

# Skating Towards Equity: A New Era of Diversity and Inclusion in The NHL

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## **Land and Knowledge Acknowledgment**

This project was developed on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. Recognizing the land as subject to Treaty 13, I extend my respect to the enduring presence and deep-seated knowledge of all Indigenous peoples who inhabit these lands.

As a design strategist, I strive to foster practices that solidify community bonds and advance a future defined by equitable knowledge sharing. Central to this endeavour is the crucial process of learning and unlearning, essential for both personal growth and the integrity of my work. My methodology is committed to shedding detrimental practices in favor of those that cultivate community reciprocity, environmental stewardship, and respect for every voice, with a focused commitment to those voices that have historically been marginalized.

## Abstract

This research examines the ability of the NHL to foster meaningful culture change, particularly through the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). It delves deep into hockey's ethos, evaluating how the NHL is integrating these critical values amidst evolving societal expectations. This exploration delves into the multifaceted role of sports as both a reflection of societal dilemmas and a catalyst for profound transformation.

Emerging from 23 interviews, this study identifies significant societal events – the presidency of Barack Obama, the polarizing elections of 2016 and 2019, the global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the renewed focus on racial injustice following George Floyd's death – as key drivers reshaping DEI strategies in major sports leagues. These events challenged the sports domain to confront its exclusionary legacies, navigate socio-political shifts and commit to a future that is genuinely inclusive and equitable.

This research underscores an urgent need for transformative actions within hockey. Actions that not only challenge but disrupt the status quo. My exploration reveals that the NHL's success in embedding DEI and transforming its culture hinges on a comprehensive strategy that addresses multiple factors at various systemic levels. It highlights the imperative for a coordinated, evolving approach to ensure DEI becomes a permanent facet of the league's identity and operational ethos.

## Dedication

In the world of sports, hockey stands out with unmatched vitality – a game of remarkable speed and precision on ice that captures our fascination and fuels our ambitions. Hockey is an incredible and dynamic display of skill, power, and teamwork, where the glide of the puck on ice echoes with the promise of unity, perseverance, and the exhilaration of competition. This project, driven by the profound impact and transformative potential of the game, is my homage to the enduring passion and resilience that define it.

I extend my deepest gratitude to **Dr. Richard Norman**. Your practice and dedication to advancing social change have been transformative to observe. Through your mentorship, you have masterfully revealed how deeply diversity, equity, and inclusion can resonate within the sports arena, fostering significant and enduring transformations.

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To **my parents**, this achievement belongs as much to you as it does to me.

And **to everyone who shared their story with me**, your commitment to changing the culture of hockey and harnessing the transformative power of sport has been incredibly inspiring. Your voices have been crucial in weaving this narrative of hope and change.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. This journey, with its highs and lows, has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life, and it's all thanks to you.

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## **Statement of Contributions**

All Illustration and design by Sara Wong



# Section 1



The research objective of this study is to assess the National Hockey League's (NHL) aptitude and readiness to foster and apply Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

Here, DEI is depicted not as a dormant checklist awaiting activation during crises but as an active, continuous commitment paralleled with the unyielding quest for hockey excellence. The study draws an analogy between DEI initiatives and strategic maneuvers in hockey, aiming to dismantle systemic obstacles in the way a player would break through a tough defence. The goal is to counteract discriminatory practices and cultivate an environment where everyone, irrespective of their background, can excel. This analogy extends to the vision that every player on the ice should have an equitable chance to influence the game, underscoring the significance of leveraging diverse talents and viewpoints. The primary research question delves into the NHL's organizational capability and potential to lead and embed a culture shift within the ambit of DEI.

The paper portrays the NHL as a potential role model in DEI, suggesting that just as a diverse and well-coordinated hockey team can achieve great success, so too can an organization benefit from a workforce that embraces diverse roles, skills, and tactics. The study also provides a comprehensive analysis of how the NHL can utilize DEI not only to enrich its internal culture but also to mirror and cater to the diverse community of fans, players, and stakeholders. It posits that the league's commitment to DEI transcends mere participation in the sport; it is about revolutionizing the game itself, making hockey, and by extension, society, more inclusive, equitable, and just.

The paper sets the foundation by discussing the dual role of sports as both a mirror to societal issues and a catalyst for change, preparing the ground for an in-depth exploration of the historical context and evolution of DEI within the sports sector. This groundwork facilitates a critical examination of the NHL's DEI framework, scrutinizing the league's strategies and commitment to creating an inclusive environment.

Through foresight techniques such as STEEPV Trend Analysis, the research contextualizes DEI in the broader sports landscape, followed by an in-depth review of the NHL's DEI initiatives using the Innovation Ambition Matrix. The study further explores systemic DEI implementation factors, including stakeholder engagement, system mapping, and needs thematic analysis, shedding light on the underpinnings of DEI dynamics within the NHL.

The application of the Viable System Model (VSM) provides a holistic view of the league's structural and operational mechanisms.

Ultimately, the research provides valuable insights that illuminate both the hurdles and potential paths forward in the NHL's quest for DEI.

It underscores the league's crucial position in setting new standards for inclusivity, framing DEI not merely as an ethical obligation but as a core driver of innovation and deeper community integration. Specifically, it highlights the importance of engaging with communities historically marginalized from the sport and addressing the systemic barriers that continue to exclude many from full participation and enjoyment of hockey.

This involves not just welcoming diverse groups but actively seeking their input, recognizing their unique challenges, and working collaboratively to create a more accessible and welcoming environment within the sport. By doing so, the NHL can transform DEI from a concept discussed in boardrooms to a lived reality that shapes the league's culture, policies, and relationship with fans worldwide.

## The Paradox of Play: How Sports Transform, Shape and Fragment Our World

Sport is transformational, transcending physical activity, embodying a philosophical and psychological platform for profound human transformation (New Deputy Secretary-General, Economic and Social Development Appointed, n.d.). Sport fosters resilience, emotional growth, and social identity, enhancing individuals' ability to navigate adversity and reinforcing communal bonds through shared experiences. Sport challenges and redefines personal and collective boundaries, promoting empathy and mutual respect across cultural divides. It mirrors the existential pursuit of excellence and self-actualization, aligning with the Aristotelian concept of flourishing through virtuous action (Heidegger, 2009). Thus, it serves not just as a reflection of human complexity but as a catalyst for personal virtue, social cohesion, and a deeper comprehension of the human condition.

The paradox of sports – as mediums that both unite and divide – illuminates the complex interplay between sports and societal norms. Sport embodies the unique duality of being both a sanctuary of leisure and a crucible of professional competition, where the pursuit of excellence, and dedication bridges the gap between play and performance. It's a realm where the joy of games meets the rigour of the arena, blending the love of participation with the drive for achievement (Sares, 2007). This dynamic reveals the dual role of sports as platforms for showcasing human potential and as mirrors reflecting the entrenched inequalities that pervade society. By acknowledging the disparities magnified by sports, the NHL is called upon to critically engage with sports as both arenas of celebration and sites of struggle. This engagement challenges both front and back offices to leverage their unifying power while confronting and addressing the systemic inequalities they reveal.

Nelson Mandela, the revered former President of South Africa and a symbol of unity and reconciliation, poignantly articulated the power of sports to inspire and unite in his 2000 speech in Monaco. He emphasized that “sports speak a universal language, reaching across cultural and societal boundaries to touch hearts and minds” (Laureus, 2020). This notion captures the essence of sports as more than physical contests; they are profound expressions of collective identity and unity.

Global sport events draw billions into a shared experience of enthusiasm and support, showcasing sports' unparalleled ability to bring people together. Yet, this unifying force contrasts sharply with sports capacity to reveal and magnify societal disparities. Scholarly research underscores how sports reflect broader societal inequities, highlighting divisions based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability. These disparities manifest in access to sports programs, media representation, and leadership within sports organizations, serving as a stark reminder of the work that remains in the quest for equality (Evans et al., 2020).

Building upon the intricate dynamics explored between sports and societal norms, my research, which delves into the NHL's capacity to implement DEI initiatives that aim to transform hockey culture. The core of DEI work within corporations is the strategic dismantling of racism and discrimination, coupled with educating on its extensive socio-economic and psychological ramifications and systemic roots. Despite the sophisticated and pervasive nature of oppression, the battle against it must remain relentless. Through targeted interventions within the hockey ecosystem, leveraging critical points and catalyzing systemic feedback loops, this research highlights the profound capacity of sports, particularly the NHL, to reshape, challenge, and revolutionize cultural norms. It delves into the NHL's DEI initiatives, probing their potential to enact cultural transformation, thereby underlining sports' unparalleled power to influence global change.

Within my interviews, I discovered another paradox, that being the reconciling of commercial objectives and DEI imperatives. When several franchise owners and senior

executive staff were asked how they have been able to reconcile the commercial objectives of their organizations with the ethical implications of DEI implementation, the perspectives gathered revealed a spectrum of responses to this challenge:

**The Ongoing Quest for Balance:** A segment of leaders acknowledged the complexity of integrating DEI with commercial goals, indicating they are still in the process of figuring it out. They view DEI and commercial objectives through a lens of mutual exclusivity or competition for resources, leading to a continuous search for an elusive equilibrium.

“If you assume that we figured it out, I mean, that is ongoing, I would want to say this is ongoing. I think every sports team and every company that claims to care about this has to grapple with it. I think some do it better than others, but it’s hard because, you know, I look at like different leagues, for example. I mean, we’re not even part of the whole. So, at the same time, like our economic model, which I don’t understand as well as well as others, how it compares to other leagues, but I do know the NFL is just like printing money, you know, so, and they have a lot of players who represent. So when they say let’s do an effort, we’ll just contribute \$500,000 to this effort, and it’s like, you know, it’s a blip on the balance sheet, whereas other organizations, when you’re like, okay, we need to invest in this, it’s a harder decision.” (Interview 1)

**Inseparability of DEI and Commercial Success:** Contrarily, another faction argues for the inseparability of DEI from commercial success, advocating that the two are not just complementary but essential to each other. From this viewpoint, DEI is seen as a driver of innovation, employee satisfaction, and customer loyalty – all of which are critical to long-term profitability and market relevance. This school of thought posits that diverse and inclusive work environments foster a broader range of ideas, solutions, and talents, which in turn enhances organizational agility and responsiveness to market dynamics.

“I guess I don’t have to reconcile them because I don’t see them as mutually exclusive. I think that when you are doing the right thing, it is good for your business. So to me, they’re one, it’s the same. I think, how you show up to work is as important as the results you generate. So for us as we think about social issues as an example. If we treat people the right way, if we make sure we have the right partners, we include them, we listen to them, and we understand them, then down the road, the P&L takes care of itself, right? They become customers in some way, whether they’re following you on social media or they’re buying your product or they’re buying your retail.” (Interview 2)

“Never one over the other. Recognize there is room for all in hockey – all backgrounds. It’s popular to spend time with loyal fans but the mental model is to grow the game.” (Interview 3)

**Decision-by-Decision Approach:** Some executives and franchise owners adopt a pragmatic, decision-by-decision approach, weighing the commercial and DEI implications of each decision as separate but intertwined considerations. This perspective reflects a nuanced understanding of the complex interdependencies between ethical commitments to DEI and the imperative to achieve financial objectives. It suggests a tailored, context-sensitive strategy where decisions are made with an awareness of both the immediate commercial impact and the long-term ethical implications.

“When suggesting DEI initiatives, it’s vital that they resonate with all parties involved – corporate, community, fans, or partners. It’s about presenting solutions that meet the institution where it’s at, promoting commercial growth while also addressing the needs of diverse community members we want to engage more closely with. We must be careful; if we promote inclusion in ways that don’t align with our business, it could backfire. It’s all about meeting individuals where they are and assisting them on their journey towards inclusion. Understanding the business space you’re in allows you to find solutions that advance social advocacy and the inclusion of others in a way that also makes business sense.” (Interview 4)

Reconciling commercial objectives with the ethical imperatives of DEI initiatives presents a multifaceted paradox hinging on navigating the often perceived tension between pursuing financial performance and committing to DEI principles. The essence of this dilemma lies in integrating DEI strategies not as ancillary or external to business goals but as integral to achieving sustainable commercial success. **The ongoing quest for balance** underscores the challenges of operationalizing DEI within traditional business models. **The view of DEI as inseparable from commercial success** reflects a transformative approach, redefining success to include social and ethical dimensions. **The decision-by-decision approach** highlights the tactical realities of navigating this complex terrain, suggesting a flexible, adaptive strategy.

In summary, the paradox of reconciling commercial objectives with DEI imperatives surfaces a critical dialogue about the role of ethics in the business of sport and the potential for DEI to be a catalyst for organizational and societal change. It reveals the evolving understanding of business success, where financial performance and ethical commitments are increasingly seen as interdependent rather than mutually exclusive (Byrd & Sparkman, 2022).

### **Historical Context: Sports as a Mirror and North Star**

The history of sports is a compelling narrative of societal change and transformation. From the desegregation of baseball with Jackie Robinson to the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics (Atlanta News First, 2022), sports have mirrored society’s struggles and aspirations. Each epoch of sports history offers a unique perspective on the prevailing social issues of its time, serving both as a mirror reflecting societal norms and as a guiding north star toward a more inclusive future.

Before the seismic events of 2020 that included a global pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, sports had already been a platform for social justice advocacy, albeit in more subdued forms. Instances like Muhammad Ali’s stand against the Vietnam War (Mullen, 2021) and the NFL’s handling of Colin Kaepernick’s protest against police brutality (Boren, 2020) exemplify this. These moments, though significant, were often isolated, highlighting the ongoing struggle for equality and recognition within the sports arena. These moments emphasize that sports can serve as a roadblock or a vehicle for social change, a testament to their dual nature in reflecting and driving societal norms (Sport, 2023).

The tragic murder of George Floyd, marked by the harrowing video footage of a police officer’s knee on his neck, while he cried out for his mother became another signal of racial injustice. This event, occurring amidst a devastating global pandemic, sparked an unprecedented response from the sports world. Athletes, teams, and leagues took bold stances, using their platforms to advocate for change and social justice (Chisam, 2019).

This period of upheaval and reflection coincided with one of the most contested presidential elections in the United States, further intensifying the already deeply divided socio-political environment. These events served as potent drivers of change,

influencing not just public discourse but also the strategic directions of major sports leagues amidst sociopolitical and cultural upheaval.

In the following sections, we will explore how major sports leagues met these winds of cultural change. We will unpack the drivers and trends that emerged, examining their impact on each leagues' approach to DEI. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between sports, society, and cultural transformation, highlighting the evolving role of sports organizations like the NHL in this new era.

