

Developing Female Leadership in the Canadian Sport System: Recommendations for High-Level Sport Organizations

Few would disagree with the contention that women's leadership differs from that of men. Difference, of course, does not imply inferiority. Difference can be, and often is, positive. But because there are precious few examples of women leaders within the context of Canadian sport, there is, consequently, little opportunity to put women's leadership to the test. Yes, of course, there are some exemplary role models. But a close examination of the administration, boards of directors, and committees of sport organizations reveals a lingering leadership imbalance, particularly when one factors in the recent outstanding, dominating performances of Canada's women athletes and coaches on that great testing ground, the world stage.

What does women's leadership mean and why does it matter? Most experts on the subject point to female leaders as possessing, more than their male counterparts, strong social and communication skills, a willingness to share information, a strong focus on positive working relationships, strength as team players, and tolerance of diversity. Surely each and every one of these aptitudes would invigorate our sport system. So why are relatively few women positioned in the upper echelons of Canadian sport?

In her timely analysis, [Josée Martel](#) brings to readers of the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) a succinct and measured analysis of the situation, based on interviews with women who chose to place themselves in the direct line of fire and who have survived to make valuable contributions to sport in Canada.

Drawing from her assessment of the barriers to more equitable female leadership, Josée offers sport organizations seven well-reasoned recommendations that, if implemented, would change the face of Canadian sport for the better by drawing into the leadership ranks many more women who are skilled, committed, and able peers of the men currently running the system. In contrast to some of the narrow prescriptions of the past, Josée recognizes the importance of creating an atmosphere in which the sport community as a whole, with women and men working together, fashions a much more inclusive environment for the greater good of those who work so hard to bring honour to themselves and to their country: Canada's athletes and coaches. — Sheila Robertson

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Developing Female Leadership in the Canadian Sport System: Recommendations for High-Level Sport Organizations

by Josée Martel

The history of women's involvement in traditionally male domains is complex and mystifying on many levels. What is clear is that women's opportunities to be leaders in public arenas such as business, economics, academia, politics, and sport administration have been limited as a result of organizational, cultural, and societal barriers.

In a study conducted for my master's thesis, I examined the issue of female under-representation in sport administration by highlighting the career paths and leadership skills of successful female leaders, while considering existing barriers that continue to limit women's opportunities to enter and progress in sport administration. The information provided in this article derives from 10 personal interviews conducted with Canadian high-level female sport leaders who held positions in regional, national, and international sport organizations. All of the respondents had been board members and some had held senior management positions in their national sport organizations. Many had also represented Canada at the international level.

The under-representation of women in sport as athletes, officials, coaches, and administrators has been extensively documented. Even today there remains a clear lack of women at all levels of virtually all sport systems (Acker, 1990; Armstrong, 1978; Chase, 1992; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1995; MacIntosh and Whitson, 1990; McKay, 1997, Rintala and Bischoff, 1994, 1996). Although women have made huge strides in terms of their athletic participation and have in many cases achieved equality in numbers to their male counterparts, Rintala and Bischoff (1997) remind us that "while women may participate as athletes, far fewer women participate in the leadership positions of sport, positions which exert control over women's sporting experiences" (p. 2).

Barriers identified in the study

The narratives provided by the female respondents in my study highlighted a number of barriers that the women had either observed or personally experienced in their career paths and leadership experiences. In particular, barriers were identified at four levels: individual, organizational, relational, and societal. Although not every participant discussed each of the barriers, all of them recognized that issues existed at each of these levels. The examples presented derive from the female respondents' experiences in Canadian sport administration.

1. Individual level

First, barriers categorized at the individual level were associated with the female leaders' personal characteristics, competencies, and circumstances. Half of the female participants in the study believed that there was a distinct lack of organizational acknowledgment of barriers that affected the entry and progression of women in sport leadership and that without recognition of these issues, it was very unlikely that measures would be developed and implemented to correct them. In addition, three respondents pointed to individual circumstances and their influence on a person's ability to devote both the time and resources to sport administration, particularly in volunteer-based organizations:

There are volunteers out there who are willing to give up their vacation pay ... or miss a day of pay. I mean, it costs you to be a volunteer. It costs you big time ... you get your expenses paid if I remember to send in my receipts ... so it can cost thousands of dollars a year to volunteer. And that's not even just around time (Participant 004).

