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The Milwaukee Bucks are among the teams that are changing the perception of CSR in sports.

Feeling the impact: Social responsibility in sports

Leagues, teams, athletes and organizations have long championed charitable causes. As the business imperatives to do more become increasingly significant, so too has the response from the sports community.

BILL KING

When Milwaukee Bucks President Peter Feigin offered Arvind Gopalratnam the lead role atop the team's restructured community relations department in 2016, he gave him the option of continuing to call the department community relations or rebranding it as corporate social responsibility.

Gopalratnam chose the latter, seeing it as a way to more clearly communicate how important the role was, and would become.

"I report directly to Peter and I have a seat at the table with our chief marketing officer, our head of sales, our head of corporate partnerships and with communications," said Gopalratnam, who came to Milwaukee from GE Healthcare and last year added responsibility for the Bucks charitable foundation. "I'm on an even, level playing field to be able to influence other departments, because community relations interacts and influences every single element of the organization.

"I appreciate that our organization values that

to the point that allows me a seat at the table to be able to influence the rest of our leadership team. I don't think that's common at the team level. Often there's a layer or two of levels in between. Community leaders report to HR or report to marketing or report to communications. I serve on the leadership team that helps determine what our overall company strategy is, rather than just my department's strategy. That says this is a priority for us."

Last year, the Minnesota Timberwolves hired local nonprofit executive Jennifer Ridgeway in the newly created role of vice president of social responsibility. Ridgeway, who worked in financial services before moving to nonprofits, was charged with coordinating the community work of the Timberwolves and their franchises in the WNBA, the G League and the NBA2K League, as well as philanthropy through their foundation, all around a unified mission statement and a set of common pillars.

"It's important to have one leader who has their pulse on the players' initiatives, our foundation and also corporate social responsibility," Ridgeway said. "And that that person also is

aware of all the different conversations that are happening across the organization, thinking about how we can support those."

The reorganization and rebranding of community relations to social responsibility is an approach seen increasingly across pro sports teams, following a trend that has caught on across the leagues.

The first league to put corporate social responsibility in an executive's title was the NBA. A decade ago the league promoted the original architect of its NBA Cares program, Kathy Behrens, from senior vice president of community and player programs to executive vice president of social responsibility and player programs. It was another five years before the NFL named its first senior vice president of social responsibility, Anna Isaacson, who was 35 years old when the league elevated her from vice president of community relations and philanthropy in the wake of the release of a video of running back Ray Rice punching his fiancée in a hotel elevator.

MLB named Billy Bean vice president of

social responsibility in 2016 but reorganized a year later, creating a special assistant to the commissioner role for Bean and promoting Melanie LeGrande from director of community affairs to vice president of social responsibility. The NHL included social responsibility in several executive titles going back to 2015, but it too reorganized in 2017 with the hiring of Kim Davis as executive vice president of social impact, growth initiatives and legislative affairs.

The addition of Davis, an African American woman who headed CSR for CEO advisory firm Teneo and before that as a managing director at JPMorgan Chase, was seen as a trumpeting of an increased emphasis on the practice in that sport. Before joining MLB, LeGrande spent three years in CSR at the \$6.5 billion Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Behrens headed the broad-based volunteer mobilization network New York Cares before leading the team that launched NBA Cares in 2005.

Increasingly, pro teams across the leagues have gone outside sports to find leaders to help reorganize and rebrand community relations departments into broader CSR teams.

“The structure of corporate responsibility has now become a business practice,” said Kevin Martinez, ESPN vice president of corporate citizenship, who spent a dozen years in community affairs and then CSR at Eddie Bauer, Starbucks, Home Depot and KPMG before joining the network in 2010. “It’s not just a community outreach or public affairs or corporate giving job. It is a strategic piece of the business. It’s still the ‘Do good, do right’ of the 1990s and 2000s, but it’s much more entrepreneurial, innovative and integrated than ever before.”

The first project that educational platform developer EVERFI worked on with a sports property was a financial literacy program that regional bank BBVA offered for use by elementary school students in a handful of NBA markets, including Dallas, Houston and Phoenix.

When the NBA All-Star Game landed in Houston in 2013, BBVA – a league sponsor – wanted to amplify the program in that market, which at the time was home to its U.S. headquarters. It arranged for Rockets star James Harden to make an appearance at a participating school.