## **Historical Roots and Contemporary Realities: Tracing the Evolution of DEI**

Today, more than any ever sport has entered the age of social causes, and consequently has invested in programs that counter racism, homophobia, and educate young people about mental illness, anxiety and social isolation, and how to manage them better. Sport enterprises are now often multifunctional, where service to members is one among many of their civic responsibilities. Furthering their complexity as multibillion dollar revenue generating, international organizations, players and their positionalities are there as well (Skinner & Stewart, 2017). Amid this backdrop of evolving sports organizations, the transition towards a more inclusive and equitable landscape serves as a pivotal chapter in their history.

The journey towards DEI has arguably spanned over a century (Ness, 2004), characterized by crucial legislative milestones and executive decisions aimed at breaking down systemic barriers and enhancing inclusivity across all sectors. This historical trajectory, from the early establishment of the Women's Bureau in 1920 (Research Guides: Rosie the Riveter: Working Women and World War II: The Women's Bureau, n.d.) to significant acts like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Rauh, n.d.) and the recent *Bostock v. Clayton Co.* ruling in 2020 (*Bostock V. Clayton County, Georgia* - Ballotpedia, n.d.), highlights the enduring efforts to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion into the very essence of American societal and organizational frameworks. These milestones not only reflect a commitment to these values but also signal the evolving landscape within which entities like the NHL navigate, continually adapting and redefining their roles in fostering an inclusive hockey culture.

Within the corporate organizational context, DEI transcends being merely a contemporary issue, evolving into an indispensable framework integral to cultivating cultures that prioritize fairness and inclusivity. This paradigm shift towards embedding DEI principles at the heart of corporate strategies is propelled by the recognition that diverse workforces necessitate equitable systems and inclusive practices to fully leverage their potential. Far from being an abstract ideal, DEI's implementation directly impacts organizational effectiveness, driving innovation, enhancing employee engagement, and fostering a competitive edge in the global marketplace (Verhulst & DeCenzo, 2022). At its core, DEI aims to address and support the myriad needs of a diverse workforce. It is a deliberate strategy aimed at cultivating an environment where every employee, irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or any other distinguishing characteristic, feels valued, supported, and integral to the organizational fabric (McKinsey & Co., 2022). By embracing DEI, organizations commit to a comprehensive plan that not only acknowledges the varied backgrounds and perspectives of their workforce but actively engages in practices that ensure equitable treatment and foster a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing organizational efficacy and morale.

This process not only accelerates wicked problem resolution but also propels the organization towards more holistic and effective strategies (Pieterse et al., 2013). Many corporate studies have reported that companies with effective DEI programs perform better than those without DEI programs. For instance, McKinsey and Co.'s 2022 study

shows that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity in executive teams were 25 percent more likely to be profitable than companies in the fourth quartile. Inclusive teams can make better decisions up to 87 percent of the time. Companies with above-average diversity produced a greater proportion of revenue from innovation (45% of total) than from companies with below (Levine, 2020). Companies with ethnic and gender diversities tend to outperform those that do not by 35 percent and 15 percent, respectively (McKinsey and Co., 2022). Approximately one-third of companies that have embraced DEI have financially pulled ahead of their competition. The research from “Great Place To Work” indicates that diverse and inclusive teams are essential for fostering innovation across all sectors. Organizations that embrace a variety of perspectives, including differences in ethnicity, gender, age, and educational background, are more likely to experience higher innovation rates (Clarke, 2023).

To effectively assess the NHL’s role in advancing DEI, it’s important to develop a visual timeline of key social movements over the last decade. This helps to contextualize the NHL’s initiatives within a broader context of societal calls for change. By connecting the NHL’s efforts to pivotal movements shown in figure 1, such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and The Truth and Reconciliation the league’s commitment to active engagement and leadership in these areas is emphasized. This approach underscores the pressing need for the NHL to champion DEI, aligning its legacy with the ongoing progress of social change.

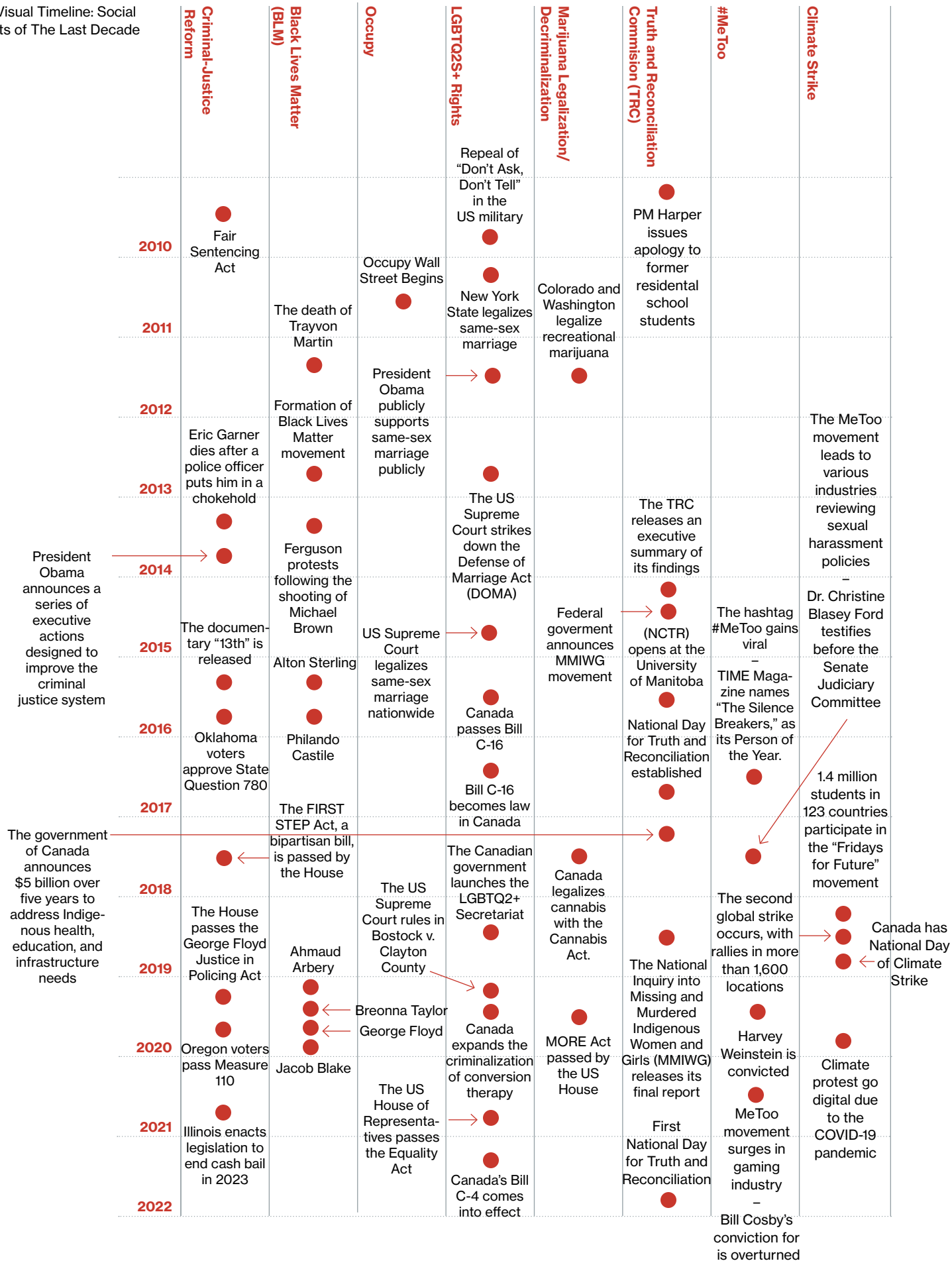
As the DEI framework broadens, incorporating insights from scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (Collins et al., 2021) and W. E. B. Du Bois (Braveman et al., 2022), it underscores the complexity of discrimination across various social identities. This evolution sets the stage for examining the role of major league sports organizations. These entities, beyond their entertainment value, mirror and influence societal issues, making them pivotal arenas for DEI initiatives. Their significant cultural and media presence offers a unique opportunity to challenge and reshape societal norms, emphasizing the crucial role these organizations play in advancing social justice and equality.

Major league sport organizations are archetypal systems of power, commanding influence that extend far beyond the boundaries of their playing fields (Parent et al., 2021). They are not merely entertainment platforms; rather, they are microcosms of broader societal dynamics, where issues of race, gender, and class are played out in real time. The visibility and reach of those organizations position them as formidable social institutions where norms are established and cultural narratives are crafted. Given their extensive media presence and the emotional investment of their fan base, they wired an extraordinary capacity to shape societal attitudes and public discourse.

In the DEI landscape, major league sports organizations hold a pivotal role at the intersection of commerce, culture, and community, wielding the influence to drive societal and systemic change. Their commitment to DEI can establish new standards, shaping norms within and beyond the sports industry. Highlighting the entrenched nature of institutional racism, as discussed by scholars like Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Patricia Williams reveal the critical need for these entities to actively dismantle barriers. By addressing racism not only within their structures but also in broader societal contexts, sports organizations significantly contribute to combating racial inequalities and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society (Appendix B: Glossary | Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

Evaluating the NHL’s dedication to DEI necessitates a deep dive into the nuanced historical context and the ongoing dialogue in DEI discourse, informed by seminal scholars like Crenshaw, Collins, Bonilla-Silva, and Hooks. Their work sheds light on the wicked problem of racism and discrimination – a multifaceted challenge that resists simple solutions and demands a strategic, knowledge-driven response to uproot systemic barriers. These barriers are not just vestiges of a bygone era; they are active elements of institutional racism and white supremacy, deeply embedded in the societal fabric.

**Figure 1** Visual Timeline: Social Movements of The Last Decade





The scholarly foundation they provide helps to decode the complexities of this wicked problem, emphasizing the urgency of crafting and implementing strategic actions that can effectively intervene and dismantle these entrenched structures. It is a formidable endeavor to foster a society that is not just diverse, equitable, and inclusive in name, but in action and essence. By engaging with these critical perspectives, the sports industry – and particularly the NHL – can better navigate the intricacies of DEI and move towards creating environments where diversity is genuinely celebrated. In such spaces, equity becomes a deliberate pursuit, not a checkbox or afterthought, and inclusion is woven into the very fabric of organizational culture, ensuring that every individual feels valued and integral to the collective identity. This evolution within the NHL mirrors a broader shift within the sports world, where DEI considerations are increasingly recognized as central to both integrity and success.

Bridging theoretical foundations with actionable insights, we transition from understanding DEI's challenges in sports to exploring how these concepts are being dynamically applied to foster tangible change.

### **DEI in Sports Contexts: A Multidimensional Challenge of DEI**

In the realm of major league sports, DEI in sports context presents a multidimensional challenge, where principles of DEI are paramount. These initiatives and practices are dedicated to enhancing representation and participation across diverse groups and individuals thus impacting organizational culture. DEI in its broad sense refers to initiatives and practices directed at fostering representation and the active involvement of varied groups and individuals. These core principles highlight critical dimensions essential for cultivating vibrant, productive environments across different contexts (Arsel et al., 2021). These concepts form the bedrock for building organizational cultures that not only value differences but also systematically address disparities and ensure an inclusive and equitable atmosphere for everyone involved (Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity – Article – Faculty & Research – Harvard Business School, n.d.-b).

My research question seeks to understand the ability of the NHL to implement DEI. The research examines how the league is not only striving to address systemic inequalities but also to foster an environment that values and promotes diversity at all levels.

Ibram X. Kendi's "How to Be an Antiracist" (Kendi, 2019) challenges existing frameworks and proposes a radical restructuring of the systems that perpetuate inequality. In relation to my research, Kendi's emphasis on proactive anti-racist policies provides a foundational model for sports organizations like the NHL to shift from passive non-racism to active interventions.

Dr. Richard Lapchick's advocacy for racial and gender equity in sports hiring practices offers concrete examples of the kind of systemic changes needed to align hiring practices with DEI principles, reinforcing the argument for comprehensive policy revisions in sports organizations, like the NHL (Home | TIDES, n.d.).

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theories on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2019) and critical race (Crenshaw et al., 1995) offer vital perspectives on the multifaceted identities of athletes and employees. My research benefits from her insights by exploring how sports organizations, like the NHL can recognize and accommodate the overlapping social identities within their teams, leading to more effective DEI strategies.

Dr. Harry Edwards' work on the empowerment of black athletes and their influence on social justice movements illuminates the sports field as a significant platform for societal change. This underscores a key point in my research: the role of sport organizations like the NHL in supporting athletes' advocacy is not just beneficial but necessary for true societal progress in DEI (Harry Edwards | Centre for Sports and Human Rights, n.d.).

Finally, Dr. Amira Rose Davis's historical analysis of race and gender narratives in sports (Weldon, 2021) provides a contextual backdrop for current DEI initiatives, reminding us that understanding the past is essential for shaping future strategies. Beverly Tatum's exploration of racial identity development (Tatum, 1992) within sports settings informs my research by highlighting the specific support systems that minority groups in sports require, advocating for tailored DEI approaches.

In summary, each piece of literature contributes a unique and critical viewpoint that supports my research question, providing both the historical context and the contemporary strategies necessary to forge more inclusive and equitable sports organizations. The advancement of DEI within the NHL mirrors a broader shift within the sports world, where DEI considerations are increasingly recognized as central to both integrity and success.

The collective advocacy of thought leaders such as Kendi, Lapchick, Crenshaw, and Edwards, has laid the groundwork for DEI strategies that are not only multifaceted and historically informed but also keenly attuned to the subtleties of intersectionality. Their scholarship compels a departure from cursory diversity metrics and token gestures, advocating instead for significant, transformative change throughout the sports industry and beyond (Crenshaw, 2019, Crenshaw et al., 1995, Home | TIDES, n.d., Kendi, 2019, Harry Edwards | Centre for Sports and Human Rights, n.d). Their systemic approach to DEI enriches our understanding and provokes us to consider both the profound systemic barriers and the intricate nature of individual identities when devising effective DEI strategies.

In sports, where the prominence and influence of athletes and organizations are immense, the insights of these thought leaders serve as a foundational schema for dissecting the complexities of DEI. They underscore the need for a coordinated, historically-aware, and intersectionality-informed approach that cultivates environments where diversity is actively celebrated, equity is intentionally sought, and inclusion is seamlessly woven into the organizational fabric. The theoretical and practical intersections they present serve as critical intervention points for DEI implementation, offering a series of feedback loops and strategies to guide the industry towards intentional, systemic reform (Peachey et al., 2019).

Ultimately, the effectiveness of DEI initiatives is reflected in the work of these scholars and activists. Their call to action encourages a move beyond superficial engagement with DEI, fostering a more comprehensive approach to eradicating inequities and nurturing spaces that are inclusive at their core – both within the sporting arena and the broader societal context. Acknowledging a spectrum of DEI perspectives accentuates the urgency of transitioning from performative support to authentic systemic transformation, mirroring a dedication to reshaping societal standards and realizing genuine inclusivity.

