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Developing Diversity Awareness and Practices in the National Rugby League (NRL): Progressive Player Participation and Club Collaborations

Abstract

In 2010 when Timanu Tahu voluntarily left the NSW State of Origin camp days before the second of three games due to racial taunts, sporting organisations and fans alike were outraged (Kogoy & Read 2010). Outraged by the lack of tolerance a professional staff member and former NRL player showed towards the individual who the comment was directed about, and the lack of tactfulness in thinking such racial taunts would be accepted and not challenged. Sport should provide scope for people to feel included, as it promotes the opportunity for teams to compete, and create a sense of unity from where they are from. In contrast, Rugby League's history is grounded in progressive inclusivity, recruiting diverse players in its appeal to its respective working class audience (Collins 1998).

Keywords

national, collaborations, practices, club, awareness, diversity, developing, participation, player, progressive, (nrl);, league, rugby

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DEVELOPING DIVERSITY AWARENESS AND PRACTICES IN THE NATIONAL RUGBY LEAGUE (NRL): PROGRESSIVE PLAYER PARTICIPATION AND CLUB COLLABORATIONS

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Introduction

In 2010 when Timanu Tahu voluntarily left the NSW State of Origin camp days before the second of three games due to racial taunts, sporting organisations and fans alike were outraged (Kogoy & Read 2010).

Outraged by the lack of tolerance a professional staff member and former NRL player showed towards the individual who the comment was directed about, and the lack of tactfulness in thinking such racial taunts would be accepted and not challenged. Sport should provide scope for people to feel included, as it promotes the opportunity for teams to compete, and create a sense of unity from where they are from. In contrast, Rugby League's history is grounded in progressive inclusivity, recruiting diverse players in its appeal to its respective working class audience (Collins 1998).

DIVERSITY IN PLAY

Ethnic culture in sport is prevalent across various codes and evident in the composition of teams. Some sports have sought the attention from particular people groups, with Pacific people generally participating in team based sports, like Rugby League, Rugby Union and Netball. Participation in such team sports further reiterates the value of team work, mateship, and community. As these are valued attributes, shared universally across cultures, there are certain differences that may manifest in players from particular ethnic backgrounds. These nuances may support the team environment, but conversely create concerns when not understood by the bigger team; especially the head coach and management. Traditionally, professional sporting organisations have been slow to respond to diversity, devaluing possible strengths gained from incorporating diverse characteristics in its membership, in turn leaving organisational culture open to discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping (Taylor 2003).

Religion also creates a varied perspective on how one may interact, and behave; based on various ethics and moral standards. Understanding this diverse characteristic can promote the ability to appreciate why certain practices are undertaken, including the need to attend certain meetings across the week, to abstaining from a particular activity. Divisions in the sporting realm may occur when religious beliefs may disrupt team dynamics. For example, players may be called away to attend a particular matter, which deters their ability to train for that afternoon. Certain rituals may be undertaken before, during and after a game. Rather than embrace these perspectives, sporting organisations may consider religious commitments as secondary to the need for professional athletes to be more focussed on maintaining their responsibility to the game; discounting the relational value diversity has in building good sport management and practice (Kitchin & David Howe 2013).

The issue of homosexuality in league continues to plague the ability for it to be embraced (Cashmore & Cleland 2011). In essence, there is an oxymoron at play, offset by a cultural restriction on how masculinity, generally supported by the notion of sport itself, is challenged by any thought that a professional player could be otherwise straight. To be a Rugby League player is to be the epitome of its gender, revered for physical strength, supported by a mental prowess that reflects enduring perseverance to perform. With this in mind, players may find it greatly challenging to accept their own ability to be same sex attracted, let alone feel confident with the response of others if they were to know; including fellow teammates. Further difficulties may occur due to the public profile professional athletes uphold, and the overarching social responsibility they have to be role models alongside lucrative sponsorship deals and promotions. Therefore, 'coming out' evokes the old age adage of you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Being inclusive is about being able to provide scope for clubs to be proactive in developing strategies on engaging diverse members (Cooke & Douglas 2010). The whole community benefits from such approaches; clubs are able to cater for their respective demographic by striving to understand certain behaviours, values, attitudes and beliefs that may deter participation. It's about shifting the perceived cultural norm away from sport being ethno centric, to being ethno inclusive. It's also about developing networks with community groups to promote sport as being a middle ground to promote community. Overtime, participants will also gain a greater understanding and insight on how to interact with diversity, by forming and playing in teams that requires individuals to operate collaboratively.

