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Abstract
Organizational culture has long been recognized as a critical component that can facilitate high performance in business (Balthazard, Cooke, & Potter, 2006). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the phenomena of organizational culture change in professional sport (NBA, MLB, and NFL). Six owners or general managers who had successfully brought their organizations through organizational culture change, as evidenced by their team’s performance, agreed to an in-person interview. Five primary themes emerged (Symptoms of a Dysfunctional Culture, My Way, Walk the Talk, Embedding New Culture, and Our Way) which together formed an initial model for organizational culture change in professional sport: the Culture Change Cycle. Each theme is discussed in depth, and differences across sport and role are explained.

Keywords
Organizational culture, culture change, leadership, performance

Introduction
Seven games into the 2008 NFL season, management within the San Francisco 49ers fired head coach Mike Nolan after he accrued an overall record of 18-37. Similarly, seventeen games into the 2008 NBA season, the Toronto Raptors fired Sam Mitchell as their head coach. Mitchell had led his team to the playoffs in each of the two previous seasons, and won the NBA Coach of the Year for the 2006-2007 campaign. Rightly or wrongly, this has become standard practice in the United States. When a sport organization underperforms the blame usually falls on the coach.

However, it is possible and even likely that a poor-performing sport organizations’ issues extend deeper than the coach. In fact, some personnel changes are often prefaced with a statement that suggests “a culture change is needed”. For example, when Rick Sund was hired as the new general manager for the Atlanta Hawks, it was reported that in his efforts to build a sustainable, winning team, his primary task was to “try to usher in a culture change in an organization that has been somewhat resistant to outside influence” (p. 1; Smith, 2008).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how accomplished leaders in professional sport have been able to alter the culture of their respective organizations to improve on-field or on-court performance. In an effort to further examine the potential relationship between organizational culture and performance in professional sport, it is first necessary to understand both of the archetypal definitions of organizational culture as well as the multiple approaches to cultural research.

Organizational Culture & Performance
Organizational culture, in laymen’s terms, is often described as “the way we do things around here” or the values that hold an organization together, yet academics have struggled to find consensus on a precise definition of culture. Ideational definitions emphasize cognitive aspects of culture, such as ‘meanings’ and ‘understandings’ (Martin, 2002). For example, Louis (1985) defined culture as a set of “meanings shared by a group of people” (p. 74). Researchers relying on an ideational approach, for example, would examine the meaning organizational members attribute to common myths or stories within the organization. Other definitions of culture are primarily materialistic, and focus on the material manifestation of ideations. Mills (1988) suggested that culture is the “manifestations of a process of ideational development located within a context of definite material conditions” (p. 366). A researcher relying on the materialistic approach would examine dress, workplace environment, hierarchy, and job descriptions. Subjectively, the researcher must determine what each materialistic item means.

Along with multiple approaches to defining culture, there are diverse methods to approaching cultural research:

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introduction, differentiation, and fragmentation (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). Studies from the integration perspective assume that all members in an organization share one consensus of culture, and there is clarity surrounding this consensus. In contrast, research grounded in the differentiation approach suggests that elements of culture can be inconsistent. Although consensus of meaning may exist with smaller subgroups of an organization, agreement may not exist across subgroups or throughout the entire organization. Furthermore, there may be ambiguities within the smaller groups, as evidenced by leaders who say one thing and do the exact opposite. Finally, the fragmentation approach takes differentiation one step further to suggest that ambiguity is the ‘essence’ of organizational culture. Consensus depends wholly upon the issue in question and can never exist across an organization (Martin, 1992).

Schein (1992) provides a definition of organizational culture that integrates both the ideational and materialist components of culture and is general enough in its wording to allow for elements of differentiation:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems. (p. 12)

Schein (1990, 1992) goes on to define the three levels of organizational culture: artifacts, values and underlying assumptions. The first, or outer, level is composed of the artifacts that an organization makes public: for example, a vision statement, company slogan, statues, or even the way cubicles are arranged can provide indications of the deeper levels of a culture. Values, the second level of culture, are reflected in how members interact with one another, how members interact with their environment, and what constructs, such as honesty, integrity or profitability, members share (Schein, 1992). The third and deepest level of organizational culture consists of the underlying assumptions. In healthy organizations, these assumptions provide the basis for the values. For example, if integrity is valued, the underlying assumption may be that only honesty can lead to success.

After defining organizational culture and its tenets, researchers began to examine the relationship between organizational culture and performance. Kotter and Heskett (1992) have made a compelling case that culture does impact performance. More specifically, these authors outline three general types of culture (strong, strategically appropriate, and adaptive) and the way each of these cultures impact performance. A strong culture is one in which the organization has an evident, notable style. A strategically appropriate culture is one that appropriately fits within its current internal and external environment. Finally, an adaptive culture is one that assists members anticipate and adapt to environmental change.

Although Kotter and Heskett (1992) identified positive correlations between performance and both strong cultures and strategically appropriate cultures, they found that the best performing organizations were those with an adaptive culture, where the culture encourages continuous change internally and externally. This change-embracing culture must come from leadership, and while the adaptive culture must value leadership, the leadership, reciprocally, must value the core constituencies of the organization (e.g., customers, stockholders and employees; Kotter, 1990). They found that individuals within higher-performing firms placed a significantly higher value on excellent leadership than those individuals within lower-performing firms. Furthermore, those in higher performing firms valued their customers, employees and stockholders significantly more than those in lower performing firms.

Previous research seems to suggest a relationship between the types of organizational culture and performance (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). More recent research has investigated other mediators of the relationship between an organization’s culture and its performance. Specifically, Balthazard, Cooke and Potter (2006) suggested that behavioral norms within an organization are reflective of that organization’s culture, or its values and assumptions, and may have a heavy impact on an organizations performance. The authors surveyed over 60,000 participants using the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI), an instrument that assesses twelve different behavioral norms that, either consciously or unconsciously, may be required for members to fit in and meet an organization’s expectations (Cooke & Lafferty, 1989). Balthazard and colleagues (2006) found that each of the four behavioral norms classified as “constructive” was positively correlated with role clarity, communication quality, “fit” with organization and job satisfaction, and negatively correlated with behavioral conformity. Furthermore, these constructive norms were also positively correlated with performance drivers, such as quality of products/services, quality of customer service, adaptability, and quality of workplace, while negatively correlated with turnover.

More recently, Smerek and Denison (2007) used archived data measuring four components of organizational culture—involvement, consistency, adaptability and mission—from 102 publicly traded companies. In essence, these four components measure both the nature of relationships between organizational members as well as the socially constructed meanings and values of an organization (Denison & Mishra, 1989). Involvement refers to team-orientation, capability development and empowerment.
Ostensibly, high involvement would lead to increased responsibility and commitment that, in turn, would facilitate prolonged or extended efforts from organizational members. Consistency alludes to both the level of agreement across the organization, as well as the strength of the primary organizational values. An organization scoring high in consistency would have increased performance due to its improved efficiency. Mission refers to the fundamental reason behind an organization’s existence, along with its goals and strategy. In essence, mission pertains to the purpose of the organization’s work. Members of an organization that scored high on mission would theoretically be united towards tangible and clearly articulated goals. Finally, adaptability measures an organization’s ability to be responsive to customer needs, and how easily an organization might adapt to and learn from those needs. A highly adaptable organization is able to quickly capitalize upon market changes.

