

# The Role of Communication in the Management of Multicultural Sports Organizations Case Study on Two Women's Volleyball Teams from Romania and Belgium

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## **Abstract**

*The world we live in has become increasingly globalized, and freedom of labor is a feature of the society in which we live. All businesses are influenced by this phenomenon of globalization and those who manage them must take into account the opportunities and disadvantages of this phenomenon. As professional sport has recently become a real industry, it is also strongly influenced by the socio-economic changes in the contemporary world. Like all businesses, sports organizations are guided by the principles of management, but still having more differences from other areas of the industry. In addition, sports organizations have become increasingly culturally diversified, being a benchmark for what multiculturalism means. Thus, for the good development of their activity, the staff that is part of them must be able to communicate effectively so that the organization can achieve its objectives. This study presents the role of communication in the management of multicultural teams in Belgium and Romania and proposes several solutions to improve communication within culturally diversified organizations.*

**Keywords:** *sports management, multiculturalism, efficient communication, sports organizations*

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## **1. Introduction**

Sport involves millions of people around the world, being played and watched by a very large number of individuals, and professional sport has become a real industry. This development of sport has led to major changes in the consumption, production and management of sporting events (Hoye, Smith, Nicholson, Stewart 2015). Moreover, managers of sports organizations must value the passion of those involved in this phenomenon to sell tickets and promotional items, to attract members or to encourage fans to volunteer (Smith, Stewart 2010).

For a sports organization to operate effectively, managers must use management-specific functions: to plan, organize, coordinate, command, control,

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motivate, evaluate, or make decisions (Fells 2000). However, there are also important differences between sports organizations and other types of business that need to be taken into account. One of the main differences is the way performance is evaluated. If in business, imperatively, leaders try to make a profit, in sports organizations, there may be other goals that take precedence over profit, such as winning competitions or providing services to society. Even in these conditions, sports managers must provide the necessary resources to carry out the activity. (Hoye, Smith, Nicholson, Stewart 2015).

Another different aspect in sports compared to the business environment is the way the competition is viewed. If in the case of ordinary companies they try to increase their market share, to beat their competitors and why not to reach a monopoly position, but in sports, clubs need competition to increase their profits (Sandy, Sloane, Rosentraub 2004). Such a situation, which may seem at least strange, happened in 2004, when the German football club Bayern Munich lent 2 million euros to the rival club, Borussia Dortmund. The president of the Bayer club said: "It was a critical situation for Borussia who could no longer pay the players' salaries. I am a big fan of the tradition in sports and I thought it was appropriate to help them (Taylor, 2013). Subsequently, the Dortmund club paid its debt and in a few years managed to win the German championship and fight with Bayern Munich even for the Champions League trophy.

## **2. Theoretical background: The role of communication in the management of multicultural sports organizations**

Nowadays, the impact of culture on sport and its consequences on the management of sports organizations is more and more obvious. So far, not enough importance has been given to this aspect, but it is clear that cultural aspects influence the activities that take place within sports organizations (Thomas, Dyall 1999). Cultural diversity has been caused by many factors, but the most important of these is demographic change (Loden, Rosener 1991).

In the following years, other research was done in the field of multicultural management, but very few studies at all, were done in the field of sports activities. However, paradoxically, these sports organizations have become increasingly globalized, and teams have become increasingly culturally diversified, becoming a benchmark for multiculturalism.

The term globalization has become so common in the 21st century that it can be considered meaningless (Dickson, Malaia Santos 2017). Globalization is a process by which space and time are reduced as a result of the development of technology, the flow of information that circulates faster and faster, the flow of goods or strong relationships between people that can be connected despite distances. (Miller, Lawrence, McKay and Rowe 2001). Globalization is an important factor that has led to major changes in the way sports are conducted today. Moreover, Globalization involves two aspects. On the one hand, the increase in contacts between regions and countries due to the influences of social networks,

a global financial system or international organizations with decision-making factors (FIFA, UEFA, FIVB, etc.) or global cultural phenomena (Champions League, World Cup, Europa League, Olympic Games, Nations League). On the other hand, the world is beginning to be considered as a single place and less as a mixture of independent countries (Robertson, 1992).

The role of the strategic leaders is more important in multicultural teams as they represent truly symbols for the persons inside and outside of the organizations (Nastase, 2010). To create a culturally intelligent organization, openness to new experiences was found to facilitate intercultural group performance (Karma and Vedina, 2009).

