

Module 3. Social Media and Organizational Governance

Imagine the following scenario:

Eduardo Perez is the General Manager for a professional football club. Eduardo has recently been promoted from the club's Finance Department, and on this particular day, as he walks into the office, he notices his cell phone is buzzing frequently. As he takes out his phone and opens his text messaging application, he sees a message from Felisa Garcia, the team's Public Relations Director. She informs him that one of the team's star players took a nude photo of himself and thought he was sending it via private message on Snapchat, but it ended up being sent to the wrong person, and now the image has been captured and spread across the Internet. Felisa also informs Eduardo that the local media are already criticizing the player and that she is overwhelmed with requests for comment from the club. Felisa asks Eduardo how the club should respond. Eduardo tells her to meet him in his office immediately and they will discuss a response.

As soon as Eduardo walks into his office, his phone buzzes again. Once he picks it up, he notices that one of the team's assistant coaches is calling. Eduardo is notified that on the last road trip, two of the athletes were out at a local bar and ended up taking some women back to their hotel. One of the players apparently recorded some of the activities in the hotel room and sent it to the other player's wife. The assistant coach tells Eduardo that the player's wife is very upset and both players have been exchanging hostile text messages. The assistant is worried about an altercation happening and asks Eduardo to call the agents for both players and see if a solution can be reached.

Eduardo makes a note to call the agents and arrange a meeting after he meets with Felisa. Eduardo recalls reading an article online about social media policies used by sport organizations, and he makes a note to ask his assistant to look more into this topic and to research vendors who can provide training on social media for the players as well as team employees.

When Felisa enters Eduardo's office, he remembers that when he worked in Finance, he didn't have to deal with social media, just numbers, which were much more predictable!

Eduardo's scenario above reflects just some of the ways that social media has had a profound effect on sport organizations. While previous modules have touched on the strategic application of social media for sport organizations, and the importance of understanding its audience, using social media to reach those audiences and obtain organizational goals, social media can also become a complicated issue for sport organizations. In a previous module, the potential of social media as a public relations tool was addressed, and this module goes into more detail on how social media used by internal

stakeholders such as athletes, team employees, and even family members can affect sport organizations. Additionally, sport organizations, like most other organizations, are looking for ways to minimize risk from social media, and integrating organizational guidelines, policies, and training are some of the ways sport organizations are working to manage risk with those inside the organization **using social media.**

Unit 3.1 Understanding Internal Stakeholders and Social Media

As we have discussed, social media has exploded across society, and many people are active on multiple social media platforms, accessing these platforms from their mobile devices. Many celebrities, including athletes, have been early adopters of social media, and consequently, sport organizations have often been in a position of trying to play *catch-up*. That is, not only do sport organizations have to stay on top of social media trends for strategic use by the organization, but they also must be aware of how people within the organization (such as athletes and high-profile team employees who have a very visible presence on social media) are using these platforms. Indeed, many sport reporters now use content posted on social media as a *source*, and given the ease for content to be posted, sport organizations cannot control or prevent issues from happening as they could with traditional forms of media.

As a result, the risk for negative public relations issues has intensified, and sport organizations must not only be concerned about social media use by athletes, but also their family members, friends, and others in the athlete's network, along with the potential for team employees, such as coaches, to cause issues. Consequently, sport organizations have taken a variety of approaches to try to reduce the risk emanating from social media, and this module will discuss some of those strategies. To be certain, the latitude to which an organization can go depends on many factors, including the existence of athletes' unions, no, organizational culture, and risk-tolerance.

3.1.1 Social Media Use by Athletes

Athletes have arguably been impacted more significantly by social media than any other sport stakeholder. Athletes have now the ability to actively produce media content, which in ways, puts them in competition with sport reporters, as athletes can break their own stories, and fans no longer need the press to filter the relationship between themselves and athletes. In addition, athletes can now share more of their identity and personality and circumvent the organization in sharing information. Perhaps most importantly, while fans have very limited access to athletes in physical contexts, such as stadiums, via social media, fans have nearly unprecedented access to athletes, which, as discussed in previous modules, has created both positive and negative outcomes. A summary of the benefits and drawbacks are consolidated in the list below:

ATHLETES' SOCIAL MEDIA USE: BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS

Benefits:

- It makes athletes appear more approachable and likeable.
- It allows athletes the ability to interact and engage fans.