These scholars encapsulate the deep, tactical, and urgently needed insights within the DEI discourse, presenting a diverse array of strategic viewpoints and intervention strategies. Their perspectives inform a robust framework for actionable DEI measures, delineating both the challenges and opportunities for implementing change that is not only effective but also enduring. Ibram X. Kendi's work necessitates the establishment of continuous feedback loops that prompt regular self-assessment and policy updates within sports organizations. Kendi would advocate for DEI interventions such as real-time monitoring of recruitment, retention, and promote data disaggregated by race and gender to identify patterns of bias and prompt immediate corrective action (Kendi, 2019).

Richard Lapchick emphasizes intervention strategies that target the recruitment and hiring processes. He suggests implementing scorecards and benchmarks for racial and gender representation at all levels of sports organizations. These would not only track progress but also hold management accountable, creating a feedback mechanism that encourages constant improvement (Home | TIDES, n.d.).

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality calls for intervention strategies that address the layered experiences of individuals, such as creating support programs that cater to the unique challenges faced by women of color in sports, both as athletes and as part of the workforce. These programs would benefit from feedback loops that continuously adapt to the evolving understanding of intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 2019, Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Dr. Harry Edwards points to the need for sports organizations to create platforms where athletes can voice concerns and contribute to social justice causes. This could take the form of intervention strategies like athlete-led DEI committees that provide direct feedback to the organization, ensuring that initiatives remain responsive and relevant to the athletes' experiences and societal developments (Harry Edwards | Centre for Sports and Human Rights, n.d.).

Dr. Amira Rose Davis's historical perspective suggests the implementation of educational programs that inform current policy and practice (Weldon, 2021). An intervention strategy here would be the creation of history-based training modules that address past injustices, with feedback systems in place to measure how this historical awareness impacts organizational culture and policies.

Beverly Tatum's exploration of racial identity development within sports settings could lead to intervention strategies like mentorship programs for young minority athletes, designed with input from the athletes themselves to ensure they are meeting their needs, thus establishing a loop that reinforces positive identity development and inclusion (Tatum, 1992).

By weaving these theorists' perspectives into tangible DEI actions within sports organizations, we see a pattern of proactive engagement, reflective adjustment, and persistent evolution towards a more inclusive and equitable industry. Each intervention is enriched by feedback loops that encourage constant learning and adaptation, ensuring that DEI efforts are not static but are living processes that grow with the organization and its people.

## Hockey at Crossroads

Arguably the NHL stands on a 'burning platform' of DEI; a crisis point. The NHL is at a pivotal crossroads where the imperative is clear: transform to embrace DEI wholeheartedly or risk the league's reputation, cultural relevance.

Every move by the NHL is magnified against the backdrop of societal shifts toward greater inclusivity, with fans, players, and stakeholders demanding more than just performative gestures. Every move by the NHL is magnified against the backdrop of societal shifts toward greater inclusivity, with fans, players, and stakeholders demanding more than just performative gestures.

As the NHL finds itself on a burning platform, where its influence in the realm of DEI risks withering away, every decision becomes pivotal. Much like power plays in hockey, each DEI initiative represents an opportunity to capitalize on an advantage and drive meaningful progress. Now, let's explore how these strategic moves are taking shape.

### Heightened Leadership and Representation Efforts

The NHL is the central governing entity that shapes the broader culture and policies that influence individual teams' decisions. However, teams retain the autonomy to implement their own strategies within the league's regulatory scope. The progressive appointments within individual teams are a testament to their independent commitment to inclusivity, reflecting a shift in the internal culture and a response to the evolving societal expectations of representation in sports leadership.

The NHL's overarching programs, like 'Hockey is for Everyone', serve as a league-wide framework to promote diversity and inclusion. Yet, it's the individual teams that breathe life into these principles through actionable hires and policies. While teams like the San Jose Sharks set a precedent for others, the league bolsters these efforts by aligning its policy and cultural evolution with societal progress. This synergy between the league's vision and the teams' execution is pivotal in driving the sport toward an era where diversity in leadership becomes the norm rather than the exception.

**Political and Social Tensions:**

Recent years have seen the NHL increasingly caught in the crosshairs of political and social debates. The league's response to the Black Lives Matter movement, especially during the 2020 playoffs, was a focal point of contention. Its decision to use the slogan "End Racism" instead of explicitly supporting "Black Lives Matter" drew criticism for not directly addressing the core issues of racial injustice ("Dumba Kneels, NHL Puts Focus on Black Lives Matter Movement | AP News," 2021). This approach highlighted the NHL's delicate balancing act between embracing social activism and maintaining its traditional fan base.

**DEI Training and Its Complexity:**

The league's introduction of immersive DEI training in locker rooms marks a monumental effort to change the mindset from the ground up. This initiative, however, unfolds against the backdrop of a sport traditionally marked by homogeneity and resistance to change, adding layers of complexity and intensity to the endeavor.

**Controversies Sparking Emotional Debates:**

The NHL's commitment to DEI has been thrust into the limelight, stirring passionate debates. Incidents like the clash with Florida's governor over a diversity-focused job fair and the league's defense of the transgender community on social media have ignited fiery discussions. These controversies highlight the deep-seated cultural rifts within the sport and society, mirroring the broader societal struggles around inclusion and equity.

**The NHL's Challenging Path Forward:**

The NHL is a deeply complex integrated network of rinks, sports, media, and markets (Ross, 2015), with a game like no other at the heart of the enterprise (Jenish, 2013). In this emotionally charged atmosphere, the NHL's actions carry immense significance. Each decision, statement, and policy becomes a pivotal moment, potentially reshaping the league's identity and its influence in the larger cultural narrative. The NHL's journey through this turbulent landscape of DEI challenges is more than a story of a sports league adapting to changing times; it's a reflection of a society grappling with its own evolving identity and values. It is a story of a major sports league looking to embed DEI in the fabric of its operations, in the most practical and impactful way.

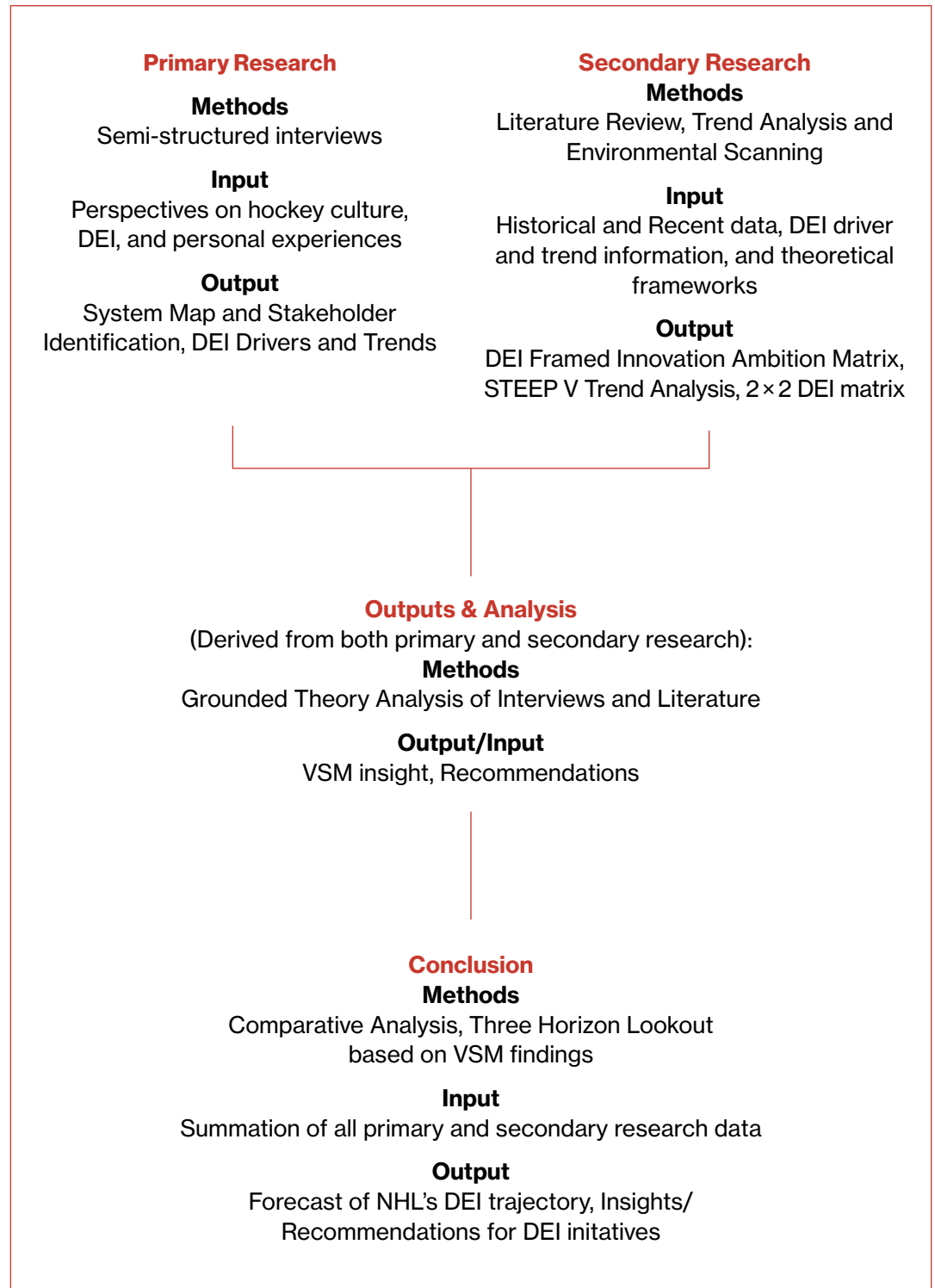
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As the NHL navigates this critical juncture, the world watches intently. The league's ability to successfully address its DEI challenges and transform its culture will not only redefine the future of hockey but also signify a significant step in the broader journey towards a more inclusive and equitable world. The stakes are high, and the emotional resonance of this journey will undoubtedly leave a lasting impact on the sport and its community.

This research scrutinizes the NHL's efforts to weave DEI into its fabric, underscoring the league's pivotal role in societal progression through sport. To deepen the analysis and magnify its impact, it's essential to pinpoint the NHL's specific DEI challenges,

## Methodology, Scope, and Approach

Figure 2 Research Inputs and Outputs



benchmark against other sports leagues, engage with varied stakeholder viewpoints, assess the impact of current DEI measures for enhancement, and anticipate future DEI trajectories. Such a multifaceted approach not only sharpens our understanding of the NHL's DEI dynamics but also charts a course for meaningful, enduring change in creating a more inclusive and equitable sports culture.

## Introduction

Over a period of 15 weeks, I conducted 23 interviews. These were strategically designed to explore the complex dynamics of DEI within the NHL and the broader sports domain.

### Methodological Approach

#### Demographic and Professional Diversity

- The interviewees predominantly consisted of executive and senior professionals from within the NHL, ensuring an authoritative and introspective look at the league's internal DEI strategies and culture.
- Complementing this a small group of the participants were drawn from a broader spectrum, encompassing other major sports leagues, sport historians, sport journalists, and a sport documentary filmmaker in the field of hockey. This deliberate inclusion of diverse external perspectives enriches the comparative analysis and broadens the scope of understanding beyond the NHL's ecosystem.

#### Inclusive Representation

- The demographic constitution of the interviewees, though not quantified in specific percentages, was intentionally varied. It included balanced representation of male and female, and ethnicities which was pivotal for examining the multifaceted implications of DEI initiatives.
- This inclusive approach underscores the importance of intersectionality in understanding the complex layers of identity and experience within the sports sector.

#### Analytical Framework

- Internal vs. External Perspectives:  
By juxtaposing insights from within the NHL with those from external observers and experts, the research offers a comparative analysis that highlights both the unique challenges faced by the NHL and the universal themes in DEI across sports disciplines.

#### Cross-Disciplinary Insights

- Incorporating academic theories, historical contexts, and perspectives of researchers and historians, the study enriches the discourse with a robust intellectual grounding, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution and current state of DEI in sports.

#### Qualitative Depth

- The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for an explorative and dynamic conversation, facilitating a deeper understanding of nuanced perspectives and unearthing subtle yet critical insights into DEI practices in the NHL.

**Introduction**

**Impact and Contribution**

This research sheds light on the complex dynamics of DEI within major sports leagues, enriching the academic and practical discourse on inclusivity in sports management. It offers valuable, context-specific insights with wide applicability, advancing the pursuit of equity and inclusion in the sports industry and beyond.

**Figure 3** Research Framework

<b>Methodology</b>	In this research, Grounded Theory was employed to gather and scrutinize interview data, aiming to capture the essence of DEI dynamics within the NHL. This systematic approach allowed for a deep dive into the prevalent conditions and practices of DEI. Simultaneously, employing Narrative Inquiry enabled the incorporation of rich, personal stories from members of the NHL community, marrying subjective experiences with the gathered objective data. This dual-method approach unfolded within the contours of the Double Diamond design framework, facilitating a structured yet expansive exploration of DEI concepts, thereby illuminating the processes behind DEI's development and execution in the NHL.
<b>Research Paradigm</b>	The research paradigm guiding my study on DEI in the NHL blends both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to address complex, real-world issues. This paradigm recognizes the value of diverse perspectives and methodologies in understanding the multifaceted nature of DEI. By employing both Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry, my approach transcends the traditional boundaries of positivist and interpretivist paradigms, aiming for a more holistic understanding of how the NHL's DEI initiatives are conceptualized, implemented, and experienced within the NHL's unique cultural and organizational context.
<b>Research Pedagogy</b>	In my research on DEI in the NHL, I embrace a pedagogy centered on experiential and reflective learning. This involves actively engaging with a variety of perspectives, both through in-depth interviews and narrative explorations, as well as thorough analysis of data and literature. My approach is highly interactive and interpretive, allowing me to continuously integrate new insights into my understanding. This dynamic learning process, where theory and practice inform each other, is crucial for navigating the complexities of DEI within the ever-evolving landscape of professional sports.
<b>Primary and Secondary Research Process</b>	My research into DEI within the NHL combined primary and secondary methods for a comprehensive view. I engaged with NHL senior leaders for firsthand DEI insights and expanded this inquiry to other major sports leagues for a broader perspective. Complementing this, I reviewed scholarly literature and industry reports to contextualize findings. This dual approach empowered me to grasp DEI strategies across the sports sector, uncovering existing practices and pinpointing opportunities for continued advancement of DEI.
<b>Analysis and Tools</b>	In my analysis of DEI within the NHL, we employed a multifaceted methodological approach, integrating semi-structured interviews, exhaustive literature reviews, and a suite of analytical tools tailored to dissect the complex DEI landscape. Utilizing the 2x2 matrix and STEEPV Trend Analysis, we identified key DEI drivers and trends, while the Innovation Ambition Matrix provided a framework for categorizing DEI initiatives according to their scope and impact. System mapping enabled us to visualize the intricate web of interactions within the NHL ecosystem, enhancing our understanding of DEI dynamics. Stakeholder identification and needs analysis were pivotal in pinpointing critical DEI stakeholders and elucidating their specific requirements and challenges. Further, the DEI-Framed Innovation Ambition Matrix was instrumental in evaluating existing DEI efforts and crafting targeted strategic interventions. Together, these methods and tools equipped us to conduct a thorough and insightful analysis, laying the groundwork for actionable DEI strategies within the NHL.

