Leadership and Facilitating an Intercollegiate Athletic Department Merger

Lisa A. Kihl
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities

Vicki Schull
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities

Leadership is an important aspect in facilitating an organizational merger. Research indicates that each merger presents a different objective and thus a variety of challenges that require different forms of leadership. Further, the merger type and merger stage influences leadership required to facilitate the merger process. This study examined merger challenges and leadership employed to assist an intercollegiate athletic department merger. Using a single qualitative case study design (i.e., interviews with 57 stakeholders and documents), the findings showed transition leadership challenges included an absence of leadership and stakeholder uncertainty, and the central integration leadership challenge was strategic planning. Transition leadership consisted of creating a transition structure, and a combination of contextual, communicative, supportive, and emotional acknowledgment, while participatory leadership was demonstrated during integration. Implications of these findings suggested that merger facilitation requires recognizing the merger type and its challenges, which informs the leadership required to assist integration.

Introduction

The global economic decline has caused many sport organizations to develop strategies to deal with diminishing budgets and rising costs. To remain competitive and maintain financial health, a growing trend in the sport industry is the merging and/or acquiring of sport organizations (Mahony & Howard, 2004) (e.g., the DEI / Ginn merger in NASCAR, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association / Hockey Canada merger, and the Adidas / Reebok merger). Research shows however that three-quarters of mergers fail (Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Waldman & Javidan, 2009), thus much of the merger literature has focused on sources of these failures, (e.g., human factors, financial shortfalls, cultural incompatibility, poor planning, and ineffective organizational structures) and suggestions for managing the merger process (e.g., Bligh, 2006; Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, Proper, & Jorbin, 2000; Marks & Mirvis, 1998, 2000, 2001; Morosini, Shane, & Singh, 1998). The importance of leadership in facilitating mergers (particularly in the transition and integration merger stages) is an emergent body of research (e.g., Bligh, 2006; Covin, Kolenko, Sightler, & Tudor, 1997; Holt, Self, Thai, & Lo, 2003; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Sitkin & Pablo, 2005; Thatch & Nyman, 2001; Tikhomirov &
Spangler, 2010; Waldman & Javidan, 2009). Much of this literature assumes that change leadership is applicable for leading large-scale change including leading mergers (Covin et al., 1997; Lauser & Peters, 2008). Marks (1988) argued that mergers are distinct from other major organizational change processes. Lauser and Peters (2008) also claimed that change leadership theories (e.g., charismatic and transformational leadership) only provide partial explanations of leading merger transition and integration stages. We cannot therefore assume that general organizational change leadership is suitable for merger facilitation (Covin et al., 1997). Each merger presents a different goal and a mix of challenges that demand different leadership approaches at various merger stages (Gadiesh, Buchanan, Daniell, & Ormiston, 2002; Lind & Stevens, 2004; Sitkin & Pablo, 2005; Thatch & Nyman, 2001). Gadiesh et al. (2002) argued that today’s merger executives are pressured to “play multiple leadership roles and switch quickly from one role to another throughout the merger process” (p. 13). Although several studies related to organizational change in sport have been undertaken (cf. Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Bloyce, Smith, Mead, & Morris, 2008; Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Skinner, Stewart, & Edwards, 2004; Steen-Johnsen & Hantsad, 2008; Zakus & Skinner, 2008), as well as studies on leadership in intercollegiate athletics (cf. Andrew, Kim, Stoll, & Todd, 2011; Doherty, 1997; Kihl, Leberman, & Schull, 2010; Ryska, 2002; Quarterman, 1998; Sullivan & Kent, 2003), limited empirical research exists that examines leadership challenges and leadership practices involved in sport organizational mergers. We, therefore, extend on previous research on mergers and leadership by investigating the perceived leadership challenges during the transition and integration phases of a merger, and the leadership employed to address these challenges. Merger is defined as “a full combination of two previously separate organizations into a third (new) entity” (Marks & Mirvis, 1998, p. 10). The research context represents a merger rather than restructuring aspects of the same organization.

Examining an intercollegiate athletic department merger during both the transition and integration stages provides a unique setting for enhancing our understanding of how merger leadership varies from change leadership in each stage. An athletic department merger is also fundamentally different from a corporate merger because first, athletic departments theoretically cannot become insolvent and cease operations. No matter what management challenges an athletic department might experience, dissolving the organization is not perceived as a realistic option. Second, the complexity of athletic department stakeholder relationships is distinct in comparison to corporate stakeholder relationships (Borland, Howard, Sanders, Gioglio, 2009). The increased merger activity throughout the sport industry demonstrates the importance of enhancing our understanding of the potential leadership challenges organizational leaders might encounter that are distinct from change leadership challenges and document leadership that could be employed and/or avoided during a merger.

This paper is from a larger study that examined the management and leadership challenges of an intercollegiate athletic department merger. In the following sections, we first highlight the theoretical framework through an overview of related literature, explain the research process, and present the findings and discussion. We conclude by outlining the contributions of our research and offering recommendations for future research.
Theoretical Framework

Merger Types, Stages, and Challenges

Mergers represent a major transformative event that are complex and create many challenges for organizations and their stakeholders (Bligh, 2006; Buono & Bowditch, 1989; Cartwright & Cooper 1992; Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Sitkin & Pablo, 2005; Tikhomirov & Spangler, 2010; Waldman & Javidan, 2009). Each merger has a different objective that generates an assortment of issues to manage and requires appropriate leadership (Gadiesh et al., 2002; Lynch & Lind, 2002; Marks & Mirvis, 2010). Additionally, mergers and merger leadership differ from other organizational change processes in the rate of change, scale of change, and critical mass of the unknown (Colvin et al., 1997; Marks, 1988), and therefore present distinct challenges to leaders managing the merger process.

Lynch and Lind (2002) categorized mergers into four types and recommended respective strategies to assist in the process. First, the plan and prosper merger involves merging similar companies that have high value and requires careful planning, cultural integration, and employee incentives to facilitate these merger types. Second, the stand and hold merger is carried out as a long-term performance investment and managers must closely monitor financial performance and complete appropriate integration planning. Third, the merge and grow focuses on an expedited process for gaining market share, where leaders and managers must focus on eliminating redundancies and careful customer management. Finally, the segment or sell merger entails rescuing a merger that was ill advised, and leaders must prepare the organization for a quick sale before losing its value. Despite the various types of mergers, the important point to consider is many mergers fail because top level leadership neglects to recognize the existence of different merger types and that each type requires different strategies and leadership approaches (Gadiesh et al., 2002; Lind & Stevens, 2004; Lynch & Lind, 2002).

Although various merger types exist, in general, mergers occur in phases and several models exist to explain this process (e.g., Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991; Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Pablo, Sitkin, & Jemison, 1996; Schweiger, 2002). Each phase or stage will present merger specific challenges leaders need to be aware of and address in the merging process. To frame our study, we drew from Schweiger’s (2002) interrelated merger model, which delineated the specific processes and challenges involved in a merger. Schweiger’s model includes five stages: 1) understanding strategic and financial objectives; 2) transactions and negotiation; 3) assessing and planning for organizational transition; 4) integration of two organizations; and 5) evaluation of integration activities. The first two stages (strategic and financial objective and transaction stages) are characterized by important pre-merger activities and due diligence such as target assessment, collection of relevant data and information, analysis of data, initial strategy development, and negotiations.