“While it’s cool to have a BBVA banker come into the classroom, it’s even cooler if James Harden shows up,” said Jon Chapman, co-founder and president of global partnerships for EVERFI, which has developed online educational modules on topics ranging from financial literacy to STEM to anti-bullying, branded for presentation by teams, leagues and sponsors. “We saw a really powerful element where you could combine sports with teaching these important skills to schools.

“So from that model, let’s go see who has the



EVERFI's Jon Chapman discovered that leagues had a strong appetite for educational initiatives.

appetite to do this on a leaguewide basis.”

That appetite has proved to be voracious.

EVERFI developed educational modules for the NHL and NHLPA around science, technology, engineering and math skills; for the NFL and the United Way around character development and also African American history; for Major League Baseball focusing on learning loss during summer vacation; and with Major League Soccer around anti-bullying.

Along with designing modules customized for each team in each league and managing the platform, EVERFI uses its reputation as a credible online education provider to ensure participation by local schools.

Its success working with one league quickly led to adoption by the rest, along with the chance to work with individual teams, coaches and athletes, both active and retired.

Earlier this month, the NHL visited EVERFI's Washington, D.C., offices to review results from the fifth year of the program, going over a 55-page impact report that examined performance against benchmarks.

“We went through a number of ways their program had an impact in the community,” Chapman said. “By market. By what kids have learned. By how their attitudes have changed. We can look at all that and more. That sort of robust data is really valuable to CSR departments, not only in sports but everywhere.”

This, those working in the field of corporate social responsibility say, is reflective of an evolution in the way the broader business world views the role of what the sports industry long has termed community relations.

Explaining her approach at the NHL, Davis pointed back to her time in the financial sector, where she grew business by targeting prospects such as women of color, who were typically ignored by investment bankers. She said she sees social responsibility as a means by which the NHL can raise its profile among those who have had little exposure to the sport.

To do that may take a recalibration of the way most in sports have viewed community relations, and especially the way it has been structured at the team level. Community work and messaging can both rely on and have an impact on most aspects of an organization: Brand marketing, sales, community relations, philanthropy, player programs, youth development and human resources. That was a message Davis delivered the first time she presented at an owners meeting.

In 19 months, she has visited 20 clubs. Often, Davis has found them to be siloed. In one case, she found a team that had little minority participation in its youth skating program but did great work with the local boys and girls club through its team foundation. She encouraged the two to work together more closely to introduce skating through the Boys and Girls Club.

“There hasn’t been a lot of cross-pollination across these departments,” Davis said. “I’ve been able to spend time with presidents and heads of marketing and leadership, helping them think about if they don’t have this kind of [senior social responsibility] role, how it could play into their current organizational structure.

“I think we’ve gotten a lot of the clubs to rethink their organizational structures around this work.”

Some see the difference between community relations and corporate social responsibility as largely semantic.

LeGrande views her work at MLB as similar to that which she did with the Baltimore Ravens, where she headed both community relations and the team’s charitable foundation before leaving sports for a few years.

When MLB restructured and rebranded its program, it put social responsibility under its chief communications officer, Pat Courtney, but also created a “working group” that brings together staff from across departments and also ties in diversity and inclusion.

Whatever a league or team might call the function, it is undeniable that the place of social responsibility has evolved in recent years at many sports organizations. There is still the

long-acknowledged assumption that good work in the community acts like a deposit in a savings account, which can be drawn upon when things turn sour on the field. But there's also an increased appetite among sponsors to amplify their work in the community, something that tying to the profile of a pro league or team can offer.

"Sometimes people still will say this function is not revenue generating," LeGrande said. "Some people still feel that way. It's a battle sometimes across teams, leagues and companies to make sure they understand that it is a business imperative and it does impact the bottom line. In the end, a lot of times your brand reputation, your affinity, your fan engagement, has to do with what you do on the ground in the community. And what that does is directly proportional with how you do with your revenues."

When NBA Cares launched in 2005, the league set out to address societal needs through philanthropy, service and legacy, setting goals in each of those areas. It wanted to raise and contribute \$100 million to charities, provide 1 million hours of hands-on service, and create 100 places in which people could live, learn or play, all within its first five years.

