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Footy mates and football professionals: A case study of change at an Australian rules football club

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Abstract

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**Footy Mates and Football Professionals: A Case Study of Change at an Australian
Rules Football Club**

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Footy Mates and Football Professionals: A Case Study of Change at an Australian Rules Football Club

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how culture, structure and practice can impede processes of organisational change in examining the formation and development of the Adelaide Football Club (AFC). It charts processes of professionalisation and innovation from the initial formation of the club through to current operations as a South Australian club within the Australian Football League (AFL). A processual framework is utilised in exploring processes of change and the influence of substantive issues, contextual conditions and political decision-making within a local and national sporting environment. Particular attention is given to the history and culture of AFL developments and the transition of AFC from a state based initiative to a professional football club. The unfolding nature of change is highlighted in the interplay of proactive decisions and events with more reactive responses to unforeseen occurrences and the way that these are played out within both national and local arenas in which certain key stakeholders can significantly shape the speed and direction of change. The paper concludes by raising the question of 'success' in evaluating performance of these types of organizations that seek to win sporting competitions whilst maintaining a healthy operating budget from which future strategies can be developed and implemented.

Keywords: organizational change, professionalization, AFL, culture, processual, sports management

Managing change is central to the establishment, growth and continuity of organizations (Burnes, 2004). These issues have been widely discussed and researched in the commercial (Palmer et al., 2009) and public sector (By and Macleod, 2009) and increasingly, the professionalization of sport and the commercialisation of sporting activities and events has witnessed the emergence of new types of sporting organizations (Greyser et al., 2004) who seek to reposition themselves in the uptake of new business developments and in the formulation and implementation of innovative strategies to secure competitive advantage. Within private business, securing and maintaining competitive advantage through new methods of work organization and systems of operation have largely centred around commercial concerns rather than on winning major sporting events (Hamel and Prahalad, 2010). Within these organizations, business success is often measured in financial terms whereas public sector organizations may focus more on efficiencies and the provision of services working within set budgetary constraints (Pettigrew et al., 1992). In the sporting example we examine, there has been a shift in strategic focus from a more social community oriented approach towards the establishment of professional football organizations who seek strategies that meet financial targets whilst

simultaneously developing programmes that support their objective of securing grand final matches and winning premierships. In charting these processes of change, we utilize Dawson's processual approach that highlights the importance of history and culture, the need to fully consider the nature of the change (which in our example is the professionalization and commercialisation of the AFL), to analyse decision-making and critical junctures in recognising the political nature of these changes, and to locate and make sense of these change in context (both the internal context of organizations and the broader external environment which influences and is influenced by organizations) and over time - the importance of the temporal dimensions to examining the dynamics of changing. (Dawson, 2003). A specific focus of this paper centres on addressing the question of how structure and organisational constraints impede the processes of professionalisation and innovation in our case study analysis of Adelaide Football Club. Following an examination of change and a critical examination of these new types of organizations, we conclude by recommending that alternative strategies be considered by those seeking to manage change towards the dual objective of supporting sporting success whilst also ensuring good financial returns in providing a strong commercial base for further growth and development.

THE PROCESSUAL APPROACH

The processual perspective proposed by Dawson (2003) aims to make complex change data accessible to the reader, to use the material to identify theoretical insights and practical lessons from the research, and to ensure that the views and voices of those who experience change are heard from the coaches through to administrative management and the chief executive officer. It aims to examine change as-it-happens and is concerned with three groups of determinants that shape this process, namely: the politics, substance and context of change. The *politics* of change is taken to refer to the political activity of consultation, negotiation, conflict and resistance, which occurs at various levels within and outside an organization during the process of change. The *context* of change refers to factors that reside within the organization as well as those within the wider business market

environment. The *substance* of change - what Pettigrew (1997) refers to as content - is seen to consist of a number of interlocking factors. Figure 1 at the end of this document summarises key elements (Andriopoulos and Dawson, 2009: 309), for further elaboration see Dawson (2003).

RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODS

A longitudinal qualitative case study approach was used to examine processes of change in two Australian Rules Football Clubs. Data collection commenced in 2008 and is still ongoing. The data collected from the Adelaide Football Club (the focus of this paper) incorporates both primary and secondary data sets. Primary data collection included twenty four interviews with full-time staff at the club. These interviews were specifically selected to represent all areas of the club from the Board of Directors, through to senior managers, coaching staff, various assistants and the club's receptionist. The interviews took place between January 2008 and February 2008 and lasted from 40 minutes to over an hour. The interviews were semi-structured and used open listening techniques as recommended by Glasser (2001), in order to explore individual experiences of change in some depth. A number of themes were identified and used to relate to staff's understanding of organisational change: the changes that had taken place (past changes), the changes that were occurring (present changes), the changes that were planned (future changes) as well as changes that they felt needed to take place but were not part of the formal change agenda. This paper draws largely on data from questions on the formation of the Adelaide Football Club, the relationship between the SANFL and the AFC, attitudes and perceptions of organizational success at the AFC, and reflections on processes of professionalization and innovation.

Following the interview programme, contact was maintained over a two year period with the club for continual updates, clarifications, consultation and further data collection. Secondary sources of data were also used and full access was permitted to the Adelaide Football Club's archives along with data collected by the club for their AFC Annual Reports (later called Year Books), AFC Magazine and

AFC Induction Manual, as well as the data reported in AFC minutes of committee meetings. Media sources were also used to collect data, for example, the local *Advertiser* newspaper ran regular features on the club, and the local radio (5AA radio station) had a regular sport show hosted by an ex-AFC senior coach. In addition, the internet was used to obtain data from the Adelaide Football Club website and from an Australian Rules football historian John Devaney on the Fullpoints Footy website.

A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF CHANGE AT THE ADELAIDE FOOTBAL CLUB

Our case organisation is the Adelaide Football Club (AFC) – known locally as the Crows - which is an Australian Rules football club based in South Australia and is one of sixteen teams in the Australian Football League's (AFL) national competition. The city of Adelaide has two AFL clubs, the other being the Port Adelaide Football Club (PAFC), which is not discussed here.

The Formation of the Adelaide Football Club (AFC)

Prior to the formation of a national league there were a number of state based competitions in which the Victorian Football League (VFL) was prominent. The movement towards a national league had long been discussed but the political will remained in abeyance until 1990, when the VFL became known as the Australian Football League (A.F.C, 2010) and the associated re-structuring heralded the beginning of a truly national competition. In earlier discussions that had taken place within the South Australian National Football League (SANFL), members had voted to support the formation of an Adelaide Football Club that would represent South Australia. It was decided that this would not be a traditional SANFL club but a 'team for all South Australians' drawing on state-wide rather than local suburban players. However, procrastinations ensued during the 1980s with little being achieved until a unanimous SANFL resolution that a team should not be entered into the AFL until 1993. Taking an independent approach, the Port Adelaide Football Club (PAFC) reached an agreement with the AFL to enter a team into its competition in 1991 (A.F.C, 2010). Not surprisingly, the other nine league

clubs reacted strongly and through a process of litigation sought to halt Port Adelaide's bid (A.F.C, 2010). Port Adelaide, the SANFL's most traditional and successful club, made a strong attempt to break-away to join the expanding VFL/AFL, but they were censored through the courts and attempts to continue negotiations were restricted (Rucci, 1995).

Almost methodically, the AFL steered the SANFL into making a commitment for 1991 (A.F.C, 1991). The political manoeuvring of the AFL was an attempt to fill the void of not having a South Australian team in a national competition. They were not ultimately concerned as to whether the team was from Port Adelaide or a composite team called the Adelaide Football Club, but they were politically astute to know that negotiating with Port Adelaide could extract a counter bid and put pressure on the SANFL to make a decision. At an AFL meeting held on the 19th September 1990, the directors voted in favour of the Adelaide Football Club application (A.F.C, 2010). The league clubs voted 13-1 in favour, with the Richmond Football Club the lone dissenting voice. On October 9th, an historic agreement finalising South Australia's entry into the AFL was signed by representatives from the SANFL and AFL, and a new chapter in Australian football history was written.