Therefore, participation in sporting activities for diverse communities can promote scope for social inclusivity to occur, where people are welcomed to play with other people as a means to integrate teamwork skills, whilst cooperatively developing social and respective communication skills. In essence, it allows diverse participants with the opportunity to further understand, and participate in a process that socialises their behaviour and attitudes in a way that is acceptable, not just to the sport itself, but to society. Conversely, this approach can also deter the ability for diversity to shape the way in which certain behaviour are integrated, and accepted as part of the sports culture itself (Taylor 2004). A lack of ability for diverse qualities to be accepted continues to reiterate a confined structure that only promotes, tolerates and accepts certain dominant perspectives, discounting others from alternative viewpoints in that sport (Doherty 1999).

But how should clubs respectively recognise and cater for diversity from a professional perspective? Organisationally, sporting entities represent an elite level that should also reflect the diversity from communities in which they draw their players.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSES

"Exposure to diverse colleagues helps managers make better decisions and cultivate new ideas by drawing on a larger pool of information and valuable experiences. A diversified staff can also help an organization increase market share by better enabling the organization to understand how to market to an increasingly diverse customer base. This serves to increase the agility and adaptability of the organization. Additionally, minority customers often feel that a company's diversified staff can better identify with their everyday experiences, thus enhancing company credibility" (Allen & Montgomery 2001, p.149). The National Rugby League (NRL) is striving to become a culturally diverse organisation, where they actively exchange and learn from ideas given by all levels, not just high level management. By providing scope for players to share how they would like to celebrate, and realise diversity as an opportunity to further understanding differences, strategies are created as a means for management to respond, and to also develop a level of accountability. Follow up is vitally important in being able to sustainably implement and promote a culture where diversity is not just tolerated, but accepted and understood. Hence, for effective change to take place, a whole of organisation approach needs to occur. The NRL have taken this challenge on, by providing training workshops to all clubs across its organisation, profiling this as a means for both players and staff to engage in the same process of change towards cultural awareness, and its impact on professional interactions and practice.

The need to create an organisational culture that challenges the acceptance of any form of intolerance to diversity, including racism, is another important factor. Included in the approach is the ability to develop guidelines, and specific practical strategies that deter inappropriate attitudes and behaviours in the workplace. From this, participants in any respective training moves beyond tokenistic view of learning culture for the sake of being aware (Babacan & Hollinsworth 2009), to actually implementing activities that deter the development of possible tensions. Practical strategies on how to interact in a professional manner promote this change, which can then deter stereotypical perspectives based on limited engagement previously experienced. For example, in diversity training for staff, participants may explore various differences in how people may perceive a particular topic. This is then further enhanced by developing strategies on improving interpersonal communication skills through the promotion of key topics.

Diversity is a key theme coaches need to be aware of; especially when it comes to effectively communicating to players. Various approaches may be employed as a means for players to understand game plays; with certain expectations expressed on individuals and the team as a whole. However, difficulties may exist with Pacific players, where styles of communication may be limited due to a lack of understanding on how to communicate between both parties (Cassidy et al. 2009). Coaches may expect a certain style of interaction when imparting important information, with a respective response given by the player. But this may be hindered when cultural characteristics that portray respect for the person sharing is misunderstood for non compliance and a lack of interest. Therefore, developing a greater awareness of the context associated with this behaviour can promote a more engaging response.

Overall, "diversity must incorporate interpersonal and intergroup interaction, organizational transformation, studies of inequality, and the moral and ethical frameworks through which diversity and multiculturalism are framed and taught" (DiTomaso & Hooijberg 1996, p.165). Staff and players should be given the opportunity to develop a meaningful interaction, rather than one based on limited gestures of good will and intention to feel like one accepts another because they exist in the same place and space. Management strategies should emphasize an importance in seeing diversity as a means to enrich the working environment, aiding diverse perspectives, opinions, values and beliefs into the ability to develop solutions to tough problems, even issues that may arise due to diversity. Such integration purports organisational scope to recognise diversity as a quality trait, enhancing further responses to a diverse community populated by diverse stakeholders and people groups. Therefore, diversity is not perceived as the enemy, rather the opposite, where the inability to incorporate diversity promotes division against social pluralism and the relative expectations of people in and around the organisation.