The researchers found that both adaptability and involvement were positively correlated with return on assets, and that this relationship was strongest in the third year after the culture measures were taken. This indicates that these two cultural elements may have their greatest impact on future performance. Furthermore, all four of these cultural elements were positively correlated with short-term sales growth, suggesting that short-term performance may be predicted by these elements.

To augment Denison and Mishra (1989) four components of culture, it would seem culture impacts employee performance in two primary ways. First, the values and norms that construct a culture assist in shaping employee behavior. In essence, clear values act as important guides to decision-making, and they do so without instituting formal rules or policies, which might constrict the autonomy that is essential for peak performance (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1997). Second, a culture can increase employee commitment. When employees associate an organization’s values and norms with their own higher ideals, employees essentially commit to a set of meaningful goals. This provides meaning to their work, and increases intrinsic motivation and effort (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996).

Despite the wide body of literature examining organizational culture in business, no empirical literature could be identified that examines organizational culture or culture change in professional sport. Literature was identified examining organizational culture in college athletics (Bailey, 2007) and the relationship between culture and athlete burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2007), although both were determined to be outside the scope of this research.

In summary, similar to Kotter and Heskett (1992), Balthazard and colleagues (2006) found that organizations that focus outwardly on customers and stockholders and internally on employee fit and communication have stronger performance. They also provided compelling evidence that members’ behavioral norms, indicative of the culture, were related to the organization’s performance. Furthermore, Smerek and Denison (2007) found that two elements of culture—involvement and adaptability—had a strong positive correlation to both short and long term performance. Although each of the above studies is correlational in nature, the results consistently suggest a relationship has emerged between those cultures that are adaptive and organizations that have consistently high performance. Assuming this link between culture and strong performance exists, the processes of culture formation, maintenance and change take on increased significance.

Organizational Culture Formation & Culture Change: A leader’s impact

Schein (1983) states that a culture takes shape from both the assumptions and theories of the founder as well as the organization’s collective lessons from its own unique experience. According to Schein (1983), five principles form the structure of any culture: relationship to the environment; the nature of truth; the qualities of human nature; the nature of human activity; and the nature of human relationships. Leaders typically model these principles, both through their focus and how they react to critical events. Specifically, Schein (1983) suggested that culture is created through the observance of the set of behaviors demonstrated by leaders that immediately follow a critical incident and the evaluation of whether those behaviors are effective.

In addition to driving cultural formation leaders can also foster cultural change. Before understanding the way in which leaders serve as change agents, it is important to first understand the nature of organizational culture change. Organizations find numerous reasons to change their culture, from increasing collaboration, initiative, and accountability (Kanter, 2004), adapting to external change (Singh, 2006), to increasing innovation (Jaskyte, 2004; Jung, Chow & Wu, 2003). Inherent in each of these culture change rationalizations is the basic desire to improve performance. Schein (1990) asserts that three steps need to occur in order to successfully change culture. First, leaders need to “unfreeze” the present system by outlining and discussing impending threats to the organization if no change occurs. Second, a new direction needs to be formalized along with a new set of assumptions; this step is the actual “change”. Finally, members of the organization need to be positively reinforced when their actions align with the new assumptions, and punished when they adhere to old assumptions. This third step is “refreezing” the new culture.

This three-step process is seemingly simple, yet culture is difficult to change. Smith (2003) reported that within a group of North American corporations that had attempted
culture change, only 19% of managers rated the culture change as ‘extremely successful’. Kotter and Haskett (1992) claim that culture is difficult to change due to the interdependence between and within the levels of culture, such as values and underlying assumptions.

In order to successfully alter culture, leaders must address a situation that has previously been ignored, increase collaboration, and inspire initiative (Kanter, 2004). To emphasize this point, Kanter provides one of the only examples in the literature of organizational culture change pertaining to professional sport: the turnaround of the Philadelphia Eagles. Since Jeffrey Lurie purchased the organization in 1994, the Eagles have embarked on a remarkable turnaround. Although they have yet to win a championship, the Eagles have been one of the most successful organizations in the NFL in the past twelve years.

Along with the process of culture change, an additional factor that contributes to successful cultural change efforts may be the type of leader that is in place. Trice and Beyer (1991) argue that cultural maintenance and cultural innovation require different types of leadership. Cultural maintenance requires a leader to sustain the current culture, while both recognizing internal conflicts exist and facilitating discussions between subcultures with diverse interests. Because cultural innovation requires a leader to unite followers and replace old cultural elements in response to a perceived crisis, the authors assert that innovation requires more dramatic personal qualities, as the leader needs to sell organizational members on his/her ideas. Essentially, Trice and Beyer (1991) argue that cultural formation and innovation requires a transformational leader, while cultural maintenance requires a “consensus leader” (p. 163).

Most leaders have the capability to influence an organization’s values through the recruitment process, socialization (norms), and specific reward systems (Chatman & Cha, 2003). The extant literature suggests that transformational leaders can go beyond these process changes and influence culture in other ways. Bass and Avolio (1994) state that transformational leaders exhibit four qualities: inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence (charismatic), and individual stimulation. With these, transformational leaders are able to tap into the personal value systems of employees, while making the connection between organizational values and desired outcomes explicit (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). For example, Wieseke, Ahearne, Lam and Dick (2009) found that charismatic leaders play a critical role in the successful development of followers’ organizational identification, or an individual’s perception of oneness with his/her organization. A transformational leader is able to accomplish this by connecting an individual’s tasks to the larger vision of the organization (Sofarelli & Brown, 1998). Furthermore, transformational leaders can assist followers in achieving their own individual goals, creating the perception that organizational members are constantly growing and developing (intellectual stimulation; Sashkin & Rosenbach, 1993). Transformational leaders also have the opportunity to communicate their values through their own behavior, providing followers with a tangible example of how they can take ownership of their own actions (idealized influence; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Finally, transformational leaders can embed new values into the culture of an organization. For example, if a leader desires a more innovative organization, then s/he would eliminate policies that discourage innovation (e.g., punishing mistakes) and implement those that encourage the value (e.g., reward risk-taking; Jung, Chow & Wu, 2003). In some cases, leaders may inadvertently foster consensus around values that may impede the new value or values they are trying to usher into the organization. Therefore, even for transformational leaders, it is critical for leaders to first gain a clear understanding of the norms of the culture before trying to implement change (Jaskyte, 2004).