In just three short months, the SANFL had come almost full circle in its attitude to the national league (AFL) and on February 1st 1991, more than 40,000 people watched Adelaide beat Essendon in a trial match. There was unprecedented local media response - especially from the Sunday Mail that camouflaged the Middle East crisis with a four page wrap-around on the victory – and there followed a remarkable rush for season tickets (A.F.C, 1991). During these early years, the club relied on the management experience that the SANFL provided, SANFL also paid for the AFL licence and provided a home ground at Football Park (now AAMI Stadium). As the AFC has grown, many would claim that the club now relies less on the SANFL than the SANFL does on the AFC, although the SANFL still has power and influence over the club in holding the AFL licence and owning the stadium where the AFC play their games.

The legacy of past decisions and the culture and history of the AFC currently serves to impede innovation and change. Opportunities for change are constrained in several ways, for example, culturally, through the old attitudes and thinking of its staff that still resonate with the time when the club was first created; structurally, in the compartmentalization that has developed between departments that reflect longstanding relationships formed from the outset. These cultural and structural constraints have shackled new ideas and silenced voices of change in seeking to firmly uphold the existing status quo. From the initial start up of the AFC, the majority of staff were recruited from the SANFL system and even at this time, were seen as procrastinators. These attitudes and expectations have, over time, become part of the culture of the club. Even today, there remains a clear division between the Football Operations Department and the Commercial Operations Department and this in itself, limits change options as there is no clear symmetry across the organisation or common sense of purpose and direction. In addition to these constraining factors, relationships between the AFC, SANFL and AFL are politically sensitive with each of these organisations vying for their own interests; there is essentially a complex matrix of relationships within which the AFC benefits least. The SANFL holds the power over the AFC as they hold the AFL Licence that allows the AFC to participate in the national competition and in addition, the AFC play their home games on grounds which are owned by the SANFL. These arrangements currently shackle innovative commercial change for the AFC.

Changing Financial Arrangements between the SANFL and AFC

The SANFL views ownership of the AFC as a business investment, the return on which (in the form of the sub-licence) is used to assist the SANFL in carrying out its obligations under the *Affiliation Agreement* which it has with the AFL, namely to control the administration of football in South Australia. Under the original sub-licence agreement, the fee payable to the SANFL was the greater of \$400,000 or 80% of its operating surplus in each year. In late 2002, in separate negotiations with

PAFC and AFC, the SANFL agreed on the payment of a fixed licence fee in order to give each club the opportunity to accumulate working capital. In late 2006, a new 5 year fixed licence agreement was negotiated with each club. However, the relationship between the SANFL and AFC is one that has changed over the years and an area in which further changes are likely to occur given the changing context of sporting developments and the changing mixture of stakeholders that are likely to influence strategic developments and decision-making processes. For example, a question was asked about the differences between the SANFL and AFC of a staff member who had previously worked with the SANFL and a large Australian bank before being employed at the AFC. The interviewee indicated that:

I think it's a bit harder here (AFC) than at the bank, but I think it's easier here (AFC) than at the SANFL. The SANFLs a bit more old school and it's a bit more – well, this is the way we do it; it's my way or the highway. I tried to change a lot when I was over there (SANFL), and quite often, if I went to change something, it would take me two years of niggling away, just to have something changed.

Another point of view raised by staff at the AFC indicated that the SANFL and AFC relationship is a two-way street. The AFC has provided the SANFL with valuable revenue in order for the SANFL to administer football in South Australia:

Well the Crows have been the SANFLs lifeline. I mean the – I can't quote the exact amount – but \$20m the Crows have put in, and if you go back pre the Crows, the SANFL was struggling along. Now because of the Crows, they have generated a huge amount of money. So it's in the interest of the SANFL to see the Crows grow bigger and stronger. But at the same time they can see that within the Crows there's a lot of funding that they can get back to them.

A recent issue reported widely in the media centres on the relationship between the SANFL and the AFC (as well as the PAFC) in the long running debate on stadium deals. The AFC have projected a stadia yield for 2010 of \$8.7 million, as one AFC staff member stated:

The SANFL are a fairly traditional organisation, the people that run the SANFL have been running it for a long time. However they put certain restrictions on us, whereas if you look at the WA model there are less restrictions on their two clubs than they're here, just from simple things like the stadium. We play at the stadium it's not our stadium for that day they control all the corporate facilities, all the catering, everything. Whereas in WA the clubs basically lease the stadium for that day and everything's theirs. So there's a lot more work for them but there is bigger returns.

