



# Creating a tennis culture in the national federation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the definition, importance, and components of a very used but commonly misunderstood term, organisational culture, and its application to sport entities such as national tennis federations. In the context of change towards professionalism, commercial orientation, and effective management practices in which these organisations are evolving to, the need for these organisations to generate and sustain the appropriate culture adapted to the challenges of the tennis ecosystem and the needs of their stakeholders is of paramount relevance. The paper reviews the main results obtained by research in this area as applied to sport organisations in general and national tennis federations.

**Key words:** values, management, organisation, national association

**Received:** 13 June 2024

**Accepted:** 19 July 2024

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*"Culture eats strategy for breakfast."*

Attributed to Peter Drucker (Management Guru)

## INTRODUCTION: CULTURE IN A NATIONAL TENNIS FEDERATION CONTEXT

### Definition and components

The culture of an organisation is a construct that, due to its relevance in all contexts, has been defined in many ways. One of the key researchers in this field, Schein (2010) defined organisational culture as: "A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 18).

In the organisational setting, other relevant authors have used a variety of terms to identify this word, such as "climate" or "context" and have indicated that it overlaps with other terms such as strategy. From a general perspective, there is an overall agreement in considering culture a term which is holistic, related to social aspects, historically affected, and difficult to change (Hofstede et al., 1990).

In the sports context, the components of the culture in national sport and tennis federations environments refer to the set of values, beliefs, and standards for acceptable behaviour that its members share (Lussier & Kimball, 2009). Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of culture as applied to a national tennis federation.

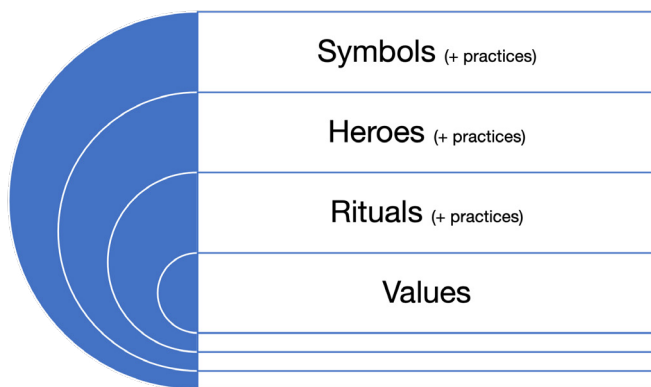
**Table 1**

Main characteristics of culture as applied to a national tennis federation (adapted from Lussier & Kimball, 2009).

Component	Characteristics
<b>Behaviours</b>	Behaviours are actions or manifestations that are visible or heard. They can be divided into: Artifacts: language (written or spoken), dress codes, jargon, and objects. Procedures: traditions, routines, rituals, stories, narratives, heroes, and myths
<b>Values and beliefs</b>	Values are principles related on how people must behave. They identify what the organisation should do to achieve success. Beliefs are principles that influence behaviours and affect decision-making processes. Both are observed indirectly, through behaviours and decisions. They are usually included in the strategy, the ideals, the mission statement, the philosophy, and the goals of the federation.
<b>Assumptions</b>	Assumptions are basic, unconscious, and inner beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that govern the culture of the organisation. They are taken for granted, central to the functioning and operation of the federation due to their stability and due to this, considerably difficult to change.

All three components need to be strong, clear, coherent, and aligned to provide for the best organisational culture possible. If this is achieved, the culture will generate stability and certainty to the organisation by facilitating clarification, homogeneity, and a common vision. As summarised by Henriksen et al. (2010a) the culture of a sport organisation, such as a national tennis federation, integrates the key basic assumptions into a cultural paradigm which assists in guiding the socialisation process of new members, provides stability to the entity, and helps in the adaptation process of the organization to the uncertain and constantly changing context of the sport ecosystem.

Some authors have also identified manifestations of culture, which are included in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Manifestations of culture (adapted from Hofstede et al., 1990).