Thus, if these days the flow of information circulates faster and faster, large sports organizations have ambitions that will lead to increased influence in different geographical areas that will lead to an increase in power and profitability (Ritzer 2003). In this regard, we can see the case of British teams that frequently organize promotional tournaments in countries in Asia, Australia or North America. Sport is one of the areas that best illustrates this phenomenon of globalization (Giulianotti, Robertson 2004). For example, after the success of the French national football team at the 1998 World Cup, where the French team won the World Cup with a very large number of players whose parents were immigrants from other countries (Kassimeris, 2011), society as a whole but also clubs sportswomen have begun to observe this phenomenon of multiculturalism. The same thing happened 20 years later when France, and with a very culturally diverse team, won the World Cup again. The globalization of professional sports is highlighted by the following aspects: international scouting and talent recruitment, match television and media content, scheduling matches at hours of interest to other geographical areas, selling players around the world and the existence of various owners (Dickson, Malaia Santos 2017).

Management is not limited by state borders and more and more companies are deciding to operate in more and more states. The world has become a set of globally interconnected cities, and companies operating in several countries are known as multinationals. Thus, sports organizations can also be considered multinational (Robins, De Cenzo, Gabilliet 2009). As a result of this globalization, multinational companies have begun to become involved in sport and have an increasing impact on professional sport (Mason, Duquette 2005). Although we are talking about a globalized world, those who are part of this world must take into account the adaptation to the local cultural specifics (Andrews, Batts, Silk 2014).

### **3. Communication within multicultural organizations**

We live in the 21st century and we seem to be witnessing a paradox. As technology develops, there are more and more means of communication, but people are actually communicating less and less and worse. Communication plays a very important role in everyday life and even more so it plays an important role in business or in sports organizations. Good communication at the level of a sports

organization can lead to efficient management and even more so the role of communication is more important in culturally diversified organizations.

Also related to communication, the former Scottish manager of the Manchester United football team, Sir Alex Ferguson states in his autobiography that "language is the biggest obstacle" when a foreign player comes to the culturally diverse team (Hodder & Stoughton, 2013). Also on the issue of communication within culturally diverse organizations, Honingsten (2017) presents in the book "Klopp: bring the noise" the fears of German manager Jurgen Klopp regarding communication in English and the thoughts of the president of the club in Mainz who told Klopp: "The spoken word it's your weapon. You have to decide if you can express in English what is important. It won't work if you let others talk. Then you would be only 70% Klopp. " In the same paper, Honingsten points out that certain complications may arise due to the initial language barrier. The German manager also addresses his players especially when he is nervous saying that "he would very much like to talk to the players in German". However, the Liverpool players state that their manager's English is "fantastic" and that they understand everything he wants to convey.

Communication, regardless of its type, is part of our daily lives. In the opinion of Ștefan Prutianu (1998), communication between people "is a transactional process, through which people transfer energies, emotions, feelings and change meanings." Regarding didactic communication, which is closer to communication within sports organizations, Iacob (1998) states that this is a "relationship based on sharing a meaning."

Pedersen (2012) considers communication as an essential element in the sports industry, both individually and collectively. Communication can be defined as a process in which people work together, create things together and manage various activities through verbal or nonverbal language. Following each conversation, individuals create an exchange of complex messages and, in addition, understanding how other people in the group communicate can lead to a successful interaction (Poole 2013).

In terms of volleyball, this is a sport that takes place in a very small space, and the actions are very fast and dynamic. Six players are found on an area of about 81 m<sup>2</sup>, and often many of these six players are of different nationalities and cultures. Moreover, the coach who gives indications on the sidelines may also be from a different culture. Thus, in sports, but even more so in volleyball, verbal and non-verbal communication is extraordinarily important (Raiola, Gaetano 2011).

In sports in general and in volleyball in particular, verbal and non-verbal communication can be used to transmit tasks, decode opponents' tactics, but also to identify the mood and physical condition of athletes (Atkinson, Nevill 2011). Raiola and Gaetano (2011) present in their paper a very interesting aspect regarding communication. They point out that body language can lead to an average of 11 to 19 points per match (which means an average of about 19% of points) and it is obvious that they could influence the outcome of a match. Thus, athletes should be able to communicate effectively both verbally and non-verbally

regardless of cultural differences, but it takes time to achieve this. This statement can be reinforced by what a player from Galați said “in the beginning it was chaos”, referring to the communication during the beginning of the competition season. In conclusion, Raiola and Gaetano (2011) state that body language has an important influence on the end result. At the same time, the coach of the CSU team mentions that “a coach must talk very often with his players and understand all the factors that could influence their performance,” but at the same time, identifying and combating the factors that generate failure is related to mastery and the skill of the coach in the field (Ploeșteanu, Savu, 2012).

