

A Study of Strategic Leadership Approaches in Culturally Diverse Sports Teams

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Abstract. Amidst the increasing manifestation of diversity in globalized societies, its pervasive influence has permeated various facets of human activity, including the labor market and workforce composition. This phenomenon is mirrored within the sports industry, where "diversity" signifies the amalgamation of unique identities and cultures within teams or organizations. This paper probes the imperative for sports industry leaders to calibrate their leadership approaches according to the cultural tapestry of their employees. By accentuating the pivotal role of team cohesion, innovation, and employee performance, the analysis underscores the complexities of managing diverse teams while debunking stereotypes. The recommendations advocate for leaders to embrace cultural sensitivity, flexibility, and integration, thereby effectively harnessing the latent potential of a multifaceted workforce.

Keywords: diversity, leadership styles, team cohesion, employee performance.

1. Introduction

Diversity is a phenomenon that is increasingly manifested in globalised societies and presents in all areas of human activity, including in the labour market and the workforce (Urbancová et al., 2016). Similarly, diversity also exists within the labour market in the sports field. The term "diversity" is a "team-level concept" (Joshi & Neely, 2018), and it refers to the representation of several groups of persons within a group or organisation who have diverse identities and cultures from one another (Ferdman, 2014). With the increasing diversity of work teams, there is growing attention to leadership in cross-cultural contexts. While leadership impacts others to comprehend and achieve agreement on what needs to be done and how it should be done, it is also a factor that enables individual and group efforts to reach common aims (Yukl & Becker, 2006). Cultural differences impact the process of leadership caused by diversity, as people from one culture may not easily understand another. Therefore, leaders need to become competent in cross-cultural awareness and practice (O'Reilly et al., 1989). Therefore, this essay is aimed to discuss whether the leaders are required to adopt styles of leadership based on their employees' backgrounds. It firstly discusses why leaders in the sports industry need to adjust their leadership style according to the cultural background of their employees. Meanwhile, it will also evaluate what challenges leaders will face when adopting this leadership style and concludes with some recommendations in the final section.

2. Enhancing Cohesion and Organizational Profitability

Leaders who adopt leadership styles dependent on cultural differences could enhance the cohesion among employees in the sports industry. Wendt et al. (2009) illustrated that leadership behaviour is essential for team cohesion. Also, both leadership and cohesion may be influenced by socio-cultural influences. Therefore, the ability of leaders to improve team cohesion is crucial when organisations have employees with different cultural backgrounds. In other words, a leader's ability to manage the relationship between employees from culturally diverse settings is one of the factors that impact the performance of the team they take charge of. Besides of this, managers who are charging of teams with multicultural should also prioritise social integration, which includes attractiveness to the organisation, satisfaction with the members in the group together with social interaction among group members (O'Reilly et al., 1989). Also, as per Schermerhorn (2012), employees who are working in a

cohesive group value their membership and try to keep positive relationships with their team members. Therefore, when leaders take cultural differences into consideration, the satisfaction among the members could be enhanced. Meanwhile, the satisfaction to the organisation will also be improved. Thus, they will be more loyal to the organisation, and the retention rate will be increased then. In turn, the trust and cohesion that leaders build when considering the cultural differences of their employees create collective efficacy, which allows each individual to be more valuable in the team (Pillai & Williams, 2004). In particular, if leaders could recognise different cultural backgrounds, employees would feel that they are taken seriously. Consequently, they will treat other members in a similar approach to the leaders. Thus, team cohesion increases when all people respect and trust each other in spite of different cultural backgrounds. Team cohesion is considered a crucial factor in different settings of the group, including the sports industry, especially in basketball and football (Beauchamp & Eys, 2007). It is more possible for those cohesive teams to work together in a practical approach and then have a better performance than those which are lacking in cohesion (Smith et al., 2013). For example, coaches, players and other staff are mostly from different countries in the NBA team. If the leaders of the team do not respect the cultural background of the players or other employees, then the team players will not trust with each other, and this impact their collaboration negatively. In other words, they will consider themselves as 'I' instead of 'we' when playing the games.

Leaders who recognise cultural differences and adjust their leadership accordingly can improve employee performance and organisational profitability. Valuable cross-cultural skills of leadership could decrease the negative impacts of unmet demands that recent expatriates perhaps feel when adjusting to a new position of job (Majahan & De Silva, 2012). This means that if leaders can do some preparation prior to the arrival of the expatriate, they can reduce the gap between those expatriates and themselves caused by cultural differences. As a result, the expatriate does not have to spend much time adapting to the new environment and can concentrate on work in a short time. This leads to a significant increase in productivity. McKinsey's (2018) report shows that companies with a diverse culture will perform better, especially when the leadership in the organisation is diverse. Specifically, organisations which have ethnically and culturally diverse leadership are 33% more likely to have a better performance compared with their peers. As previously mentioned, these figures could demonstrate that a company with diverse leadership based on cultural differences could achieve higher productivity and organisational profitability. Those leaders who respect multiculturalism increase employee motivation and are more likely to be successful compared to their peers. Due to this, the leader, as well as the company, will receive increased financial revenue and company profits. In other words, such a leadership approach could contribute to higher motivation from the employees, and then the productivity could be doubled and redoubled. It is also an approach for the organisation to achieve their goals when adapting management methods to the cultural background of the employee. It is also similar in the sports industry. If a team contains many players from different backgrounds of culture, the cultural differences between the players make the coach's task more difficult. When coaches do not identify and address various cultural barriers, team performance decreases (Maderer et al., 2014). Therefore, team performance is dependent on how the coaches and the leaders manage those members from different cultures and communicate with them efficiently to a certain extent.