The current AAMI Stadium deal between both the Adelaide Football Club and the Port Adelaide Football Club is financially holding back the on-field ambitions of both clubs. Recently, the Victorian based AFL clubs negotiated new stadium deals at the MCG and Etihad Stadium. Adelaide is currently \$2.4 million behind in the average stadia returns, despite regularly selling out AAMI Stadium. Moreover, the Adelaide CEO Steven Trigg concedes that the strongly supported Adelaide Football Club was hurting from its deal at AAMI Stadium and that early financial agreements constrained change options:

It's a major issue. For a number of years, 80% of our income has basically come from three areas and that's memberships, sponsorship and AFL distribution. That's why a lot of clubs have gone out and purchased hotels and poker machines and that, and we have looked at that. Our hands were pretty tied for quite a few years because of our arrangement with the SANFL and that's one area that's affected us quite a lot in the early days since we had the what we call the 80/20 rule. So 80% of surplus had to go back to the SANFL, so if you made a million dollars your sending \$800,000 back so it didn't create a lot of incentive to find new income so as long as you make enough to keep ahead.

Now probably one of the best decisions we got changed a few years ago is we pay them (SANFL) a fixed fee. Now all of a sudden if you're making extra money you will be able to keep a bit of extra money.

The SANFL currently faces a dilemma over how to distribute the money generated by the South Australian Football. For example, do they first look after the interests of the two AFL clubs (Adelaide and Port Adelaide) and then hand over the remaining revenue to the nine SANFL clubs? Or do you 'tax' the two AFL clubs to the level required to sustain and maintain the standards at the nine SANFL clubs? Presently, the SANFL appears to favour taxing the two AFL clubs to support the SANFL. Consequently, there are concerns that Port Adelaide and the Adelaide Football Clubs will fall behind developments occurring at other AFL Clubs and as a consequence, be less competitive both commercially and on the field (Rucci, 2010b).

Organizational Success: On-Field Wins versus Financial Performance

Shilbury's 1994 study (cited in Booth, 2005) of the strategic planning practices of AFL clubs found that financial performance and on-field performance are the two most important aspects of football club management. This shift in focus towards balancing business ventures with on-field success is highlighted in the earlier work of Dabscheck (1975: 178) who found that club officials '... major objective is to see their football team win as many premierships as possible'. Stewart's study in 1984 (also cited in Booth, 2005: 7) concurs, arguing that 'profits are seen as a secondary goal: a premiership is ranked more highly than operating surplus'. Both authors also found that clubs were prepared to go into debt to achieve playing success.

Booth's (2005) analyses on these issues found that they remain primarily win-maximisers (subject to break-even financials) rather than profit maximisers. These two objectives can compliment and compete with each other, and whilst what makes a successful club remains open to debate, success is

generally measured in the media by teams reaching finals and winning premierships. On this score, the Adelaide Football Club is successful as it has played in the finals in 8 of the last 9, along with 2 premierships in 1997 and 1998, although it has been 11 years since they won the ultimate success, a premiership. Interestingly, an AFL club like Collingwood - which has one of the largest revenues (over \$62 million dollars with a \$2 million annual profit) - is not deemed to be successful on-the-field as it has not won a premiership since 1990.

Once the ultimate on-the-field success is achieved - as was the case with the AFC winning premierships - it is often short lived as building for the next success begins straight away. Since 2007, when the Adelaide Football Club's operating surplus was \$2.2 million, the construction of a new facility (a state of the art building to provide the best resources for administrators, coaches and players) in conjunction with the global financial crisis, has impacted heavily on the club which posted a 2009 surplus of \$98,000. Recently, the AFL reviewed the AFL Clubs finances and highlighted how access to large amounts of money does not immediately translate to on-field success, unlike other professional codes, such as, European Football (Rucci, 2010a). For example, AFL Club's four biggest spenders (Sydney, West Coast, Collingwood and Brisbane) have allocated \$600.2 million to their football departments and have won 592 games and 5 premierships between them; whereas AFL Clubs Essendon, Adelaide, Geelong and Carlton have spent \$56 million less and have won more games (595) and the same amount of premierships (5). Under the AFL's efficiency ratings, which measures how much a club spends for its wins, the Adelaide Football Club is ranked second. The message from the AFL's review of club finances is that a club's success is based on how wisely it spends, rather than how much it spends.

