2006

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AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AS A DIMENSION OF DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN SPORT FEDERATIONS

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Abstract

Affirmative action in the transformation process of South African sport aims at balancing the concerns of white sport participants with the aspirations of participants of color. The aims of this study are to determine perceptions of South African sport federations in diversity management and the affirmative action profile of South African sport federations, and to suggest strategies to manage affirmative action. A Likert scale questionnaire evaluated perceptions of 32 sport federations on affirmative action factors. Below-average scores were recorded on affirmative action policy and the provision of specialized training opportunities. Political rather than managerial reasons are regarded as the leading factor for implementing affirmative action initiatives. Organizational change, institutionalized policy, and organizational analysis are strategies for managing affirmative action initiatives.

Key words: South African sport federations, affirmative action, diversity management

The political transformation of South Africa since 1994 has resulted in new political structures and changes in social institutions and economic frameworks. The corporate business environment has been compelled to develop and
implement new strategies and structures to facilitate the management of the diverse South African labor force. Affirmative action is undoubtedly at this stage of South African transformation a contentious issue. Recently, a South African labor union, Solidarity, has embarked on an international campaign lobbying support for its Code of Best Practices in Affirmative Action. South African sport organizations in the business environment are also not exempt from finding new strategies to actively recognize value and manage the increasingly multicultural nature of postapartheid sport. Transformation charters, quota systems, and development plans are realities that have to balance the concerns of white sport participants with the aspirations of participants of color. De Beer and Radley (2000) claim that unless South African leaders in all industries recognize, value, and manage diversity and change, they will miss a critical opportunity for the successful integration necessary for the country to achieve progress and transformation. South African sport leaders should, therefore, take responsibility for this opportunity and make strategic adjustments to facilitate the full potential of South Africa's human capital through sport.

Problem Statement and Aims

The rationale, value, and scope of diversity management to corporates (including sport organizations) have been well debated in literature (De Beer & Radley, 2000; Cavanaugh, 2001; Cornelius, 2001; Melymuka, 2001; Smit & Cronje, 1997). From a perusal of diversity management literature, three integrated dimensions of diversity management emerge: (a) \textit{affirmative action initiatives} (reflecting South Africa's diversity in management structures, formal policy regarding affirmative action, provision of specialized training opportunities for diverse groups, quantifiable affirmative action targets, and relation between diversity management and affirmative action); (b) \textit{economic empowerment initiatives} (representation of stakeholders, service providers, and members from designated groups, and implementation of equal opportunities policy), and (c) \textit{supportive management philosophy} (women's position within the sport federation and accommodation of ethnic and cultural differences). Although South African sport organizations are required to meet minimum standards of diversity management, it seems as if South African sport federation leaders are unaware of the multifaceted scope of diversity management and tend to concentrate on isolated elements of affirmative action issues in team selection and governance structures (Welman, 2005). Examples taken from South African newspaper headings such as "Green and gold still looks like black and white," "Mpitsang hits quota bogey for a six," and "UCB will reintroduce quota system in cricket" illustrate the contentious and emotional nature of affirmative action in
South African sport. Bill (2002) warned against a strategy emphasizing a single dimension of diversity and emphasized that effective diversity management reflects continuous monitoring of critical success factors. All three dimensions on a continuum of diversity management are needed before intervention strategies are recommended. The dimension of affirmative action is probably most visible in the transformation efforts of South African sport federations.

**Research Methodology**

**Research Approach**

A qualitative approach was followed. It provides well-grounded explanations of diversity management perceptions and affirmative action practices in the natural settings of the sport federations (Henderson, 1991).

**Research Instrument**

A questionnaire consisting of 38 statements evaluated sport federations on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = fully agree) on the three main dimensions of diversity management: (a) **affirmative action initiatives** (reflecting South African diversity in management structures, formal policy regarding affirmative action, provision of specialized training opportunities to diverse groups, quantifiable affirmative action targets, and relation between diversity management and affirmative action); (b) **economic empowerment initiatives** (representation of stakeholders, service providers, and members from designated groups; tempo of economic empowerment of designated groups; and implementation of equal opportunities policy); and (c) **supportive management philosophy** (women's position within the sport federation, equitable representation of men and women in management of the sport federation, and accommodation of ethnic and cultural differences). Questions on the **demographic profile** (related to diversity management) of the sport federations were also included in the questionnaire. Questions evaluating the dimensions of diversity management were based on the literature review as well as discussions with researchers at the Center for Diversity Management at the University of Pretoria.

**Sample Size**

Questionnaires were administered electronically to all (N=82) national South African sports federations registered at the South African Sports Commission. One electronic follow-up was done and yielded a response rate of 39% (n=32).
In his initial budget speech to Parliament, the Honorable Minister of Sport and Recreation (Stofile, 2004) stated that sport is an important barometer of how a particular society is organized. For that reason, South African sport must be assisted to transform in the direction of an integrated South Africa that is sensitive to all dimensions of diversity. Sport is a powerful transformative force and has already contributed substantially to nation building and reconciliation. The challenge now is to maintain momentum and build on prior successes. Transformation and diversity management constitute an integral part of a sport and recreation system in which the interests of participants at all levels are cared for. They will, however, never be fully realized without clear policy guidelines and support. The concepts of affirmative action, access, and equity as mechanisms for transformation and diversity management are, therefore, embedded in official government priorities and strategies for sport.