#### **4. Research methodology**

The information for this study was obtained through interviews with people who are part of multicultural sports organizations. For the interviews, a series of questions were used to determine the impact that culture has on the activity of some sports organizations and thus it was found that a particularly important role in sports organizations is played by the communication process. The people who responded to these interviews are of quite significant cultural diversity. Among the differences that stand out are differences in nationality, differences in culture, age, gender or religion. Thus, among the respondents are 23 players and 2 coaches. In terms of nationalities, 7 players are of Romanian origin, 5 Belgian Walloon players, 1 Belgian Flemish player, 2 Bulgarian players, 2 Serbian players, 2 Croatian players, 1 French player, 1 Ukrainian player, 1 Spanish player, 1 Brazilian player. The coach of the Romanian team is Romanian, while the coach of the Belgian team is Belgian, walon. The age differences between the players end up being 15 years. The youngest respondents are 18 years old, while the oldest reach the age of 33.

Following the drafting of the information obtained from the meetings, it was found that there were common themes, with several sub-themes: communication, conflict, adaptation, culture, personality, education, travel, behavior, motivation and performance. These main themes have been coded as nodes in the Nvivo software. From each interview, the paragraphs and sections that were considered to be related to these topics were coded. Subsequently, the software highlighted which of these initially coded paragraphs are related to the topic as well as the percentage in which it is related to that topic (coding density). At the same time, it is important to note that the same paragraph may be related to several topics. At the same time, it should be noted that the interviews were conducted in Romanian, English or French and were subsequently translated and written in English to be analyzed in the Nvivo software.

The qualitative analysis of this information was performed through the Nvivo software. This software helps to disseminate information and make the most of the data obtained from interviews. However, Nvivo does not analyze data instead of researchers, but only provides some important indications (Bazely, Jackson 2013). Nvivo software offers the possibility to analyze data from various

perspectives (Brandao, Miguez 2016). In addition, using this software, the data are very relevant and pertinent (Richards, 1999).

## 5. Findings

The information obtained from the interviews attests to the fact that communication is very important in sports organizations. 22 respondents talk extensively about this topic, providing a total of 37 references. The one who talks the most about communication and also with a very high density, is the coach of the team from Galați. It states that linguistic differences create as many problems as cultural differences. Any player who wants to play abroad must learn English. Thus, in the context of globalization, including players who do not necessarily want to play abroad are forced to learn English in order to communicate with those on the team and to understand the message of the coach when he transmits the instructions in English. In this regard, young Romanians try to learn one or more foreign languages from an early age, because they are aware that they will rarely meet a non-native Romanian who speaks Romanian. On the other hand, in nations that have created radiant cultures, the common man is not tempted to learn a foreign language. Spanish or French think that everyone speaks Spanish or French, but they are wrong (Baconschi, 2019). Also, the Romanian coach goes on to say that most foreign players who do not speak English fail to adapt. Some of them may have the chance to have a colleague speak their native language. There are also rarer situations in which cultural proximity can compensate for the lack of language skills, as is the case of the Bulgarian player who has integrated very well in Romania, although she has only a few basic expressions in English. In fact, it provided answers to questions via Google Translate. Moreover, in such a multicultural team, there are many situations in which the information in English reaches the players, but they do not understand the message that the sender wanted to convey.

It often happens that foreign players take advantage of the fact that they do not understand the language in order to evade certain tasks or to evade the efficient performance of tasks. The technician states that he tries to avoid such situations by offering as many motor explanations as possible, the body language being thus extraordinarily important. Thus, players can no longer say that they did not understand what they have to do. At the same time, experience helps to detect such problems. An interesting aspect regarding the communication in multicultural teams is specified by a Romanian coach, who mentions that "it happened to me to communicate better with foreigners than with Romanians. It's about people and not necessarily about nationality. " Another problem is represented by the fact that many Romanian managers consider that foreign players must learn the Romanian language and communicate in the Romanian language. Of course, this is desirable, but Romanian is a fairly difficult language and on the other hand not all athletes have language skills. However, they should make an effort and try to learn the local

language, whatever it is, but this takes time, and managers may be more lenient on this issue.

Charleroi's walon coach says that the most difficult thing in a multicultural team is communication. It tries to make the players understand that communicating is very important in all aspects of life, but even more so in sports. This idea is also underlined by the Ukrainian player of the team from Galați. Returning to the Belgian coach, he states that "communication is necessary in any situation, without communication it would be a disaster."