Symbols are expressions, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry cultural meaning. Heroes are individuals with highly prized characteristics, serving as models for behaviour. Rituals are collective activities, technically superfluous but socially essential, carried out for their own sake. These three elements can be grouped as practices, which are conventions, traditions, or usages.

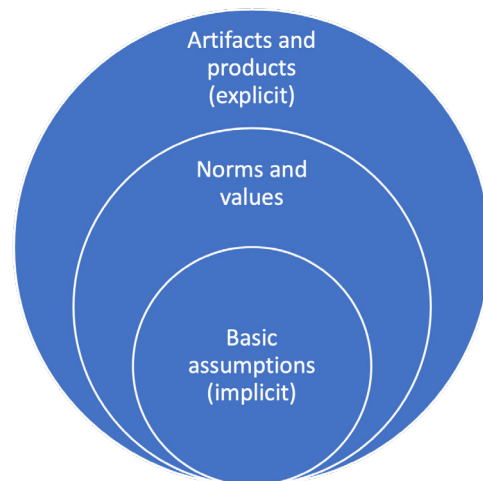
The core of an organizational culture is formed by shared values, which are broad, nonspecific feelings of good and evil, beauty and ugly, normal, and abnormal, rational, and irrational, often unconscious, and rarely discussable (Hofstede et al., 1990).

Decision making in federations is also considered a crucial component of culture. In this context, Cruickshank & Collins (2012) conceived culture in sport organisations such as federations as day-to-day decisions based on management ideals and athletes' beliefs.

The explicit and implicit components of culture have also been identified and are depicted in Figure 2.

### Importance and characteristics

Why is organisational culture important in the sports context? Do national tennis federations need a culture? Organisational culture is a very relevant and studied term in business, management, and research. Girginov (2022, p. 86) stated that "A search on 'organisational culture' in the Web of Science data base returned 19,096 articles including 1,501 published in 2020 alone".



**Figure 2.** The culture onion model (adapted from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2020).

Culture is important due to its functions. It provides order, stabilisation, orientation, and meaning to an organisation. Furthermore, it helps reducing complexity, facilitates adaptability, internal coordination, as well as motivation and identification of stakeholders. According to McGannon and Smith (2015) the importance of the culture in sport organisations such as national federations is "because culture shapes how we think, feel, and behave; we cannot step outside culture, thus to ignore it would be to miss a key matter that shapes people's self-identities and lives" (p.79).

Adopting the right culture by sport organisations does work since the values, attitudes, and goals that make up a team or an organisation's culture can directly influence their functioning and performance (SIRC & Own the Podium, 2021). Therefore, having a strong culture is a salient characteristic of organisations such as national federations that achieve success in their operations (Lussier & Kimball, 2009). Identifying, and understanding the culture of these organisations is an essential step to grasp their functioning and how things should be done, when evaluating their performance (Delobbe et al., 2000).

The management of the culture of an organisation should be considered as a continuous process which has no start or finish, and that includes practices and products that provide meaning and value to a given context or organisation. It continuously develops and articulates through human actions and interactions that characterise the development of the organisation (Skille & Chroni, 2018).

Organisational cultures can also be characterised as strong or weak according to their implementation. In strong cultures, stakeholders are united, embrace assumptions and display behaviours accordingly so that cooperation, communication, and performance flow. Conversely, in weak cultures, these values and beliefs are constantly fought, and discomfort is felt and noticed in the behaviours (Lussier & Kimball, 2009).

### Culture challenges and changes

The complexity of this term has also generated considerable debate (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019). Some scholars have already commented on 'the fall of organisational culture' and labelled the topic 'intellectually dead' (Alvesson et al., 2017,

p.105), in favour of concepts such as organisational identity, commitment, change, and sense-making. Schein (2015) has reflected on the uses and misuses of the term as well as on the complexity of the construct. In the sport context, the generation of destructive organisational cultures has also been studied (Feddersen, et al. 2020).