During the transition stage, a formalized agreement is reached, a public announcement is made, and a transition structure is typically established to assist with integration planning, coordination, and to provide employee support (Marks & Mirvis, 2000, 2010). Schweiger (2002) argued managers are consumed by early activity in the strategic/financial and transaction stages and, therefore, during the transition stage, fail to adequately plan and prepare for the process of integration. Marks and Mirvis (2010) maintained developing a transition structure, comprised of senior leadership, coordinators, and transition teams, is imperative to facilitate integration planning. A transition structure’s main role and responsibility involve knowledge building...
regarding issue identification and decision making; relationship building that assists in developing synergies and preventing potential culture clashes and loyalty issues; and ensuring the organization effectively performs day-to-day operations to meet customer needs. Merging organizations can also enter a “limbo period” during the transition stage where they wait for regulatory approvals (Thatch & Nyman, 2001). Typically, during this limbo time, minimal information is shared between organizations, which results in a great deal of uncertainty, while the likelihood of change generates stakeholder stress that impacts perceptions, decisions, and interpersonal relationships (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro et al., 2000; Nguyen & Kleiner, 2003; Schweiger, 2002; Thatch, & Nyman, 2001). Therefore, this limbo period associated with the transition stage creates significant challenges to leaders. Further, Thatch and Nyman (2001) contended organizations are required to continue functioning during transition and employees are obliged to perform their respective roles and responsibilities. These challenges can therefore be debilitating for organizations if they are not addressed through appropriate leadership (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro et al., 2000; Thatch & Nyman, 2001). In general, the change management and leadership literature both neglect this transition or “limbo period” as it is more often a unique characteristic of mergers.

The integration stage occurs following the closing of the deal and continues until the merging partners have been fully integrated. This stage represents official changes such as restructuring of work, assimilation of new groups, and the creation of a new organizational identity. Leadership challenges that plague integration include human resource issues (i.e., assessing employee skills and abilities, employee fears regarding who their boss will be, change in their role and responsibilities, fear of loss of employment, merging cultures), combining company structures and functions, developing a new organizational mission and vision, and encouraging stakeholders to accept the new organizational mission and structure (Lauser & Peters, 2008; Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Schweiger, 2002; Tikhomirov & Spangler, 2010). Nguyen and Kleiner (2003) indicated the integration stage holds the greatest opportunity for failures to occur due to a lack of extensive integration planning and inadequate concerns for a variety of human relation issues. Finally, the evaluation stage is characterized by continual assessments and implementation of improvements in the merger, which should be an ongoing process throughout the merger (Schweiger, 2002).

### Leadership and Merger Facilitation

Leadership is a critical aspect in facilitating the merger process (Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Sitkin & Pablo, 2005; Thatch & Nyman, 2001; Waldman & Javidan, 2009). Research suggests leadership is an important aspect of early merger preparation and integration including engaging in transition planning, communicating a mission, assisting with cultural integration organizational restructuring, and developing synergies (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro, et al., 2000; Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, et al., 2000; Clemente, 2001; Galen, 1999; Tikhomirov & Spangler, 2010; Waldman & Javidan, 2009). Scholars examining leadership and mergers have applied different types of change leadership such as situational leadership (Covin et al., 1997), transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1985; Eisenbach, Watson, & Pillai, 1999), charismatic (Tikhomirov & Spangler, 2010; Waldman & Javidan, 2009), and cultural leadership (Schein, 1992) to investigate the effectiveness of the merger process. However, as previously argued, mergers differ from normal change events and situational demands in the transition and integration stages “translate into specific leadership role requirements” (Tikhomirov & Spangler,
Leadership more suited to addressing challenges that arise in distinct critical merger stages, such as the transition stage, is often not identified.

Research suggests the most critical merger activities influencing merger performance occur, in particular, during the transition and integration stages (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro, et al., 2000; Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, et al., 2000; Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Thatch & Nyman, 2001). Mainly, the transition stage can be the most debilitating as leaders are managing during a time of uncertainty, high employee anxiety, and feelings of betrayal (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro, et al., 2000; Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, et al., 2000; Marks & Mirvis, 2000; Thatch & Nyman, 2001). Leadership during the transition stage, therefore, necessitates a variety of leadership practices (Marks & Mirvis, 2000, 2010; Thatch & Nyman, 2001). Thatch and Nyman’s (2001) transition merger model advocates leaders develop six main skill categories to facilitate merger transitions, which is illustrated in Figure 1. First, emotional acknowledgement addresses employees’ emotional reactions to a merger announcement by taking the time to talk with employees about their feelings during the transition process. Leaders can assist employees throughout this time of anxiety and uncertainty by employing authentic communication where they acknowledge both the positives and challenges of the merger. Second, it is necessary to keep employees focused on their work roles and customer responsibilities. Leaders may need to consider renegotiating performance objectives, direct organizational priorities, and monitor progress and deadlines. Third, communication cubed suggests that informal and formal communication should be increased to prevent rumors and provide accurate and updated progress on merger activities. Further, communicating with upper management is also critical for mid-management leaders to assist with two-way communications. The fourth category is focused on creativity and involvement. Leaders can take advantage of the transition period where traditional work policies may not be followed, thus, encouraging employee creativity and emphasizing the transition provides an opportunity for positive change. Motivation and incentives is the fifth category. In order to keep and motivate employees, it is important that leaders provide incentives (Lynch & Lind, 2002). Conveying to employees they are valued through positive feedback, and if possible, monetary rewards can reinforce employee worth. Finally, merger and acquisition savvy requires leaders to be competent in dealing with various organizational dynamics related to mergers. Learning to read and react to situations that occur and/or proactively addressing potential political game playing is important for integration preparation.

Drawing from Sitkin, Lind, and Long’s (2001) integrative model of leadership, Sitkin and Pablo (2005) outlined the various types of leadership required to assist merger integration and proposed their model can assess the nuances and complexity of leadership practices and strategies in a merger context. Six essential dimensions of leadership are proposed that impact followers in achieving integration and are summarized in Table 1. Personal leadership is based on the assumption that, for a leader to be deemed credible by followers, he/she must be perceived to possess a persona or identity that is representative of one’s vision, values, beliefs, and style. Leaders ought to display consistency in their decisions, behaviors, and attitudes based on their identity. Personal leadership fosters loyalty among followers because a predictable leader is perceived as comforting during times of consistent change experienced during a merger. Relational leadership emphasizes the importance of developing interpersonal relationships among organizational members by fostering mutual understandings of the organization’s purpose.
and their role in fulfilling this purpose. Followers develop a sense of interpersonal understanding of trust and justice with the leader. Contextual leadership entails building an infrastructure that enables organizational stakeholders to be effective, and, as a result, the leader builds community. Inspirational leadership involves building the desire to achieve excellence through raising expectations and engendering greater aspirations of organizational stakeholders. Leaders encourage followers to consistently strive for greatness through creating a sense of enthusiasm for embracing challenges and engaging in risk taking. Supportive leadership consists of informing stakeholders of urgent organizational issues and providing them with the necessary support, resources, and encouragement to use their own capacity to address issues. In addition to symbolic leadership, stewardship requires playing the role of balancer by insuring the multiple forms of leadership previously described are effectively applied to a particular situation. The steward leader also instills a sense of personal responsibility in followers to the whole organizational and an understanding of the needs of the organizational and, thus, displaying the ability and desire to behave in a way that advances the greater good.

