TEAM CULTURE WITHIN THE WOMEN’S GAME

From the perspective of the author’s vast exposure to various formats of rugby union as a player, a coach and a rugby fanatic, this paper will review team culture and its importance within the realm of women’s rugby union at all levels of the game.

It will also determine if there are any key differences to team culture through the progressive representative levels and how it differs from their male counterparts.

To conclude, recommendations on how to build and nurture development are made.

**Key concepts summarised:**

*Team culture*

Culture is a term that is thrown around and used but very hard to determine exactly what it means. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2018), culture is defined as “the way of life, ....the general customs and beliefs, of a group of people at a particular time”.

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Task #9 – Written Assignment

Essentially it is the collective accepted behaviours and actions of a team; in terms of rugby, it is the way things are done on and off the field.

Women’s rugby

Females play the same version of the male’s rugby union. The difference lies in the growth of the sport between the sexes. Growth inhibitors to the female formatted game include social pressures on women playing what is considered a ‘man’s game’ and world events such as World War II.

Why concentrate on women’s rugby union?

I am a female who has both played across varying levels of competition and is currently coaching women’s rugby. In my opinion, there are limited findings or observations recorded about team culture and the importance it plays with the women’s domain despite the rapid growth in women’s rugby participation over the past two decades (Feliciano, 2016).

I have found the female psyche and motives for wanting to participate in rugby, as well as their ability to commit to be different to that of their male counterpart.

Observations and findings

Club Rugby

At the grass roots level, there are various types of females who want to become involved in the women’s game for a multitude of reasons.

This group of females stem from all walks of life.

Given that rugby is a non-traditional female sport with pathways being virtually non-existent until recent, females tend to come to
join the game much later in life than males do, with limited skill or experience.

A further complication is the role that the female plays in the family dynamic with many already mothers, juggling domestic commitments or those team members that fall pregnant.

Another key group are those who join for the social aspect of the game. They tend to not want to improve beyond this level.

That leaves the experienced individuals who are striving for higher honours with added pressure due to the inexperienced and/or limited availability players at training or game time.

Given the limited teams in any female local competition, a coach has to deal with these issues, unlike a coach of a male team who can drop a player to another level or bench them.

In my opinion, this is probably the hardest level to try and build culture as you have too many variables competing with each other over a long period of time. However I consider it is the most important sector to concentrate on to ensure growth of the game.

Representative

Within the state and national levels, the majority of the players are there for the same reason and have a common goal so trying to fit everyone under the one umbrella is substantially easier than with your club rugby. The players are more driven and committed and predominately want to succeed.

I have observed on too many occasions that competitiveness at this level plays out very differently to that of a male participant. Evidence and personal observation indicates that females in this domain tend to have a more emotional reaction to decisions or the actions of others whereas males act more rationally (Carle &
Nauright, 1999). I consider that there is a lot more care amongst female individuals required in this area to ensure that both the individual and the team are on the same page.

The representative level maybe all about winning so may build some values, beliefs and disciplines around those ideals.

*What have I learnt about team culture?*

I have been fortunate enough to have been coached and mentored by some exceptional people across different sporting codes. The common qualities these people portrayed included showing genuine interest in their participants, demonstrated their trustworthiness and displayed and expected outstanding work ethic. These qualities continue to inspire me and as such I try to emulate these with my interaction with my players.

Understanding your players is a significant factor in trying to get the best out of them and trying to build your culture. Understanding that every player has a story and trying to get to know him or her on that level shows you care. I have found that you become family, which makes them work just that little much harder for you because they don’t want to let you down. It hurts more to disappoint family members then a coach. So that’s what we try to create in a lot of my teams a sense of whanaungatanga (family togetherness).
We also try to do as many team building activities as possible whether its mini volleyball and netball tournaments, white water rafting, team building camps as well as celebrations with themes. It’s a way of having fun and working on team interaction without really knowing it.

But essentially cultivating team culture is an ongoing process.

*How has it helped me as a player and now coach?*

Having played majority of my rugby in New Zealand, involved with club and representative level I have learnt the importance of hard work, socialising with each other off the paddock and one club.

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Team culture was driven to support the club as a whole. Each team would support the others when they weren’t playing and vice versa, then all teams would meet at the club for the after match function.

I have played at two Brisbane rugby union clubs and have integrated the team culture aspect learnt in New Zealand into these two clubs which have been successful in most parts.

Success off the field helps make for success on the field as you build trust and camaraderie with your fellow teammates.

*Whose responsibility is it?*

I have always been a big believer that it was my job as head coach to drive the culture, until it’s at a level where you are happy and have good senior players who enhance it. It then becomes a collective effort as it now revolves around what’s best for the team and how can we make this better which normally the ideas come from the players.

"The leadership challenge is to build a culture that generates and sustains winning behavior. If you attack behavior without building the culture, the behavior may change temporarily, but it will eventually (probably quickly) revert." **Urban Meyer**
Recommendations for improved team culture

Whilst the following recommendations are made, it is noted that this is not an exhaustive list due to the limitations of this paper. It should however be considered an evolving list, adapted to suit one’s team or organisation and their current situation, needs, goals and objectives.

Based on my personal exposure in rugby over the past two decades, I consider the following actions are crucial for successful team culture;

- develop relationships with the players, coaching and management staff of the team. Networking is vital and can lead to many opportunities personally as well as internal (team, club...)

- clear structure, transparency, accountability and support. Practice what you preach – ensure your credibility is upheld – to foster trust

- encouragement of successes/milestones, provide challenging and engaging sessions,

- after match functions / during & off season activities (to create memories and shared experiences that bring the team closer together/ assistance and attendance at club functions

- fun ensure you are always working hard but having fun, a happy coach, makes a happy team, makes rugby so much more enjoyable

“Responsibility equals accountability equals ownership. And a sense of ownership is the most powerful weapon a team or organization can have.” Pat Summitt, Legendary Tennessee Women’s Basketball Coach
Bibliography