Context – Progressive and Proactive

In 2011, player statistics were characterised by the increasing number of Pacific people across the 16 NRL clubs. Pacific people have enjoyed a greater representation in the game, despite being only 1.3% of the entire Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Pacific people, by definition, include 23 people groups who have heritage from the South Pacific Island throughout the regions of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. This also includes the Indigenous people of New Zealand; Maori.

With the increasing presence of the NRL National Welfare and Education team, a dedicated Pacific Project Officer was employed. This role was established to enhance the game’s response to Pacific people across the organisation, including the need to provide cultural perspectives on player matters on both a national and local level. Nigel Vagana started in this role after a successful career as a NRL player (1996 – 2008), providing further vision and leadership on the development of cultural capacity building in professional sports. In 2010, Nigel meet with the author of this report, Jioji Ravulo, to discuss the need to create an interactive workshop for both players and management. A presentation was developed with the following in mind; 1) to associate and understand Pacific players better, 2) appreciate Pacific cultural values and norms 3) promote celebration of ethnic, religious and sexual diversity.

Through the recent completion of his Doctoral research (Ravulo 2009), Jioji was able to utilise his ethnographic data on Pacific communities residing in Australia to form the basis of the presentation. This included an overview on Pacific values and beliefs, alongside intercultural differences / strains that further promoted a better understanding of Pacific people, and their interaction with people and places within an Australian context. As engagement was a priority in also creating effective workshop material, Nigel provided direct examples from an NRL player perspective to assist in having participants understand the material in context to their role within the game. More so, the need to create a way for local clubs to start developing practical strategies to celebrating diversity was another key attribute to the workshop being portrayed as a useful and helpful resource. From late 2010, the workshop was offered to all 15 Australian based NRL clubs; the first training resource from the NRL National Welfare and Education team.

Entitled “NRL Pacific Cultural Awareness Training” the first section covered the five key values of Pacific Communities: Family, Spirituality, Food, Recreation / Sports, Visual and Performing Arts. Intercultural differences were presented in the second section via a comparison between “Western” and “Pacific” perspectives, relating and contrasting interactions based on the education system, vocational and employment aspiration,

financial literacy, personal and social skills, alcohol and other drugs, and health; including physical, mental and sexual. In the third and final section, the material differed for the workshop being presented to the Playing group (NRL players). They were asked to reflect on a table across two key questions – a) “How can you support each other to celebrate ethnic, religious and sexual diversity as a team” and b) “How can the club best support you in celebrating as a team” (Table 2). The first question was designed to encourage players to articulate their solutions, whilst forming a sense of teamwork in creating such possible outcomes. The second question encouraged players to be more pro active in seeing how Club Management, including Playing Staff (e.g. Coaches, Medics, Physios, etc.) could assist fostering this approach. For the Club staff, their final section was to review the feedback provided by players, and to discuss the practical application of such requests. Additionally, staff reflected on further strategies on the importance of building rapport with Pacific players. Certain key topics were suggested to assist in starting conversations; again based on the preceding cultural context. This included being able to “acknowledge, appreciate and communicate” areas like family commitments, church and community commitments, extracurricular skills and talents, and language skills; including the need to develop verbal articulation skills.

TABLE 1: PREVALENCE OF PACIFIC PLAYERS IN SQUADS

SQUAD	NUMBER OF PLAYERS	PACIFIC PLAYERS	%
National Rugby League (NRL)	450	150	33%
National Youth Competition (NYC)	500	180	36%

TABLE 2: PLAYERS FEEDBACK

	ETHNIC DIVERSITY	RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY	SEXUAL DIVERSITY
Team	<div><div>→ Hungi (socialising)</div><div>→ Kava Session</div><div>→ Sing along/Karaoke</div><div>→ Dancing</div><div>→ Music</div><div>→ Taking initiative to interact</div><div>→ Multicultural Food Days</div><div>→ Multicultural dress</div><div>→ Access natural remedies/healing</div></div>	<div><div>→ Visit churches with fellow players</div><div>→ Respect each other's pre game plans</div><div>→ Prayer time together before game (or respect)</div></div>	<div><div>→ Communicating expectations</div><div>→ Communicate as team</div><div>→ Having good sense of humour</div><div>→ Having access to safe sex resources</div><div>→ Attending events</div></div>
Club	<div><div>→ Help players to interact/mix</div><div>→ Giving adequate time</div><div>→ Family days</div><div>→ Saying names properly</div><div>→ Wear different cultural jerseys</div><div>→ Communicate more effectively</div><div>→ Budget for these resources/activities</div><div>→ Cultural Advisors in teams</div></div>	<div><div>→ Playing staff respecting pre game plan</div><div>→ Finding a balance</div><div>→ Chaplain</div><div>→ Giving appropriate time</div><div>→ Acknowledge different days</div></div>	<div><div>→ Respect people's choices</div><div>→ Sexual health checks</div><div>→ Providing safe sex resources</div></div>