Sitkin and Pablo (2005) contended each merger stage calls for various leadership strategies and skills that necessitate leaders to employ multifaceted leadership (i.e., utilizing contingency, participative, charismatic, transformational, and transactional leadership), which can assist them in successfully developing synergies and reconfiguring the organization. Although Sitkin and Pablo prescribed different types of leadership to facilitate the integration stage, they fail to identify which specific type(s) of leadership is needed to address distinctive leadership challenges. Additionally, the model is narrow in its focus and neglects to include transition merger challenges and required leadership.

Table 1 - Six essential dimensions of leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership type</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Fosters loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Engenders trust and loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>Builds community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational</td>
<td>Encourages elevated aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Builds internal sense of self-discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Builds internal sense of responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst effective leadership for change management is well documented in the literature (e.g., Burns, 1978; Gilley, Dixon, & Gilley, 2008; Kotter, 1996), the role of leadership in facilitating a merger is an understudied area in both mainstream management and sport management research. Examining leadership that fosters mergers is critical to identifying principles and practices that enhance organizational combinations and ultimately improve our understanding of merger facilitation (Schweiger, 2002).

Research Context

The research site was a large university in the United States that merged its men’s and women’s intercollegiate athletic departments. Prior to the merger announcement on April 11, 2002, for 29 years the University had “two distinct athletics programs each with its own leadership, vision and mission” (University minutes, 2002, p. 1), as well as distinct financial models, policies and procedures, and organizational structures. Compounding the issue regarding the merger was the simultaneous cutting of three sports—men’s and women’s golf and men’s gymnastics. The central rationale for merging the departments was related to serious athletic department fiscal short falls, duplication of services, and a perceived dysfunctional relationship between the men’s and women’s athletic administrators (University-Intercollegiate Athletics, 2001). The intercollegiate athletic department employs approximately 300 employees (University, 2007-2008), has approximately 853 student-athletes and sponsors 12 men’s and 13 women’s sport programs that are members of a major athletic conference.

The transition stage was three months and included the period from the announcement of the merger in May 2002 until the Athletic Director’s (AD) hiring in July 2002 and then his subsequent arrival in August 2002. The integration stage, represented the period from August 2002 to August 2004 where the two departments combined in terms of amalgamating structures, policies, procedures, culture, and reorganizing personnel roles and responsibilities. Although no definitive timeline for an integration period is documented in the literature, typically integration lasts five to seven years (Buono & Bowditch, 1989; Covin et al., 1997). At the time of study, the department was three years into post-integration.

Method

The method for the study was a single-qualitative case study (Yin, 2009). As Yin (2009) explained, a case study method allows for the explanation of complex organizational phenomena through examining characteristics of real-life events. Examining the two merger stages allowed for an understanding of the leadership used to facilitate a specific kind of merger and the distinctive merger phases and their respective challenges. The case was selected based on two central criteria: 1) its uniqueness; and 2) theoretical contributions (Yin, 2009). More importantly, the case enhanced our understanding of the challenges encountered during an organizational merger and provided a rare perspective into merger leadership within the context of intercollegiate sport. While the findings of single case studies cannot be generalized, Yin contends they are appropriate when the goal is to extend existing theory and provide a comparison point for other cases.

After the athletic director granted his permission to conduct the study and receiving Institutional Review Board approval (IRB), we invited participants to partake in the study. The IRB approval included an agreement between the participants and the researchers that the

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participants would be identified by general position (e.g., administrator, coach, or staff). It was believed that participants might be identifiable due to the contentious nature and uniqueness of the case. Thus, to protect the identity of the participants, where quotes were used, general stakeholder role descriptions (e.g., booster, coach, and staff) were provided along with the date the interview was conducted. However, in Table 2 an overview of the participant’s’ role, gender, and sport is presented.

Table 2 - *Classification of participants’ role, gender, & sport*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central university administrators</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female (n=3)</td>
<td>Revenue (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=0)</td>
<td>Non-revenue (n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic department administrators</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female (n=4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic department staff</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Females (n=4)</td>
<td>men’s golf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Males (n=5)</td>
<td>women’s hockey, women’s swimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic unit directors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., compliance and academic counseling)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female (n=5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=4)</td>
<td>Non-revenue (n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female (n=9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-athletes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female (n=2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two sources of data were collected over a 10-month period between June 2004 and August 2005. First, semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 57 individuals representing the following stakeholder groups (Table 2): athletic department administrators (n=12); central university administrators (n=3); athletic department staff (n=9); coaches (n=9); student-athletes (n=3); faculty (n=3); and athletic boosters (n=18). Sampling was based on a combination of reaching theme saturation, purpose criterion sampling, and willingness to participate in the study. Participant selection criteria were athletic department
stakeholders who had experienced the merger and observed leadership challenges. The sample of student-athletes interviewed was small due to the fact that most student-athletes did not have experience with or knowledge of the leadership challenges. Patton (2002) argued that the utility and credibility of purposeful samples is based on the study’s purpose and rationale. Using an interview guide (Patton, 2002), participants were asked to describe the series of events that occurred during the transition and integration stages of the merger, identify the various challenges experienced or observed during the two stages of the merger, and to describe their perceptions of the leadership employed by various stakeholders. Second, over 100 documents were collected including: pertinent institutional meeting minutes; newspaper articles; institutional reports; and athletic department promotional materials.

Interviews ranged from 60-120 minutes in length and were transcribed verbatim. Follow-up questions, where necessary, were sent via email to gain clarification on certain statements and to verify the content (i.e., member checks). All data were read and re-read and codes were initially derived from the theory and the literature. Next, the data were downloaded into the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development, 1997), which assisted with data management and analysis. Data were coded and organized into categories using Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) open coding technique. Next, the categories were axial coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) where relations between concepts were sought and themes identified. This process entailed comparing and contrasting participants’ understandings of the leadership challenges identified in the transition and integration stages of the merger, the perceptions of leadership used, and their assessments of leadership. Check-coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was then carried out where the codes, categories, and themes were reviewed, confirmed, and where necessary, revised. The analysis ultimately led to a descriptive account of the merger process under study, along with first order and second order categories that represented the merger type and leadership, participants’ perceptions of the different leadership challenges identified during the transition and integration stages of the merger, and the leadership used to facilitate these two merger stages, which is described below in the findings section.