Conversely, some have argued that it is difficult for leaders to have any impact on culture, as culture has a larger influence on leaders (Hatch, 1993). In an attempt to address this theoretical disagreement, Sarros, Gray and Densten (2002) surveyed over 1,900 managers in Australia and found “that leadership was a far more prominent predictor of culture than culture was of leadership” (p. 15), and that both transactional and transformational elements of leadership impacted culture. Similarly, the path model created by Sarros, Cooper and Santora (2008) indicates that transformational leadership accounts for 24% of the variance of organizational culture. Collectively, the literature suggests that there is a strong link between leadership and culture, and that transformational or charismatic leadership plays a critical role in successful culture change.

Although there has been significant research into the construct of organizational culture and change within business, this phenomenon has not been examined within professional sport other than the above reference by Kanter (2004). Professional sport is simply a business with a unique product—a team. Due to the compelling relationship between a healthy organizational culture and strong performance, it is arguable that the lack of success of a professional sport team can be symptomatic of a larger problem within that organization’s culture. Furthermore, new leadership is often required to make changes to an organization’s culture. While this leads to many inquiries that have yet to be explored in the sport literature, this study was designed to concentrate primarily on how leaders create more of a performance-oriented culture in professional sport organizations. Additionally, this study examined whether leaders in professional sport are consciously aware of the critical elements of the culture of their organization.
Finally, this research examined the similarities and differences that exist in leaders’ efforts to bring about culture change across organizations.

**Method**

**Participants**

Operational construct sampling and intensity sampling were utilized in selecting participants, as together these sampling methods were able to purposively target leaders in professional sport who have led a culture transformation. Operational construct sampling entails the utilization of real-world examples (Patton, 2002). Therefore, targeted participants were owners and/or general managers who had experienced leading a sport organization through a successful culture change effort, as evidenced by their teams on-field or on-court performance. Intensity sampling consists of selecting cases that are rich examples of the subject matter being studied (Patton, 2002). To ensure participants had the potential to provide answers with adequate depth to questions posed about the phenomenon of culture change, leaders had to meet four specific criteria:

1. The participant had to be the primary decision maker within his organization. This was determined through organizational research, including in-depth analysis of articles about personnel changes within the organization.
2. In the NBA and NFL, the leader’s respective team must have increased its winning percentage by 25% in consecutive years. Due to the high number of regular season games in MLB, the leader’s team must have increased its winning percentage by a total of 10% in a two year period.
3. In addition to this increase in performance, the team must have maintained a record that was over .500 for three years after increasing its winning percentage.
4. The leader’s team must have had seasons with a winning percentage at or below .500 in at least two of the three seasons prior to the increase in performance.

Together, criteria two and three indicate that a team has undergone sustainable improvement. The third criterion also eliminated organizations that may have experienced a short-term improvement, since culture is a phenomenon that persists over time (Falcione & Kaplan, 1984). The final criterion increases the probability that the past culture of an organization may have been dysfunctional prior to its turnaround by virtue of the team’s win-loss record. These criteria helped reduce the overall population of potential participants to include only those who had proven to be exceptional agents of change within their organizations.

Since 1995, there have been 32 organizations across the three sports that meet the criteria stated above ($n = 12$, MLB; $n = 12$, NFL; $n = 8$, NBA). Of these 32 cases, the primary investigator attempted to select a representative sample of both roles (general manager, owner) and sport type (basketball, football, baseball). The final sample ($N = 6$) comprised 18% of the population that met the above criteria, and included two owners and one general manager from the NFL, two general managers from the NBA, and one general manager from Major League Baseball. A brief biography of each participant can be found in Appendix A.

Creswell (2002) indicated that 3-5 participants be utilized for case study research, while Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that an adequate sample size in qualitative research is one that allows the researcher to attain ‘theoretical saturation’, which occurs when the themes and categories are considered well developed and new data no longer emerges. There is no set number of interviews or participants that determines theoretical saturation. Both researchers involved in data analysis agreed that no new themes or categories emerged during the analysis of the final two interviews, indicating that, to a certain extent, theoretical saturation had occurred. However, the researchers are open to the possibility that themes may have been further refined with additional participants.

**Instrumentation**

The interview protocol was developed by the primary investigator and modified by experts in qualitative research, industrial/organizational psychology, and sport psychology. The final interview elicits a description of participants’ backgrounds, along with the recalled culture when the leader arrived, the leader’s values, change processes, critical events that have required the leadership of the participant, and the vision of the participant. Interview questions align with Schein’s (1983) five principles that form the structure of organizational culture. (Appendix B)

**Procedure**

Semi-structured, open-ended, in-person interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews averaged 59 minutes, ranging from 31 minutes to 76 minutes, and each was recorded for accuracy. Explicit permission was obtained from IRB and participants to use their names in this research. The primary investigator also obtained permission to view facilities in order to examine artifacts that offered further insight into the interview and an organization’s culture.
Data Analysis & Triangulation

Upon completion of the interviews, each recording was digitally copied to protect the integrity of the data. Each interview was fully transcribed by the primary researcher and double-checked for accuracy. A modified interpretive analysis was used to guide the inquiry into the data. The purpose of this type of analysis is for the researcher to "produce meaning that makes sense of the social phenomena" being studied (p. 180; Hatch, 2002). The primary investigator followed the general format outlined by Hatch (2002) in the interpretive analysis process, which includes reading the data for a sense of the whole, identifying impressions in the form of memos, and then coding the transcriptions where impressions are supported or challenged. However, open coding was employed during the first reading. These codes were grouped into general categories, which were then separated into higher order themes.

This research incorporated multiple forms of triangulation. First, six separate collection points were utilized as each participant was asked the same set of questions. Second, data triangulation occurred through the use of both interview data and document/artifact analysis. Third, investigator triangulation took place as a second researcher separately examined and coded the data. Finally, participant triangulation was used as each participant was provided the opportunity to offer feedback on the conclusions of the primary investigator.

Results

To assess the first and second research questions, interpretive qualitative analysis was conducted. Five separate themes emerged, each of which had multiple subthemes. Emergent themes included symptoms of a dysfunctional culture, my way, walk the talk, embedding new culture, and our way. Textual examples extracted from interview transcriptions will be provided along with an in-depth explanation of each theme and corresponding subtheme. In select cases, the primary investigator has included words or phrases within brackets that will assist with context.

Symptoms of a Dysfunctional Culture

Five of six participants were aware of dysfunctional elements, both materialistic and idealational, within the culture they had joined. Occasionally, symptoms were evident in the surface layer of culture (Schein, 1992). Such artifacts included sub-standard facilities or a poor win-loss record. In other instances participants referred espoused values or underlying assumptions. Consistent with Schein’s (1992) conceptualization of culture, these elements were abstract and often related to attitudes or values held by organizational members. Examples were wide ranging and have been organized into two subthemes: negative environment and a losing habit.