This factor, not surprisingly, seemed to have a greater impact on women who had or wanted to have children, because their personal responsibilities were perceived to conflict with the heavy demands of sport leadership. It is therefore essential that sport leaders understand both the financial and personal

costs of sport administration and recognize how these impede women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

2. Organizational level

At the organizational level, all of the female respondents pointed to various aspects of the structure and culture of sport organizations as hindering women's opportunities to enter administration and progress to leadership positions. With regard to the structural functioning of the organization, elements relating to administrative procedures such as the length of service for members or the ways in which members come into governance structures were highlighted as barriers to women's full participation in high-level sport leadership. Specifically, if some individuals held their membership for lengthy periods, there were fewer positions in which women could gain representation. This situation is intensified when one looks at senior management and leadership positions within high-level national and international sport organizations. Since these issues were identified by all of the respondents, it is evident that they were significant.

3. Relational level

Barriers noted at the relational level were typically identified in the professional relationships between individual members in sport organizations. Notably, three respondents described leadership situations in which they had encountered strong resistance on the part of male leaders. In addition, six respondents reported that female leaders' work was often more highly scrutinized by other administrators, which suggests that women have to work harder than men to ensure that their ideas and opinions are respected in the boardroom. To this end, one woman related a significant experience:

It was my very first meeting so you can imagine, I was hardly over the top in confidence and plus you're surrounded by 21 men, not knowing anyone. I had a couple of points that I had to bring up ... I presented them as best I could ... I wasn't a babe in woods when it came to sitting around the boardroom. Anyway, during one of the breaks, I was pulled over by, I'm sure a well-meaning gentleman ... who told me that ... [I] really have to watch [my] tone [because] people might be [put] off. They may agree with [me], but ... [he told me that] I needed to take a much softer approach and not be so, I guess, aggressive. I was absolutely ... shocked ... I mean, I could see myself as aggressive or assertive at much, much later meetings, but this is ... a stereotype (Participant 010).

Moreover, the study revealed that men's strong social networks continue to act as a barrier to women's entry to and progress in sport administration. These "old boys' clubs" not only reproduce the masculine culture in the organizations but also have an influence throughout the sport system, which makes it easier for men within the network to gain access to leadership positions.

4. Societal level

At the societal level, stereotypes about female leaders and their skills and styles continue to constrain women's abilities to succeed into high-level leadership positions. Additionally, general societal trends as they relate to employment and income are reflected in the conditions of women working in sport administration, inasmuch as these women are usually located in the lowest echelons of work, status, and salary. Because the traditional volunteer-based governance model has shifted to a professionalized and commercialized administration, potential members are now being recruited from the political and business arenas, where, again, men dominate leadership positions. In this way, men are more likely to possess the qualifications, leadership skills, and social networks now required to gain sport administration posts. This finding clearly reflects many other studies on women in sport leadership (Cameron, 1996; MacIntosh and Whitson, 1990; Pfister et al., 2005) that have assessed the influence of the gendered labour market on women's opportunities to participate in high-level sport leadership. In addition, this finding also reflects the gendered labour market on an international scale. For example, a report from the United Nations pointed out that "Because of education and employment trends, it is suggested optimistically that the pool from which the next generation of managers is drawn will contain as many women as men. However, this will effectively lead to a greater access to top levels of

management only if the structural barriers that impede the access of women managers (lower and middle levels) to decisive positions can be surmounted” (United Nations, 1995).

For this reason, a global effort must be made if barriers for women in sport administration are to be eliminated.

Recommendations

Here I provide some modest recommendations for sport organizations and their leaders in hope that some could be implemented and result in an increase in women entering and progressing in sport leadership positions. Without a doubt, effective measures are needed to eradicate the barriers still affecting women in sport administration and thus encourage and promote their full participation in sport leadership at every level. These recommendations have been devised to help committees and boards to recognize the importance of having women involved in the decision-making process and to demonstrate how this can be achieved.