Figure 4 Methodology

<b>Double Diamond Framework</b>	The Double Diamond framework involves four phases – Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver. It is used to tackle complex problems by expanding and contracting the problem space through divergent and convergent thinking stages. I adopted the framework to structure my workflow process.
<b>Design Odyssey Framework</b>	The Design Odyssey framework is a strategic and iterative approach to design. I adopted the framework when structuring my research plan as it emphasizes a structured exploratory process that allows for continuous adaptation, and learning as new insights are discovered. The framework represents a quest to uncover deep insights, challenge assumptions and explore a wide range of solutions to complex problems.
<b>Grounded Theory</b>	Grounded Theory is a research method that focuses on developing theories from interview data, allowing new insights to emerge without starting with preconceived hypotheses. This method was utilized to facilitate the discovery of insights from interviews conducted.
<b>Narrative Inquiry</b>	In this study, I utilized Narrative Inquiry within semi-structured interviews to deeply explore the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) experiences of individuals in the NHL community. This approach enabled participants to share their personal stories, providing rich insights into the DEI landscape. By combining the flexibility of semi-structured interviews with the depth of narrative inquiry, we captured complex personal experiences, uncovering nuanced understandings of DEI challenges and achievements in the NHL. This method proved essential in revealing the emotional and experiential dimensions of DEI, offering a comprehensive and empathetic view of its impact within the league.
<b>Viable System Model (VSM)</b>	The VSM is a framework used for analyzing organizations as complex, adaptive systems. My utilization of the VSM to the NHL helped me dissect its organizational structure, decision making processes, how the organization interacts within its internal and external environment, and most importantly in the context of this research, the NHL's capability to develop and implement DEI.
<b>Systems Thinking</b>	System thinking is an approach to problem solving that views issues as part of a broader, interconnected system rather than isolated incidents. Applying this perspective enabled me to analyze the NHL not just as an entity but as part of a larger societal and economic ecosystem.
<b>Stakeholder Identification</b>	I identified stakeholders through a comprehensive process that involved environmental scanning and literature reviews. This approach allowed me to pinpoint key individuals and groups within the NHL ecosystem whose interests and influences were critical to the success of DEI initiatives that can change hockey culture.
<b>Thematic Analysis</b>	Thematic analysis is a qualitative research methodology that I used for exploring the NHL's DEI efforts. It involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within interview data. By meticulously organizing and interpreting rich textual data, I gained profound insights into the cultural narratives and values embedded in the NHL's DEI initiatives. This method allowed me to capture the emotional and ideological essences that drive the league's strategies, revealing not just the effectiveness of these efforts, but also their resonance with broader societal aspirations for change and justice. Thematic analysis, not only shed light on the 'what' and 'how' of the NHL's DEI actions but also delves into the 'why', offering a deeper understanding of the league's commitment to shaping a more inclusive and equitable sports culture.
<b>DEI Framed Innovation Ambition Matrix (IAM):</b>	The IAM is a strategic tool that categorizes innovations into three types based on their market impact and novelty: core innovations (enhance existing products for current customers), adjacent innovations (expand into new markets or sectors using existing capabilities), and transformational innovations (develop breakthrough products or services for new markets). Adapted the tool based on DEI initiatives to highlight approaches to DEI taken across NHL franchises.
<b>Foresight Techniques</b>	Foresight techniques are a collection of methodologies used to explore and anticipate future developments. Methods such as trend analysis, and environmental scanning, are used to plan for future developments and challenges with regard to how DEI is being implemented across some of the major league sports.
<b>3 Horizon Lookout</b>	Upon a VSM assessment, recommendations were cast across three separate time horizons. Immediate Horizon (H1), Medium Horizon (H2), and Long-term Horizon (H3).
<b>Sensemaking</b>	Sensemaking is an insightful qualitative research methodology that focuses on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences. It's particularly useful in understanding complex organizational behaviors and cultural shifts, such as those involved in the NHL's DEI initiatives. By exploring how stakeholders within the NHL perceive and react to DEI efforts, I uncovered the narratives and frameworks that shape their attitudes and actions.



**Introduction**

Transitioning from an in-depth exploration of the research methodologies employed to assess the NHL's capacity and willingness to implement DEI strategies and effect cultural change, we pivot towards the tangible outcomes and innovations emerging within the broader sports industry. Shifting from the theoretical underpinnings and procedural groundwork, this next section delves into the real-world applications and the evolving landscape of DEI within the sports realm, providing a bridge between methodological rigour and practical execution.

# Section 2



Building on this shift, we delve into the specific strategies marking the forefront of DEI efforts in sports. This section evaluates strategic DEI advancements across the sports sector, tackling “wicked problems” with complex, strategic interventions. These challenges, embedded in the fabric of sports, demand nuanced approaches for meaningful progress (Buchanan, 1992).

With this broader perspective, we now spotlight an area where DEI efforts have been particularly groundbreaking. Before delving into the specific strategic actions undertaken in the wider sporting world, it is crucial to recognize the pivotal role that women’s professional sports have played in driving this change. Women’s professional sports have been pivotal in DEI, setting a precedent for activism and social change. Their efforts, documented in the evolving landscape, have inspired wider sector engagement. This narrative aligns with Norbert Elias’s concept of sports as societal barometers, reflecting and sometimes shaping cultural norms and conflicts (Kleen, 2022). Their efforts have not only paved the way for significant reforms but have also driven their male counterparts and other stakeholders to engage more actively in social change initiatives. Reflecting on these significant contributions, let’s visualize their impact.

**Figure 5**  
Professional Women’s Leagues and Social Change

<p><b>Hockey</b></p>	<p>The USA Hockey Women’s Team’s 2017 threat to boycott the IIHF World Championship over equitable support and pay disparities with the men’s team catalyzed a landmark agreement with USA Hockey. This agreement heralded improved compensation and more equitable resources in areas such as training, development, and marketing.</p> <p>In 2023, it was announced that the Professional Women’s Hockey League would be established. This comes after years upon years of calls and actions from athletes and fans alike for its establishment.</p>
<p><b>Soccer</b></p>	<p>The U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team’s lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation for gender discrimination became a cornerstone in the ongoing battle for gender equality in sports, capturing worldwide attention for its demand for equal pay and treatment.</p>
<p><b>Basketball</b></p>	<p>In 2020, WNBA President Nneka Ogwumike highlighted the unprecedented unity of over 140 players, underlining their substantial influence and the league’s commitment to social justice. This period also saw the WNBA dedicating their season to the “Say Her Name” campaign, aligning with broader movements where athletes leveraged their platforms against social injustices, particularly focusing on female victims of police brutality and racial violence.</p>
<p><b>Track and Field</b></p>	<p>U.S. sprinter Allyson Felix publicly criticized her sponsor, Nike, for not providing maternity protections in its contracts with female athletes. Her advocacy led to Nike changing its policy, providing more support and protection for athletes during and after pregnancy. This was a significant step forward for the rights of female athletes. Along with other athletes, Allyson formed ‘The Collective’ to support Black women athletes. Felix has used her influence to raise awareness about racial disparities in healthcare, especially concerning Black maternal mortality.</p>
<p><b>Golf</b></p>	<p>Renee Powell, a trailblazer in golf and the second African American woman on the LPGA Tour, continues to champion diversity and inclusion within the sport. Through the Clearview Legacy Foundation, she honors the legacy of Clearview Golf Club – the first African American-designed, built, owned, and operated golf course – while utilizing golf for community development and youth empowerment.</p>

This past April, Over 800 individuals and groups, including Olympic and professional athletes, academics, and advocacy organizations, have urged the NCAA – the largest college sports association with over 1,000 member schools – to allow transgender women to compete in women’s college sports (Hundreds of Athletes Urge the NCAA Not to Ban Trans Athletes From Women’s Sports, 2024 ). This initiative, organized by the LGBTQ2S+ sports advocacy group Athlete Ally, features prominent figures like Megan Rapinoe and Sue Bird among the signatories. In her statement released through Athlete Ally, Megan Rapinoe emphasized that bans framed as ‘protecting women’s sports’ do not represent them and are ineffective in providing protection. Rapinoe, using her platform, further stated, “The time is now for the NCAA and the nationwide athletic community to speak up and affirm that sports should be for everyone, including transgender athletes.”

The narrative depicted in figure 5 serves as a testament to the proactive role of women in sports. As illustrated in figure 5 Titled, “Professional Women’s Leagues and Social Change” there is longstanding history that professional women have advanced and advocated for social change. These examples showcase how women athletes have used their platforms to challenge and change societal norms, fighting for justice and equality both within and outside the realm of sports.

### Drivers and Trends

In understanding these driving forces, we gain insights into their profound impact on DEI initiatives within the sports sector. Based on the 23 interviews I conducted, the following three mega drivers emerged as pivotal in shaping DEI strategies:

**Socio-Political Climate:** The election of former President Barack Obama, who served two presidential terms as the first African American, and the presidential elections of 2016 and 2019. These were especially divisive periods that significantly shaped the socio-political landscape, impacting sports leagues’ DEI strategies.

**COVID-19 Pandemic:** This global crisis has exposed and intensified socioeconomic disparities, prompting sports organizations to reevaluate and adjust their DEI approaches.

**Racial Injustice Awareness:** The tragic murder of George Floyd has heightened awareness of historical and systemic racial injustices, propelling sports into a pivotal role in organizational transformation and social advocacy.

**Figure 6** Mega Driver, Driver, Trend and Signal (Stucki, 2023)

<b>Mega Driver</b>	Amidst the constellation of drivers, there emerges a colossus, a titan among stars, a mega driver. It is the roaring thunder, the relentless tide, the force that bends destiny to its will. Major drivers bear the weight of exceptional importance, shaping the contours of the future’s landscape. In the theatre of foresight, they stand center stage, their influence undeniable, their impact immeasurable.
<b>Driver</b>	A Driver is a fundamental force or factor that has the capacity to influence and shape multiple trends and developments. Drivers are often large-scale, systemic, and deeply rooted in the environment. They are the broad, underlying currents that set the stage for change.
<b>Trend</b>	A trend is a general direction in which something is changing or developing. Trends are typically the observable and measurable outcomes or consequences of one or more drivers. They are manifestations of how these drivers are affecting various aspects of society, the economy, technology, or other domains. Trends can be short-term or long-term and may evolve over time.
<b>Signal</b>	Signals are specific, often early indicators of emerging trends or changes. They are smaller, more discrete events or developments that suggest the presence or onset of a trend. Signals can be thought of as the “early warning signs” that something significant might be happening.

**Historical and Systemic Racial Injustice: George Floyd's murder**

On May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a horrifying event unfolded that would reverberate across the world.

George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was accused of using a counterfeit \$20 bill to purchase cigarettes. Store owners called the police. When police arrived. They confronted and detained Floyd. What followed was a deeply sinister sequence captured on video by bystanders. Floyd was handcuffed and forcibly pinned to the ground beside a police cruiser. Officer Derek Chauvin then relentlessly placed his knee on Floyd's neck. Over the next agonizing 9 minutes and 29 seconds, Floyd's desperate pleas of "I can't breathe" were met with cruel indifference. His life was extinguished under the unyielding pressure of the officer's knee, marking a grim chapter in the relentless narrative of racial injustice in America. This brutal act ignited worldwide outrage, sparking both loud and silent protests that filled streets and echoed across social media, turning grief into a global demand for change and a resolute call to dismantle systemic racism and police brutality.

The murder of George Floyd represents a pivotal moment in the ongoing narrative of historical and systemic racial injustice. It not only epitomizes the deeply ingrained racial disparities within law enforcement and the judicial system but also serves as a potent symbol of the enduring legacy of racism that permeates society. This event, stark in its brutality and captured in harrowing detail, has catalyzed a deeply profound reckoning with issues of race, power, and inequity. It underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive and critical examination of societal structures, policies and attitudes that perpetuate discrimination and injustice. As an emblematic instance of a much broader and deeply rooted problem, the murder of George Floyd demands not only reflection but also committed action toward dismantling systemic racism and fostering a more equitable and just society (Samuels & Olorunnipa, 2022).

**Evolving Political Landscape following 8 years with the first elected African American President, followed by a deeply contested 2016 US Election and lead up to the violently contested 2020 US Presidential Election**

Barack Obama's presidency was a beacon of hope, a symbol of groundbreaking progress. His tenure from 2008 to 2016 was characterized by a steadfast commitment to enhancing the lives of marginalized communities through empathetic and forward-thinking policies. The Affordable Care Act, also known as "Obamacare," was a transformative health reform law that brought healthcare within reach for millions, especially benefiting those in low-income brackets who had long been neglected (Impact of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) in the United States (2009–2017) – Ballotpedia, n.d.). The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act signified a resounding statement against gender-based wage disparities, empowering workers to challenge pay discrimination (Remarks of President Barack Obama on the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay, 2009). In the wake of the financial crisis, the Dodd-Frank Act emerged as a fortress safeguarding consumers and stabilizing the financial system (California, n.d.).

The repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" marked a historic step in the journey towards LGBTQ2S+ rights, ending a long-standing policy of discrimination in the military. The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act expanded the federal hate crime law, encompassing crimes motivated by gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability – a powerful stand against bigotry and injustice (National Organization for Women, 2016). The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was a bold response to the Great Recession, a lifeline that saved jobs, spurred infrastructure, and bolstered education and health sectors (U.S. Department of State Information Related to The American Recovery And Reinvestment Act of 2009, n.d.). Each of these legislative actions, woven together, painted a portrait of a presidency deeply invested in the tapestry of social justice, equity, and economic recovery. Following Barack Obama's

progressive tenure, the 2016 election introduced a significant pivot in the nation's leadership, prominently amplifying more divisive and exclusionary rhetoric from the highest office. This shift marked a stark contrast to previous administrations, as the national discourse increasingly gravitated towards views that, while couched in frankness, often veered into discriminatory and xenophobic territories, thereby reshaping the political landscape with profound implications.