Negative environment. Five of the six participants were able to identify adverse elements of their respective organization’s environment, both physical and psychological. Physical elements included poor facilities, while psychological elements consisted of the absence of important values such as trust, honesty and integrity. Additionally, leaders identified values that were not perceived to be conducive to success, including selfishness, placing too much emphasis on monetary profit and minimizing the value of players. In two cases, new leaders discovered that bad leadership had been contributing to the negative environment.

There had been some cultural issues with respect to where winning and where players stood in the pecking order… the focus had been before Jim took over on maximizing revenues above all else. Not that that’s not a good thing, but some of it was at the expense of facilities, some of it was at the expense of efficiencies, and some of it was at the expense of alienating players.—Bill Polian

Losing habit. In many ways, teams had become accustomed to mediocrity. Across all participants a losing habit had become the norm, bad decisions were common, and there was little confidence in the organization. Furthermore, a minimal level of accountability, effort and communication existed throughout the organization. All of these factors contributed to a low fan base.

The culture was kind of one where they accepted being mediocre, they accepted that they were a mid-market club, and you heard that a lot. And everyone accepted “we’re a mid-market club; our revenues are about halfway through”.—Bill Stoneman

The team just had not been successful for a long time. What transpires when you aren’t successful for a long time is you get a lot of bad attitudes; you get a lot of “well, here we go again” type things, because you just haven’t had any success.

And it was always the glass is half empty rather than half full.—Rod Thorn

My Way

Simultaneous to noting the dysfunctional elements of the culture, leaders soon let the organization know that there was a new way to do things. In all but two cases, this occurred immediately after they assumed their new position. In one case, the “new way” was delayed roughly one year so the new owner could get acclimated to sport
ownership. In another case, the owner had been with the franchise for his entire adult life. The second major theme, *My Way*, was prominently expressed by all participants and was comprised of five subthemes: *vision, my values, change personnel, grow people*, and *explicit communication*.

**Vision.** Vision was commonly expressed with the very simple sentiment of winning, or making the organization better. The vision provided a tangible goal around which organizational members could come together. Additionally, this subtheme was often coupled with the planning process, or a blueprint for winning.

It’s win. Take this club to the top, but do it the right way. Do it by having a good scouts, who sign good players, who will be passed on to good player development people, who would all understand the Angels’ way of playing the game on the field.—Bill Stoneman

I hand wrote on a piece of paper five points. And I would read them and have them with me every night when I went to bed, and when I woke up in the morning. It was really more of how to become a very good football team. But with that is obviously a very good organization.—Jeffrey Lurie

**My values.** Values were brought to the organization by the leader, and provided a foundation for future success and a basis for organizational decisions. These were the seeds for what would become the organization’s ‘espoused values’. Values were diverse, and include honesty, integrity, loyalty, trust, commitment, dignity, professionalism, philanthropy and team. Many values related specifically to the leader’s belief in how people should treat one another. Values were often implicitly expressed through stories and anecdotes about past decisions.

I think that people understand that we have integrity and that’s the prime part of the way we operate. We try not to lose our integrity because of some difficult decisions.—Dan Rooney

I’ve always said that people have my trust and loyalty implicitly and will always have it until you prove to me that you don’t deserve it.—Geoff Petrie

**Change personnel.** Five of the six participants explicitly stated that it was necessary to bring new people into the organization, individuals who shared their values and were familiar with their methods. When looking for new personnel, whether it was front-office, coaches, or players, four leaders expressed that they minimized experience and instead looked at a person’s potential, or ‘ceiling’. Considerable risk accompanied the decision to bring in a coach with no experience, for if the person failed at their task then it was likely that the leader would be blamed. Even with that knowledge, all six participants had hired a coach with no previous head-coaching experience. Additionally, the concept of hiring the “best people” consistently arose indicating that a potential employee, whether a player or coach, had to have credibility, work hard, be innovative, passionate and have a positive attitude.

A lot of it was having to hire key executives that would be the, I guess you’d call them, the lieutenants of change, the ones that would absolutely make it their highest priority to be part of the change of the culture and the attitude and of the whole direction.—Jeffrey Lurie

That’s one of the management mistakes or hiring mistakes that a lot of people make - that they put experience higher on the criteria level than they should.—Bill Stoneman

**Grow people.** Consistent with Kotter and Heskett’s (1992) assertion that successful organizations focus inwardly on employee fit, all participants expressed interest in the growth of those who worked for them. This growth occurred with employees in their present jobs, when they advanced to new positions, and when they adopted a new mindset or philosophy. The growth mindset that each leader displayed demonstrated a long-term investment in individuals working for the organization and a sincere passion for development.

My philosophy has always been to try and help people do their jobs better. Because if players don’t do well and coaches don’t coach well, the team’s not going to be successful, and then you’re not going to be successful.—Geoff Petrie

One of the great joys of coaching or being involved in this business is seeing the people you work with accept your philosophy and grow.—Bill Polian

**Explicit communication.** Simply having a compelling vision was not enough to promote change. It was critical for leaders to honestly and clearly communicate their vision, plan, and expectations to both players and staff. All six participants verbalized this sentiment. These communication efforts occurred either on a scheduled basis or in an ad hoc manner. Additionally, the coach was expected to act as a critical advocate and mouthpiece for communicating participants’ expectations.

I meet with the marketing and sales staff and front office staff twice a year, once in the off season to explain what we’re going to do in the off season, and once at the beginning of the season.—Bill Polian
I always try to talk to the players four or five times a year. I’ll have a meeting where we talk about where we are, what we need to do.—Rod Thorn

**Walk the Talk**

The third major theme endorsed by all participants, *Walk the Talk*, alludes to the method used to implement the plan that allowed each organization to progress towards the vision of its leader. Stated simply, this is ‘how’ the organization found success and how a leader demonstrated his espoused values. Schein (1983) suggested that the five principals of organizational culture are modeled through leaders’ focus and how leaders react to critical events. Data supported this assertion, as leaders discussed their involvement in both daily events and critical organizational decisions.

You know, you say it and say it, but it’s how you do it. You can say things and not really carry it out, you know what I mean? So we try to do it both ways. We try to say our goal is to win, and we’re going to do whatever it takes, and then do it.—Dan Rooney

Once again, this theme was often articulated through stories that reflected a passion for their jobs and an awareness of how their actions were scrutinized by those they were tasked to lead.

When I was GM here, I might get home at 11 at night, but at 8:15 I was here, why? Because the people here in this department, I wanted to show them, hey, I want them dedicated. It’s not fair for me to stroll in at 10:00 but they have to be here at 8:30. No. But that’s what you do, you lead by example.—Bill Stoneman

Walk the Talk encompasses four subthemes, including *day to day, obstacles to change, critical events, and artifact impact.*

**Day to day.** Three leaders repetitively acted on a daily basis to communicate their message and perpetuate the plan. The manner in which the leader handled non-critical decisions was also important. Furthermore, it was crucial to maintain an attention to detail.

