The Architects of ‘Strategifying’ SFD-CSR: A Case Study of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment’s MLSE Launchpad.

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Sport management researchers have identified the deliberate efforts of professional team sport organizations (PTSOs) to orient corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in alignment with their business interests (Smith & Westerbeck, 2007; Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014; Babiak & Kihl, 2018). This research has established that CSR initiatives are part of organizational strategy (Mintzberg & Walters, 1985). Heinze et al. (2014) highlight the importance of leadership and decision-making in establishing a supportive structure and community support in their study of the Detroit Lions. While the process of developing a strategic approach has become central to understanding CSR in PTSOs, we know very little about how CSR itself becomes strategic. Gond, Cabantous, and Krikorian (2018) coined the term “strategifying” to define how CSR is made strategic and the institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Hempel, Lawrence, & Tracey, 2017) that is required to shift the boundaries of what defines strategy in organizations. This concept builds on “strategy-as-practice” scholarship (Whittington, 1996; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Smets, Greenwood, & Lounsbury, 2015) that focuses on those who develop the strategies and their actions and interactions that shape strategy.

The purpose of our study is to contribute to understanding strategic sport CSR in PTSOs by exploring how sport CSR becomes strategic and how actors influence this change. We present findings from a revelatory case study (Corely & Gioia, 2004; Yin, 2009) of CSR reorientation by a PTSO. In this presentation, we explore how the “architects” who lead the change and their various “patterns of actions” transformed the prevailing expectations and standards of practice of CSR and made sport for development (SFD) CSR strategic by shifting understandings and boundaries of strategy. Between 2009 and 2017 the Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE) Foundation underwent as significant reorientation with respect to sport CSR culminating in the development of MLSE LaunchPad—a community facility in the Moss Park community of Toronto funded by the MLSE Foundation. This presentation is based on in-depth interviews with four key actors involved in the reorientation of sport CSR into strategy—the former CEO of MLSE, the founding MLSE Foundation Chair, the current head of community affairs, MLSE; and the current Executive Director of MLSE Foundation and MLSE LaunchPad. We also draw from interviews with 9 internal actors and 12 external stakeholder representatives who were involved in or impacted by the reorientation.

Our findings highlight three core themes: relational, reflexive, and discursive strategifying work of key leaders. We highlight how this work 1) changed the boundaries of strategy to include sport CSR and 2) changed the boundaries of sport CSR to include a philanthropic investment orientation that involves operating and evaluating a community facility and the provision of free programs to youth in the community. We conclude with a discussion of how our analysis highlights the purposeful work of key actors in changing the boundaries of what is strategic (Gond et al., 2018) CSR and contributes to a new understanding of SFD-CSR for the PTSO sector.