In fact, it has been noted that the intrinsically elements of a leisure-based culture and amateur and non-profit orientations that have defined the role of national sport federations for years have impeded the adoption of components such as effectiveness and efficiency as crucial aspects of the practice of sports management and administration. Furthermore, national sport federations have shown to exhibit contradictions and tensions “between professional staff and volunteers, support for elite athletes versus promoting mass participatory programs, the need for both government support and private funding, and the contradictions between non-profit and commercial cultures” (Shilbury & Moore, 2006, p.16).

The constant evolving ecosystem requires organisational cultures to continuously adapt and embrace change. They should favour evolution, questioning and progress to avoid stagnation. Effective culture changes should be developed by people to meet the requirements of the new times, and satisfy their customer needs (Lussier & Kimball, 2009).

**Culture, leadership, and people**

Research in sport agrees that managers and directors play a key role in shaping their organisation cultures (Lussier & Kimball, 2009). In many cases, their belief and faith in the organisation, elevates them to the position of legends and heroes for their colleagues and the rest of stakeholders. Their acts and personalities become part of the cultural narrative of the organisation which helps to endure their memory and foster the organisation’s culture.

In this context related to people management, experts such as Evered & Selman (1989) emphasised the relevance of the role of the organisation leaders and advocated for a shift from a management culture based on the aim of controlling others to a management culture based on coaching principles and, thus, focused on the goal of empowering people, which is what defines the role of tennis coaches as leaders.

People grow the culture. Therefore, when hiring people, organisations should ensure that the newcomers fit with their existing culture, understand their identity and personality, and bonding mechanisms. Kilian & Schaefer (2020) when talking about attributes of people (leaders and members) that fit with a given organisational culture indicate that individuals

should be relational, collective, intentional, exemplary, and consistent.

**RESEARCH ON CULTURE IN SPORT ORGANISATIONS**

The culture of sport organisations has attracted considerable attention from researchers. Themes such as diversity, staff satisfaction, organisation effectiveness, change, leadership, and sports policy among others have been studied in the literature. As per the typology or organisations, teams, and clubs (professional and high-performance) as opposed to federations, associations or committees have received more attention from researchers.

Specifically, as it refers to culture and sport management, Girginov (2010) suggested that sport management should be understood as a specific cultural system of meaning and practice. He indicated that both culture and sport “both strive to create order and to avoid uncertainty... and sport managers’ beliefs, values and assumptions broadly constitute their ‘ethos’, which is often interpreted as national culture or ‘collective programming of the mind” (p. 398).

In their review of research on organisational culture in sport Maitland et al. (2014) emphasised the different methods and paradigms used to study culture in sport and the wide range of topics explored. They suggested the importance of including players, coaches and athletes in the studies as well as the need to considering conflict and ambiguity as crucial factors to understand this phenomenon.

**Leadership and professionalisation**

As it relates to leadership, in a seminal study, Weese (1996) found a positive correlation between culture strength and organisational effectiveness, thereby producing some preliminary insights into the linkage between the concepts of leadership, culture, and organisational effectiveness.

The relationships between organisational culture and transformational leadership in college sport were studied by Scott (1997), who concluded that a strong positive culture in a corporate organisation, established through visions, collaboration, and communication, generally results in overall success.

The interaction of leadership and organisational culture transformation in professional sport teams was analysed by Frontiera (2010) who developed an initial model that could guide the process organisational culture change in professional sport as shown in Figure 3.