One of the keys to the success has definitely been an attention to detail. It’s not like you say, here’s a weight room, or here’s a training table. What are you surrounding it with? Exactly what is the equipment? What is the rehab mechanism? Do we have everything you can have to get a human being to heal? And can we do better?—Jeffrey Lurie

**Obstacles to change.** The integrity of the leader’s vision/plan must be upheld despite organizational barriers that had previously been used as excuses. It was important for executives to view these as challenges to be overcome rather than legitimate reasons for failure. Examples included a team’s perceived small market status, lack of a fan base and a harsh economic environment. Some of the same physical symptoms of a negative culture identified in the *negative environment* subtheme, including dilapidated facilities or a lack of a practice facility, were acknowledged with the caveat that they were no longer a legitimate reason for poor performance.

What I tried to do was to, to change the culture to the degree that we are going to win, it has nothing to do with where we’re located, we can sell tickets, we can be successful here.—Rod Thorn

One critical component of *obstacles to change* was media and fan pressure. All participants explicitly stated that the media could be a powerful force and would attempt to derail the organization’s focus in a quest for the next big story. Both media and fans were sometimes critical of an organization’s actions, or inaction, as each group craved the “quick fix”. It was necessary for leaders and organizational members to ignore this pressure, stay true to their values and remain focused on the larger plan.

There’s gonna be a lot of public criticism, and there’s gonna be a lot of back biting, and there’s gonna be a lot of second-guessing, and you just have to ride that out. You just have to stick your chin into the wind and ride it out.—Bill Polian

If you really want to run a successful organization, a lot of the outside world wants a quick fix and will always go for the quick fix, however they perceive that to be.—Jeffrey Lurie

**Critical events.** Five of six participants relayed examples of important events that they presided over. Each was a value-driven decision that relayed to the organization that either new values existed or old behaviors would not be tolerated. Examples were wide-ranging, and included changes in the front office, on the field, and with the coaching staff.

The specific event that turned us around was trading Marbury for Kidd. Marbury was the face of that franchise, he was much younger than Kidd, at the time we did it it was a very controversial trade, because a lot of people felt, ‘why are you trading this great young talent for an older guy with problems?’—Rod Thorn
Artifact impact. All participants relayed examples of physical improvements that they had generated that reflect their values and concern for other members of the organization. This subtheme is the essence of the materialistic definition of culture, as leaders attributed ‘meaning’ to physical improvements. Each participant mentioned specific improvements, in some cases dramatic, made to facilities that positively impacted players. More importantly, changes were a tangible example of the value that the participants placed on players. Each participant was consciously aware that the physical environment around athletes made a large impact.

One of the real key things was designing this building where the cafeteria is the center-place of the whole building. It’s right in the middle, purposefully. It’s right in the first floor. And it’s where everybody comes together every day. And from day one in here, you had departments that never even talked to each other, barely know each other’s name. You had football people having lunch with marketing people. Just the whole cross-pollination.—Jeffrey Lurie

We had to have the rocks out in left center field that Disney put in; that’s neat and the fans liked it. But they were a little too brightly painted, and our left handed hitters complained and they hadn’t done anything about it. So we had to raise our voices a bit and finally got some action on it.—Bill Stoneman

Embedding New Culture

With a steady focus on the plan, each organization eventually saw tangible signs of success, which demonstrated the validity of the new values and philosophies that the leader had brought to the organization. Success was experienced through both steady improvement and in a dramatic fashion, such as a World Series win. In both cases, success helped to embed the new values into the fabric of the organization, implicitly demonstrating to organizational members that the leader’s espoused values were effective. Embedding New Culture is composed of two subthemes: new success and turning point.

New success. Each participant eventually experienced success with his organization. This subtheme refers to slow, steady improvement which then induces renewed commitment from organizational members. Success was not always actualized in the form of wins, as a team sometimes noticed improvement that was not reflected in their record. Most importantly, the new success imparted a new sense of confidence in the organization along with a slow entrenchment of the leader’s philosophy.

The best thing that happened early on was that we started winning more games right away, and that’s healthy because it creates the sense of belief that what you’re doing is right. And it started to engender confidence with the players and coaches…so the whole mentality started to shift over to the, the whole thing, ‘it’s the same old thing again’ to ‘oh, this might be something different’.—Geoff Petrie

Turning point. Occasionally, an organization came to the sudden realization that they had significantly improved, or a precipitous event transpired that collectively assisted an organization form a new world-view. It was possible for teams to experience both slow improvement, as outlined above, while also having a sudden realization that the newfound success was not fleeting. For example, Jeffrey Lurie outlined his perception of the meaning, shared across the Eagles’ organization, of moving into new facilities:

The day we moved into the NovaCare complex was really one of the real changing of culture events. And it went from having some of the worst facilities in the NFL, to arguably the best at the time in terms of working environment. And everybody, from lowest level employees to superstar players, um, it was sort of a ‘wow’ moment.

In one instance, Bill Stoneman related that a senior executive in the Angels’ organization was removed. Here he relayed the impact of when the organization learned that this executive was not going to be replaced, and that Stoneman was going to fill that role:

And everything changed. In fact, it just reached the field, the ticket sellers, everybody. Everybody said, ‘whoa, we’re getting some support here, you know, this is good!’

Both of the above examples are materialistic in nature, but the participants believed that organizational members placed a greater meaning into the changes, which in turn helped embed the leader’s values into the culture.

Our Way

The fifth and final theme to emerge was Our Way, which was expressed by all six participants. This theme indicates
that a culture shift had transpired and members had a new ‘lens’ through which to interpret the world. Our Way refers to how an organization selected members, how they made decisions, how things were run internally, and its collective values. Additionally, this extends to the new vernacular that organizational members shared, as well as any new traditions that were established.

We sign a player and we talk about our philosophy here is different from…We just don’t just follow a routine, because someone else did something we’re going to do the same. We go with the idea of what is right. - Dan Rooney

Our Way consists of three subthemes, including our values, better decisions and independent thought.

Our values. Expressed by all six participants, this subtheme encompasses the sentiment of valuing people within the organization, especially players, along with leadership and the fans. These values were again expressed through the decisions and actions of organizational members. For example, Bill Polian made the decision to drop a player, but gave the player the option of where he wanted to go. When asked why he did that, Polian implicitly demonstrated his respect for the player by stating:

He’d given really good service to the team, and he deserved that.

Lurie essentially expressed his value in people by protecting players and coaches from poor character players:

I feel it’s our responsibility to not bring in players that are like that. And we’ve made mistakes, but you owe it to the players you have to not bring in bad guys.

Additional excerpts demonstrating the values of people, players, fans and leadership included the following:

You know, talking to people, and letting them know that you value their opinion, and you have to say okay, well we don’t agree with that, or we do we’ve got to pick it up and play it through.—Dan Rooney

I think our team does as good of job with the fans, trying to include fans, being fan friendly, I think we do as good as anybody.—Rod Thorn

Better decisions. In addition to having new organizational values, the new leader, through the culture, facilitated better decisions. Five participants relayed that decisions were made according to the values of the leader and according to the organizational plan. This often applied to the type of player an organization wanted on its roster. Furthermore, members within the organization felt more confident in leadership and organizational decisions.

