Organizational Culture and Identity: A Case Study from the Australian Football League

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ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises research that was undertaken between January 2000 and December 2004 into the organizational culture and identity of Fremantle Football Club, a professional sporting organization that competes in an elite national football competition, the Australian Football League.

The thesis began with a review of the contemporary literature on the principal topic, organizational culture and identity. The literature was subsequently used to frame and explain the approach taken in the research, which was to explore culture and identity as distinguishable, inter-dependent concepts integral to the functioning of sports organizations. The justification for the need to explore their impact in professional sporting organizations, because of a gap in our knowledge, was also provided.

The research was conducted as a single qualitative case study that enabled an in-depth investigation into how Fremantle Football Club’s culture and identity were formed and how they influenced its structure, strategy, behaviour and performance. Significantly, the research covered the entire history of the club since its inception in 1994, revealing three distinct periods in which culture and identity were strongly influenced by the values and beliefs of the club’s leaders, particularly the CEOs, as well as board members, senior management and coaches.

The first period comprised a time of self-absorption with an inappropriate culture that saw it in frequent conflict with external stakeholders as on-field success eluded it. Despite establishing a strong and clearly defined identity, FFC’s inward looking culture undermined its capacity to fully engage with its heavily regulated environment. Subsequently, the club became dysfunctional as little was provided by way of long term planning and direction.

The second period was epitomised by a club that was heavily fractured by internal disagreements at different levels of its governance that undermined its performance and created a cultural vacuum into which it withdrew. Little progress was made as the club stagnated. Despite consolidating its identity, individualism took precedence over the collective good with scant regard for the direction or well being of the organization.

The club emerged into the third period with new personnel at all levels of its leadership and management adopting a different approach to previous administrations. The club
embarked on a journey of reconciliation with its governing agencies, and adopted an externally engaged perspective that provided the club’s stakeholders with a strong sense of its future direction based on consultation and strategic planning.

The results of the research show that organizational culture and identity are dynamic, fluid, systems that respond to the value and beliefs of senior leadership. Importantly for this and other sports organizations, the culture and identity are responsive to short term transformation belying previously held notions of cultural change as a long-term process. This was possible for two reasons. Firstly, because FFC was a small organization in terms of staff numbers, the dissemination of transforming values could be more easily achieved. Secondly, because it was a club with a short history, it was more amenable to transformation, with stakeholders using the dismissal of senior coaches as a catalyst for change.

The results also show that organizational performance will flourish if both of the following two conditions are met. Firstly, culture and identity are fully aligned with each other and the organization’s vision, which enables clearly defined and consistent strategies to emerge. Secondly, the aligned culture, identity and vision are consistent with the external environment enabling the club to fully engage with that environment.
STUDENT DECLARATION

I, Gervase Alastair Haimes, declare that the PhD thesis entitled “Organizational Culture and Identity: A Case Study from the Australian Football League” is no more than 100,000 words exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature: Date:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In particular I want to thank my supervisor Bob Stewart. Bob always responded quickly, positively and encouragingly as I completed this project, based in Perth while he was based in Melbourne. It meant our meetings were infrequent but I was never left to dwell on problems or the difficulties of doing a PhD in such circumstances. Bob went beyond the call of duty with his insightful and perceptive review of my work. Thanks Bob.

Others to acknowledge are those without whose help the project may have failed. David Parkin, while still coaching full time, gave up one and a half days as he introduced me to several contacts. The timing of his encouragement was critical. Cameron Schwab from the Fremantle Football Club not only permitted me access to the club but critically challenged my work. Ross Booth of Monash University gave of his time to my project and despite a diversity of our research interests encouraged me to pursue my path with Bob. These three provided what was perhaps marginal time and interest to them but was so vital in timely encouragement and made the project doable.

The research and supervisory trips to Melbourne would have been impossible without some very good friends, Tony Coutas and Tracey Giles. They accommodated me, tolerated me and made it possible, fun and cheap, thanks mainly to red wine and curry. Finally, to my partner Jane Hogg whose birthday I missed on a number of occasions to travel to Melbourne. I promise to make it up and without her love and support the project would just have been too arduous. Thank you to you all.
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