While the NBA continues to contribute to charities and teams log considerable community service hours, it was clear from early on that it was place-making that would become a hallmark of NBA Cares.

"We hit those numbers very quickly because our players and teams got behind it," said Todd Jacobson, senior vice president of social responsibility for the NBA. "They saw that creating places was important. We shot through 100 in the first year. And we extended that number. And we pivoted away from money because we realized it was much more important to talk about the action."

While the presentation of a 5-foot-long check still has its place at halftime of games, those most often are preceeded by videos that show players and team executives and staff working in the community.

"People always come back to the money, but the most important aspect was time," Jacobson said. "When you asked our fans, it was that honest contribution, the authenticity of spending time and being involved, that mattered most. You can't replace that piece of it. That interaction of really spending time with folks in the community and making that connection. We tell our players, these moments happen all the time and they mean everything to the people who need them the most."

When Martinez joined ESPN in 2010, the group now known as corporate citizenship was called corporate outreach, housed within communications. Martinez was struck by the



As he grows its CSR efforts, Kevin Martinez expects to be held to the same standards of success as ESPN's other executives.

quiet manner in which the network approached its philanthropy and volunteerism.

"There was this kind of interesting perspective: We're a media company but we don't talk about ourselves," Martinez said. "Well, wait a minute. This is, like, 2010. What do you mean you don't talk about yourself? It's a reputation strategy. How do we get new consumers? How do we tell [millennials] that we have purpose, because it's one of their four major value propositions when they decide to do anything? We need to demonstrate that we are like them and that we are promoting those values."

At the same time, the buy-in across the company on its flagship charity, the V Foundation, was unlike anything Martinez had seen.

"I've never been with a company where I can walk into any office and say, 'Hey, I have a question about the V,' and have absolute attention. Everyone cares about it. It's culturally significant."

The structure now in place at ESPN aims to spread that passion to other endeavors and maximize their effectiveness. Martinez points to integration of his work group into all departments at the network as the key.

When Martinez learns that ESPN's head of distribution is meeting with Comcast, he makes sure that someone from the network touches base with that company's senior vice president of social impact. When the network is in talks with a property on a rights agreement, he looks for ways an alignment of CSR strategies might benefit both sides.

Knowing that all the sports leagues have made equity and inclusion priorities, Martinez looked for ways to tie them more closely to Special Olympics, looping in ESPN's content development group, which created 50 vignettes for air around Special Olympics' 50th anniversary last year. Knowing that Bank of America, Coca-Cola and Microsoft are leading Special Olympics supporters who regularly do business with ESPN, Martinez flagged them as brands that might sign on as sponsors of the vignettes, or at the very least would like to know that they were coming.

"That kind of integration really demands an invitation to the meeting," Martinez said, "which I'm so thankful our company gives us."

Just as marketers measure the effectiveness of a sponsorship or ad campaign, ESPN analyzes results from the programs emanating from its corporate citizenship department. Martinez said he expects to be held to the same standards as his counterparts in marketing, and the only way to assess that is through measurement and tracking. Impact reports like the one ESPN produces annually have become increasingly common across leagues and teams.

There is nothing squishy about the results-based analysis that EVERFI, the NFL and the United Way considered when assessing the impact of the Character Playbook.

Since 2016, 475,285 students in 5,302 schools across 50 states and the District of Columbia have logged 883,458 learning hours through the program, EVERFI reported. Of those, 44% improved in areas such as understanding and managing emotions and resolving conflicts.

More than 65% of students surveyed said the program gave them higher expectations of how to treat someone in a relationship, showed them that they could play a positive role in resolving conflict and gave them the confidence to step in when they saw someone treated disrespectfully. Ninety-five percent of teachers said they would recommend the program to a colleague and 84% said it covered content students would not have otherwise seen.

Coupling usage data with participant surveys, EVERFI was able to deliver the NFL and United Way an impact report that showed defensible results.

"We live in an analytics, metric-driven society," Chapman said. "An operator of a business wouldn't make a decision on impact around a non-community relations issue without looking at metrics and measurement and how this has worked. Much of that same discipline is now being applied to CSR initiatives. So the heads of corporate social responsibility departments are demanding that same rigor. And we want to provide that to them."