1. Recruiting female leaders to sport organizations

First, it is fundamental that the sport system continue to encourage the lifelong participation of girls and women in sport, because the longer women are involved in sport, the likelier they are to become involved in its administration. It is essential to actively recruit women for participation as well as for leadership in sport. This recruitment process should target women at a young age, particularly at the local and regional levels, involving them in administrative tasks in a volunteer capacity. In this way, they acquire the skills and experience needed to gain access to leadership positions in high-level sport organizations. In addition, this “new blood” in the organization can provide a fresh perspective and ensure that organizations recognize and address current issues facing sport.

My study found that women became involved in sport leadership in different ways from men. Therefore, it is imperative that sport organizations implement new and innovative ways of recruiting women into sport administration. For example, many of the female sport administrators I interviewed were former athletes. Recruitment strategies should continue to focus on female athletes, but could be expanded to recruit women from business and politics as well as educational settings such as colleges and universities where a number of potentially qualified and influential women might be found who are interested in serving in sport administration.

Moreover, organizational working groups such as the nominating committee need to ensure that women are being tapped for various leadership positions and, in this way, guarantee that some of these female leaders will be elected. One respondent suggested that female leaders be nominated in various categories so that they enter the organization in different capacities, which will ultimately increase their overall presence. This can be done by generating a list of qualified women to serve at the regional, national, and international levels. In this way, nominating committees would be less likely to overlook experienced female administrators when presenting a list of potential candidates for election or selection. As a result, more female candidates would be up for nomination, which could potentially increase their access to leadership roles within sport organizations. Finally, senior members in the organization need to continue encouraging and promoting female members to leadership positions. It is anticipated that an increase in senior female sport administrators would be a catalyst for an increase in female leaders throughout the organization.

2. Advancing female administrators into higher-level leadership positions

Once women have reached a leadership position, it is important that they be provided with a number of leadership opportunities on a wide range of projects, programs, and committees within the organization. When female administrators take on leadership opportunities and successfully demonstrate their skills, they become more visible within the organization. This is crucial if they are to progress into the top leadership positions.

To this end, female leaders should be encouraged to attend sporting events, organizational meetings, conferences, seminars, and workshops to gain experience and build social networks. Where they can, sport organizations should make provisions to provide financial assistance—for daycare, travel, and registration fees, for example—for female members to attend meetings, conferences, and other networking events. More importantly, the organization should collaborate with past and present female leaders to promote sport administration as a viable option for women. This includes the creation of various mentoring programs for women, encouraging them to enter sport administration and progress into high-level sport leadership positions. In addition, sport organizations need to transition their leaders just as they do their athletes, given that retired leaders are a great source of knowledge. Their expertise can be a vital tool for up-and-coming female sport administrators.

3. Implementing quotas or mandated equality

Although the debate about the implementation of quotas or affirmative action policies continues, with many organizations voting against such measures, it is suggested that mandating some sort of equality at the governance level is important to ensure that minority groups are represented at the boardroom table.

My study revealed that there continues to be a large degree of organizational resistance to the use of quotas or “mandated equality”. It seems that such measures are perceived to constrain the quality of membership by legislating the gender, age, race, or ethnicity of the individual filling the position. In essence, quotas are believed to conflict with the notion that the best person for the job should fill the position, regardless of gender. On the other hand, a quota system allows an organization to make a clear affirmation about the under-representation of women in sport administration and thus eradicate the idea that there will be more female sport leaders in due time, an idea that has clearly not been borne out over the past 25 years.

In describing her organization’s experience of mandating equality, one respondent said,

The resistance was not on the part of the women for equality; it was on the part of the men. ... There was a feeling that ... mandating 50/50 perhaps did not allow for the best people and that an organization is best served by the best people. There was another group of us ... who said, “Yes, but if we don’t start out this way, we will never likely get to that point” (Participant 006).

For this reason, sport governing bodies need to recognize the immediate impact that such policies can have. The organization could set aside two executive positions that are to be filled by appointed, elected, or nominated women who could remain there for a specified term, at which time they would be re-elected or replaced. Similarly, sport organizations could mandate equality on their boards by specifying, for example, five male and five female members. The top leadership positions such as president and vice-president could then be elected or appointed from this board, regardless of gender. For those sport organizations sending delegates to larger boards, it could be mandated that there be one delegate from each gender representing the organization.