- It enables athletes to express more of their identity (e.g., popular culture preferences, favorite foods.)
- It provides an opportunity for corporate sponsorship.
- It offers platform for athletes to share first-person view of their experiences.
- It offers space for athletes to share their community and charitable work.
- It offers opportunity for athletes to promote social justice and advocacy

Drawbacks:

- It gives the potential to athletes to divulge confidential information.
- It opens athletes up for criticism and hateful messages from fans and the public.
- It has the potential of capturing and disseminating the athletes' private behavior.
- It may become a distraction.
- It gives athletes the potential to post content, which can create public relations issues.
- It has the potential of functioning as a pushback from fans and/or sponsors due to athletes' social justice efforts.

Additionally, the athletes who play for a sport organization are often the most visible public face of the organization, and as such, their social media activity is likely to be intensely followed by fans, the community, and the sport media. Thus, it is important that sport organizations understand what the athletes employed by their organization are doing on social media and assess both the potential for risk and the way those athletes who are doing good things on social media can have their content integrated into the organization's social media strategy. Whether the athlete is engaging in positive or problematic social media use, it is important to remember that efforts to shape an athlete's social media presence should be collaborative.

For professional athletes who have paid representation, working with agents and/or the athlete's public relations team may be advisable. For amateur athletes or professional athletes who do not have representation, it may be advisable to have the club's media or public relations staff work with the athletes. It is also important to ensure that the organization communicates its athletes about social media, that athletes know where the organization stands on social media, and that the organization is invested in making social media a harmonious, rather than contentious endeavor.

Certainly, every organization will have a different set of circumstances with its athletes. Some will have athletes with an audience of millions, while others may have athletes with an audience in the hundreds or thousands, and some organizations may have stronger media intensity than others. Regardless of the circumstances, it is crucial to understand what a sport organization's athletes are doing on social media, and to assess the probability of risk. To help you better understand this process, using the table below, select three athletes who are affiliated with your organization and investigate their content on two social media platforms over the past 30 days. As you do so, make notes of what content is

commendable, what content could be an asset to the organization’s social media strategy, and what content might potentially cause negative outcomes:

Table 1. Athlete Social Media Analysis

Athlete Social Media Analysis		
Social Media Platform		
Athlete #1		
Athlete #2		
Athlete #3		

How athletes are using social media is an important topic for sport organizations to understand and address. Nevertheless, athletes are not the only internal stakeholders who an organization needs to be concerned with. Coaches have increasingly become visible social media users as well.

3.1.2 Social Media Use by Coaches

Just as athletes are very visible representatives of the organization, so are coaches. In fact, coaches can often rival athletes in terms of public visibility and commercial endorsements, particularly at the amateur level, where a coach tends to be a more permanent presence than the players. In addition, although being later adopters than athletes, coaches have started to realize that social media can be a valuable branding tool, a way to connect with their players, and for coaches at the amateur level, an asset in player recruiting. It is important that coaches make sure they understand the technical nuances of each social media platform they use. For instance, there have been several coaches who have sent messages on Twitter, thinking they were using the *Direct Message* function, but instead ended up posting a public message. Accordingly, it is important that sport organizations work with coaches (or their representation who often runs the coach’s social media account) to make sure that there is an understanding of the nuances of each social media platform the coach will be using.

Additionally, just as an organization will need to address boundaries with athletes, so it will need to do with coaches. This is particularly evident when an organization is governed by a legislative body, such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which has rules about when a coach can and cannot use social media to contact recruits. Moreover, coaches should be cautioned on proper boundaries on social media, particularly with private messaging. For instance, there have been several coaches, at the amateur level, who have been arrested for the content they sent via private message on social media, which creates a serious public relations issue for the organization. Thus, while social media can be a great asset for coaches, it also contains risk, and making sure that coaches have the proper training and understanding of social media and that they are aware of boundaries is a vital priority for sport organizations.