Two priorities of the White Paper on Sport and Recreation (Sport and Recreation South Africa, 2004) specifically address these issues: (a) develop the human resource potential required for effective management of sport and recreation in South Africa, and (b) ensure that all sport and recreation bodies meet their affirmative action objectives. The report of the ministerial task team on high performance sport (Phaahla, 2002) also sets a clear framework for enabling access and equity to sport as the foundation for effective affirmative action management strategies.

Affirmative action is frequently confused with diversity management. These two terms are often used interchangeably. Affirmative action and diversity management, although related concepts, are separate points on the continuum of interventions available to the sport industry to facilitate transformation. **Affirmative action** is grounded in moral and social responsibility to amend wrongs done in the past and implies the active extension of participation opportunities to groups formerly underutilized or underrepresented in a particular industry or institution (South African sport). **Diversity management** implies the creation of an intranational environment within which divergent perspectives, approaches, and sensitivities are incorporated and developed to capitalize on diversity in such a way that the full potential of individuals (sportspersons) and institutions (sport federations) may be optimally realized. Diversity management in sport focuses on the business case for diversity and can be regarded as a strategic approach to sport that contributes to maximizing performances, creativity, and commitment of participants and management, while meeting the needs of diverse consumer groups. Affirmative action, although one mechanism involved in changing the organizational culture...
of South African sport, provides essential input into a holistic diversity management strategy.

**Results and Discussion**

Efficient diversity management directly influences the success of organizations (Arredondo, 1996) as it creates and sustains desired organizational change. Researchers (Cornelius, 2001; De Beer & Radley, 2000; Griggs & Louw, 1995; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1997) seem to agree that diversity management initiatives should be incorporated into approaches to management organizational strategies and depend on employee involvement. They further agree that diversity management initiatives should be dynamic to progress along the diversity management continuum. The starting point for facilitating diversity management action plans is diagnosing an organization's current perceptions on dimensions of diversity management, including affirmative action, prior to designing intervention strategies (De Beer & Radley, 2000).

Smit and Cronje (1997) postulate that the key elements of an effective diversity strategy center around three main dimensions: affirmative action initiatives, economic empowerment of previously disadvantaged groups, and the institutionalization of a supportive management philosophy. Even though the focal point of the resultant discussion is on the perceptions of South African sport federations on affirmative action initiatives, it cannot be divorced from the perceptions on the nature and necessity of diversity management as a concept.

**Perceptions on Diversity Management**

Results displayed a somewhat myopic view of South African sport federations regarding diversity. Diversity was primarily defined as meeting quotas in sport teams, a view that unequivocally disregards the complexity of the concept and undoubtedly influences resulting management strategies in this regard. Elements such as religious and sexual orientation, family status, gender, cultural diversity, health status, physical ability, age, ethnicity, and diverse value systems were not recognized by 60.14% of the respondents from the analysis of definitions provided on diversity. Cavanaugh (2001), Carnevale and Stone (1994), as well as Thomas (1995), caution against the narrow definition of diversity, as it leads to one-dimensional management strategies. Women represented only 34.7% of management in South African sports organizations although they comprise 51.9% of the South African population. People with disabilities represented only 2.9%, and people of color only 23.5%, signifying that the demography of the South African population is not adequately reflected.
Affirmative Action Initiatives as Dimension of Diversity Management

Figure 1 reflects the scores of ten critical success factors relevant to this dimension. The above average score of $\bar{x} = 3.460$ recorded for perceived reflection of a South African diversity clearly contradicts the previous demographic findings. The existence of formal policy regarding affirmative action ($\bar{x} = 2.750$) and provision of specialized training or mentoring programs aimed at historically disadvantaged groups ($\bar{x} = 2.750$) deserve further clarification.

*Figure 1. Affirmative Action Profile as a Dimension of Diversity Management: South African sport federations’ Responses to Factors Relevant to Affirmative Action*

South African sport federations...
- reflect South African diversity
- have formal policy addressing the position of historically disadvantaged persons
- provide specialized training opportunities to diverse groups
- set quantifiable benchmarks for developing diverse groups
- regard implementation of affirmative action as legal requirements
- regard implementation of affirmative action as a moral requirement
- regard implementation of affirmative action as a social requirement
- regard implementation of affirmative action as a political requirement
- regard implementation of affirmative action as a managerial requirement
- regard affirmative action as synonymous to diversity management
The earlier deduction that sport federations are myopic regarding training/mentoring programs is reinforced when analyzing the relevancy of the mentioned training/mentoring initiatives. It can be surmised that sport-specific training initiatives for people of color and open competitions are incorrectly regarded as affirmative action initiatives. South African sport federation officials regard political reasons as the primary motivational factor (\( \bar{x} = 3,940 \)) for implementing affirmative action initiatives in contrast to research (De Beer & Radley, 2000; Solomon, 2002), suggesting that managerial reasons should be the primary driving force. Only 48.62% of the respondents listed managerial reasons as the primary concern, a finding that should question the sustainability of relevant organizational change in South African sport. The eclectic and myopic approach to diversity management is reiterated in the limited perception (43.58%) that sport federations have a legal obligation toward affirmative action. The latter finding seems to indicate that sport federations regard the implementation of affirmative action as an option rather than a legal requirement. Equating diversity management to mere affirmative action likewise confirms sport federations' myopic perception of diversity management.