The presentation was designed to be visually engaging, with material being presented by relevant pictures rather than text. Each slide had a practical example to help further nuance the concept being presented, which also included an interactive approach by participants being encouraged to also provide practical examples/insight into their own interaction with Pacific people. Another key feature was a short role-play; where two people volunteer to enact behaviour shown by a player from either a Non Pacific, or Pacific background. This strove to highlight the importance of interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and critical thinking skills, and how diverse ethnic cultures may interact within such behaviour. Within the last section, all participants were given the opportunity to contribute to the start of developing and implementing solutions, with hope that this would continue to promote a more inclusive approach to celebrating diversity within the team itself, and throughout the wider club environment.

It was anticipated that delivering the workshop to the Player group; separate from team coaches and management, would further promote team building, especially with the ebb and flow of new and old players. Commonly, as player's progress within the club, they may take on leadership roles; whereas junior players are still striving to develop a greater understanding of their place in the club. Therefore, having the time to collaborate together as a team, off the field, was part of a bigger strategy to promote more ownership of the goals being formed from this workshop, whilst promoting a level of sustainability based on a genuine interest in being involved.

Similarly, the presentation given separately to the Club staff also promoted the need to develop a greater awareness and understanding of diversity, and the possibility of staff being able to form better relationship with the players. Staff were also encouraged to understand their role as positions of power and authority; and the need to build a connection with Pacific players, whom may not approach people in leadership due to a cultural value around respect. Therefore, learning strategies to build rapport, and support the wider team to foster a more

appreciative attitude towards diversity, was a key feature to building club, and wider organisational capacity in working with cultural differences.

A short evaluation – “5 Quick Questions”, were completed as a means to collect direct feedback from participants on two levels, satisfaction and usefulness. At the same time, collection of this data promoted the opportunity to gauge the willingness of people in each club in undertaking such training in the first place, and their perspective to seeing organisational wide training implemented for overall individual and organisational development. Further review of this data was intended to create a greater understanding of the relational demography occurring between players from diversity, amongst their peers, and how respective parties; along with the clubs in which they operate, promote the opportunity for diversity to be recognised, and celebrated. Adding to this is the scope to review deep level differences and pro active diversity management strategies (Cunningham & Fink 2006) as a means to understand diversity as it interacts, and the way in which people create solutions to responds effectively to such characteristics.

Feedback from Participants

PLAYERS OVERVIEW

In total, 218 responses were collected from NRL players across 8 clubs between March – November 2011. From this data, majority of participants were aged 21 (17%) followed by 22 (12.9%) and 20 (10.1%) years old. This supports the average playing age within the NRL. Half of the participating players had been involved at the elite level for no more than 3 years. Ethnically, 55% identified as being Anglo Australia. A further 26.6% of players were from a Pacific background (Maori, Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, Cook Islander). Again, this cross section of participants further reiterated the racial demographic within the game.

PLAYERS FEEDBACK

On average, players scored the training a 4.42 out of 5 for being 'enjoyable'. Additional responses showed a positive understanding of the intention behind the workshop, and a genuine enjoyment in participating in activities that promoted team perspectives (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: FEEDBACK FROM PLAYERS

[PLAYERS] WHAT DID YOU ENJOY?
"Refreshing – gave me a better understanding about my team mates"
"Bit of fun and a chance for the Island boys to speak up"
"Information, something to be proud of that we have people with ethnic background in our group"
"Was good to know that the NRL care about multicultural players"
"It was good for the boys to learn a bit about how we react around things" <i>(comment from Pacific player)</i>

Overall, near to 90% of participants felt that they had learnt more about Pacific cultural diversity as a result of undertaking the training. Furthermore, when asked individually how they would continue to celebrate diversity in the team, responses included positive comments around developing a sense of team, promoting a greater and shared approach to diversity, and feeling more involved (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: FURTHER PLAYER FEEDBACK

"I will make myself available for group functions to respect other cultures and religions"
"Get together more and communicate"
"Be more open minded and speak my mind" <i>(from Pacific player)</i>
"Listening to others and respect their ways"
"Be aware"
"By embracing my fellow boy"

STAFF OVERVIEW

A total of 194 responses were collected from NRL staff from across 10 clubs between March – November 2011. The majority of participants were from the Marketing (23.1%), followed by Coaching (19.4%) and Training (10.25%) staff. The third highest proportion of staff involved in the training had actively worked in the NRL for either 10 or more years (18%). Most staff had served for three or less years (44.5%).

