CREATING
A
CLUB
CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is going to explore how a rugby club can create or sustain a culture that they and others in the rugby community can identify with. What I intend to analyse is the meaning of the word culture in a rugby sense, how a player can fit that culture and a case study on an Australian club side and how they have had a successful culture for a long period of time.

“Groups can arise from almost nothing

The desire to form and join a group is extremely powerful and built into our nature. Amongst other things groups give us a most valuable gift, our social identity, which contributes to our sense of who we are” (1)

Most of our lives are spent in groups with other people, in the case of rugby it can be a group of players from different backgrounds coming together for a common theme.

What is Culture

“Culture is the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterises an institution, organisation or group” (3)

Culture is clearly defined in the above sentence. It needs people buy-in for it to work effectively as you are sharing a set of attitudes, values, goals and practices. When that buy-in is reached everyone should be in philosophical alignment so they are working together to characterise the full potential of their particular institution, organisation or group.
In a rugby sense this may also be respecting a past cultural tradition or history that people already identify this club with. Some clubs have a history of over 100 years and as this paper will examine further many of those key cultural elements can stay the same.

Obviously this is different for a new organisation but a strong culture can still be achieved. When the ACT Brumbies were formed in 1995 their coach Rod Macqueen decided to take the side away for a tour of Japan before the start of the season. The Japanese tour proved a success for the two purposes Macqueen had sought. They had developed a distinct pattern of play and just as importantly bonded together and created their own culture. A great deal of the latter could be attributed to the rules and regulations players had set for their own behaviour. Before embarking on the trip Macqueen suggested they come up with their own set of standards put together by a small group headed by Brett Robinson and Pat Howard. (2)

Even though the idea of rules and regulations was done by Macqueen, note that the players had created their culture as they knew the various personalities and what best suited them as a group.

**The Player**

*What player fits our culture;* the importance of player buy-in has been explained in the Brumbies situation, the Rod Macqueen way was to copy his business theories across to rugby. If we look at the player as part of a business we can then get a clearer picture of the type we are looking for.

People are the most important asset in a business. The cost to the business is significant from both a percentage of expenses and time invested. The returns are varied and may not occur in year one - the aim is for long term tenure.
There is a huge cost if a worker leaves both tangible in severance and recruitment costs plus the intellectual property (IP) that walks with them.

The same can be said about a rugby club. We spend time and resources recruiting players but often they only stay for one year. The skills and IP that leave need to replaced and can hamper team development as we need to ‘re-train’ our people.

We tend to focus on skills and ignore how important behaviours are to a positive culture. While aptitude is a given when recruiting, a common theme in business is the importance of ‘cultural fit’ – both ways. If the culture of the company does not fit with the individual’s beliefs or desires, it will most likely end in tears (and vice versa). The following model could be considered to determine a player’s suitability:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor Behaviour</th>
<th>Good Behaviour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good Skills</td>
<td>Good Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Behaviour</td>
<td>Good Behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Skills</td>
<td>Poor Skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Using a traffic light analogy: The green is a definite ‘go’, the red a definite ‘stop/no’ and the yellow is where your discussion could lead to which is the better option - to proceed with caution or stop.

Too often in rugby we look at the skill set of the player, the potential match winning return and ignore how a bad attitude with matching behaviours can have a negative (often deadly) effect on how the team performs. A star player(s) contribution on the field can be negated by the decline in team performance, due to their alienation and distaste for the poor behaviour of the star(s)
The Club

The Brothers Rugby Club (Brisbane) was formed in 1905; it has delivered 83 internationals, 209 Queensland players and has won 27 Brisbane Premier Grade Premierships, more than any other Brisbane club. This club has a great history and it has a culture of being a family orientated club, many players join because they had a family member who played or was associated with the club. However, this amounts to nothing for the young player if they don’t see personal development in their own game and the coaching staff has put in place a strong rugby program.

The Brothers motto is ‘once a Brother always a Brother’. Once at the club and because of the family environment most players will play out their career with the club. Zane Hilton the present Premier Grade Coach was captain of the team in 2000, he states that the longevity of players helps his clubs success. Eight of his teammates from that 2000 side played in Brothers winning grand final side that he coached in 2009. The most important ingredient for their success was they had good leaders who were an integrated part of the Brothers culture.

“Leaders gain trust by conforming

A high-profile, high-status role in any group is that of its leader, but where do leaders come from? In some groups, they are appointed or imposed from outside, but in many groups leaders emerge slowly and subtly from the ranks” (1)

At Brothers there is a leadership group in their top grade, lower grades, colts and woman’s team. This group will set the standards and they are responsible for their present on and off field culture. The important aspect of this is each of these separate groups has different priorities due to the varying standard of
rugby they play but when the entire group come together there is always one common theme and priority and that is the whole club.

Brothers is known throughout the Brisbane community as ‘The Filth’ a reputation given to them from earlier years where they were known for their tough, uncompromising forward pack.

With the advent of the modern game and more importantly the style of play their present crop of players would prefer, they now play a running game. This is something the entire leadership group signed off on. With the core elements of their culture still in place it was agreed you don’t move forward by standing in the same spot.

“Tradition is beliefs or customs taught by one generation to the next. Traditions serve to preserve a wide range of culturally significant ideas, specific practices and various methods used” (3)

Tony Shaw (present day President and ex-Wallaby Captain) was one of those players who would have enhanced ‘The Filth’ reputation. His was a golden era of premierships and representative players in the 70’s and 80’s. Much of the same traditions that are evident today were in place back then. He remembers a family orientated club where the entire first grade side would get to the ground early to watch all lower grade games. All players would socialise together and they formed a great bond with many ex-players still in contact today.

This was led by senior players and although the title ‘Leadership Group’ was not even thought of at this time it seems it was always in operation. Tony remembers as an 18 year old listening intently to what the other experienced players had to say in terms of on and off field standards and then as he
became a more experienced player he became part of a group that would be doing the leading.

The Brothers Club have sustained a culture. Everyone who joins this club seems to have a sense of belonging (family), rugby people outside the club seem to hate them with a passion which strengthens their resolve and is something they seem to thrive on. But this would amount to nothing if this club was not moving with the times in terms of rugby development. They have one of the best young coaches in the game who is looking at all times to improve his practices and techniques, and he has put in place a program that is attractive to any player joining the club that wants to go to the next level.

The most important aspect of this clubs long standing success is the players set the standards. With a strong leadership team and other players buying in they are all in philosophical alignment. Though tradition is an important part of what they do, the players will set their standards fitting in with the group they presently have. There is no better example of this than the modern style of free flowing rugby they now play compared to the more physical game of the 70’s and 80’s.

**Conclusion**

Whether a club has a proud history dating back many years like Brothers or is newly formed like the Brumbies in 1995, cultural success will come back to a strong group of leaders. In Brothers case it was the player(s) who had been part of that club for a long period of time and with the Brumbies it was the experienced player(s) who was prepared to share attitudes, values, goals and practices. This will give the young player direction and a sense of belonging (family) and hopefully the ambition to be a leader himself one day.
References:


Thanks to:

Pat Callanan
(Northern Suburbs Rugby Club, Sydney)

Zane Hilton
(Brothers Rugby Club, Brisbane)

Tony Shaw
(Brothers Rugby Club, Brisbane)