One of the most common problems in multicultural sports organizations is the differences in the language of communication. On the one hand there are local athletes who speak the local language, and on the other hand there are foreign athletes who speak another language. In the case of foreign athletes there may be various situations, among which the most common are those in which they speak English, but there are also situations in which some of them speak the same mother tongue and can thus lead to the creation of subgroups. In the case of the team from Galați, seven players spoke Romanian, while in the case of foreigners, two of them used Russian to communicate with each other, while two other players used Spanish. In the case of the Charleroi team, on the one hand there were the French-speaking players (walonele, a Flemish player and a French player), and on the other hand there were the Balkan players who used the Serbo-Croatian language to communicate Croatian (2 players), a Serbian player and a Bulgarian player). This obviously led to the creation of subgroups, but which did not affect the group's connection. An important aspect to mention is that all players understand the French language except for one Croatian player, for which it is very difficult when the messages are transmitted only in French, she feels excluded. Regarding this issue, both foreign and domestic players unanimously agree that it is natural for an individual to speak their mother tongue. However, some Romanian local players feel frustrated when they hear foreign players communicate in a language they do not understand. On the other hand, foreign players may also feel excluded or marginalized when the native language is spoken excessively. In order to avoid these situations as much as possible, in both teams analyzed, when it is a group issue, a team issue is discussed in English (the language common to all players), while in private discussions each discusses in native. The players also specify that in order to avoid dissensions between the group of natives and the group of foreigners, they usually translate each other what they discuss with each other, when a player requests it.

Apart from the Belgian coach who considers that the most difficult aspect in such a multicultural team is communication, there are three other players who think the same. One of the players is Bulgarian and plays in Romania, and the other is a Romanian player who plays for a Romanian team. The Bulgarian player considers that the most difficult aspect in her adaptation process is the fact that she has to speak a foreign language, while the Romanian player only states that it is very difficult, but not the most difficult. This idea is important because a player who plays in her country finds it very difficult to communicate in such a culturally

diverse team. The same player states that the lack of communication made the first matches a mess from this point of view. Regarding the difficulty of communicating in a foreign language, also speaks a Spanish player who states that in such a multicultural team "it is difficult to communicate because people are different." A Croatian player also talks about the differences, stating that "it is difficult to communicate in a multicultural team because those who are part of the team have different characters. Regardless of the language you speak, it is important to have communication skills and to know how to interact with people."

In addition to the ideas discussed, there are other prominent issues related to communication. A Ukrainian player points out a very noteworthy aspect, namely that "connections with other people can be formed even if you do not speak a common language so well." Another idea that stands out is that for athletes who speak several languages it is often very difficult to choose the language in which to communicate, especially when they have to communicate very quickly. This idea is supported by both a Spanish player and a Flemish player, both of whom speak at least three foreign languages. The Flemish player states that "I often want to say something in English but the words come to me in Flemish." Moreover, the Spanish player states that "it is difficult to say what you think in a foreign language."

Another idea that needs to be mentioned is that foreign languages can be improved over time, after the athlete frequently uses that language, but the first contact with that language can be very hard, especially when linguistic differences they are very large. There is also the statement of a Brazilian player who played for a Romanian team and who states that "if she had spoken the Romanian language, it would have been easier for her to adapt both sportingly and socially." As a complement to this idea, a Bulgarian player playing in Belgium states that "when an individual wants to adapt to a foreign country, they must first learn the language of that country."

Returning to Baconschi's (2019) idea that individuals born and raised in countries that use an international language are less motivated to learn a foreign language, because they will meet many non-native people who use their mother tongue, and this may influence the activity of multicultural organizations in that country. This situation also happens within the Belgian team, where the young players do not speak English very well. In addition, for young Belgian players, in addition to not speaking an international language, there is also an age difference that can influence their communication with other foreign players, some of whom are 10 years older.

## **6. Conclusions and proposals**

Communication is very important in all aspects of life, especially in a team, whether it is a sports team or not. Thus, knowledge of a foreign language (preferably English) of international circulation is a mandatory aspect for those



who want to work in such a team. As a result of this study, several conclusions were found.

First of all, foreigners should understand that it is not easy for local players to speak English in any situation, as it is natural and natural for them to use their native language. Then, foreign players should try to learn the language and when they want to understand certain aspects, they should ask their colleagues to translate. On the other hand, local players should translate the discussions when requested to do so by foreign players. Locals in the culture in which a foreign player operates appreciate his efforts to learn the local language or various aspects of culture, which is why, no matter how difficult or easy a foreign language is, learning and using any word from a foreign language will be appreciated.

An interesting aspect is that foreign players can help each other when they speak the same language of international circulation or even the same mother tongue. Thus, it is even recommended that those who speak the same language spend more time together to be able to communicate and adapt more easily. However, if there are several players who speak the same language, subgroups can be created. Subgroups exist in any organization, but in culturally diversified sports organizations there is this extra factor that can create subgroups. In essence, the formation of subgroups is normal and is not a negative thing as long as they do not affect the cohesion of the whole group. To prevent the formation of these subgroups, a solution would be to organize recreational activities in which all members of the group interact.

Moreover, another noteworthy aspect is that individuals can have a connection and understand each other despite not speaking the same language. In these situations, nonverbal language is especially important. In this sense, a Romanian coach of a volleyball team also states that there were situations in which he communicated better with foreign players than with Romanians. However, such situations are rarer and in no way mean that those involved do not have to learn languages of international circulation.

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