### **Donald Trump: A Tenure of Controversy and Division**

The subsequent president Donald J. Trump was known for various controversial remarks and actions. His tenure was marked by sexist comments, such as the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape where he made derogatory remarks about women. He was a prominent figure in promoting birtherism, repeatedly questioning President Obama's birthplace and legitimacy. His rhetoric often had racist undertones, exemplified by referring to African countries as "shithole countries" and calling Mexican immigrants "rapists" (Vigil & Muñoz, 2023). Additionally, he displayed xenophobia, as seen in his push for a travel ban targeting predominantly Muslim countries. The repeal of the individual mandate in the Affordable Care Act symbolized a step back from healthcare accessibility, leaving many vulnerable groups in uncertainty. The withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement signalled a retreat from global environmental responsibility, stirring concern among those advocating for climate justice. Furthermore, the banning of critical race theory in federal training represented a move away from acknowledging and addressing systemic racism, contrasting sharply with efforts to increase social awareness and promote diversity (Leadership Council on Civil and Human Rights, 2022).

This period culminated in the January 6th insurrection, led predominantly by white supremacist groups. This event was a deeply symbolic act of defiance against the democratic process, characterized by the display of a Confederate flag in the heart of the U.S. Capitol. A horrific day forever engraved into our memory.

Trump's presidency, marked by these actions, is often remembered as a period where societal divisions were violently deepened, challenging the very fabric of a nation striving for unity and understanding.

In the unfolding saga of America's journey, these presidencies etched chapters of profound emotional contrast. Obama's tenure, imbued with a sense of immense inspiration and historic breakthrough, marked the elevation of the first Black man to the nation's highest office, igniting a collective sense of possibility and progress. In stark opposition, the Trump era emerged as a period shrouded in fear and darkness, a time that many perceived as a regression, fraught with divisive rhetoric and policies that cast long shadows of distress and unease across the nation. These consecutive presidencies, with their opposed emotional legacies, reflect the depths of America's aspirations and anxieties, painting a vivid portrait of a nation grappling with its ideals and realities (Mitchell, 2023).

### **COVID-19 Global Pandemic**

In January 2020, the world stood on the brink of an unprecedented global crisis. With the declaration of a state of emergency, COVID-19 emerged as a full-blown pandemic, upending lives, economies, and the very fabric of societies across the globe. As borders closed and cities went into lockdown, the reality of a new, formidable enemy became starkly apparent.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a transformative global event, fundamentally reshaping public health, economic structures, educational systems, and social norms, while simultaneously exposing and amplifying existing disparities (Haygarth, 2021). This crisis highlighted the critical vulnerabilities in global healthcare systems, demonstrating the urgent need for resilient, equitable healthcare infrastructure. Economically, it

caused widespread job losses and business disruptions, disproportionately impacting lower-income groups and underserved communities, thus emphasizing the need for robust economic safety nets and policies. The pandemic triggered widespread job losses and business disruptions, with a disproportionate impact on lower-income groups and underserved communities. This situation highlighted the urgent need for robust economic safety nets and inclusive policies. Moreover, the sudden shift to remote education during the pandemic laid bare significant digital divides and educational inequalities, emphasizing the critical importance of ensuring equitable access to technology and educational resources for all students. In sectors like healthcare, employment, and public transportation, the global crisis exacerbated pre-existing systemic inequalities, pushing many who were already on the edge, over it. These stark disparities call for a comprehensive reevaluation of our social and economic structures to build a more equitable future. Socially, the pandemic changed human interactions, fostering a new reliance on virtual communication and redefining community support systems. It also brought environmental considerations to the forefront, with reduced pollution levels during lockdowns sparking discussions on sustainable development. Overall, COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for social change, urging a global reevaluation and restructuring towards more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable systems across various sectors.

## **STEEPV DEI Trend Analysis Across Sport**

Having examined the significant global events and their profound impact on DEI, we now pivot to assess how these developments have influenced the approaches to DEI platforms within major sports leagues. To do this, we will apply the STEEPV Trend Analysis to understand and articulate the broader trends and their implications.

This methodological pivot enables us to dissect and understand the multifaceted DEI dynamics within these leagues more deeply. By transitioning from a broad overview of the mega drivers to the analytical depths of STEEPV Trend Analysis, we bridge the gap between contextual understanding and analytical precision. This next section will visually present the STEEPV Trend Analysis, offering a clearer, more structured interpretation of how each trend influences DEI initiatives within the sports industry.

## Section 2

**Figure 7** PGA and Golf Canada DEI STEEPV Trend Analysis

PGA and Golf Canada	
<b>Social</b>	The PGA is taking significant strides to enhance its diversity by revising membership programs and committee compositions to reflect a broader range of backgrounds. A landmark initiative includes adjusting the Playing Ability Test (PAT) scores, making golf more accessible to individuals with diverse abilities. The First Tee Program, spearheaded by Golf Canada, targets traditionally underrepresented youth, marking a critical step towards diversifying the sport's future participants and audience.
<b>Technology</b>	In 2020, the PGA initiated a five-year partnership with 100 Black Men of America and Dell Technologies, focusing on bolstering career readiness, financial literacy, community engagement, and golf itself. They've also incorporated demographic data collection and introduced new membership categories on their website.
<b>Economical</b>	In a notable collaboration, the PGA, alongside 100 Black Men of America and Dell Technologies, embarked on a five-year journey starting in 2020 to enrich career readiness and engagement in golf among African American communities, supplemented by strategic demographic analyses and the introduction of new membership tiers. Commissioner Monahan's pledge of a \$100 million investment over the coming decade underscores a profound commitment to social equity within the PGA sphere, complemented by engaging diverse-owned enterprises in the PGA's procurement processes and utilizing sponsor exemptions to support aspiring golfers of color.
<b>Environmental</b>	Operational changes within the PGA include the adoption of inclusion guidelines for golf facilities, a focus on sustainable and inclusive procurement practices, and an acknowledgment of historical land ownership issues, reflecting a holistic approach to inclusivity.
<b>Political</b>	DEI training for all PGA staff, with an expansion to include zone staff and a review of trans-inclusion policies scheduled for 2023, indicates a comprehensive strategy for fostering an inclusive organizational culture.
<b>Values</b>	At the governance level, the PGA undertakes inclusion assessments and develops community-based initiatives that create transparent pathways into the sport, notably collaborating with HBCUs to dismantle barriers for marginalized groups. Meanwhile, Golf Canada leverages partnerships with community entities like Boys and Girls Clubs and Big Brothers Big Sisters to embed golf into diverse community settings, a strategy crucial for broadening the sport's appeal and accessibility.

**Figure 8** NFL DEI STEEPV Trend Analysis

NFL	
<b>Social</b>	The NFL demonstrates a robust commitment to social engagement, highlighted by a notable representation of Black players in its 2023 draft. To further institutionalize diversity, an NFL Diversity Advisory Committee has been established to scrutinize and refine diversity policies, with a special focus on elevating diversity in senior-level coaching and executive roles.
<b>Technology</b>	In the realm of fan engagement and player welfare, the NFL is channeling investments into health and safety technologies while harnessing mobile apps, social media, and virtual reality to create inclusive fan experiences.
<b>Economical</b>	Economic equity remains a cornerstone of the NFL's strategy, evidenced by significant investments in Black-owned businesses and collaborations with the Contract with Black America Institute to enhance economic inclusivity.
<b>Environmental</b>	The league cultivates a welcoming environment for its employees through various Affinity Groups, fostering networks like the Asian-Pacific Exchange, Black Engagement Network, and PRIDE, thereby enhancing interaction, professional growth, and community service. These groups encompass various aspects of diversity, such as the Asian-Pacific Exchange, Black Engagement Network, and LGBTQ+ visibility through PRIDE.
<b>Political</b>	Super Bowl host city selections are increasingly informed by considerations around inclusivity, anti-discrimination, and equitable economic policies, reflecting the NFL's broader commitment to societal issues such as criminal justice reform, voting rights, and racial equity.
<b>Values</b>	Across all 32 clubs and the league office, the NFL is dedicated to implementing comprehensive DEI strategies, encompassing education, training, and consistent data collection to nurture an inclusive culture. This extends to initiatives like coaching fellowships and gender inclusivity programs, underpinning the NFL's resolve to ensure equal opportunities and foster a diverse and inclusive environment throughout the league.



## Section 2

**Figure 9** NBA DEI STEEPV Trend Analysis

NBA	
<b>Social</b>	The NBA sets a precedent in social engagement, particularly in addressing racial and social justice. The league, along with its players and teams, actively engages in various forms of activism and advocacy, underscoring a commitment to inclusivity. This extends beyond racial justice to include gender inclusivity and mental health awareness, aiming to dismantle stigma and provide support for mental well-being.
<b>Technology</b>	Embracing technological advancements, the NBA has innovated fan engagement through augmented and virtual reality experiences, particularly during the pandemic. Additionally, the league employs data analytics and artificial intelligence to scrutinize and improve inclusivity in hiring practices and fan interactions.
<b>Economical</b>	Teams and players in the NBA actively invest in DEI initiatives, channeling resources into scholarships, grants, and community-based programs, further solidifying their commitment to fostering diverse and inclusive environments.
<b>Environmental</b>	Environmental justice also features prominently in the NBA's social responsibility agenda, with athletes engaging in initiatives that promote sustainability and social welfare within their communities.
<b>Political</b>	Promoting democratic participation, twenty NBA teams have transformed their facilities into voting centers, advocating for civic engagement and participation.
<b>Values</b>	At its core, the NBA integrates DEI into its mission and vision, influencing the league's strategic decisions, policies, and initiatives. This holistic approach ensures that inclusivity and equity are not peripheral concerns but central pillars guiding the league's direction and actions.

**Figure 10** MLS DEI STEEPV Trend Analysis

MLS	
<b>Social</b>	Major League Soccer (MLS) has demonstrated a commitment to enhancing diversity and inclusion, evidenced by notable improvements in hiring practices for women, reversing previous trends of decline in racial and gender diversity. This shift underscores a broader commitment to inclusivity within the league.
<b>Technology</b>	The initiation of MLS ADVANCE marks a strategic effort to bolster inclusion and representation across the league. This initiative aims to cultivate a global database of diverse candidates, aiding clubs in recruiting underrepresented talent and promoting broader inclusivity in sporting roles.
<b>Economical</b>	In an unprecedented financial collaboration, MLS's partnership with the National Black Bank Foundation, involving a significant \$25 million loan transaction, aims to address the racial wealth gap. This initiative not only supports Black community banks but also highlights the league's active role in fostering economic equity.
<b>Environmental</b>	To ensure an inclusive and respectful atmosphere, MLS has established fan code of conduct policies, creating a safer environment for all attendees. This is complemented by MLS WORKS' "Soccer For All" campaign, which emphasizes the league's dedication to combating discrimination and promoting inclusivity.
<b>Political</b>	The league has also instituted new diversity hiring mandates, requiring that open sporting positions have finalist pools with at least two non-white candidates, one of whom must be Black. This Diversity Hiring Policy has been instrumental in increasing the representation of underrepresented groups in key roles.
<b>Values</b>	Moreover, MLS's commitment extends to coaching and executive levels, with strategic programs aimed at elevating underrepresented coaches and enforcing an updated Diversity Hiring Policy. This concerted effort has significantly increased the presence of underrepresented candidates in finalist pools and sporting positions across the league, illustrating MLS's active pursuit of diversity and inclusion within its ranks.

**Figure 11** MLB DEI STEEPV Trend Analysis

MLB	
<b>Social</b>	Several Major League Baseball (MLB) clubs have initiated programs and formed partnerships aimed at enhancing social and racial justice, reflecting a strengthened commitment to these critical issues within and beyond the sport.
<b>Technology</b>	MLB's collaboration with organizations such as the National Association of Black Engineers and Hispanic/Latino Engineers underscores its strategic efforts to diversify its talent acquisition, directly addressing the need for a more inclusive talent pipeline.
<b>Economical</b>	The league's Diverse Business Partnership Program (DBP) represents a focused endeavor to engage and collaborate with LGBTQ2S+ and minority-owned businesses, indicating a proactive approach to inclusive outreach and economic empowerment.
<b>Environmental</b>	Through the "Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities" (RBI) program, MLB actively brings baseball to underserved and inner-city youth, complementing these efforts with unique PLAY BALL events at Black churches, thereby forging deeper community ties and enhancing accessibility to the sport.
<b>Political</b>	MLB's legal team's engagement with the "Lawyers for Racial Justice" program, offering pro bono services to tackle issues like law enforcement in schools, underscores the league's commitment to addressing broader systemic challenges affecting children of color.
<b>Values</b>	Moreover, MLB has aligned with its players and teams in backing the Black community against oppression, discrimination, and inequality. This solidarity is manifested through league-wide visual displays, supporting players' expressions of solidarity, and facilitating player-led moments of unity, exemplifying MLB's evolving stance towards a more inclusive and socially responsible sports environment.