Although resources can be used unwisely and in ways that do not achieve strategic objectives, limited funding or comparatively low level of resources vis a vis other clubs does restrict change options and opportunities for future developments. As such, the current financial arrangements that the AFC have

with the SANFL is impeding change. Ultimately money affects the ability of an organisation to change as it limits the amount of money and resources that can be spent on research and development, innovations, various investments, as well as limiting the amount that can be spent on salaries and rewards (in seeking to attract the best qualified people to work at the organisation). While there is some evidence that money does not directly lead to success on the football field, for example, because of the salary cap money does not directly affect the procurement of better football players, the clubs with greater financial resources can nevertheless attract the best sport scientists and coaches.

The Way Forward? Professionalization and Innovation

Since the early days of community sport, the national AFL clubs are now far more commercially-orientated, taking a more professional approach to the management of the business and in the coaching and training of players. With professionalization there has been a concomitant change in the 'footy culture' both on the field and in external presentations via the media and public appearances. There has also been a shift away from managers being 'good blokes' who are totally immersed in traditional footy culture (which was a play hard drink hard social culture), to using business knowledge and acumen in drawing on personnel with financial experience and formal qualifications. As such, national football is no longer viewed as a hobby, but has grown into a multi-million dollar business with a more commercially-oriented culture. This shift in a move to professionalization is evident in the change in general management at the AFC. Bill Sanders was the inaugural general manager (later changed to CEO) and came from the SANFL club Woodville West Torrens and was viewed as the 'old school footy type'; whereas, Steven Trigg (current CEO) has work experience not only within SANFL football but also from working in the private sector (he holds an MBA) and is viewed as 'more professional':

Steven Trigg has an awesome reputation nationally and has been touted as a future CEO of the AFL and I think he's an outstanding leader and we were in a position where we can employ the best because so many people want to work here.

In managing for the future, the club has encouraged people to forward new ideas and suggest innovative solutions to ongoing issues or problems. For example, in 2004 they created a new department entitled *Innovation and Strategic Projects* – which was retitled in 2008 as *People and Performance* – that supports creativity and innovation in pursuit of their key strategic priority to: ‘ensure that the Adelaide Football Club is at the forefront or leading edge of technologies, strategies, advancements and programs – across all Club activities’ (A.F.C., 2008). This innovative program encourages staff with new ideas to come forward and to speak to their managers (either through email or in person) and/or speak to someone in the People and Performance Department.

Once a new idea is put forward it is logged (all ideas are logged no matter what they are), they are then reviewed and acknowledged every month at a formal meeting. Each idea is identified, a summary of the idea is recorded along with a code that details status into: A = Actioned; H = High priority; M = Medium priority; L = Low priority; U = Outside Scope; and E = Existing. At the end of the meeting the staff vote for which one they think is best. This process takes place every month and at the end of the year the monthly winners are voted on again for the best innovation for the year. One successful idea was the 19th Man, which was an idea borrowed from an NFL team in USA. In America, there is a college that owns the name 12th man (Texas A & M University) and it has registered the name with no logos (Tomas, 2006). The 12th man in college football refers to the supporters because they have eleven on the field. The Seattle Sea Hawks (NFL Team) also wanted to use it but were forced to use the ‘title’ under a lease agreement. The Adelaide Football Club wanted to try a similar concept in Australian football by using the 19th man (there are 18 team players on the field), and consequently the Adelaide Football Club members became known as the 19th Man - which is now registered with the Club.