While we aimed to adhere to standards of trustworthiness (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), we acknowledge the following limitations in this study. First, a single qualitative study design is limited in making empirical generalizations, however, theoretical generalizations can be made (Yin, 2009) and a greater understanding of the uniqueness of the case under investigation (Stake, 1995). Second, while the sample was limited in the number of student-athletes interviewed, nonetheless, most of the athletes did not have first-hand experience with the leadership challenges and leadership used and thus did not meet the criteria for sample selection. Last, although the interviews produced information rich data, we acknowledge that some of the participants might have struggled to recall some of the events that occurred three to four years prior to the interviews. We believe that we addressed this concern by interviewing until we reached theme saturation, asking probing questions during the interviews, asking follow-up questions after the interviews, and performing member checks.

Findings

Merger Type and Leadership

Depicted as a same business merger (both departments delivered intercollegiate sport programs at a major level), the main objective for merging the two departments was value
maximization through cost savings and ultimately revenue enhancement. Strategies for realizing value maximization included capitalizing on synergies via blending major operational and managerial functions and implementing plan and prosper strategies. For example, the department combined various staff operations as the merger of two departments created overlap in some positions (e.g. athletic administrators, marketing personnel, sport information directors, human resource managers, and athletic trainers). Each department had a marketing director, and when the departments merged, only one individual was required to fill the marketing director position. An athletic administrator explained, “because when you merge a department, there is two of everything, two directors of marketing, two directors of strength and conditioning, two of everything, well we cannot continue to have two of everything” (athletic administrator, 7-27-2004).

The athletic department merger under study resembled a plan and prosper (Lynch & Lind, 2002) merger type. Merger planning was deferred until a new athletic director was hired, and, thus, the majority of planning occurred during the integration phase. Planning strategies included assessing personnel abilities, roles, and responsibilities, along with careful planning in merging cultures, operations, and management functions. To facilitate the development and implementation of a merger plan, several operational and management assessments (i.e. budget, cultural, and personnel) were performed. A chief financial officer was hired, who examined the department’s budgetary and spending practices. A consultant was also hired to assist with performing a cultural audit and to learn about challenges existing within the department. The athletic director spent approximately eight months performing a personnel assessment and evaluating the department’s functions and operational procedures. During this time, the director also appraised the skills and abilities of the department’s staff, coaches, and his inherited management team. To assist in creating an atmosphere of psychological safety during this time, the director displayed personal and relational leadership where staff members were informed that organizational changes would not occur until the various department reviews were completed. A coach shared:

“This Athletic Director has been patient. He wanted to come in and see how things worked. This department is huge. For him to come in and make hard decisions at the beginning—he probably would have regretted some of them” (quoted in Spiros, 2003),

This decision relieved some of the anxiety about the anticipated change and possible loss of employment.

When he (the athletic director) first got there, he announced to everyone that he was not going to make any personnel changes for a long time. He was going to listen and evaluate and so he diffused their [the staff and coaches] fears right away … anybody with any common sense at all would have said that and done that because there had to be a time of reassurance and calmness. Someone isn’t going to come here and take advantage of a merger to lop a bunch of heads off. The athletic director very smartly not only said it but followed through and didn’t do that. He took his time … for a good while we continued to operate the way we had basically until he had thought through how he wanted to organize, and then we changed. (athletic administrator, 7-14-2004)
At the end of the appraisal period, department restructuring occurred. Administrative roles, responsibilities, and reporting lines were revised and assigned, and administrative personnel changes were made. The various structural, procedural, human resource, and policy changes created minimal problems for some stakeholders in adjusting whilst some participants felt that a minority number of individuals from the different stakeholder groups resisted and/or were unhappy with the changes made.

**Transition Stage Challenges**

The transition stage demonstrated two main challenges for athletic department stakeholders in terms of an absence of leadership and stakeholder uncertainty.

**Absence of leadership.** The first leadership challenge represented an absence of formal leadership where the institution was without an athletic director, university president, and a chief of staff for a six-week period. The president and chief of staff resigned to take similar roles at another institution, and the contracts of the previous athletic directors expired, prior to the hiring of the new director. Consequently, the absence of these central leaders hindered transition preparation as the senior associate athletic directors lacked formal decision-making authority regarding the department’s future operations and no major decisions could be made until the new director and president were appointed. Thus, a dual challenge arose relating to transition planning and managing day-to-day operations. During the transition period, senior associate athletic directors and athletic department personnel were limited in their planning and coordination efforts as concerns were raised regarding who held the authority to provide critical information about department resource and operational management (i.e., the future of sports, budgets, and the philosophy of the future combined department). Participants indicated major challenges arose in leading the department including the hiring of two coaches, preventing the elimination of two sports, and making various administrative decisions (e.g., ordering uniforms, deciding on logos and letterheads, contracts, facilities, spending and budget development). In leading through these challenges, a variety of issues surfaced. More specifically, it was very difficult to hire coaches without personnel serving in critical leadership positions (i.e., senior associate athletic directors, athletics director, and the university president).

You are managing issues within issues. For example, what is your philosophy in being able to hire a new coach? You can say, “I don’t know who your boss will be, your two bosses [athletic director and president] will be. I don’t know if I will be here, I don’t know when the director is going to be here, and I don’t know if we are going to have sports.” (athletic administrator, 7-13-2004)

Hiring became a challenge without these critical leadership positions filled because potential candidates were asking about the department’s philosophy, future executive managers, and verification of the existence of a position after the hiring of the athletic director and the president. The athletic director and president potentially might decide that financially the university was unable to support the two sports and therefore eliminate them.

While the absence of leadership did not dramatically impact *modus operandi*, it nonetheless placed the department in a suspended state until the new director was hired. This lack of positional leadership created a sense of uncertainty among several university and athletic administrators regarding the status of the merger, the search for a director, and who had final
authority in decision making. The athletic department was labeled by participants as a “rudderless ship” (staff, 1-19-2005). Staff members became frustrated with the coordination strategy of maintaining the status quo because individuals felt like they were “spinning their wheels,” which limited their productivity and ability to move forward in operations (staff, 9-16-2004). A staff member explained:

The status quo that was what was hard. You would want an answer for something and it would be like, “Well we don’t know, we have to wait. I don’t know we have to wait.” A lot of things that we would want to do I felt like we lost a step because you had to wait things out before you could get things going again. (9-16-2004)

**Stakeholder uncertainty.** The second transition challenge identified by participants was stakeholders’ experiences of anxiety and uncertainty as a result of the pending merger. Throughout the transition stage, participants shared their apprehensions about their futures and uncertainty about the unknown—potential change in organizational policies and procedures, future leadership, organisational culture, job security, and the tiering of sports.²

The following participant quotations are representative of stakeholder uncertainties:

I think the challenge was the boogey man was out there, but no boogey man was. I don’t think there ever was one. But people put that out there, that fear of the unknown. (coach, 9-16-2004)

The former men’s athletic director tried to make the point that no one was going to lose their job for at least a year and I don’t think anybody really bought into the idea because again they knew that the athletic director was not going to be there. There was also a transition taking place in the president’s office too, nobody really knew what direction things were going to end up going in. (booster 2-8-2005)

The issue was the uncertainty of how this [the merging of two departments] was all going to fit together. Coaches of course were extremely concerned, always, about who their new leader might be and what that leader might be about and what will be the new goals and directives and operations and procedures. (athletic administrator, 8-20-2004)

People had a lot of weirdness about the unknown, and I wish there wasn’t so much weirdness and fear of the unknown, but we didn’t know what was going to happen so we all kind of had to do what we could. (staff, 10-11-2004)

Supporters of the women’s program were also anxious about the potential hostile environment and lack of support for the women’s sports programs in a combined department. A women’s department booster stated “there’s a hostile atmosphere towards women’s sports at the U. I’m really suspicious that they [the University] do not have the women’s athletics department well-being in mind” (quoted in Helms, 2002).

