverse structural designs. In this case, decisions appear driven by their community-oriented practices and subsequent activities and outcomes, with the proposed role of community, its relative importance, and operational needs largely dictating the structural design in place. In line with community-oriented practice presented here, initial results suggest a reciprocal relationship between the behaviors, norms and procedures undertaken by community-oriented practitioners and organizational designs observable within PTSOs. The results provide a contribution in determining and classifying different team practices for community involvement of PTSOs, while advancing understanding of both the antecedents of design decisions for community-oriented structures, as well as potential benefits and limitations of different structural designs. Reflective of shared practices of teams in a single league, the research setting provides an opportunity to address the research questions within a consistent league structure, while noting the opportunity to advance work on community-oriented practices in a different but comparable regional context to much existing work.