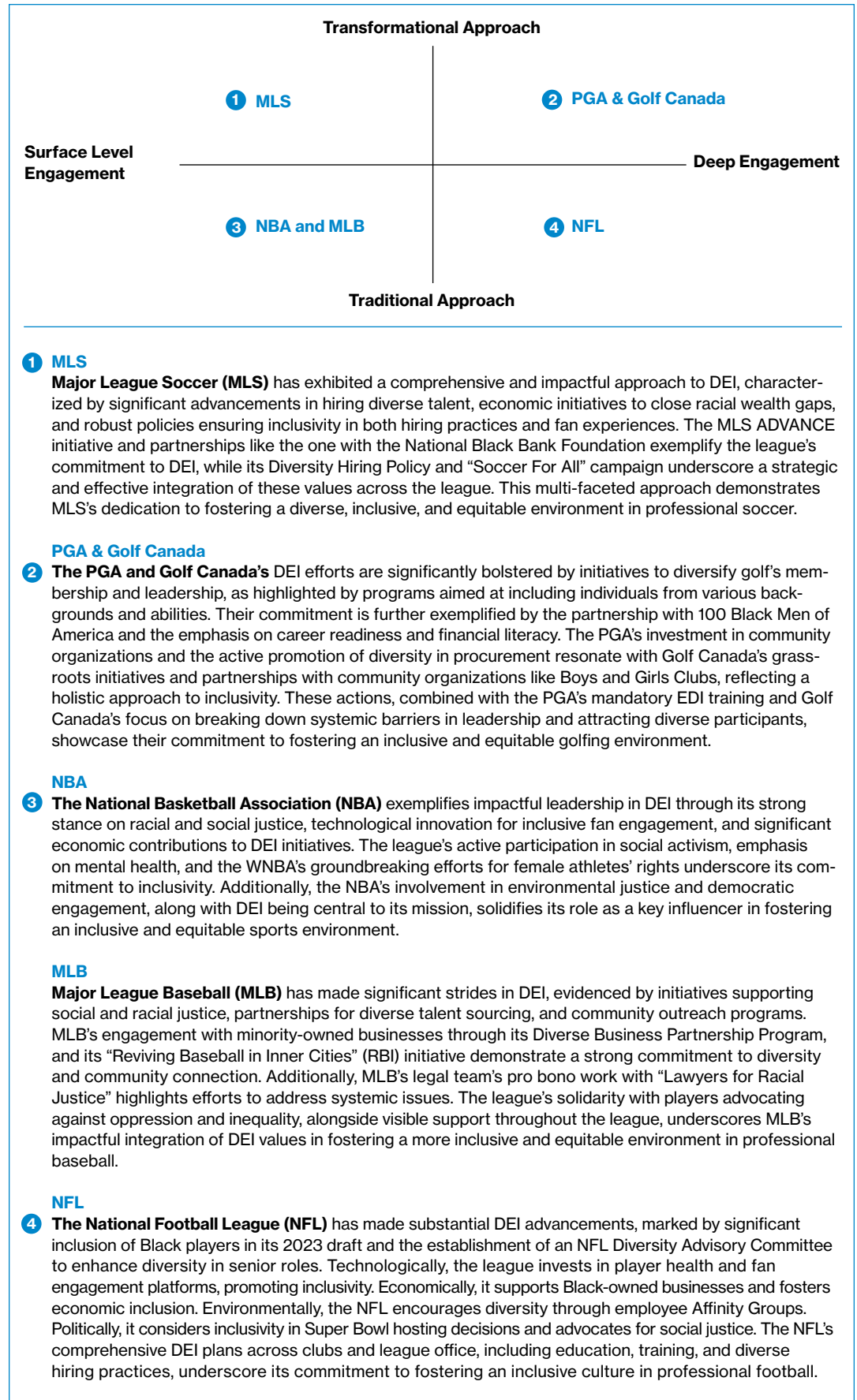
In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened calls for social justice following George Floyd's death, major sports leagues are adopting a comprehensive and nuanced approach to diversity and inclusion. These efforts extend beyond minimum standards and permeate all aspects of the organization – from talent acquisition and fan engagement to corporate practices and community relations – making equity and inclusion integral to the league's operations. This strategic commitment serves as a catalyst for the league to lead by example, demonstrating how sports can drive societal progress and foster a more inclusive global community.

As we apply the insights from the STEEPV Trend Analysis framework to practical scenarios, we see leagues like the NFL and NBA adopting systemic DEI strategies that reflect societal challenges and foster continuous dialogue. This shift is critical for maintaining cultural relevance and unity, urging leagues like MLS and PGA to embrace their international diversity and challenge traditional norms, thereby enhancing inclusivity across all facets of their operations.

### Matrix of Approaches to DEI

Now, we plot these major leagues in transition on a 2x2 matrix to visualize their strategic DEI initiatives and culture change efforts. This visualization is not intended for comparison but rather to assess the unique approaches of each league with respect to their markets, front office functions, back office operations, and their engagement with both traditional and new fans. This matrix helps highlight how each league tailors its strategies to meet diverse needs and capitalize on opportunities for growth and inclusivity within their specific contexts.

**Figure 12** Matrix of Approaches to DEI



## Section 2

This nuanced transition from broader DEI paradigms to specific, actionable strategies informs our subsequent inquiry into the NHL's DEI portfolio. Through this lens, we are poised to dissect the NHL's specific DEI initiatives and their impacts at the franchise level. This analytical shift allows us to scrutinize the league's concrete efforts against the backdrop of evolving DEI standards within the sports sector, providing a rigorous examination of the NHL's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in practice.

# Section 3



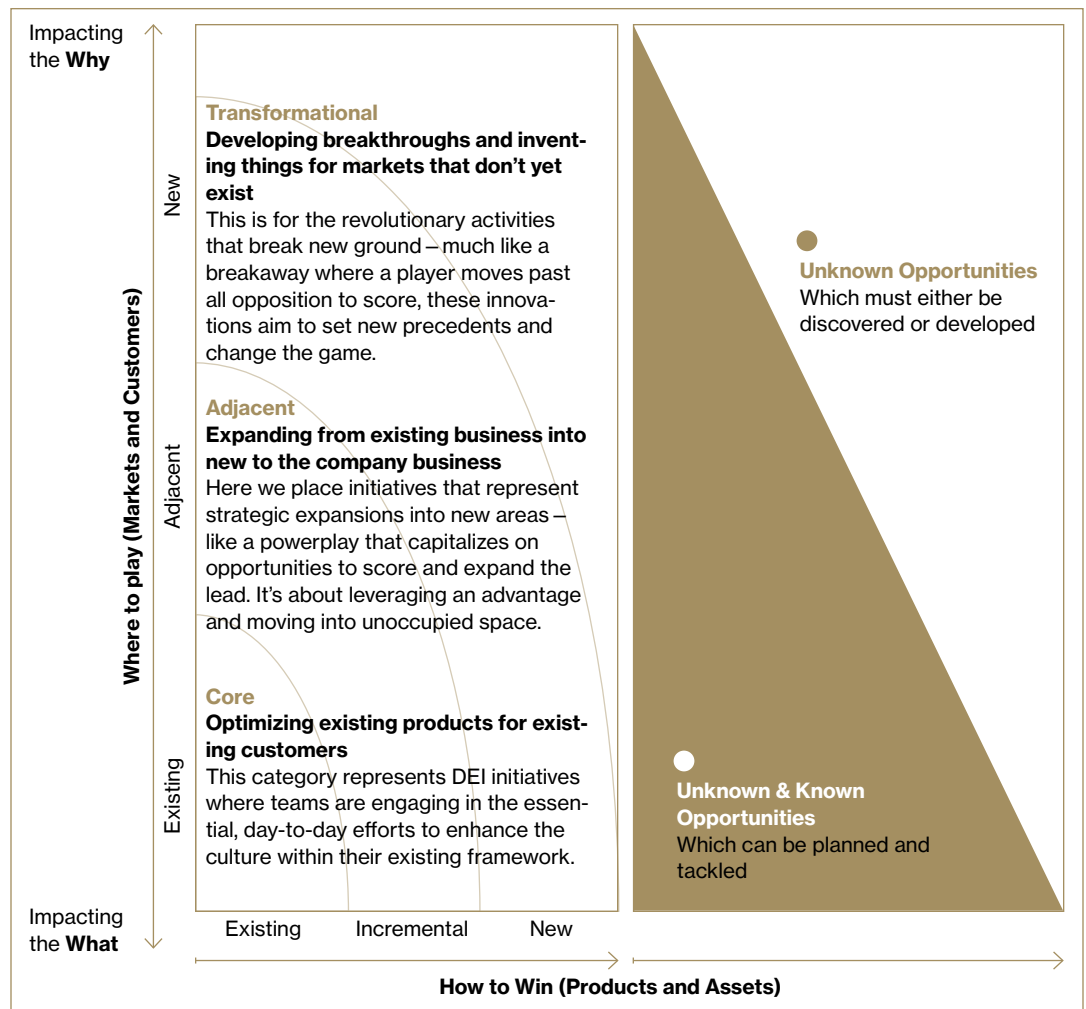
# 3

## Global Goals and Local Voices: NHL DEI Portfolio and Platform

This chapter embarks on a thorough examination of the NHL’s DEI initiatives, emphasizing their impact on both organizational culture dynamics and the broader hockey community. To assess the depth and influence of these initiatives, we turn to the Innovation Ambition Matrix (Nagji, 2021), a strategic tool typically utilized in business analysis to categorize innovations by their market impact and novelty.

In my research context, the Innovation Ambition Matrix serves as a unique lens to evaluate the scope and resonance of the NHL’s DEI strategies. Through this framework, I aim to not only categorize DEI initiatives but also understand their strategic positioning within the league’s overarching goals and objectives. This approach facilitates a nuanced assessment of how DEI efforts contribute to both social impact and organizational innovation.

**Figure 13**  
Innovation Ambition Matrix  
(Nagji, 2021)



Insights gathered from interviews underscore the pivotal role of significant societal events, such as the historic presidency of Barack Obama, polarizing elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, and heightened awareness of racial injustice, in shaping the NHL's DEI strategies. These events compel the league to confront its legacy of exclusion and adapt to evolving socio-political landscapes, emphasizing the imperative for transformative actions in hockey.

The application of the Innovation Ambition Matrix to the NHL's DEI efforts reveals a spectrum of initiatives, ranging from core optimizations to transformational breakthroughs. Notably, clubs like the Seattle Kraken and the Las Vegas Golden Knights emerge as pioneers in spearheading transformational DEI initiatives, setting new industry standards and inspiring others to follow suit.

By analyzing DEI initiatives through the lens of the Innovation Ambition Matrix, we gain valuable insights into their tangible and intangible impacts, from enhancing the NHL's brand to fostering deeper community engagement. This analysis underscores the strategic importance of DEI in driving sustainable growth and relevance for the league in today's socio-cultural landscape.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that DEI is not just a moral imperative but a strategic imperative for the NHL. As the league continues to navigate complexities and challenges, DEI initiatives remain essential for fostering innovation, resilience, and broader societal influence. Through strategic alignment and visionary leadership, the NHL can leverage DEI as a catalyst for transformative change within the organization and beyond.

The section on core initiatives delves into the foundational efforts undertaken by the NHL to optimize existing DEI operations. These initiatives aim to refine and enhance the league's current practices, ensuring that diversity and inclusion are deeply ingrained in every aspect of its operations. Through examples such as the Detroit Red Wings' "Learn, Play, Score" initiative and the Anaheim Ducks' comprehensive approach to cultural inclusion, we witness how core initiatives strengthen internal culture and bolster the NHL's reputation as an inclusive organization.

Moving to adjacent initiatives, we explore how the NHL is expanding its DEI efforts into new areas that are related to its core operations. These initiatives extend the league's reach to underrepresented communities and markets, broadening its audience while reinforcing its commitment to social responsibility. The Toronto Maple Leafs' strategic vision under Mark Fraser and the Arizona Coyotes' focus on diversity in coaching and management exemplify how franchises are innovating to foster inclusivity beyond traditional boundaries.

Finally, we examine transformational initiatives, where the NHL is pioneering new ground in the realm of DEI. These ambitious efforts set new standards for sports leagues, aiming to redefine the role of sports in society. Franchises like the San Jose Sharks and the Vancouver Canucks are embedding DEI into their core operations and community engagement strategies, challenging the status quo and making hockey a beacon of diversity and inclusion.

By showcasing examples from franchises across the league, this section illustrates the NHL's commitment to driving meaningful change and fostering a more inclusive and equitable hockey community. Through core, adjacent, and transformational initiatives, the NHL is not only optimizing existing practices but also pushing the boundaries of what is possible in the realm of DEI.

## Core DEI Initiatives: Optimizing Existing Operations

Core initiatives focus on enhancing and refining the existing DEI operations within the NHL. These efforts are aimed at improving what the league is already doing well, ensuring that foundational DEI practices are deeply embedded into every aspect of its operations. This could involve:

- **Refining Recruitment and Retention:** Implementing more inclusive hiring practices to diversify staff and player rosters.
- **Enhancing Player and Fan Engagement:** Improving programs that foster inclusivity among players and fans, ensuring that hockey is welcoming to all.

The impact of core initiatives on franchise operations is foundational, strengthening the internal culture and enhancing the league's reputation. These initiatives help maintain a baseline of inclusivity, ensuring that the NHL remains committed to its current values of diversity and equity.

### Featured Franchise



## The Detroit Red Wings

In 2020, the Detroit Red Wings launched the groundbreaking “Learn, Play, Score” initiative, a \$1 million, two-year endeavour aimed at expanding hockey across Detroit. This transcendent effort, supported by the Red Wings and their foundation along with assistance from the NHL’s Industry Growth Fund, seeks to empower Detroit’s youth by reaching 30,000 children citywide. Through after-school leagues, immersive esports experiences, and access to skating at the iconic Little Caesars Arena, the program not only teaches hockey skills but also imparts invaluable life lessons, fostering empowerment and resilience (Nagl, 2020).

In alignment with their commitment to social impact, the Red Wings, in collaboration with Chevrolet, introduced the “Learn, Play, Score: Street Hockey in The D: At School” program. This transformative initiative targets over 34,000 students from the Detroit Public Schools Community District, using hockey as a platform for social change. By emphasizing crucial life skills like teamwork and holistic well-being, the program serves as a counterforce against systemic barriers and marginalization (Murawski, 2020).

Through authentic engagement with the community, exemplified by interactions with students at Bunche Preparatory Academy and Chrysler Elementary School, the Red Wings players, including captain Dylan Larkin and teammates Lucas Raymond and Moritz Seider, embody the ethos of the program, forging connections and inspiring aspirations. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to creating a space where diversity is celebrated and every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to thrive (Writer, 2020).

By embracing an anti-oppressive lens, they champion a future where every child has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their community. This isn’t just about hockey – it’s about harnessing the power of sport to dismantle barriers and pave the way for a more just and equitable society in The D. The Red Wings are championing a future where every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their community (Gunsorek, 2023). This detailed focus on overcoming systemic barriers highlights the Red Wings’ dedication to creating a space where diversity is celebrated as a key component of hockey’s growth and success.





### **Anaheim Ducks**

Through strategic initiatives and grassroots involvement, the Anaheim Ducks are deeply embedding DEI into their operations and community relations. By hiring a cultural anthropologist, providing voting facilities at the Honda Center, and engaging in inclusion training, they're laying a foundation for inclusive practices (Vote Center | Honda Center, n.d.). Complementing these efforts is the Anaheim Ducks S.C.O.R.E. program, which reaches over 40,000 unique students annually across five counties. Since its inception in 2005, it has impacted over 250,000 students, addressing healthy living habits and academic excellence. The program leverages hockey to teach educational themes, promote positive character building, and recognize youth for academic dedication. Furthermore, the Ducks' Top Flight street hockey program caters to participants with special needs and all abilities, showcasing their commitment to inclusivity. With a multifaceted approach, the team is fostering an inclusive culture within their organization and among their fan base, making strides towards a more diverse and equitable community (NHL, n.d.).



### **Boston Bruins**

Now in its fourth year, the Bruins' diversity mentorship program offers hands-on coaching initiatives that focus on individual pairings, reflecting a targeted approach to nurturing talent and fostering inclusivity within the sport. By providing personalized guidance and support, the Bruins are breaking down barriers to entry and advancement in hockey, ensuring that diverse perspectives and talents are recognized, valued, and developed. This mentorship model underscores the Bruins' commitment to creating a more diverse and inclusive future for hockey. Additionally, the Bruins' Diversity and Inclusion Scouting Mentorship Program, launched in September 2021, aims to mentor and elevate individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, providing a basis for careers in scouting or the hockey industry (O'Mard, 2021).