Several of the coaches of non-revenue sports and some student-athletes also shared concerns the merger would result in a notable further tiering of sports and ultimately a decrease in resources. A student-athlete explained:
Small market teams such as the non-profits, like swimming or track and field, the gymnastics team, those teams obviously they were really scared … they didn’t know where they were going to fit in or anything. We were nervous about the future just because there was going to be such a change and we didn’t know how it was all going to personally affect each team because it was such a huge thing that each team was going to experience different consequences based on their rank and money and their identity of their sport. (student-athlete, 7-23-2004)

In addition, athletic administrators were also dealing with their own fears of job insecurity, as their positions were not guaranteed. The interim president had suggested all senior administrators be terminated when the new athletic director was hired. An athletic administrator stated that “the athletic director made it plain to us when he started that the advice he received from the University president was to get rid of us” (7-5-2004).

Transition Stage Leadership

Leadership demonstrated during the transition stage included the creation of a transition structure, and a combination of contextual, communication, supportive, and emotional acknowledgement.

Transition structure. A temporary transition structure was created to assist with the planning for integration and coordination of operations until a new director was hired (Hartman, 2002). The transition structure was a configuration of administrators that was essentially in name only, and lacked an official mandate or delineated roles. The transition team evolved from two university administrators (i.e., university chief of staff and a senior administrator) who assumed leadership roles and requested the support of the two senior associate athletic directors from the respective two athletic departments. A university administrator explained the rationale for the structure:

It was a decision that the chief of staff and I made that we needed to do something in the interim. We needed to ask the two associate athletic directors to step up and help out with some of the transitional issues. We needed to start acting like a merged department, which was difficult because you still had the current senior associates. People really sensed it would be difficult to accomplish too much. You didn’t want to, until the new director came. There was a very conscious decision to say we will not make short term decisions and force the merger that is part of the [new] director’s charge. When he was hired, he was charged with merging the departments. (6-25-2004)

The two senior associates were assigned the responsibility of providing oversight of their respective departments. However, due to the lack of a transition mandate and member roles, along with the new director’s responsibility to merge the two departments, the transition team performed minimal integration planning. Hence, limited meetings and discussions about the impeding merger occurred. A senior associate athletic director explained, “we maybe met once or twice. We did not do a whole lot. There weren’t many decisions that came out of that process so it was there more in name I think than in anything else” (7-14-2004).

Contextual, communication, supportive, and emotional acknowledgement. Transition
stage leadership reflected a combination of contextual, communication supportive, and emotional acknowledgement that was displayed by the senior associate athletic directors in varying degrees. The two senior associate athletic directors were the individuals responsible for overseeing the operations of the two departments until the hiring of the athletic director (Hartman, 2002), and thus, by almost default, they performed most of these leadership tasks. The transition team’s lack of mandate and authority in decision making resulted in the two senior associate athletic directors demonstrating contextual leadership that reflected a contingency-based management approach. This approach involved the senior associates supporting the day-to-day operations of the athletic departments including marketing, gaining sponsorships, providing athletic training services, budgeting, assisting coaches in the oversight of their respective sports, and performing other administrative functions. It was explained:

The main focus was to make sure business went on as usual. (athletic administrator, 8-14-2004)
In reality, we just went about day-to-day, no significant decisions of any kind were made during that period because it would have been a waste of time … it was mostly a maintenance mode. (athletic administrator, 6-14-2004)

The maintenance of an operational status quo was frustrating to certain staff, administrators, and coaches because they were restricted in implementing critical changes until the new leader was hired. An athletic administrator shared:

It was hard when you did not know who the next athletic director [would] be. You really can’t implement anything at all because you don’t know what that person is going to want to do and what their style is. You are really trying to maintain and succeed. We wanted to not miss a beat in our success on the field and off so that was the most important for us. (athletic administrator, 7-14-2004)

The level of formal and informal communication provided to department stakeholders varied. University administrators initially met with coaches, men’s and women’s senior management members, and unit directors about the merger announcement. The unit directors and senior management team members were responsible for communicating updates. Merger updates were mostly performed through meetings and informal discussions. Participants mentioned they received periodic email updates from the senior associates. However, they held different perceptions about the sufficiency of communication and/or receiving updates regarding the merger process. On the one hand, staff, coaches, selected athletic administrators, and selected boosters believed insufficient information was communicated. For example the following are representative quotes:

You know, because we kind of thought, okay, are we going to have an all-staff meeting? Is anybody going to come in and explain to us some of the questions that people had. And that would be central administration. And I think that probably was the biggest frustration, was that nobody from central administration, and I know people asked, but nobody from central administration, maybe they didn’t feel the need or maybe they didn’t feel like it was important, (athletic administrator, 8-24-2004)
I think they (senior athletic administrators) were the holders of information to a certain extent. They were the ones that were in communication with the university as a whole, within the administration. So they held a lot of the information, so whatever they decided to tell people, they could kind-of pick and choose. I just remember having the feeling like, I know they know more than they are letting on, but what they are telling people is, “just hang tight”. (staff, 8-19-2004).

These participants perceived the insufficient communication about the transition process was attributed to the absence of leadership, the lack of planning from the transition team, and the uncertainty of who had the authority to communicate and what information was authorized for release. While on the other hand, university administrators and certain boosters and athletic administrators felt adequate information was conveyed. For example, an athletic administrator shared:

we used staff meetings as our opportunities to discuss the change, to reassure people to make sure things got done, all sorts of things as I said before we didn’t call very many special meetings but we used those forums to discuss the issues and to make sure things were getting done. (10-14-2004).