Measured against the benchmarks of the diversity management continuum of Bill (2002), it seems as if South African sport federations are primarily positioned in a neutral diversity zone. The benchmarks of this neutral position are declared as awareness of affirmative action programs, conflicting views on diversity policies, limited attention given to management philosophies and economic empowerment, limited to no support for and implementation of diversity training programs, and conflicting management commitment to diversity management. Organizations positioned in the neutral zone concentrate mainly on affirmative action initiatives and regard it as the primary dimension of diversity management (Bill, 2002). When the above benchmarks are superimposed on the results reflected in Figure 1, it could justify sport federations' one-dimensional perspective on diversity management relegating it to mere affirmative action quotas in sport teams. It seems as if South African sport federation leaders do not yet consider affirmative action as an element of diversity management for enhancing organizational change and effectiveness, but rather perceive it principally as a political issue. This undoubtedly prevents sport federations from capitalizing on diversity in South African sport.

Strategies for Managing Affirmative Action in South African Sport

An affirmative action strategy is more than a declaration of good intention. It describes a program of action leading toward the accomplishment of specific and measurable results contributing to an intranational business scenario meeting the
moral and legal responsibilities of diversity in the South African sport industry. Various strategies may be applied to implement affirmative action optimally. For the purpose of this article, three generic strategies are emphasized briefly.

**Organizational Change**

The search for competent and committed sports participants and managers cannot be limited to one group. South African sport federation leaders need to shift the emphasis away from the political player-quota perception on the sport fields to a management approach of valuing diversity and creating an organizational culture of inclusion. Social inclusion should represent a broader range of constituents than just team members and must be visible in the boardrooms where the full spectrum of diversity should be reflected. Visible positive role models in management positions in South African sport that the total spectrum of sport stakeholders can identify with could accelerate the required change in organizational culture. Sustainable organizational change to facilitate affirmative action is, however, based on a compatible and supportive management style. Concerted efforts to move sport federations from the currently dominating Eurocentric management style to an Afrocentric style where the underlying values of cohesion, participative decision making, interpersonal support, and acceptance of diversity prevail, could accelerate management efforts to reposition affirmative action beyond the political arena.

**Institutionalize Policy**

Clear and effective policy on affirmative action as well as diversity management serves as a bonding and directive strategy. National leadership structures in South African sport therefore have to formulate clear guidelines to move sport federations out of the neutral and aware phase of holistic diversity management. Effective leadership and management are essential as a dynamic force of the sport leader/manager in order to institutionalize policy. The value of appropriate, participative, and inclusive management training programs according to the needs of individual sport federations can for that reason not be overemphasized. Attempts of sport federations to formulate transformation charters and best practice documents in this regard have to be recognized and supported.

**Organizational Analysis and Monitoring**

A strategy of urgently pursuing and evaluating affirmative action benchmarks and objectives should be adopted. Continuously evaluating and monitoring targets
make it possible to demonstrate progress, institutionalize policy, and change organizational culture. Conducting regular audits of progress on all elements of affirmative action in sport federations as well as on diversity management and the appointment of a transformation monitor as proposed by the ministerial task team on high performance sport in South Africa could guide the visible mapping of performance targets. In this regard national government stated in its Strategic Plan for 2004–2007 (Sport and Recreation South Africa, 2004) that government funding policy of national sport federations will be linked to meeting affirmative action objectives and criteria set out in a Transformation Charter. Representivity targets in the proposed Transformation Charter are set with regards to women, people with disabilities, and race as well as geographical location in all spheres of participation in South African sport, thus reflecting a more multidimensional strategy than mere race quotas in sport teams.

**Conclusion**

South African sport federations equate and relegate diversity management to mere race quotas on sport teams. The affirmative action profile of South African sport federations therefore seems unsatisfactory and one-dimensional and is mainly perceived as a contentious political issue in South African sport rather than a management strategy to optimize human capital. Affirmative action in the form of team quotas is, however, a short-term solution to a long-term challenge. Implemented in isolation, affirmative action attempts to address imbalances with debatable effectiveness. A more long-term sustainable solution is a holistic diversity management strategy for South African sport focusing on all dimensions of diversity management with clear benchmarks to be obtained at a specified point in the future in order to move along the diversity management continuum. Managing diversity should, in the long term, make affirmative action unnecessary as managing diversity in its broadest sense might make people more receptive to affirmative action primarily because it suggests that there is a light at the end of the tunnel (Thomas, 1995).

**References**


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