### **Chicago Blackhawks**

Under Danny Wirtz's leadership, the Chicago Blackhawks are spearheading significant social change through impactful programming. Their G.O.A.L. Program introduces hockey at the grassroots level, providing gear and coaching in safe environments. Concurrently, the Support West initiative uplifts minority-owned businesses in West Side neighborhoods, driving economic growth and empowerment. Complementing these efforts, the One West Side partnership, supported by the Blackhawks Foundation, A Better Chicago, and United Airlines, signifies a long-term commitment to community investment (NHL, n.d.). Led by tactical teams, these multimillion-dollar programs actively dismantle barriers through targeted investment and grassroots efforts. Leveraging their influence and longstanding local relationships, the Blackhawks empower individuals and reshape the narrative of opportunity, particularly in communities marginalized by systemic injustice. Jaimie Faulkner's appointment as President of Business Operations in 2020 marked a milestone for women in the hockey community and signalled deep cultural change within the organization. Meanwhile, the Chicago Blackhawks Community Fund continues to support agency-based programs addressing youth development, workforce opportunities, and Native American Veterans, aligning with their commitment to fostering positive change in their community (Robert R. McCormick Foundation, 2023).



### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

In 2023 it was announced that The Columbus Blue Jackets foundation would be investing \$1.3 million in Central Ohio nonprofits, dedicating \$150,000 to the YMCA of Central Ohio to fund construction of an accessible playground at the historic Eldon & Elsie Ward Family YMCA (Columbus Business First, 2023).



### **Buffalo Sabres**

The Buffalo Sabres are partnering with RISE and EVERFI to bring the Diversity Foundations for High School program to local schools in Western New York. This initiative introduces students to key concepts of identity, bias, and ally behaviour through five digital lessons suitable for grades 9-12. RISE CEO Diahann Billings-Burford commended the Sabres for their commitment to racial equity, highlighting the program's potential for real change (RISE, n.d.).



### **Philadelphia Flyers**

The Philadelphia Flyers are making strides towards economic equity by supporting the league's initiative for broader economic inclusion and increasing their financial commitments to minority-owned businesses. This strategic focus on financial inclusion highlights the Flyers' role in driving tangible change and contributes to a more inclusive and equitable economy (Philadelphia Flyers Release First-Ever Community Impact Report Detailing Commitment to Local Communities, 2024). Additionally, the Flyers are demonstrating their commitment to inclusivity by offering a Sensory-Friendly Lounge complete with service dogs during select home games, providing an accessible and welcoming environment for all fans ("Flyers to Offer Sensory-Friendly Lounge Complete With Service Dog During Select Home Games," 2019).

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## **Adjacent DEI Initiatives: Expanding into New Areas**

Adjacent initiatives represent a step beyond optimizing what already exists, pushing the NHL to expand its DEI efforts into new areas that are related to, but not currently a part of, its core operations. This might include:

- **Community Outreach Programs:** Extending efforts to underrepresented communities through hockey clinics, education programs, and partnerships with local organizations.
- **Market Expansion:** Targeting new audiences and markets with tailored marketing campaigns that highlight the league's commitment to inclusivity.

The impact on franchise operations includes broadening the league's audience and strengthening community ties. Adjacent initiatives allow the NHL to reach new fans and participants, expanding its market while reinforcing its commitment to social responsibility. Here are the franchises moving beyond programs and products that already exist, expanding their DEI efforts:



#### Featured Franchise

### The Toronto Maple Leafs

Under the strategic vision of Mark Fraser, Director, of Culture & Inclusion at Toronto Maple Leafs, and the supportive framework of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE), the Toronto Maple Leafs are harnessing the universal appeal of sports to forge a better, more inclusive world. Recognizing sports as a unifying force, the Leafs are actively bridging cultural divides, dismantling stereotypes, and nurturing a society where inclusivity and respect are paramount (Sachdeva, n.d.).

Mark Fraser's mission in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) epitomizes this drive. Tackling the deep-rooted inequities within hockey, his initiatives interlace diversity and inclusion into the fabric of the Leafs' culture and outreach, extending this ethos to the fans and community at large. By facilitating open conversations on topics like discrimination and championing the celebration of diverse cultures, Fraser's approach is both enlightening and unifying (Kennedy, 2023).

A key aspect of his strategy involves using common experiences, such as shared meals from iconic local eateries, to educate and bond. These gatherings are not just about team cohesion; they're learning experiences that highlight the significance of embracing diverse cultural narratives. Similarly, Fraser's efforts to bring community leaders and historical figures into the Leafs' fold not only enrich the team's perspective but also reinforce the organization's commitment to inclusivity.

This commitment extends to partnerships with grassroots organizations dedicated to making hockey more accessible and representative, such as Black Girl Hockey Club, Apna Hockey, Hockey Equality, and Hockey For Youth. These collaborations are pivotal, ensuring that hockey becomes a part of belonging, and fostering a sense of visibility and appreciation among all fans (TSN, 2023).

The Toronto Maple Leafs and MLSE's engagement in social impact initiatives reflect a deep understanding of sports as a catalyst for societal advancement. By acknowledging the global stage sports occupy, they aim to leverage this influence for societal betterment, transcending traditional views of sports as mere games (MLSE, n.d.).



#### Arizona Coyotes

The Coyotes are championing diversity in coaching and management through former player's and coaches' stories, internship programs, recruitment, and direct mentorship involving the head coach. This holistic approach not only empowers diverse coaching talents but also celebrates their achievements, setting a new precedent for inclusivity in sports leadership (Brown, 2022).



#### New York Rangers

The New York Rangers are advancing social impact by partnering with the New York Department of Education (NYDOE) to launch the Junior Rangers Ball Hockey Program. This initiative aims to promote healthy habits in children by introducing them to hockey and providing necessary resources and equipment. Through this collaboration, the Rangers will provide hockey equipment and faculty hockey training to city elementary schools, benefiting more than 63,000 students across the city. The partnership was inspired by the Black Girl Hockey Club's efforts to create inclusive hockey spaces for Black women. District 31 Superintendent Dr. Marion Wilson expressed gratitude for the collaboration, emphasizing the importance of exposing students to new experiences. This initiative represents a significant step towards fostering inclusivity and providing opportunities for youth in New York City (Sonya Gugliara, [sgugliara@siadvance.com](mailto:sgugliara@siadvance.com), 2023).



### **Calgary Flames**

The Calgary Flames Foundation is deeply committed to fostering inclusivity and accessibility in sports and recreation, making a significant impact through a multitude of initiatives. From prioritizing adaptive sports programs like the PX3 Roller-Sled Program and the extension of the SuperHEROS Program to creating inclusive spaces such as outdoor rinks in indigenous communities and providing scholarships for BIPOC student-athletes, they are dedicated to breaking barriers and promoting diversity. Additionally, partnerships with organizations like Spirit North and the Indigenous Sports Heroes Education Experience showcase their efforts to support Indigenous youth and celebrate their achievements in sports. Furthermore, collaborations with community groups like the Calgary Hitmen and Siksika Nation and initiatives such as the Umoja Community Mosaic and the Immigrant Education Society Calgary Flames Wellness Hut demonstrate their commitment to promoting health, wellness, and social integration. Through these initiatives, the Calgary Flames Foundation is making sports and recreation more accessible and inclusive for all members of the community, regardless of background or ability (slandstudios, 2024).



### **Montreal Canadiens**

By actively recognizing and supporting Indigenous communities and neglected neighbourhoods, the Canadiens are addressing past oversights and fostering a culture of acknowledgment and respect. Their financial and cultural investments are sowing the seeds for enduring partnerships, nurturing a community fabric that is vibrant, diverse, and inclusive (Kahnawake Well-represented at Canadiens' Indigenous Celebration Night, n.d.).



### **Nashville Predators**

The Nashville Predators Foundation demonstrates a strong commitment to serving the community of Nashville and Middle Tennessee by addressing educational, social, health, and cultural needs. With over \$8 million awarded in grants since 1998, the foundation supports local youth-oriented organizations. Through initiatives like the Smashville Seminar and partnerships with educational institutions like Tennessee State University, the Predators offer unique opportunities for academic growth and professional development. Additionally, the Predators actively promote civic engagement, partnering with the Tennessee Secretary of State to host voter registration events at Bridgestone Arena and advocating for increased voter registration through programs like Your Vote Matters. The Predators also prioritize inclusivity, with initiatives like the Smashville Pregame Greeter Program providing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, and hosting events like Black History Night to celebrate and honour Black culture and history, showcasing local talent and supporting historically Black colleges and universities. Through these efforts, the Nashville Predators make a significant social impact and contribute to the overall well-being of the community (NHL, n.d.).



### **Washington Capitals**

The Washington Capitals have established a Black Hockey Committee, comprising community and organization leaders, to address racism and promote inclusivity in hockey. The community leaders focused on eradicating racism and expanding the game in underserved communities. Members include Duante' Abercrombie, Alexandria Briggs-Blake, Neal Henderson, Tammi Lynch, and Corinne McIntosh-Douglas. Each bring unique perspectives and experiences to the table. Their collective efforts aim to conduct outreach, educate coaches and parents, and foster a more inclusive hockey environment. The committee is supported by various departments within the Capitals organization, emphasizing the team's commitment to promoting diversity and equality in the sport (Washington Capitals Announce Black History Month Programming Aligned With Hockey Diversity, Inclusion and Racial Equality Initiatives, n.d.).



### **New Jersey Devils**

The owners of the New Jersey Devils, under Harris Blitzer Sports & Entertainment, pledged \$20 million in 2020 to combat systemic racism and promote equality following the death of George Floyd. This commitment reflects a five-year plan aimed at eradicating racism and addressing inequality. Josh Harris, the Devil's managing partner and HBSE founder, emphasized the importance of providing resources for tangible action and creating greater opportunities for equality (Admin, 2020). Across the 2019-2020 season, the Devils Youth Foundation invested over \$1.6 million in community programs, impacting over 10,000 children and families across New Jersey. Additionally, they supported over 40 community organizations and initiatives focused on education, health and wellness, and youth hockey development. Furthermore, the Devils Youth Foundation's initiatives have led to the construction of 20 street hockey rinks, the distribution of over 17,000 pieces of hockey equipment to youth players, and the provision of financial assistance for over 7,000 young athletes to participate in hockey programs. Overall, their efforts demonstrate a significant commitment to positively impacting communities and promoting equity and inclusion through youth sports (Impact Report - Devils Youth Foundation, 2023).



### **Carolina Hurricanes**

The Carolina Hurricanes are actively advancing DEI efforts both within their organization and throughout their community relationships. Internally, they've established a dedicated committee to lead initiatives aimed at fostering a more inclusive environment. This includes initiatives like the "Amplifying Black Voices" podcast, launched to spotlight the stories of Black fans and employees, and the Canes Girls Youth Hockey program, designed to cultivate the next generation of female hockey players through comprehensive development opportunities (Podchaser, n.d.). Alongside these efforts, the Hurricanes maintain their steadfast support for the Capital City Crew, a local non-profit in the "Hockey is for Everyone" network, providing diverse youth with the chance to participate in hockey. Through these multifaceted initiatives, the Carolina Hurricanes are making significant strides toward building a more inclusive and representative hockey community (Piggott, 2023).



### **Colorado Avalanche**

Kroenke Sports Charities, the philanthropic arm of the Colorado Avalanche's parent company, proudly introduced "Common Goals" in March 2021. This transformative educational initiative, in partnership with Western Union, aims to ignite conversations about diversity and inclusion among students in five Colorado high schools. Through an engaging online "Diversity Foundations" course, students delve into essential topics like identity, bias, power dynamics, privilege, and oppression (Dowling & Kroenke Sports Charities, 2021).



### **Edmonton Oilers**

The Edmonton Oilers, in collaboration with the Otipemisiwak Métis Government, have launched an inspiring initiative to promote Indigenous youth participation in hockey. Through their partnership, the Oilers invited Métis female youth to join their U9 girls hockey camp, providing them with valuable training and mentorship opportunities. This initiative aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, aiming to reduce barriers to sports participation and nurture young Indigenous athletes' development. By fostering inclusivity and empowerment within their community, the Oilers and the Otipemisiwak Métis Government are taking meaningful steps toward Reconciliation. This partnership signifies a commitment to promoting DEI both on and off the ice, making hockey more accessible and welcoming to Indigenous youth in Alberta (Mna, 2023).

## Transformational DEI Initiatives: Pioneering New Ground

Transformational initiatives are the most ambitious, involving efforts that are completely new to both the NHL and the world of sports. These initiatives aim to set new standards for how sports leagues can contribute to DEI, potentially including:

- **First-of-a-Kind Hires:** Elevating individuals to influential positions with strategic mandates within the organization. These trailblazing appointments ensure that diverse perspectives and experiences are central to key decision-making processes, driving innovation and inclusivity forward within the NHL.
- **Innovative Partnerships:** Collaborating with tech companies to develop tools that address bias in hiring and/or fan engagement.
- **Revolutionizing Fan Experience:** Utilizing virtual reality or other technologies to create more inclusive and accessible fan experiences, regardless of location or physical ability.

The impact of transformational initiatives on franchise operations is profound, positioning the NHL as a leader in innovation and social change. These efforts can redefine the role of sports leagues in society, opening up new avenues for growth and engagement that were previously unimaginable. Here are the franchises stepping into transformational DEI:

### Featured Franchise



## The San Jose Sharks

The Sharks are examples of embedding DEI into the core of their organization and community engagement strategies. With a steadfast commitment to celebrating the rich tapestry of cultures in their region, they have instituted Spanish Heritage Night, South Asian Night, and Puerto Rican Night, and were pioneers in embracing Pride Nights, showcasing their commitment to recognizing and celebrating the diversity of their community (NHL, 2024).

The San Jose Sharks have taken significant steps to address diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice within their organization and the Bay Area community by introducing the Teal for Change Council. Established in June 2020, the Council has led various initiatives, including a voter engagement campaign, updates to the SAP Center's dress code, and an educational series on diversity and inclusion. Additionally, the Sharks Sports & Entertainment will recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Juneteenth as paid holidays, and the Jr. Sharks Code of Conduct has been updated to promote inclusivity in youth hockey (Sharks Announce Teal for Change Council to Expand Social Justice Efforts, n.d.)

Their proactive efforts extend into the community, notably through the development of nine sheets of ice in recent years, a direct counter to the challenges posed by the high cost of real estate in Silicon Valley and the accessibility issues of hockey as a sport. This significant investment in infrastructure demonstrates a tangible commitment to making hockey accessible and enjoyable for everyone, directly confronting the sport's traditional barriers to entry (Yimby, 2021).