Supportive leadership and emotional acknowledgment was exhibited mostly by the two senior associate athletic directors where they helped alleviate the fears of various stakeholders in terms of losing their jobs, losing their sports, and concerns about the impact on hiring of a new athletic director due to the university president leaving. The senior associates’ strategies were encouraging stakeholders to focus on performing their roles and responsibilities and fulfilling the needs of the student-athletes. Further, by offering supportive leadership the senior associate athletic directors also provided emotional acknowledgment through recognizing the anger and grief experienced by certain stakeholders. The senior associates stated:

I tried to focus on the day-to-day and not think about the longer term because there were so many unknowns. I didn’t have answers for what was going to happen a month from now or when the new director comes in. None of us knew those answers and at that time as well, the university president announced he was leaving so we also had that change going on which was going to significantly impact the athletic director search. The way I tried to deal with it was to focus on the day-to-day and if people got anxious … try to calm them down and the coaches were able to focus on their sport and that is how people got through it. But it was a very, very tense time. (athletic administrator 6-13-2004)

Trying to just get people to stay focused on their jobs and do what they have always been doing and hired to do and do that until they have been told differently by a new leader and not to worry about what the future might hold, I think that is where I spent most of my time. (athletic administrator 7-14-2004)

**Integration Stage Challenges: Strategic Planning**

To assist with the integration, the department engaged in an extensive and inclusive strategic planning process. The strategic plan would assist in implementing the department’s
newly developed vision and mission and serve as a roadmap for becoming a model Division I athletic program (University-Intercollegiate Athletics, 2004). An outside consultant facilitated the process, which involved dividing department stakeholders into nine teams relating to different areas (e.g., compliance, financial, culture, diversity, and student-athlete success), and each team was required to develop goals and objectives related to their respective area (Scoggins, 2004). Based on the stakeholders’ recommendations, the strategic planner condensed the nine objectives into five areas. In general, participants believed strategic planning was a worthwhile process and appreciated it was inclusive as different stakeholders were engaged in dialogue about the department’s future.

Participants however reported several concerns regarding the strategic planning. First, the consultant’s ability to lead the strategic planning process was questioned in terms of his former affiliation, lack of experience, poor leadership, and inappropriate use of power. The consultant was considered an “outsider” who had a history from a rival institution and had limited administrative experience in Division I athletics. Strategic planning was extremely time-consuming, particularly for the management team, who felt they were overworked, performing 12 to 14 hour days and working six to seven days a week to fulfill their work responsibilities. When timelines were not met, the strategic planner questioned some of the management team’s work ethic. This criticism offended the management team because they perceived their labor efforts were not valued and overlooked. The time expectations displayed the contradictory demands placed on personnel between, on the one hand, performing strategic and visionary activities and, on the other hand, attempting to fulfill administrative duties and responsibilities. Participants also felt the strategic planner possessed too much power during the planning process where department stakeholders perceived to be reporting to the consultant rather than the athletic director. A faculty member explained:

A consultant was hired to help with strategic planning and there have been a lot of issues with that because of a feeling that he did more than consulting. He has pulled back but there were a lot of issues with his over stepping his authority. A lot of people felt threatened by him and complaining suggesting that he was going beyond the scope of what he should be doing. (10-12-2004)

The transparency of the process for narrowing the nine objectives into five was also questioned. Participants indicated the five objectives were neither reflective of the stakeholders’ perceptions nor reflected in the discussions about the objectives. Thus, participants questioned the participatory nature of the strategic planning process, and some felt disappointed and deceived by the administration in that their input did not appear in the final document. A coach explained:

They incorporated people in different committees, but talking with others on other committees, the final drafts that came out didn’t represent a lot of the things that people brought up, for what they wanted to see us be in terms of who we are and our vision and what we should do with the strategic plan. They included us in the process just to say that they did. I’m not sure that they took a lot of the suggestions and things to heart or utilized them. (10-11-2004)

Although many department stakeholders were fully invested in the organization and aspired to
make the merger a success, the leadership of the strategic planning process unnecessarily hindered integration. Despite this leadership challenge, many participants indicated the strategic planning process provided the department with much needed direction, assisted in developing a shared culture, empowered individuals throughout the department to act as cultural change leaders, and served as a means to create ongoing momentum for a new department. While the goal was to find common ground between the two former athletic departments and people were encouraged “to think about the betterment of the athletic department”, some individuals however had not “bought into” the new organizational philosophy two years post integration (staff, 7-19-2004).

Integration Stage Leadership: Participatory Leadership

To facilitate integration and strategic planning, a participatory leadership approach was adopted by the new department and facilitated by members of the athletic administrative management team. Participatory leadership was broadly defined as democratic decision making that was stakeholder focused and leading through others. The department encouraged and permitted organizational stakeholders to be included in discussions about decisions that affected them. For example, to facilitate integration stakeholders were provided input on the new department, mission and vision, the new logo, as well as policy and procedural changes. The athletic director considered different viewpoints but nonetheless held the final judgment. Furthermore, strategic planning was abetted through including stakeholders in discussions about the future direction of the department. As a result, despite the concerns regarding strategic planning, the inclusionary planning process aided integration by unifying the departments as a distinct organization was created (mission, vision, and values), which helped move the organization forward. The following quotes are representative of stakeholders’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the participatory nature of strategic planning:

There were a lot of people involved and so I think you had people that were able to say how they felt and ideas that they had some people that come forward thought this was wonderful, “I think it’s excellent, it had my ideas”. (university administrator, 8-24-2004)

We needed to know what is the best route for the department. Especially after this merger. I was so happy to see it because it gets us in the same room with the outside people with the faculty the men the women the support staff, it gets in all levels of jobs represented and to me just having people in the room talking about what do we think we need to do here and getting those exchanges made some of it is like therapy it is just getting it out on the table and then having people respond to it and working together. (coach, 8-10-2004).

I thought the process was very good and interesting and I learned a lot in being a part of it. It was a real workshop type, open, a lot of communication and ideas exchanged and then we developed an approach and a plan out of each of our little area which was very helpful for everybody that was participating. (booster, 2-8-2005)

Leadership through others entailed leading by example and supporting the new leadership and organizational mission, which was perceived to be critical to successful integration. Leading through others as it pertained to participatory leadership was described as:
It’s the idea of leading through others. If you get a critical mass on board, they will influence others and therefore be spreading the word that you want spread. The athletic director has key members on board whether they’re coaches or staff or whatever. I feel like the coaches whom I know the best, probably are supportive and see the vision and hope that we can get where he wants us to get. (coach, 10-25-2004)

The staff, management team, coaches, student-athletes, they are leaders because they help drive the vision home. Those are the ones that ultimately love to bring the vision and mission to life. A lot of them are doing it [driving the mission home] and they don’t even know it. (athletic administrator, 10-14-2004)

Several individuals in various official positions assumed leadership roles and formed an unofficial team of leaders (including coaches, athletic and university administrators, staff, and boosters). The large organizational context consisting of multiple stakeholder groups demonstrated that acceptance of the merger was related to participatory leadership that consisted of individuals from different levels of the organization (e.g., student-athletes, coaches, administration, and university officials) who took self-appointed leadership roles because they were strongly committed to the ongoing success of the department. These individuals were described as accessible, intelligent, team players, and effective communicators; they supported the merger, accepted change, supported strategic planning, displayed a strong work ethic, and attended both men’s and women’s sport competitions. For example, the student-athlete council created a group where they “would go to a soccer match or a football game and then they made sure to cover men’s and women’s sports in all realms and be supportive and there was that kind of leadership effort” (athletic administrator, 7-16-2004).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership challenges during the transition and integration phases of a merger between two intercollegiate athletic departments, as well as the leadership instituted to assist in merging the two departments. The findings showed the central merger objective was value maximization; however the merger type was not clearly distinguished based on the unique characteristics and context of the merger. The key leadership challenges during the transition stage were an absence of leadership and stakeholder uncertainty, while the central leadership challenge during integration was associated with strategic planning. The leadership exhibited during transition included creating a transition structure, and a combination of contextual, communication, supportive, and emotional acknowledgment. Participatory leadership was demonstrated during integration.