Although coaches and athletes are very visible public figures for sport organizations, it is important to be aware of what other organizational employees are doing on social media too. Again, sport fans have an insatiable appetite for information and can use social media to track down a variety of organization employees.

3.1.3 Social Media Use by Team Administrators and Employees

While team employees and administrators may be less of a risk to initiate a public relations issue for the organization, it is important to provide a consistent message about social media across the organization. Consider that many organizational employees have access to confidential information (e.g., that an organization is about to trade a player or fire a coach), and what might be an innocent comment on a personal social media platform can instantly create a media firestorm, prompt consternation amongst the fans and put the organization in a reactionary position. Whereas later in the module we will cover social media policies and guidelines for organizational employees, it is important that sport organizations assess which employees have access to confidential or sensitive information and stress the importance of keeping that information private and not divulging it on social media.

To help you better understand this concept, use the following table to assess two employee job titles which might be at risk for revealing confidential information and assess the kinds of private information that could be released:

Table 2. Social Media Risk Assessment

Social Media Risk Assessment	
Job Position	Risks

While it is important for organizations to be aware of how people inside the organization are using social media, this is not the end of the problem. In fact, given the public nature of social media, and the plethora of people seeking information about sport organizations, the family members and relatives of athletes, and other team employees can also create issues for a sports organization on social media.

3.1.4 Social Media Use by Family Members and Relatives

Although organizations have a good deal of influence with team employees, even athletes, when family members and relatives of athletes and team employees enter the picture, the equation becomes more complicated. For instance, through a social media policy, an organization can influence how an employee uses social media, but there is little an

organization can do to curtail social media use by family members and relatives of athletes and team employees. While the reach of the organization is somewhat limited with this stakeholder group, it is still important to be aware of potential risk. Thus, just as an organization might assess which athletes and team employees may put the organization at greater risk with social media content, so can an organization make these evaluations with family members and friends. To be certain, this can be a delicate process and one that is better handled with care and transparency. In a situation where an athlete has professional representation, raising concerns about both the way a family member or friend is using social media and the way this behavior might negatively impact the athlete could be raised with the athlete's representation. In other scenarios, a conversation with the athlete may be warranted and may be better undertaken by someone who has a good relationship with the athlete. In any event, when such conversations occur, they should be done with empathy rather than condescension.

Even though the social media content posted by friends and family members can be something that a sport organization has little control over, with athletes and internal team employees, there are more concrete steps that can be taken to manage the risk of social media. However, there are still areas which organizations need to be careful about, such as being perceived as impinging on freedom of speech. The ways in which an organization can manage social media is the subject of the next section.

Unit 3.2 Strategies for Managing Internal Social Media Use

There are several steps that organizations can take in managing internal social media use. In the early days of social media, sport organizations (among other organizations) tended to take a heavy-handed approach in dealing with social media, which included employees or athletes using social media and/or placing employees or athletes under excessive social media monitoring, which was often undisclosed. While there is certainly risk in the ways that internal stakeholders use social media, sport organizations (along with other organizations) have gradually started to relax from these rigid procedures, and instead, take a more collaborative approach, one that still includes policy, and in some cases, monitoring, but which is coupled with education and training.

3.2.1 Establishing Social Media Guidelines

As sport organizations consider how to manage social media use by internal stakeholders, they must also consider what they feel the acceptable boundaries are, keeping in mind that these boundaries might differ for various groups in the organization (e.g., the boundaries for an athlete and the public relations manager may have some variation.) In addition, the language choices are important considerations as well. Will the organization have a *policy*, or will they have *guidelines*? While there is not *one* right way to approach this issue, it is worth noting that calling something a policy versus calling something a guideline has very different connotations. As organizations consider what kind of framework they want for their internal management of social media, some important considerations include the ones listed below:

- **Content Guidelines** – Will employees be given guidance on what kinds of content they should or should not post on social media? For example, athletes may be instructed not to post criticism of coaches and teammates and injury information, whereas administrative employees may be told not to post criticism of their supervisor. Additionally, some organizations may consider adding things like not posting content that contains sexist, homophobic, or racist language or images. As organizations think about guidelines for content, it will be important to consult legal counsel as there may be restrictions on what can be imposed upon unionized employees and other employee groups. It is also important that if social media platforms are going to specifically be addressed, organizations be current with social media technology. For instance, an organizational policy that referenced MySpace but did not discuss Snapchat would appear very outdated to the audience and likely cause them to lose interest and not take this organizational direction seriously.
- **Relationship Guidelines** – Organizations may need to consider guidelines for different internal stakeholders for social media. For instance, should supervisors be connected on social media with people they supervise? As discussed earlier, private messaging

can lead to issues and has led to coaches being arrested; setting boundaries, particularly if coaches oversee athletes who are minors, is an important factor to include here.

- **Reinforcing Organizational Representation** – Organizations may need to begin their guidelines on social media by reinforcing the notion that employees are representatives of the organization, and as such, the organization is often judged by the conduct of its employees. This is particularly evident in sports organizations that have a very large public following, and very large public profiles.
- **Balancing Freedom of Speech** – Legal issue will be touched on later, but organizations may want to address freedom of speech. Organizations do not want to be seen as infringing on freedom of speech, particularly as social media is a forum that people use to express their political views and to advocate for social justice. While it is in the organization's best interest not to prohibit this kind of content, notifying employees that their visibility may lead to hostile reactions and advising them to be mindful of the potential for negative audience reaction may be advisable.
- **Consequences** – It is important that the organization outlines what the consequences for violating the social media policies and/or guidelines are. Of course, the discipline is likely to be different for athletes compared to other team employees, but generally a progressive discipline system works best. Letting employees know what the consequences are helps the organization be transparent with their stance on social media to its internal audiences.

Creating organizational guidelines and/or policies is only part of the process in managing social media. Increasingly, organizations, including sport organizations, have begun investing in social media training and education, which tends to focus on a positive, more collaborative, approach, compared to a restrictive, prohibitive, approach.

3.2.2 Establishing Social Media Training

Sport organizations, along with other organizations, have learned that simply passing out a policy or guidelines on social media is insufficient. Given how quickly social media changes and how widely it is used among the population, organizations have shifted to investing in training and education for their employees. In the context of sport, while internal audiences are still subject to guidelines and policies, training and education has become a tool to show employees and other internal groups the benefits of using social media, and making it a positive, rather than a negative thing. This shift tends to align with accepted theories of social learning. For example, while people can learn appropriate behavior by being restricted, this often leads to resentment and tends to prevent full-scale behavioral change. However, if a person receives positive reinforcement for the desired behavior, they are more likely to engage in that desired behavior.

In the case of social media, most people do not want to be lectured to, and, instead, would rather be shown how social media can benefit them. Thus, while training and education programs should include the organization's guidelines and/or policy, the training should

also be supplemented by positive things that employees and other internal groups can do on social media. How can they use it strategically? How can their social media use be aligned with the organization's strategy for social media? In developing a social media training and education program, there are some important considerations:

- **Who Will Provide the Training?** – Will the training be done by an internal employee? Will it be outsourced to a vendor? There are advantages and disadvantages to each method. For example, using an internal team employee is often more cost-effective, and this person is likely to already have relationships with the audience, and therefore, may be seen as more credible. On the other hand, using an outside vendor may be more time-efficient, as developing and presenting a social media training may not be suitable for a team employee. In addition, an outside vendor may be better received by the audience and, perhaps, be viewed as less partial to the organization.
- **Training Structure** – Organizations need to determine how frequent the social media training will be, how long it will be, and how it will be provided. For example, the organization may decide that doing a training session annually is sufficient, or may elect to train some groups (e.g., athletes) more frequently than other team employees. Besides, it is advisable that training sessions are kept to a short (30-60 minutes is ideal), and the organization will need to decide if the training will be provided in-person or electronically. Whichever route is selected, it is important that the training be engaging and contain a strong duration focus on visual content, rather than lecture-only or text-only presentations.
- **Feedback** – Just as with any training program, it is important that a social media education program is assessed. Asking the audience to assess the training and provide feedback on what they enjoyed and what they found least captivating is helpful in crafting future training sessions. It is important that feedback mechanisms are brief.
- **Adaptation** – As we have discussed in the course, social media is constantly changing and evolving. Thus, it is important that organizations keep current in both their training and guidelines. For example, if an organization was to talk about outdated social media platforms such as MySpace and Xanga in their social media guidelines and training, the audience would likely immediately lose interest, and the organization's credibility would be severely impacted.