STAFF FEEDBACK

On average, staff gave the training a '4.55' out of 5 for being 'enjoyable'. Additional responses also given include having a greater insight into cultural perspectives, understanding why certain behaviours are evident in their interaction with players from diverse backgrounds, and profiling difference as something to be embraced, rather than seen as a barrier (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: FEEDBACK FROM STAFF

[PLAYERS] WHAT DID YOU ENJOY?
"Provided a greater understanding of Pacific culture/Islanders and how they respond to different circumstances/situations"
"Culturally enlightening"
"Put a lot of things into perspective"
"Understanding the cultural of not just the western world"
"Valuable insight"
"Can now understand a few dealing I have had with players i.e. eye contact, bowing of head"

Overall, near to 95% of participants felt that they had learnt more about Pacific cultural diversity as a result of undertaking the training; with 67% of this group saying they had learnt 'a lot more'. Furthermore, when asked individually how they would contribute to supporting the club's response to diversity, feedback included having a more professional approach and understanding when dealing with diversity, building a working relationship through conversations that promote a relational attitude, and negotiating work outcomes conducive to other family and community commitments (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: FURTHER FEEDBACK FROM STAFF

"Taught me how to better communicate"
"In the way I speak and communicate with them and their families"
"Relationship building, communication quality therefore more consistent performance"
"Feel more comfortable to approach players"
"Not get angry when they won't talk on camera"
"It will make my choice of player promo's and community work much more educated and effective"

Moving Towards Effective Engagement

DIVERSITY AWARENESS AND PRACTICES

With Australia boasting an ethnically diverse community, it is important that its respective workforce is also responsive to such characteristics. Cross cultural training (CCT) plays an integral role in assisting this process to occur, where management are expected to implement training opportunities that enhance workplace environments that subsequently inform capacity to deal with diversity. In a national report on 'The effectiveness of cross cultural training in the Australian context' (Bean 2006), they found that "underpinning social capital and social cohesion is cultural competence, which can be broadly described as the ability of systems, organisations, professions and individuals to work effectively in culturally diverse environments and situations. Cross-cultural training, which aims to develop the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to interact appropriately and effectively with culturally diverse customers and co-workers, is an important element in the development of cultural competence." (p. 2). Training was seen as a gateway for further opportunities for staff to develop quality service delivery and experience enhanced workforce relations. However, there was a lack of ability for such training, if brief and not monitored for competency afterwards, to create critical self reflection for participants in being able to understand their own culture, and how this may impact on skills one may use to help counteract possible problems that could arise in diverse workplace environments. Further issues may then arise in individuals not feeling competent in consistently dealing with conflict off the back of a lack of understanding caused by diversity. The report does suggest that an effective model for cross cultural training highlights organisational context in understanding diversity, where training material provides individuals to learn how to specifically respond and apply culturally competent professional practice based on actual workplace activities. For example, a client responding negatively to a service

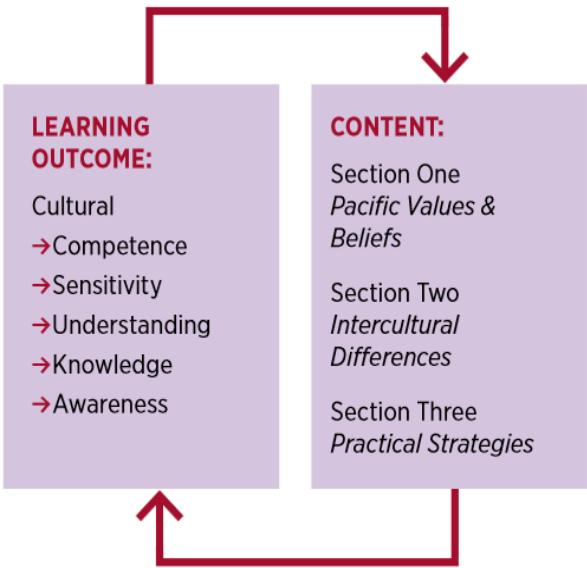
being provided by that organisation may be indicative of a cultural attitude, rather than an individual reaction based on the workers perceived understanding of how they, as a worker, might personally respond. Therefore, training needs to provide individual cultural competence; helping individuals to interact harmoniously with others by enhancing knowledge, alongside a commitment to develop organisational cultural competence; providing skills and resources, in facilitating a streamlined and sustainable response to diversity (Bean 2006).