This movement towards professionalization and the cultivation of working environments where creative ideas can flourish and where potential innovations can be identified and evaluated are all seen to be integral to managing a sustainable AFL club that can develop a competitive edge. Some of the defining aspects of a successful AFL club that we can distil from our analyses are: firstly, achieving on-field success by reaching the finals consistently and winning premierships; secondly, developing a group of professional managers, coaches and players, and in ensuring good financial performance in making robust business decisions; and thirdly, in developing a wide network of support (state wide as well as some out-of-state support) that supports the club through membership subscriptions and attendance at games. Significant changes have occurred over the last twenty year and these changes continue and represent for us a complex dynamic ongoing process that warrants further research, analysis and theoretical reflection.

The AFC started out as a semi-professional club/organisation and has evolved over the years into a professional organisation as has the other AFL clubs. There are many factors involved that have influenced the professionalisation of the AFL clubs and a critical turning point in this process was the new media deal negotiated by the AFL and television networks which brought in a large amount of money which was then distributed to the clubs. The innovations program at the AFC promotes change for the right reason (and not for change sake) and as a consequence has led to a more effective and pro-active management approach.

CONCLUSION

Our focus on the formation and development of the Adelaide Football Club (AFC) takes as its starting point the historical context within which political interest emerged in promoting a truly national competition across states between various AFL teams, which was to compliment and augment the then largely state-based system. The VFL was a key political stakeholder behind these changes following their restructuring in the 1990s into the Australian Football League (AFL) – sometimes

referred to as the VFL/AFL. Over time, there has been a series of politically charged conflicts around decision-making within Australian rules football that reflect differing vested interests, culture, tradition and practice. In common with other organizational research, turf issues were found to be of fundamental concern shaping the political landscape of Australian rules football and influencing decision-making processes (Buchanan and Badham, 2008). For example, whilst the SANFL was generally in favour of forming a team to represent South Australia they remained hesitant and this stimulated further events, such as, the politically sensitive discussions between the AFL and the Port Adelaide Football Club. Issues from the past (SANFL being the oldest Australian rules football league) go some way to explaining the culture of conservatism among key SANFL protagonists. Whilst many recognised that things would need to change in the future, they were also easily convinced that to hold on to the status quo for a while longer would be a good thing. Rather astutely, the AFL engaged Port Adelaide in discussions to either find a replacement team or what seems more likely, to simply stir a quicker response from the SANFL over their proposed composite team the Crows (the AFC). These political tactics proved successful and the turnaround by the SANFL can also be explained by the general recognition of the centrality of change to the future development of the sport.