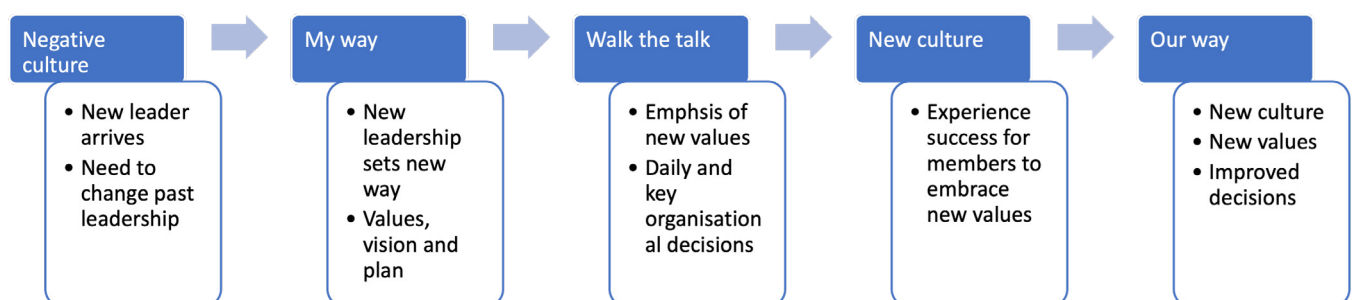


Figure 3. Change process in the culture of sport organisations (adapted from Frontiera, 2010).

Organisational culture and leadership were found as one of the aspects that either trigger or hinder the professionalisation process of International Federations. However, it was also acknowledged that organisational culture is an issue that is rarely discussed (Clausen et al., 2018).

In a cricket national association, Thomas et al. (2019) explored the possibility of cultural change through the impact of increasing paid staff via the implementation of zonal coordinators into the national cricket structure. They concluded that a strong organizational culture is the crux of any successful entity and failure to address issues or keep up with the demands of needed change will inevitably lead to failure.

Hall et al. (2022) explored the transition from an amateur to professional culture in a rugby national programme. They found some key elements to this process which included: an amateur environment that required change (amateur behaviours and lack of quality personnel, lack of vision, and lack of professional facilities); the organisation's professional culture building blocks (establishing a vision, educate and demonstrate what professionalism look like, well-being, holistic development, evidencing and positively reinforcing change); a leadership strategy to manage key stakeholders (transactional approach, external support, etc.) and managing on-going challenges in the organisation's professional culture (performance pressure, lack of competition, management of troublesome individuals).

### Cultural diversity and variation

The management and impact of cultural diversity in sport organisations was studied by Doherty & Chelladurai (1999). They understood organizational culture or "how things are done around here", as a continuum of valuing similarity and diversity. Results advocated the use of an organizational culture based around the benefits of diversity (innovation, creativity, social responsibility, etc.) which are specially needed in complex scenarios.

The cultural profiles of Australian sport organizations were analysed by Colyer (2000). The profiles were compared with the views of the members on their respective organizations with results showing tensions between volunteers and employees that suggest the existence of subcultures.

The cultures of national sport governing bodies have been found not to be the same (Slack & Parent, 2006) since each one of them will be influenced by factors such as: the culture of the sport, the characteristics of the stakeholders, the history, background, and success of the organisation, as well as its goals. This is the reason why when changing the culture of a sport organisation is crucial to take the views of all involved, use performance indicators, and reflect on how the organisation has dealt with challenges (Wagstaff & Burton-Wyle, 2018).

### Effectiveness and satisfaction

The organisational effectiveness of national Olympic sporting organisations (NOSOs) and its relationships with the culture was studied by Shilbury & Moore (2006) who identified productivity and planning as some of the critical determinants of effectiveness in these organisations.

A positive and significant relationship between sport offices organizational culture and effectiveness, as well as entrepreneurship was found in a study by Seifari & Amoozadeh (2014). They concluded that effectiveness in sport organizations would be at its maximum when a teamwork culture, the support for initiative and creativity, and a flexible structure encourage employees to innovate.

Organisational culture and job satisfaction in professional baseball clubs was analysed by Choi et al. (2008) who a market culture in these organisations. However, they identified a clan culture that had a significant influence on overall employee job satisfaction and satisfaction with co-workers, supervision, and personal growth.

### Change

Slack & Parent (2006) indicated that an analysis of organizational culture might provide deep insights into sport management by helping managers develop and change various characteristics of their organisations and that "a focus on organizational culture provides a different approach to understanding patterns of action in sport organizations" (p. 271).