Several findings of this study merit attention and add to the literature on merger leadership. First, while the ability to recognize the merger type and adjust leadership approaches accordingly is advocated (e.g. Gadiesh et al., 2002; Lind & Stevens, 2004; Lynch & Lind, 2004), this may be much more difficult to accomplish in practice as each merger is unique. Our research indicated that it is perhaps more important for top level leadership to recognize the nuances associated with each merger and to address unique contextual challenges with appropriate leadership strategies, paying particular attention to the transition and integration stages, which represent vital stages to merger success (Nguyen & Kleiner, 2003; Schweiger, 2002). In the context of intercollegiate athletics, the central objective of the merger was to reduce costs.
through duplication of operations and revenue generation, which is consistent with the merge and grow approach that calls for quick integration to mitigate risks and realize early merger benefits (Epstein, 2004; Gadiesh et al., 2002; Lind & Stevens, 2004; Lynch & Lind, 2002). However in this case, for a variety of reasons (e.g. the athletic director was hired after the transition period, was assigned the responsibility to lead the merger, and was unfamiliar with the organizational culture, organizational functions, day-to-day operations, and personnel), a plan and prosper approach was used, which included careful planning, merging cultures, and providing employee incentives (Lynch & Lind, 2002). The athletic director’s careful planning and decision-making included methodically assessing organizational operations, personnel skills and abilities, organizational culture, and the various organizational stakeholders and their relationship to the organization. Contradictory to the literature (Lind & Stevens, 2004; Lynch & Lind, 2002), employee incentives in this case were not used to assist with integration. Merger scholars proposed integration planning occurs during the transition stage (e.g. Marks & Mirvis, 1998, 2010; Schweiger, 2002). However, this was not the case in this athletic department merger.

Instances where the task of integrating organizations is assigned to new executive leadership can delay planning and influence the leadership used related to the merger type. Additionally, the actual length of time taken to assess, plan, and ultimately integrate the two departments was in stark contrast to the very rapid transition and integration recommended in the merger literature (Lind & Stevens, 2004; Lynch & Lind, 2002; Schweiger, 2002).

Second, the transition stage, or what Thatch and Nyman (2001) referred to as “limbo land”, is distinct to mergers and create unique leadership challenges compared to change leadership. Transition structures are temporary systems comprised of senior leadership, coordinators, and transition teams that assess the two organizations and plan and prepare for the coordination of the integration of people, processes, and cultures (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, et al., 2000; Holt et al., 2003; Marks & Mirvis, 2000). The implementation of a transition structure to prepare and plan for integration is typical of most mergers (Marks & Mirvis, 1998, 2002, 2001; Schweiger, 2002). The absence of leadership during the transition stage can create an unnecessarily challenging limbo period or prolong this stage, which impacts integration planning, creates stakeholder uncertainty, and influences leadership. In this study, the transition team lacked a true mandate and specific roles (i.e. merger planning, steering committee, transition managers, and task forces), in large part because of the lack of leadership in key university positions (i.e. university president, chief of staff, athletic director). As a result, critical transition tasks and operations were neglected or became stagnant. Additionally, while the lack of top-level leadership during a merger is unlikely, it provided a unique setting to examine the nuances of a merger in the context of intercollegiate athletics and higher education where leadership transitions in multiple university units and departments are more common.

Third, specific leadership challenges arose when the transition team relied on middle management to coordinate interim department operations (e.g., hiring and budgetary decisions) without formal decision-making authority. In cases when an organization’s key leadership positions have yet to be filled, a central challenge for middle level administrators responsible for carrying out operations is recruiting talented staff to work for the unknown (i.e., department philosophy, supervisors, and financial stability). This challenge is particularly salient to intercollegiate athletics as employee turnover and hiring often occur in the summer months, and it is more likely hiring searches for athletic administrators, coaches, assistant coaches, and other athletic department staff may be occurring simultaneously. Both the change leadership and merger leadership research neglects to acknowledge the possible occurrence of an absence of
leadership and the related challenges organizational managers might encounter. Further, ineffective coordination of communication to the staff fueled speculation and/or rumors about the unknown. Increased centralization and decreased communication by management to employees is labeled by Marks and Mirvis (1997, 2010) as the “merger syndrome.” Marks and Mirvis (2010) argued insufficient communication from top management perpetuates the “rumor mill.” Whilst we acknowledge the importance of communication is imperative in both the context of change and merger leadership, based on our findings we reiterate the importance of communication leadership during the transition stage to address organizational stakeholders’ psychological concerns during this limbo period or time of uncertainty (Thatch & Nyman, 2001).

In addition, the absence of leadership can lead to middle managers using contextual, supportive, and emotional acknowledgement leadership. In situations where leadership fluctuations exist, it is important that organizations develop action plans that outline their approach to carry out operational decisions and avoid stagnation. In an intercollegiate athletics setting, the lack of leadership may impede progress but not significantly impact the delivery of the different sport programs and coordination of various athletic department units as many units may continue to operate autonomously and the measure of success within intercollegiate athletics is not based solely on financial aspects. An absence of leadership will, however, compound the uncertainty experienced by employees, and the lack of coordination by the transition team can create an overwhelming situation for the new athletic director and impinge on merging the two departments (these challenges are further explained in the integration section). Future research on leadership can examine different transitional structures that might address situations when formal leadership is in flux and/or absent.

Fourth, strategic planning was used as a tactic to implement the new organizational mission and vision. The strategic planning process did facilitate organizational integration as the extensive and participatory leadership provided the opportunity for stakeholders to work toward common goals, and to assess and adjust the organization's direction in response to merging the two departments. Strategic planning nonetheless created challenges that impeded the process. The consultant did not possess the necessary skills and abilities to lead the planning process. For example, the consultant lacked athletic experience, inappropriately used his power, was considered an outsider, displayed poor leadership, and was the antithesis to supportive and relational leadership. The strategic planner’s demands, compounded by his affiliation with a rival institution potentially undermined the athletic director’s efforts to engage stakeholders in shaping the new department’s identity and creating unity. Whilst strategic planning as a means for organizational change is rich in the literature (e.g., Dutton & Duncan, 1987; Garud, & Van de Ven, 2010; Liedtka, 2000), this study illustrates the importance for merger managers to consider the leadership style and previous organizational affiliations of a consultant when seeking their help with strategic planning and merger integration. Intercollegiate athletic departments are laden with culture and rivalries and elicit strong emotions from their stakeholders (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). Leaders with intercollegiate athletics must give thought and attention to these strong allegiances to a particular institution when hiring a consultant with ties to another rival institution. Future research could examine different situations where leadership types prevent organizational transformation and highlight leadership practices that should be avoided.