And once you set out on that path, you have to have a plan, and you’ve got to work that plan, and you can’t deviate from it, unless you’re convinced, and people that really know, are convinced, that deviation is the right thing to do. And those are the hardest decisions of all.—Bill Polian

Independent thought. To remain successful, five leaders suggested that it was important for them to think “outside the box”. This sentiment is consistent with previous research that suggests the most successful organizations are those which have the ability to adapt to internal and external changes (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Smerek & Denison, 2007). Each leader suggested that his organization had to make a special effort to think differently from the rest of its respective league. Leaders expressed that money could not be the primary driver behind decisions, and that they had to remain adaptable and open to change while still following their blueprint.

Because you don’t want to get stuck like with the same ideas that were brought in 12 years ago. We got to be that constantly innovative, looking at new ways of evaluating players, new ways of structuring areas of the operation.—Jeffrey Lurie

When these guys are saying that everyone’s doing, this dude’s doing this, I say “they’re not the Steelers, we do this thing the Steeler way” But we’re not gonna follow because some other team does it. If we think its right we will.—Dan Rooney

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to study how leaders in professional sport changed culture. The secondary purpose was to examine whether leaders were aware of different elements of organizational culture, while the tertiary purpose was to identify differences in the culture change process across sport and across roles. Through further examination of the emergent themes it became apparent that the primary and secondary research questions were closely related.

Cultural Change Cycle

In order to better conceptualize the relationship between the above-stated purposes, the main themes and corresponding subthemes have been organized into a chronological
schematic that illustrates the process of culture change in professional sport organizations as constructed by the primary investigator and the six participants, entitled the Culture Change Cycle (see Figure 1). The Culture Change Cycle serves to explain the primary and secondary research questions. Each theme of the Culture Change Cycle can be viewed as an abstracted step in the change process and will be supported by previous research/literature.

**Symptoms of a Negative Culture.** First, a new leader arrives and witnesses the collateral damage from past leadership and poor management. These symptoms are both ideational and materialistic in nature, and are evident in all three of Schein’s (1992) culture levels.

**My Way.** Second, the leader implements a new way of doing things and sets out to communicate his values, vision, and plan. The literature supports multiple subthemes in My Way. For example, explicit communication, expressed by all participants, outlined the constant formal and informal communications methods that a leader employed to articulate his plan and vision. From the perspective of individuals who have taken part in large-scale change efforts, one of the key mediators to successful culture change efforts is a high degree of communication (Covin & Kilmann, 1990). Specifically, consistent communication on change efforts had a positive impact on followers. Conversely, Smeltzer (1991) found that a primary reason for the failure of change efforts is the presence of rumors, often developed because of a lack of timely and accurate information from leadership.

A second subtheme supported by past research was My Values. Lord and Brown (2001) submitted that leaders could influence the values of others explicitly through communication, or implicitly through action. More importantly, through the process of making their values known, leaders can provide a normative roadmap for acceptable behaviors within the organization (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998).

A third subtheme from My Way that was supported in the literature was vision. Collins and Porras (1991) assert that without a vision, an organization can only react to the future rather than create the future. Cummings and Worley (2005) indicate that creating a vision is a key component to the organizational change process. Vision must also integrate aspects of core ideology (values, purpose) and an envisioned future (dreams, hopes and aspirations). All participants suggested that their primary goal was to “win”, or “win championships”, but many added that it is important to do it “the right way”, suggesting that their values played an integral role in how they wanted to win. Kotter (2007) further stated that one of the biggest mistakes leaders make in change efforts is under-communicating the vision. In essence, the day to day communication efforts that the leader makes in the Culture Change Cycle emphasizes repeatedly that the leader will not be distracted from his vision. As Schein (1992) stated, organizational members must have good reason to be receptive to a vision. Within each of these organizations, the accumulated frustration of years of mediocrity may have provided ample reasoning to embrace a new vision.

**Walk the Talk.** Third, through both daily and key organizational decisions, the leader repeatedly emphasizes the new values. One obvious assumption of this theme is that the leader is present through the change process. In support of this process, Smith (2003) found that one of the strongest correlates to successful culture change was the presence of the sponsor throughout the entire process, and an equally strong correlate to failure was the departure of the leader or sponsor during the change process. In fact, Kotter (2007) used the same terminology when he stated that leaders learn to “walk the talk” and become a living symbol of the new corporate culture.

**Embedding the New Culture.** Fourth, the organization experiences successes, both large and small. A primary condition for successful culture change outlined by Gagliardi (1986) was that an organization needs to collectively experience success with the new values. Only then can organizational members embrace new values without reservation. Our Way. Finally, a new culture, complete with new values and improved decisions, is crystallized. However, the idea of culture change as a cycle is a subtle departure from past conceptualizations of organizational culture change. For example, Schein (1990) utilized Kurt Lewin’s model for change (unfreeze, change, re-freeze; Kent, 2001) to suggest that the cultural change process is linear and that the resultant new culture is static. For the highly successful leaders participating in this research, a key component that has allowed their organizations to maintain success for prolonged periods is the process of introspective evaluation that each goes through at the end of a season. This process identified procedures and assumptions that were working, and those that were not, indicating that the resultant culture was not completely frozen. This idea was best captured by Bill Polian:

And one of the things we always want to do is question the mechanics of what we’re doing.

The concept of adaptability and an openness to change is critical for continued organizational success and has been found to be directly correlated to organizational performance (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Smerek & Denison, 2007). Kanter (1983) states unequivocally that it is not only advisable, but necessary, for an organization to innovate and change in order to keep up with both internal and external market factors. If an organization bypasses this introspective process, it may lead to decreased performance and a cultural fracture, as organizational members would have evidence that current values are not conducive to success.
Examples of this type of failure exist across the professional sport landscape: once highly successful organizations stubbornly cling to past formulas for success. Singh (2006) suggests that this ‘hubris’ is a major reason that organizations become obsolete. By consistently evaluating performance and looking for ways to improve, the organization ensures that its methods remain relevant and safeguards itself against hubris. The participants in this study would suggest that this introspective process occurs within the Our Way step and is inclusive of the subtheme, independent thought.

**Practical Implications for Leaders**

Although each turnaround was fascinating as a stand-alone case study, these stories collectively carry a powerful message about culture change for all organizational leaders. This message contains four primary lessons that speak to ‘process’ rather than ‘content’, as the content of each story was unique while the process of each was remarkably similar. Within the Culture Change Cycle, these lessons can be found primarily in My Way, Walk the Talk, and Embedding New Culture.