3. Cultivating Creativity and Innovation through Diverse Leadership

It is more possible to bring more creativity and innovation when leaders adopt leadership styles considering the cultural differences. Diverse leadership leads to creativity, and innovative solutions, as culturally diverse groups are likely to develop unique alternatives and challenge previous ideas together with standard approaches to doing things (Adler, 1991). Different countries have different customs and traditions, which means that people from different countries may have different ideas and creativity. In addition, people from different countries at different stages of development may have different perspectives and approaches to thinking. When a company leader adopts different

leadership styles depending on the cultural background of the employees, it could maximise the effect of innovation and creativity brought by diverse employees. Therefore, it could improve the quality of decision making, stimulates creativity and innovation, and encourages employees to be interested and curious about solving problems and presenting their own ideas (Robbins, 1994). These make it easier for companies to recognise the problems with their old ideas and to adopt better ideas and approaches. In the sports industry, the number of foreign players within the five major European football leagues has risen obviously since 1995 (Frick, 2009). For example, 69.2% of Premier League players in 2017 were foreigners (Sky sports, 2017). Through involving foreign players, the officials of clubs also would like to gain benefit from the particular advantages of players with various cultural backgrounds. There are different skills in football led by different origins (Maderer et al., 2014). For example, German clubs pay more attention to discipline, strength and efficiency. Meanwhile, it is more significant to practise technical skills in Brazil. Therefore, the pooling of skills in multicultural football teams is expected to improve their success rate if they could take advantage of various skills based on cultural differences. It is similar for many sports companies or organisations. As sports is a globalised industry, sports companies or organisations need a broader perspective to attract and manage their customers or fans. Therefore, it could significantly increase the efficiency of a company if it creates different groups and uses multiple perspectives to deal with the same situation.

4. Challenges in Adapting Leadership Styles to Cultural Diversity

While adapting leadership styles to cultural differences is an excellent way to lead, there are many challenges that managers may face with when practising this approach. Firstly, leaders cannot meet the needs of all employees from a perspective of culture, especially in very diverse companies (Ourfali, 2015). It is difficult for leaders to match the needs of each employee. Certain cultures (e.g. Russia, USA) would like to choose those leaders who are accountable, visible and assertive. However, others such as Japan are more likely to accept leaders who are more likely to be behind the scenes instead of being quite visible. Meanwhile, some cultures such as Spain are likely to accept leaders who could gain respect by standing above the crowd (Tsui et al., 2007). Adapting leadership approaches based on the culture of the employee is not achievable as the gap among employees may quite huge. From a cultural point of view, it is difficult for leaders to treat their employees with absolute equality. The needs of employees also arise in relation to the stage of development of each country, or rather in relation to the power distance (Hofstede, 1983). The greater the power distance, the more different the needs will be between the two countries. Such a gap is very difficult to change in turn.

In addition to this, stereotypes are also one of the challenges to leadership. Stereotypes could make people to making decisions about colleagues and managers without information about the individuals (Fadil, 1995). Many stereotypes are ingrained in people's consciousness as they grow up and are difficult to change or reverse as a result. Although not all stereotypes are negative, all stereotypes are simplified and one-sided. Such stereotypes could limit their work and create challenges for leaders. This is because when stereotypes are established, it is difficult to change perceptions of the individuals with different cultures. Such stereotypes are bidirectional as employees and leaders could form stereotypes of each other which could challenge their leadership. Once it is formed, it would be a serious concern as well as biases on culture without consciousness and become a quite complex challenge in the diversity of workplace to overcome. Therefore, leaders need to promote integration rather than isolated consideration of cultural differences.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explores the question of whether leaders within the sports industry should tailor their leadership styles to accommodate the diverse cultural backgrounds of their employees. Adapting leadership approaches to account for cultural distinctions yields manifold benefits, foremost among them being the augmentation of team cohesion. Consequently, this enhances overall team

performance and amplifies productivity. Furthermore, embracing the rich array of cultural backgrounds fosters an environment conducive to innovation and creativity. However, the assimilation of culturally sensitive leadership can encounter hurdles, including the formidable challenge of dispelling entrenched stereotypes.

In instances where there are pronounced cultural disparities among team members or an abundance of diversity within a team, the task of uniformly meeting each employee's expectations becomes unfeasible for a leader. In light of these merits and complexities, several recommendations emerge for leaders to navigate this terrain adeptly. Primarily, leaders should exhibit flexibility and a commitment to fostering integration. This involves acknowledging and respecting the cultural nuances of each individual rather than adhering to a rigid approach. Effective management hinges on the establishment of mutual understanding and respect between leaders and their team members.

Furthermore, it is imperative for leaders to transcend linear thinking. A dynamic approach requires leaders to continuously fine-tune their perspectives and evaluate the outcomes of their initiatives before calibrating their strategies accordingly. This iterative process forms the bedrock for cultivating a thriving and holistic growth trajectory within a diverse team setting.

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