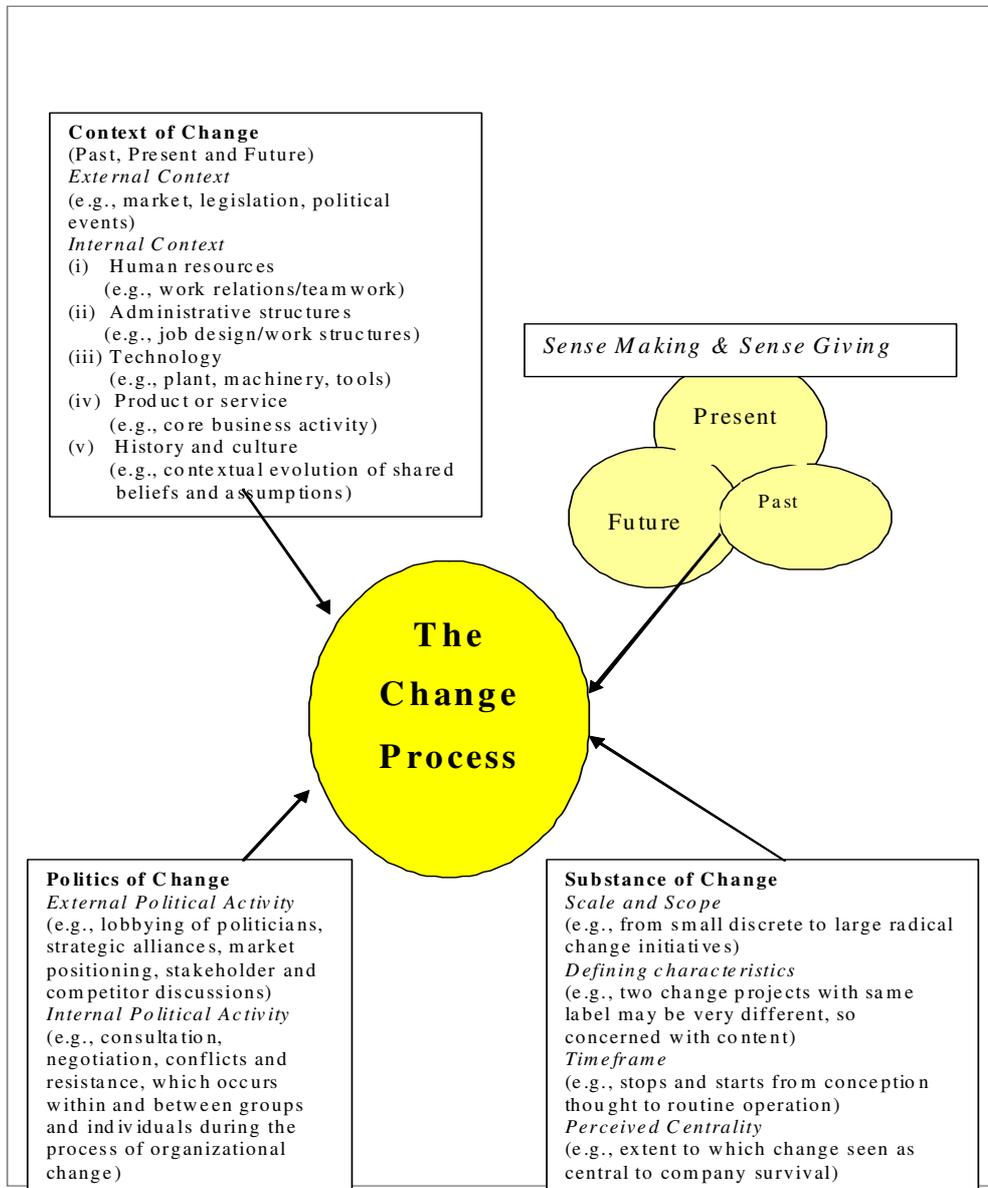
Following the launch and success of the Crows in 1991, there was a contextual shift to the football landscape in which opportunities for change emerged, especially around concerns and interests in the future development of rules football at both national and regional levels. Professionalization, commercial performance and the pursuit of on-field wins all served to influence the dynamic relationship between the politics, context and substance of change over the years that followed. Success became linked not only to victories on the field, but also to changes that supported commercial rewards through sponsorship and revenue generating schemes. However, these were themselves initially constrained and later enabled by the existing and changing financial arrangements between the SANFL and the two national clubs in South Australia (Port Power and the Crows). Over

time, there has been a shift in power relations and the traditional culture of 'footy mates' has been redefined into a culture of 'football professionals' under which greater emphasis is now placed on business management, coaching, training and towards taking a more professional approach to being a player than was previously the case.

Clubs within the AFL have grown into million dollar commercial businesses and these changes are ongoing reflecting the processual nature of change. Our case study analyses usefully demonstrates the emergence and development of these new type of competitively-sports-based organisations that need to combine on-field success in winning premierships and playing finals; with developing networks of support through sponsorship deals, membership and club attendance; and the need to ensure commercial as well as sporting returns on investments in building professional management teams, playing to the media and securing adequate financial backing.

The structure and relationship between the AFL, SANFL, and the AFC is hindering the progress of the AFC and in 2010 the AFC recorded its first ever financial loss. This is a business concern given that the AFC has a sustainable number of members, near capacity sponsorship and above average gate takings from home games. This is mainly due to the constraints enforced by the SANFL and its ownership of the AFC sporting grounds that limits opportunities for innovative funding initiatives at home match games. The need for change is evident but this is likely to be further constrained by the power relationships and political manoeuvring that is likely to occur between the AFL, the AFC and the SANFL. Management has a key role to play in future developments at AFC in ensuring astute political behaviour and decision-making, and in continuing to support and nurture professionalisation and innovation at all levels throughout the organisation – the agenda is set for change and these changes need to be achieved if the club is to be a significant force in the AFL.

Figure 1: Dawson’s Processual Framework for Understanding Change
 (Source: Andriopoulos and Dawson, 2009: 309)



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