It is important that these kinds of initiatives be subject to review every few years to ensure that the results are positive and the methods effective. In this way, quotas or affirmative action policies will not be perceived as permanent and irreversible and thus there may be less resistance to their implementation. For organizations that have equality policies, it is essential that they be associated with compliance strategies and that there be some system in place to monitor their effectiveness.

4. Developing organizational support systems and social networks

Another identified issue was the fact that women often leave sport administration when starting a family. Thus, organizations lose many valuable female members. Where possible, sport organizations should allow flexible work schedules and provide assistance to women who want to continue serving as members in a limited capacity. For example, if women need to work from home, then the organization could provide financial assistance to make that possible by, for example, paying her Internet and telephone charges. Perhaps two people could do the job of one until the new mother is ready to return

full time. Such measures also give potential female administrators in lower socio-economic classes the opportunity to serve in the organization and thus provide them with an important and often under-represented perspective. For instance, administrators from lower socio-economic classes could provide insight into issues of class and the sport system, thus creating avenues to making sport more accessible to all members of the community.

5. Leadership training for all sport leaders

Although sport organizations must continue the work they are doing, they could benefit from providing leadership training to all of their members. In this way, every administrator could know what to bring to and expect from the boardroom table without singling out women in particular and “fixing” them for leadership. In addition, each organization should develop organizational handbooks or manuals that describe its organizational structure, policies, and leadership strategies as well as specific administrative information on a number of topics important to training and advancing members through the organization. Further, sport organizations could collaborate with educational institutions to develop leadership training programs for schools and universities. This could provide students with opportunities to become involved in sport leadership.

It is important to keep in mind what Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995) believe about women’s individual deficiencies as a barrier to their involvement in high-level sport administration: “hard work and individual self-improvement, though necessary for success, cannot independently enable most women to overcome most of the male-preferencing obstacles present in today’s workplaces” (p. 57).

6. Shifting the organizational structure and culture to create a supportive environment for female leaders

It is important that the organization review its current policies and question the influence of these policies on organizational membership in general as well as assessing overall administrative functioning. For example, governing bodies should ensure that there are various ways in which members can join their boards and related committees. There needs to be a number of different avenues into the organization so that members can bring different perspectives to a board, which increases the likelihood of overall organizational representation. For example, members are typically nominated and elected to leadership positions in sport administration. However, the use of appointed positions on all organizational working groups and in its management can be strategic as it allows the association to fill that position with the appropriate person.

All administrators, but particularly female leaders, are encouraged to question the organizational processes and approaches and to critically analyze the traditions and culture that persist in sport administration. Where needed, members should be encouraged to discuss these issues or approaches and develop a committee to assess, debate, recommend, and take the necessary steps to initiate change. By ensuring that female leaders are accepted and comfortable within the organization, it is more likely that they will remain long enough to advance into top leadership roles.

7. Recognizing female leaders and the Women and Sport movement

It is important that sport organizations continue to publicly recognize women who are making a significant contribution to the organization in particular and sport in general. It is equally important to acknowledge the work of Canadian organizations in promoting the growth of women in sport and building the stepping stones for improving the status of women in high-level sport leadership. The development of new programs and awards, in addition to a public focus on female leaders’ successes, will not only highlight the work that is being done by women but may entice more of them to become involved in sport administration.

Conclusion

I believe that it is most important to seek the active support of male sport leaders in the effort to change the gender imbalance in sport administration. If men are more aware of and have a better understanding of the issues facing female sport leaders, they may be less resistant to initiatives related

to women and sport issues. Equally important, men are also a source of great knowledge and should be engaged as they could provide valuable insight and a unique perspective to these issues.

When excellent programs or initiatives are implemented and present positive results, sport organizations need to encourage inter-organizational collaboration and establish best practices for the entire sport system. In this way, change is not isolated but is enacted at all levels. This unifies the system and coordinates all of the resources available. Although there is still a long road ahead, we cannot underestimate the positive impact that policies and programs can have on increasing female representation in high-level sport leadership.

About the author



Josée Martel has a bachelor's degree in health and physical education from Laurentian University as well as a master of arts degree in human kinetics from the University of British Columbia. Her areas of research address the under-representation of women in sport administration as reflected by their roles and experiences within the Canadian sport system. She has recently assumed a position at Tennis Canada and currently resides in Toronto. Josée intends to pursue her studies at the PhD level.

References available upon request.