Finally, merger leadership is typically perceived as an individual (O’Toole, Galbraith, Lawler, 2002) and extremely top-down manner (Shibayama, Tanikawa, & Kimura, 2011), which is in contrast to transformational and participative leadership for organizational change (Kotter, 2000; Oreg & Berson, 2011). Sitkin and Pablo (2005) suggested leaders can facilitate mergers by
utilizing the six dimensions of leadership, where credible leaders can instill followers with “the necessary level of commitment, confidence, and comfort” to move the organization forward (p. 220). However, Sitkin and Pablo overlooked the argument that effective integration leadership generally requires the active incorporation of stakeholders in the planning change process (Bligh, 2006; Gilley et al., 2008; Shibayama et al., 2011). Bligh (2006) argued that deliberately involving a variety of stakeholders throughout the integration process assists in building commitment to change and maintaining the momentum to change. In this case, strategic planning that incorporated participatory leadership not only facilitated integration through gaining stakeholder buy-in, but also provided stakeholders a focus point to assist in creating a new department and providing a blueprint for carrying out the mission and realizing strategic objectives. Participatory leadership is based on the assumption that individuals are more successful and enthusiastic in their activities when they have agency and a voice in how policies and/or decisions impact them (Moomaw, 1984; Yukl, 2010) and is particularly relevant to departments of intercollegiate athletics, which feature multiple stakeholders groups and their cooperation and support is vital to organizational success. Moomaw (1984) contends a guiding principle for successful implementation of participatory leadership entails using a centralized strategy to formulate the organization’s mission and goals, evaluation procedures, and leadership training.

While we recognize mergers and subsequent leadership practices differ from other change processes (Colvin et al., 1997; Marks, 1988), in the intercollegiate context with multiple stakeholder groups, participatory leadership often employed in smaller scale organizational change were present in this case. The findings support the notion that peers can play a significant role in serving as agents of influence (Pearce & Sims, 2000; Yukl, 2010). Individuals who possess local knowledge of a situation and are actively involved in developing a vision for an organization will influence integration (Pearce & Sims, 2000, 2002). In this study, whilst the athletic director and the strategic planner appeared to use participatory leadership, the findings showed leaders can lose credibility if they fail to be transparent to stakeholders in communicating final judgments. Further, selecting the “right” leader to facilitate strategic planning is imperative otherwise stakeholders involved in the process can experience unnecessary challenges and/or the process can be unnecessarily hindered. Future research could examine participatory leadership and strategic planning to assess its appropriateness in other sport merger contexts.

**Practical Implications and Conclusion**

The research has several practical implications for sport managers assigned the task of merging sport organizations. The transition stage is one of the most challenging phases for leaders because of the uncertainty related to potential structural and staff changes, employee anxiety, and the general lack of management communication with organizational stakeholders (Marks & Mirvis, 2000; Thatch & Lynch, 2001). Marks and Mirvis (2000, 2010) recommended that organizations develop a transition structure that carry out the key governance, coordination, and task force teams that develop strategies for integrating the departments. Situations where there is an absence of senior leadership it is possible that the development of a transition structure and/or its mandate can be overlooked. As a result, the organization is in a holding pattern until a CEO is appointed. Despite the absence of senior leadership, management is still responsible for ensuring that the transition structure is developed and assigned a directive.
The literature recommends that the merger process should occur quickly to dispel employee fears and anxiety (e.g., Gadish et al., 2002; Lynch & Lind, 2002). However, in this study we found that expediting the integration process might not be an effective strategy to integrate merging organizations. Instances where an outside CEO is assigned the task to merge sport organizations, taking one’s time and performing a deliberate assessment of the structure, staff capabilities, roles and responsibilities, cultural assessments, and understanding stakeholder relationships, is more valuable. As a result, a careful evaluation of the situation will allow the new leader to make more informed decisions and alleviate some of the stakeholder anxiety (Marks & Mirvis, 2010).

Strategic planning is one recommended strategy for integration success (McDonald, Coulthard, & de Lange, 2006). Strategic planning assists integration organizations in developing a new mission and vision, stakeholder acceptance of the merger, effective communication of merger progress, and unifying departments (Habeck, Froger, & Tram, 2000). However, when selecting a consultant to facilitate strategic planning in a sport organizational context it is critical to hire an individual that does not possess an affiliation with a rival organization, the individual’s role and responsibilities are clearly delineated, the individual does not assume power, and is encouraging throughout the process. Careful consideration of selecting the “right” individual to lead merger integration is critical otherwise the strategic planning process can be hindered. In conclusion, this research exposed the leadership challenges exposed in the transition and integration phases during the merging of two athletic departments, and the leadership employed to address these challenges. The research findings highlighted that when a new executive is assigned the task to integrate departments, the type of merger and organizational context will inform the leadership used to facilitate the process. In addition, in the absence of key executive leadership during transition, middle managers will experience challenges in managing the-day-to-day operations and minimal transition planning can occur. Further, the absence of leadership impeded the development and implementation of an effective communication plan, which was critical for addressing the psychological challenges (e.g., the tiering of sports, gender equity, and the elimination of sports) evident in the merger. These challenges required middle managers to engage in contextual leadership and supportive leadership to assist in managing operations and addressing stakeholder uncertainty. In contrast, the results demonstrated that, despite the absence of leadership and poor coordination of the transition team during the transition phase of the merger, the leadership of the senior associates was sufficient to maintain operations until the appointment of a new department leader was made. This adequacy of leadership raised the question of whether leadership during the transition is as important as integration leadership and planning.

Extending the theoretical framework, the findings also illustrated that relying on top down leadership to facilitate integration is not always warranted. Circumstances where combining organizations with strong cultures and several stakeholder groups can use strategic planning and participatory leadership as an effective approach to integrating departments. Caution must be taken, however, in selecting a strategic planner that is suitable for leading this activity; otherwise, such a strategy may fall short of expectations. Future research that examines strategic planning and participatory leadership as a means to facilitate merger integration as well as building on our theoretical framework including Schweiger (2002), Lynch and Lind (2002), Thatch and Nyman (2001), and Sitkin and Pablo (2005) could uncover some of the complexities of merger leadership in the sporting industry.
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Footnotes

1Schweiger (2002) defined the transition stage as typically beginning after the formal merger agreement is signed and should be completed prior to closing” (p. 137) and the integration stage “as beginning after closing and continues until after the merger partners have integrated” (p. 16).

2Tiering of sports in this study refers to placing priority of certain sports (mostly revenue generation sports) in terms of financial and support allocation.

3The strategic objectives of the department included: 1) Develop stakeholder-centered leadership; 2) Honor the educational and athletic value of student-athletes; 3) Deliver a consistent message that celebrates the department’s mission; and 4) Recruit, retain, and reward people that display the highest integrity.