The need for expertise in culture change was identified by Fletcher & Arnold (2011) as one of the crucial elements when optimizing culture for elite teams. These authors acknowledged the role of sport psychologists in this process and the need to develop ecologically valid and practically meaningful knowledge, much in the same line as Cruickshank & Collins (2012) did regarding the role of these experts in reinforcing appropriate values and beliefs in their organisations. In a follow up paper, Cruickshank et al. (2014) also argued that successful culture change in an Olympic setting required support from the CEO, coaching staff, athletes, support staff and media.

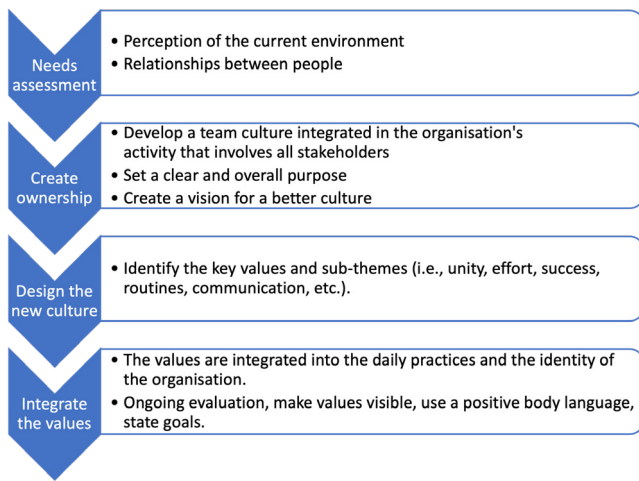
In terms of change and adaptation, Ruoranen (2018) discussed how international competition and expectations from various stakeholders have led national federations to adapt their structures, activities, staff, and even organizational culture, resulting in profound organizational changes.

### Success and learning

Successful talent development is one of the key roles of national federations. In this context, organisational culture was identified in several studies by Henriksen et al., in sailing (2010a), athletics (2010b) and kayaking (2011) as an important component of the holistic talent development environment.

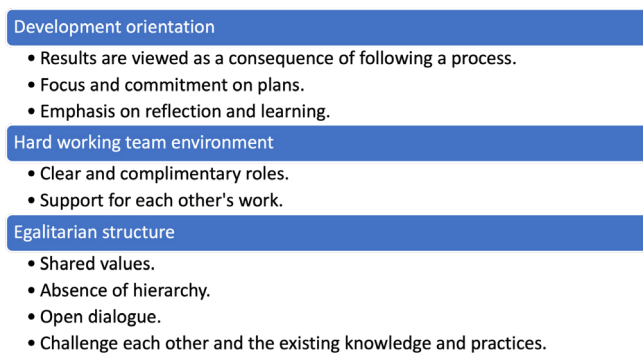
In a golf study, Henriksen et al. (2014) found that a coherent organisational culture is crucial for the generation of a successful environment. These authors considered that culture was characterised by the integration of the key basic assumptions into a cultural paradigm guiding socialisation of new members and providing stability.

The creation, maintenance, and development of a high-performance culture in a sport organisation was studied by Henriksen (2015) who suggested that this was a key function of the sport psychologist. The proposed programme included a series of steps depicted in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Steps for the creation, maintenance, and development of a high-performance culture in a sport organisation (adapted from Henriksen, 2015).

Another study by Skille & Chroni (2018) explored the organisational culture of Norwegian federations and how it worked within the elite system to produce international success. Two attributes that influenced the culture through the work of their sport directors were identified: dedication to the job (sacrifices, sense of privilege, closeness to the sport), and external support (coaches, athletes, and support staff). Three key qualities of the successful culture which were found are summarised in Figure 5.



**Figure 4.** Qualities of successful culture of national federations (adapted from Skille & Chroni, 2018).

The development of a winning rugby team culture and its relationships with leadership was examined by Cole & Martin (2018) who found that the need to formally recognize culture as a crucial component, the establishment and reinforcement of values, and a flat organisation structure assisted in the facilitation of tangible elements of the team management practice.

The effectiveness of elite team managers in delivering an organisational learning culture was explored by Matic & Maksimovic (2020). It was found that individual (i.e., better support, openness, and feedback from each other in the organization), and organisational aspects (availability of information to all, better resource management, initiative recognition, openness to cooperation, and leadership) explained the differences between these managers.