Social media guidelines and training are important tools as organizations seek to manage social media. However, to be effective, these tools must also have efficacy. Thus, it is very important that organizations stay current on social media law and ensure that their policies and trainings are compliant.

3.2.3 Managing Legal Issues

Social media technology has proliferated at a rapid pace, and just as organizations are challenged to keep up with its evolution, the legal system is often behind the technology as well. While organizations manage internal social media use, it is crucial that they ensure

their guidelines, policies, and trainings are not illegal! For instance, in some states in the U.S., it is illegal for educational institutions to ask for a student to turn over a social media password. Thus, an Intercollegiate Athletics Department in one of these states would want to ensure that their policies/guidelines did not contain language that required athletes to submit this information. Additionally, these athletic programs would also want to be careful about language that could be considered a violation, such as a policy that required an athlete to accept a coach as a follower.

As noted earlier, freedom of speech is a topic that often comes up when social media is discussed. While every sport organization would want to work with legal counsel to determine applicability in their location, in general, organizations can take action for content posted on social media. In other words, employees are free to post content on social media, but they are not free from the consequences. Again, while laws will vary by location, organizations must also be careful about the extent they discipline or take action, based on an employee's criticism or expression of dissent.

A final area of legality that sport organizations need to be aware of pertains to athletes and other employees being subjected to harassment and threats via social media. While it can be difficult to locate perpetrators, organizations may need to provide resources to athletes and other team employees who are targeted or feel threatened by messages directed at them via social media. Even though tracking down random users can be difficult, that is not the case if this behavior, unfortunately, occurs between team employees. Thus, organizations need to make sure that social media is addressed in their organizational policies and guidelines pertaining to harassment, bullying, and code of conduct.

Social media requires investment. Just as it requires effort and resources to be a strategic tool for organization, so does it require resource allocation to manage its use by internal groups in order to reduce risk and public relations incidents. In other words, social media is something that requires constant attention, and cannot be treated as a static entity.

3.2.4 Staying Current with the Social Media Landscape

Social media technology has quickly proliferated across society and is constantly changing. Accordingly, organizations must stay current with this technology and adapt. For example, a few years ago, Snapchat was a relatively minor social media platform, which was mostly considered to be a tool for teens to send dirty pictures to one another. While that behavior still occurs on the platform, Snapchat has now become a force in social media, and most major organizations, including sport organizations, have a presence on the platform. It is important to note here that in addition to the strategic application of social media, it is also important to keep up on contemporary social media law and changes that might affect how an organization can govern this technology. Certainly, this requires time and effort, but successful organizations make that investment. Apart from news articles, books, research, and other educational materials, social media itself is a great way to stay current on these changes. There are a variety of people who work in social media who use it to discuss what

is happening with it, and thus, simply browsing, say, Twitter can daily be one way to stay current on changes in the realm of social media.

Social media has become a strategic tool for organizations, but the latter have to be as vigilant with its use by internal audiences as they are to reach external audiences. Athletes, coaches, team employees, family members and relatives all carry certain degrees of risk with social media, and it is crucial that organizations assess the potential risk and take steps to mitigate it. Organizations can do this through establishing boundaries and guidelines that govern social media behavior, along with creating meaningful educational programs that present a balanced message on social media to employees and which are legally compliant.

References

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