*Form a clear vision and stay true to your plan:* Each of these leaders developed a simple vision along with a plan to see that vision realized. Leaders were steadfast in their adherence to the plan, even when there were significant pressures to diverge. The only time a leader “compromised” from his plan was when “people who really knew”, or multiple people who they highly respected for their content knowledge, suggested they chart an alternate course.

*Triangulate your values.* Espoused values are a critical part of a healthy culture, and each leader was able to clearly communicate his values in multiple ways. First, each was able to articulate his values verbally. In doing this, leaders did not put their followers in a position to guess about what they held to be important. Second, leaders believed that all organizational members were scrutinizing their actions on a day-to-day basis. They were cognizant that even insignificant and seemingly minute actions and decisions might transmit a message relating to their values. Finally, when critical decisions and crises arose, leaders essentially modeled their values through their actions. In essence, leaders “triangulated” their values by communicated the same values to their followers from multiple directions.

*Celebrate success.* In sport, it is relatively easy to determine whether a team has been successful. Simply compare the win-loss record to previous years. In business, government and non-profit, success can be more ambiguous. Therefore, it falls upon the leader to make successes explicit and communicate them throughout an organization. This may help to further engrain espoused values into the culture as it is logical to assume that espoused values lead to success.

**Think Independently.** Once a culture that facilitates success has been established, hubris, or the belief that past formulas for success will continue to work, can become a significant threat (Singh, 2006). Each leader in this study seemed to question league “maxims”, as well as their own assumptions. These assumptions are considered to be the core level of culture, and need to be aligned with espoused values. Some teams had built-in processes at the end of each season to ensure that they remain on the leading edge and are able to anticipate and, in some cases, create the external changes and trends that lesser organizations fail to comprehend. Leaders of all organizational types can build in similar processes to ensure that their cultures continue to evolve and their organizations remains relevant.

**Differences Across Roles and Sport**

The purpose of the final research question was to identify differences in the culture change process across roles and across sports. No differences were identified between the cultural change process as outlined by owners as compared to those outlined by general managers.

Although no differences emerged across roles, one major difference materialized across the three sports. The two basketball executives consistently mentioned players, player acquisitions, and draft picks as significant causes for their team’s turnaround, more so than executives in baseball or football. Even when asked about values, these participants mentioned specific player acquisitions that reflected their values. Although all involved placed a premium on talent, the general managers in basketball seemingly placed more weight on the player-personnel aspect of culture change, which fell under the *My Way* theme of the Culture Change Cycle.

A basketball team is smaller than both football and baseball teams. A NFL team is allowed 53 players on its active roster, with 11 players on the field at any given time. An MLB team allows 42 players, with nine players on the field in defensive situations, and only one to four players on offense, depending on base runners. In contrast, an NBA roster has 12 active players, with five on the court at any time. Each NBA player plays both offense and defense. In fact, Geoff Petrie of the Kings stated:

Basketball is a little unique in that respect...because one player - performance wise anyway, in basketball, - can really dramatically impact a team’s performance because of the small number of players and the nature of the game.

Although no literature could be located focusing on culture change and group size, Dunbar (1996), an evolutionary psychologist, suggested that social complexity increases exponentially with group size. For example, a manager...
overseeing four others has to maintain four individual relationships along with six third-party relationships; in a group of 20, a manager must maintain 19 direct relationships, 171 third-party relationships, and numerous 3-4 person relationships with potentially competing interests. Based on Dunbar’s numbers it is arguable that culture change may be more difficult and time-consuming for a large group (i.e., football, baseball) than for a small group (basketball) simply because of the greater number of relationships that need to be managed and convinced that culture change is necessary.

**Limitations**

It should be noted that the Culture Change Cycle is based on the integration perspective, which is perhaps the most dogmatic view of culture as it offers little room for ambiguity (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). Three assumptions were made in the creation of this model, which coincide with the three assumptions of the integration perspective: consistency of cultural manifestations, consensus among cultural members, and a belief that leaders create the culture. Martin (1992) suggests that a single perspective of an organization’s culture could potentially be misleading. Because only the leader from each organization was interviewed, it was impossible to learn whether the meanings and values they attributed to specific cultural manifestations were consistent or shared with other members at different levels. The primary assumption, based upon performance data of the organization, was that the leader was the change agent and his values permeated the organization. The only way to verify this is to speak with other members in the organization. Although this was beyond the scope of this study, it is a potential line of inquiry for future research on organizational culture in professional sport.

Additionally, the retrospective nature of this qualitative inquiry may lend itself recall-error, which Patton (2002) suggests can be a weakness to qualitative inquiry. The most recent turning point, as outlined in the methods section, for participants in this study occurred in 2002. It is possible that the positive changes each organization has experienced could have biased participants to report the “good” things that occurred and exclude the negative.

Finally, one anomaly did emerge amongst the participants. Dan Rooney’s Steelers had the most established culture, as the theme of Our Way was most prominent in his interview. This can be attributed to methodological errors in the criteria used for participation. In reviewing historical data, it became obvious that the Steelers qualified for this study on a technicality. In the three years prior to 2001, the Steelers had win-loss records of 7-9, 6-10, and 9-7, respectively. However, in each of the six seasons prior to their 1998 7-9 campaign, the Steelers made the playoffs and had five double-digit win seasons. This illustrates that the seasons between 1998 and 2000 may have been an anomaly rather than evidence of a poor culture. The historical data, in conjunction with the interview, leads one to believe that the Steelers successful culture had been long established with a strong tradition, an avid fan base, and four Super Bowl Championship seasons. Additionally, the consistency of leadership in the Steelers’ organization was unique as compared to the other participants’ organizations, where relatively recent changes in ownership had transpired.

**Summary & Future Directions**

Schein (1992) states, “the bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential to leaders if they are to lead.” Each leader participating in this research had an acute awareness of the cultural elements of their organization, and each leader’s respective organization has experienced a high level of success while the participant has been at the helm. Accordingly, understanding the organizational culture change process could prove beneficial for leaders or organizations where the product is people. Additionally, it may prove beneficial for consultants to understand where an organization is in the culture change process as it may provide the opportunity to assist leadership in changing and embedding new values.

Future lines of inquiry could further contribute to the findings of this study in three specific ways. First, there is an opportunity to gain a more holistic view of a sport organization’s culture through seeking the perspectives of members at different levels, both vertically and horizontally, and learning whether they share a similar perspective on cultural meanings. Players could share insight about their view of the organization’s culture, providing information that can be triangulated with coaches and various levels of management across departments. Second, quantitative methodology could be employed in conjunction with the current qualitative methods to assist in identifying some of the underlying dynamics of organizational culture change within a sports franchise. In using a mixed methodology, it may be possible to isolate key factors in leadership that assist in the change process, as well as contrast specific elements of culture within high-performing sport organizations and those of under-performing organizations. Third, this research speaks of transformational leadership in a general manner. Specific elements of transformational leadership can be examined in an attempt to further understand their relationship with the different stages of the culture change process outlined in this research.
Appendix A

Brief Participant Biography

Dan Rooney
Dan Rooney was born on January 20, 1932. Although Dan never played professional football, he has been involved with the game at the professional level throughout his life, as his father owned the Pittsburgh Steelers. Dan first became president of the Steelers’ organization in 1975 and maintained that position until 2003, when he gave day-to-day operations to his son, Art.