**Culture and sports policy/governance**

As indicated by Geeraert (2019) federations are embedded in a sport governance culture. Due to their key strategic role in the national sport ecosystem, good governance is a must if they want to progress to adopt modern business principles to allow for commercialisation and professionalisation of the sport. Moreover, organisational culture and governance are social constructs.

Sotiriadou et al. (2013) explored sprint canoe in Australia and identified that the sport's culture plays a key role in shaping policy, policy linkages and interrelationships. Similar conclusions were achieved by McLeod et al. (2021). Authors such as Souvenir et al. (2023) have also studied the relevance of organisational culture when comes to tackling fraud and unethical behaviours.

The relationships between good governance and organisational culture were explored by Girginov (2022) who stated that despite its importance, culture is a neglected aspect of sports governance. Furthermore, it was suggested that there are many ways in which culture could be used by national federations to achieve effectiveness since there are different approaches that depend on the assumptions, beliefs, and values of each organisation. From a practical perspective, it is proposed that national federations should adapt, interpret, and operationalise the general principles of good governance to their unique organisational cultures using tools such as dialogue with the various constituencies.

**Culture in national tennis organisations**

Some papers have explored the prevalent culture in tennis organisations and nations. Carlson (1988) conducted a sociological study of tennis in Sweden and suggested that the success of Swedish tennis in 1980's was based around a culture of security, easy access to playing opportunities, multi-sport sampling, late specialisation, team effort, and motivating, engaging, sound and caring coaching practices. In a posterior study on the Swedish tennis culture, Jokiahio (2015) found that coaches believed that the pressure on the kids was deeply rooted in the tennis culture where they felt an increase during the recent years.

A "women's tennis culture" was identified by Thompson (1992) as the ways women's tennis was organized older women's leisure. On another relevant topic, talent identification, detection, selection, and development are some of the key roles of many national federations. Crespo & McInerney (2007) identified culture as one of the key elements that these organisations should consider when implementing a SWOT analysis of the capabilities of the federation in implementing this programme.

Culture was found one of the most relevant themes when analysing the tennis specific policies and factors that influenced international success of a nations by Brouwers et al. (2015). They concluded by acknowledging the challenges that high-performance directors' and sport policy makers' have in nurturing and enhancing the national tennis culture.

They suggested that the tennis culture of a nation is part of the environmental and contextual factors of the tennis ecosystem of a nation. In the case of high-performance, they speak about the importance of an elite tennis culture. Furthermore, apart from the tennis culture, they also added the commercial environment of the game.

Specifically, the nation's tennis culture was considered one of the key environmental factors which included aspects such as: top players performances, existence of tennis role models, tennis success history, and the cultural importance of tennis in the nation as compared to other sports. The tennis culture has also to be aligned with the overall nation's sport culture and the school culture of the country.

Different tennis cultures of several tennis nations were presented in an excellent book edited by Lake (2019) providing a very comprehensive overview of this topic. In another interesting research, Storr & Richards (2022) studied the impact of the tennis community culture at club level to create a safe space for LGBT+ tennis players.

Finally, the impact of the tennis culture on a country such as China was explored by Rick & Li (2023). They understood that tennis is a sport that reflects social class dynamic shifts in the country and can play a critical part in this process. The sport was tied to a newly established middle and upper-middle class experience in the country.

## CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that organisational culture is a key aspect of sport organisations such as national federations. Strong cultures are behind the success of these organisations. They are instrumental to ensure that they progress to meet the needs of the new changing environments. Research in this area has mostly focused on the relevance of culture in high-performance teams. Even though, little is known about the specific characteristics and challenges national federations face when deciding to elaborate, develop or improve an effective organisational culture, some studies have shown that the culture of a national federation can have a considerable impact on the national teams, the coaches, and the sport in general (Skille & Chroni, 2018). Further and more tennis specific research is needed on this area to provide evidence-based, and user-friendly guidance to these organisations.

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