Importance in developing cultural competency should be hedged around a desire to integrate cultural perspectives, rather than find ways to see them as a problems that needs solving (Chang 2007). As such, should standards be applied to all professional sporting organisations as a means to create a more united, and universal approach to diversity in Australia? And if so, how would this be managed, and more so evaluated for its effectiveness (Spracklen 2006)? Nonetheless, there is an imperative and weighted importance on the future role professional sports people and organisations play in reflecting a societal tolerance, and acceptance of diversity. The commercialisation of sport also offsets this professional image (Phillips & Hutchins 2003), and once again a responsibility needed in catering for diversity which will exists in many shapes and forms across the community.

CULTURAL AWARENESS VS. CULTURAL COMPETENCY

According to taxonomy of cultural competency developed by Lister (1999) cultural awareness is reached through the ability to describe how differences are developed from a particular culture or sub culture. However, for cultural competence to occur, which is seen as a higher learning outcome, people respond sensitively to the needs associated with these differences, providing scope for diversity to be embraced, and not minimised. In between being culturally aware, and culturally competent is the process of developing ‘cultural knowledge’ – becoming familiar with difference and certain inequalities experienced by cultural group, ‘cultural understanding’ – recognising issues people from diverse culture experience when interacting with dominant culture, and ‘cultural sensitivity’ – acknowledges how professional practice, in reference to their own culture, impacts on interactions undertaken with diverse groups. The training package reviewed in this research report provides possible ways in which cultural competency can be developed, off the back of developing an awareness, knowledge, understanding and sensitivity. This was achieved by providing practical strategies, to both players and staff, with further opportunities for review to occur from both the NRL as an organisation, and the clubs in which the training was implemented. In the evaluation, players were asked to think through how they would continue to implement areas of cultural competence through practical activities; further embedding the learning outcomes and endeavour to create a sustainable response.

FIGURE 5: CULTURAL LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CONTENT



Conclusion

Developing player participation and club collaborations through engaging cultural awareness strategies strives towards organisational change. Creating meaningful opportunities for individuals to value their own position, whilst understanding how this impacts on others can also promote a sense of collegiality; and greater purpose in celebrating differences as a valued part of a team, club, organisation and wider community. By adopting a pro-active approach, rather than reactive, management afford staff a greater chance to work more productively and efficiently in resolving possible tensions that may occur as a result of misunderstanding, or limited appreciation for diversity in action. In essence, cultural awareness training enhances the organisational culture of a workplace, whilst esteeming differences to be part of a thriving work environment. But first, one needs to promote an understanding of factors that are diverse, rather than diminish a person's contribution as part of assimilation to the expected dominant norms and values. Therefore, understanding how differences occur, and why this may be case, can then help pave a way for people to work collaboratively rather than use the notion of difference to work against.

As a result of implementing this strategy, the National Rugby League has better positioned Pacific cultural awareness as an integral part of its operations. Further development in creating a Pacific cultural workshop for local and regional sporting high schools in Australia has evolved, with the NRL further supporting other Pacific oriented initiatives within local community groups. The nomination of specific Pacific counsellors to work alongside clubs and players has also occurred, with specific attention towards all counsellors becoming culturally competent. This also includes working more closely with qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counsellors who continue to provide support to both players and club staff in developing a greater competence in working collaboratively with Indigenous communities. A Pacific Advisory Group has also been established, with attention towards the ongoing development of culturally appropriate responses to player welfare and development. Such good practice approaches are now being referenced by

other codes, including the evolving work of Australian Rugby Union (ARU) with the Rugby Union Player Association (RUPA), and National Football League (NFL) in North America. Additionally, the roll-out of Rugby League in the Pacific region further support's organisational commitment to work collaboratively with local clubs, and wider Pacific community.

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