The Steelers qualified to be in this study in 2001. In the three seasons prior to the turnaround, the Steelers accrued a 22-26 record. Since the turnaround, the Steelers have earned a 73-38 record, and appeared in five of the seven playoffs, along with one AFC Championship and one Super Bowl Championship.

Rooney has been one of the most active owners in the NFL. He has served on numerous committees, and has an unmatched historical perspective of the league and the challenges that it has overcome.

Bill Stoneman
Bill Stoneman, born on April 7, 1944, had a successful Major League career from 1967-1974 with the Cubs, Angels and Expos. Career highlights include two no-hitters while with the Expos. After his career was cut short by injuries, Mr. Stoneman spent a decade as a financial analyst in Canada. Convinced by Montreal Expos ownership to return to the game, Stoneman left Montreal and took the general manager position with the Los Angeles Angels. While there, Stoneman hired Mike Scioscia and built the 2002 World Series team, while transforming the Angels into a sustained winner.

The Angels turnaround occurred in 2002. In the three years prior, the Angels had a 227-259 win-loss record. In the ten years prior to arriving, the Angels held a 734-821 win-loss record. In the five years following the turnaround, the Angels have 452-358 record, and have been in the playoffs three times with three league championships and one World Series title.

Geoff Petrie
Geoff Petrie was born April 17, 1948. After graduating from Princeton, Petrie was drafted by the Portland Trail Blazers and played in the NBA from 1970-1976. When his playing career ended, Petrie held both coaching and general management positions with the Blazers. When the Sacramento general manager position opened in 1995, Petrie moved South and began rebuilding the Sacramento Kings into a perennial contender.

The Sacramento Kings turnaround occurred in 1999. In the three years prior to the turnaround, the Kings were a pedestrian 127-146. In the ten years prior, the Kings were an awful 323-524, one of the worst records in the NBA. In the season prior to the turnaround, the Kings were 27-55. In the nine seasons since, the Kings are 428-278, and have been in the playoffs eight times. Petrie has been awarded the NBA Executive of the Year twice for his work (1998-99, 2000-2001), and is currently in the midst of another rebuilding project with the Kings.

Rod Thorn
Born May 23, 1941, Rod Thorn left West Virginia University early after being drafted by the Washington Bullets in 1963. His professional career lasted until 1971 and had stops in St. Louis, Detroit and Seattle. Thorn was briefly involved as an assistant coach for both the NBA and the ABA prior to taking the general manager position with the Chicago Bulls. In his final season with the Bulls, Thorn drafted Michael Jordan out of North Carolina which propelled the Bulls into an era of dominance seldom seen in the NBA.

After working at league headquarters for over a decade, Thorn took the General Manager position in New Jersey in 2000. The Nets turnaround came in 2002 shortly after Thorn’s arrival. In the three years prior to the turnaround, the Nets accrued a 73-141 record. In the ten years prior, the Nets were 330-458. In 2001, the Nets were 280-212 and have been in the playoffs all six seasons. They have earned two Eastern Conference Championships and appeared in the NBA Finals twice, falling short in their ultimate goal to superior Western Conference teams. Thorn earned the NBA Executive of the Year title in 2001-2002.

Bill Polian
At 66, Bill Polian is regarded as one of the premier General Managers in the NFL. Polian orchestrated the Bills famous run to four consecutive Super Bowls prior to taking a position with the Carolina Panthers in 1995, then a first year expansion franchise. Polian built the Panthers into the most successful expansion franchise in the history of the NFL, as the team played for the NFC Championship during their second season. In 1997, Polian decided to leave the Panthers and join the Indianapolis Colts.

The Colts turnaround occurred in 1999. In the three years prior to the shift, the Colts were 15-33. Even worse, in the ten years prior to the shift, the Colts were 61-99. Since 1999, the Colts have accrued a 102-42 record, and have consistently been in the hunt for a Super Bowl. In eight of the nine seasons, the Colts have been in the playoffs. They have appeared in the AFC Championship game twice; after their victory over the Patriots in 2007, they went on to win Super Bowl XLI.

Polian has won the NFL Executive of the Year five times (1988, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1999). He is known for choosing...
Appendix A (continued)

Peyton Manning over Ryan Leaf in the 1998 draft, hired Tony Dungy, and is currently a member of the NFL Competition Committee.

Jeffrey Lurie

Jeffrey Lurie, born in 1951, purchased the Philadelphia Eagles in 1994 for $195 million. The Eagles are now estimated to be worth over $1 billion. Prior to his entry into the NFL, Lurie owned a Hollywood production company called Chestnut Hill Productions.

The Eagles turnaround came in 2000. In the three years prior to the shift, the Eagles were 14-33, and it was not uncommon to see Eagles fans with paper bags over their heads. In the ten years prior to the shift, the Eagles were just over .500 at 80-73. In the eight seasons since 2000, the Eagles are 83-45, and have represented Philadelphia in the playoffs six times. They have one NFC Championship in that time, and one Super Bowl appearance.

Lurie has his PhD in Social Policy from Brandeis University. Prior to his life in Hollywood, Lurie was an adjunct professor at Boston University. He was voted NFL Owner of the Year in 1995.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Script for Study

Good morning/afternoon/evening, thank you for participating in this research. The purpose of the study is to determine how executives in professional sport have successfully brought their franchises through culture change. I would like to audiotape this interview in order to accurately represent what you say; may I have your permission to tape this interview? Before we begin I want to make sure you understand the following:

Because of these questions, and the high-profile nature of professional sport, your name will likely be disclosed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, you can choose to stop the interview at any time and you do not have to answer every question.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this study.

1. Tell me about your background. How did you get to where you are now?
2. Describe the values in this organization when you arrived?
   a. How did people treat one another?
   b. What was the organization’s relationship with the fans?
   c. What was the organization’s relationship with the players?
3. How was the culture affecting performance?
4. How did you communicate that change was necessary?
5. What were other [organizational decision-makers] perceptions of the changes that needed to be made?
6. Looking back over the early phase of your tenure in this position, what would you describe as the critical events that required you to demonstrate your leadership and your values? How did you deal with these events?
7. What was your vision for this organization?
8. How did you communicate that vision to others?
   • Those you work with
   • Athletes
   • Fans
   • League
9. Can you describe some early successes that you believe were able to persuade the rest of the organization that your vision was realistic?
10. How are your values now reflected in this organization?
11. Can you point to any specific physical changes/documents that can be attributed to you?
12. Is there anything I haven’t asked about that you think I should know?

References