The Sharks understand that the power of hockey goes beyond the television screen, emphasizing the immersive and captivating experience of live games or playing the sport firsthand. In one of the most diverse areas globally, even more so than New York, the Sharks' initiatives are not just practical but a manifestation of their deep-seated belief in the importance of belonging and inclusion for all, regardless of background. Through their actions, the Sharks are not only addressing the inequities present in every corner of society but are also paving the way for a more inclusive future in sports, challenging the status quo.



### **Vancouver Canucks**

By weaving Diwali celebrations and collaborations with local artists into the fabric of their community outreach, the Vancouver Canucks are not merely hosting events; they are fostering a movement of cultural integration within the sports domain. This strategic embrace of cultural diversity transcends conventional fan engagement, crafting an immersive fan experience that honours and reflects the multifaceted identities within their community. Through these actions, the Canucks are setting a benchmark for how sports franchises can play a pivotal role in celebrating cultural diversity, thereby nurturing a sense of belonging and unity among a diverse fan base (Paterson, 2023).



### **St. Louis Blues**

Motivated by a dual commitment to making hockey more inclusive and fostering greater opportunity and equity in their city, the Blues have implemented impactful programs aimed at breaking down barriers and fostering equity. One significant initiative involves the renovation of an old church, Walnut Park United Methodist Church, in Walnut Park, one of St. Louis's most challenged communities, into a haven for young people seeking refuge from their challenging environment (St Louis Blues, 2021). Through financial support and collaboration with other entities, the Blues have transformed this space into a beacon of hope, demonstrating their commitment to community development beyond the confines of sports. Additionally, the Blues have launched the North City Blues program, offering children of colour the opportunity to learn to skate and play hockey. This Learn to Play program not only introduces kids to the sport but also aims to create a sustainable pathway for their continued involvement, addressing barriers to participation and promoting diversity within hockey. As DEI continues to evolve within the organization and the broader industry, the Blues have established internal structures, such as employee resource groups, and fostered a culture of inclusion. Through impactful storytelling and tangible actions, the Blues are dedicated to driving positive change and leaving a lasting legacy in the realm of DEI (North City Blues, n.d.).



### **Winnipeg Jets**

Focusing on newcomers and Indigenous communities, the Jets are crafting a nurturing environment for those often left on the fringes of society. This proactive engagement serves as a bridge, connecting disparate community segments, facilitating cultural interchange, and empowering marginalized groups through sports, signifying a step towards more compassionate community integration (Kitching, 2023).



### **Vegas Golden Knights**

The Vegas Golden Knights' collaboration with the developer of the old Texas Station and Fiesta Rancho sites in North Las Vegas holds significant promise for the community, particularly given its predominantly Hispanic demographic. This partnership not only symbolizes a pivotal moment for the city's growth but also reflects a commitment to DEI in the region. The planned \$20 million facility, featuring two ice sheets and seating for 3,000 people, represents more than just a sports arena; it signifies a hub for community engagement, recreation, and opportunity. As the Knights embark on youth hockey programming in this area, they aim to foster inclusivity and accessibility, recognizing the importance of expanding hockey participation among diverse populations. The Hilo Park development, encompassing residential, commercial, and athletic components, further underscores the team's dedication to enhancing the quality of life for residents in North Las Vegas, particularly those in underserved communities (Haas, 2023).



### **Seattle Kraken**

The Seattle Kraken's efforts represent a truly transformational dedication to fostering equity racial justice, and community empowerment, igniting genuine transformation both within their organization and throughout their communities. Detroit native Everett Fitzhugh was named the first Black NHL team broadcaster by the Kraken in 2020 (KIRO 7 News Seattle, 2021). J.T. Brown and Everett Fitzhugh became the first all-Black broadcasting duo in NHL history when they called the Seattle Kraken's road game against the Winnipeg Jets on ROOT Sports Northwest in 2022 (NPR, 2022). Whether through proactive community engagement, impactful youth outreach, or our unwavering advocacy for environmental justice (a strategic pillar for the organization), their actions speak volumes about our commitment to integrity and ethical principles. In their collaborations with Indigenous communities, they have embarked on a purposeful journey of trust-building and collaboration. Through authentic dialogue and mutual respect, they have co-created initiatives like the Land Acknowledgement Statement and prominently featured the Muckleshoot tribe patch on our jerseys. These partnerships are rooted in genuine relationships and ongoing dialogue, underscoring our commitment to fostering meaningful and lasting change (Clark, 2023).



### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

The Tampa Bay Lightning has made NHL history by celebrating Black Heritage on Black History Night with a groundbreaking event honouring the "Divine Nine" Black fraternities and sororities. For the first time in NHL history, representatives from these organizations conducted a ceremonial puck drop, paying tribute to the contributions of African Americans in the sport. This event, featuring a special appearance by 100-year-old Tuskegee Airman Daniel Keel during the national anthem, showcased the Lightning's commitment to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, the Lightning Foundation made a significant donation to the Divine Nine, further supporting local students in the Tampa Bay metropolitan area through scholarships and programs administered by the local Alumni Chapters' leadership. Through these initiatives, the Lightning continues to inspire and advocate for positive change within the community and beyond (Harlan, 2023).



### **Dallas Stars**

The Dallas Stars' dedication to DEI isn't just a passive endeavour – it's a vibrant, dynamic force that's reshaping lives and communities in profound ways. As the first Cuban American NHL player, Al Montoya is paying it forward by improving access to the game of hockey in Hispanic communities (NHL, 2024). Through initiatives like the Future Stars Program, led by the impassioned Montoya, the Stars are igniting a spark of excitement and possibility in neighbourhoods where hockey might have seemed like a distant dream. Kids who had never held a hockey stick before now find themselves immersed in the thrill of the game, their faces lighting up with joy as they score their first goals. For them, hockey isn't just a sport – it's a gateway to new experiences, friendships, and opportunities they never thought possible.

And it's not just about the game itself. The Future Stars Program is breaking down barriers and building bridges, fostering a sense of belonging and pride in communities that have historically been overlooked. Through partnerships with organizations like the Greater Dallas Boys and Girls Clubs, the Stars are creating spaces where kids from all walks of life can come together, united by their love for hockey. But the impact doesn't stop there. As these kids attend their first Stars game at the American Airlines Center, the energy in the arena is electric. They soak in every moment, wide-eyed and filled with wonder, as they witness the excitement of live hockey. As they leave the arena, they carry with them a newfound passion for the sport and a sense of connection to their hometown team (Kolb, 2024).





### **Minnesota Wild**

The Wild's diverse programming under "Hockey is for Me" and "Girls Hockey Weekend" to name a few, are more than just sports education; they are vehicles for social change. By offering these opportunities specifically to racialized youth, they are not only promoting diversity on the ice but are also levelling the playing field, fostering a generation where diversity in hockey is celebrated and encouraged (NHL, 2023).



### **Florida Panthers**

The Florida Panthers are making significant strides in promoting DEI both within their organization and in the broader community. By appointing diverse leaders like Brett Peterson and Thomas Eugene to key positions, they're setting a precedent for inclusivity in sports management. Furthermore, their partnership with organizations like RISE and EVERFI is extending the reach of DEI initiatives into local schools, reaching over 20,000 students in Broward and Miami-Dade counties. Through programs like Diversity Foundations, students are exposed to essential concepts of identity, bias, and privilege, fostering conversations that promote understanding and respect. The impact of these initiatives goes beyond the classroom. By providing free access to educational resources and fostering a culture of inclusivity, the Panthers are empowering the next generation to be advocates for social justice and equity. Moreover, their collaboration with RISE and EVERFI demonstrates a commitment to meaningful action and long-term change, aligning with their core values of respect and empathy (RISE, n.d.).



### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

The establishment of the Willie O'Ree Academy represents a bold stride towards rectifying the racial imbalances within hockey. By dedicating a space for Black athletes to excel, the Penguins are not just nurturing talent but are actively contributing to a cultural shift toward a more inclusive and representative sporting environment (Penguins Create 'Willie O'Ree Academy' to Provide Unique Opportunities for Black Youth Hockey Players | Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation, n.d.).



### **Ottawa Senators**

The Senators' focus on building lasting relationships with Indigenous communities marks a significant step toward reconciliation and mutual respect. Beyond his on-ice contributions, Travis Hamonic and his wife Stephanie are deeply involved in supporting Indigenous youth. They established initiatives such as the Northern Project Initiative, which brings Indigenous kids from the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon to see NHL games, as well as Hammer's D-Partner Program, which supports children who have lost a parent. Additionally, they played key roles in founding the Women in Need Society (WINS) and the "Hit the Ice" reality TV show, which features young Indigenous players at NHL-style training camps (Quinney, 2023).



### **New York Islanders**

The partnership between the New York Islanders, the 43 Oak Foundation, and UBS, a global financial services firm, exemplifies a comprehensive approach to DEI in hockey. This transformative initiative entails a \$1 million commitment over five years to support minority and underprivileged youth hockey players aged 13-22 in the New York Metropolitan Area. Through collaborative efforts, including player clinics, engagement programs, and financial support for essential resources such as transportation and equipment, the initiative aims to break down barriers and foster inclusivity in the sport. By amplifying the voices and experiences of underrepresented communities, the Islanders and UBS Arena are catalyzing meaningful change and paving the way for a more diverse and equitable future in hockey (nyislanders, 2024).



### Los Angeles Kings

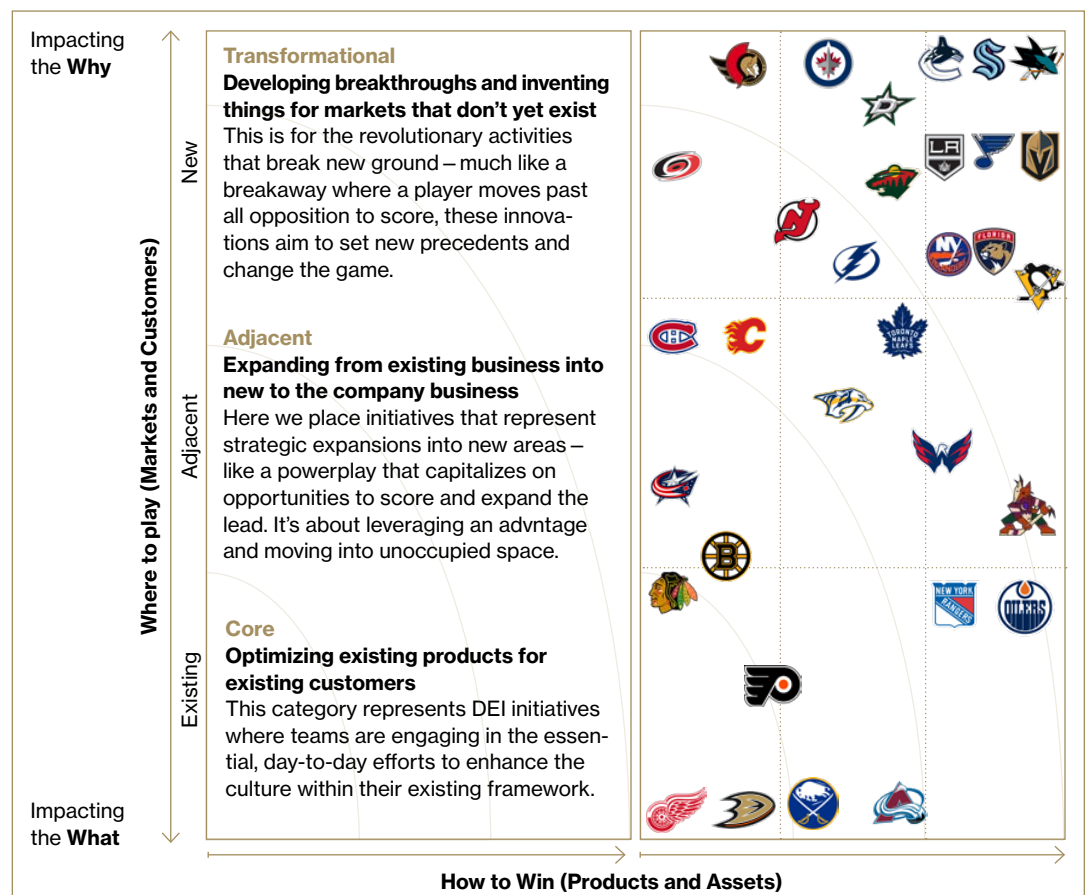
Deeply engaged in addressing systemic barriers with initiatives for diverse youth development and intentional hiring practices. Notable for the “We Are All Kings” inclusivity campaign and appointing Blake Bolden, marking a historic inclusion milestone. Blake Bolden became the NHL’s second female scout and first black woman in that role when she accepted a job with the Los Angeles Kings in February 2020 (Thompson, 2021).

The application of the Innovation Ambition Matrix reveals how these DEI efforts align with broader objectives. Core initiatives like refining recruitment and retention, and enhancing player and fan engagement, bolster the league’s internal culture and market positioning. They ensure that the league not only maintains but strengthens its commitment to inclusivity, thereby solidifying its reputation and relationship with existing audiences.

Adjacent initiatives, such as community outreach programs and market expansion strategies, illustrate the league’s efforts to reach beyond its traditional boundaries, engaging new communities and demographics. This not only broadens the NHL’s audience but also enriches the sport with diverse perspectives and stories, enhancing the league’s cultural and social relevance.

Transformational initiatives represent the NHL’s boldest steps: venturing into uncharted territories with initiatives that are novel both to the league and to the world of sports. These efforts have the potential to redefine the role of sports organizations in promoting diversity and inclusion, setting new industry standards, and catalyzing societal change.

**Figure 14** NHL DEI Innovation Ambition Matrix



In the realm of DEI, leadership and pioneering clubs such as the Seattle Kraken, St. Louis Blues and Vegas Golden Knights are not merely participants; they are trailblazers, reshaping the landscape of hockey through innovative and inclusive practices. These clubs exemplify how adopting and advancing DEI initiatives can catalyze broader organizational and societal transformation.

As we transition to the system study of the NHL, it becomes evident that the league's DEI initiatives, examined through the Innovation Ambition Matrix, are not isolated actions but integral components of a larger ecosystem. They contribute to a cycle of innovation, inclusion, and growth that extends well beyond the ice rink, influencing communities and cultures around the globe.

This understanding reinforces the imperative for the NHL to continuously evolve its DEI strategies, recognizing the significant impact these efforts can have on shaping a more inclusive, equitable, and innovative future for the sport. By embracing DEI as a fundamental aspect of its mission and operations, the NHL not only enhances its competitiveness and relevance but also contributes to a more inclusive and equitable society.

In conclusion, the NHL's commitment to DEI, as framed within the Innovation Ambition Matrix, exemplifies a strategic imperative for both inclusivity and innovation within the league. Through the categorization and evaluation of these initiatives, it becomes evident that they are not only agents of social change but also catalysts for organizational growth and resilience. This holistic perspective underscores the transformative potential of DEI initiatives, solidifying their status as indispensable components of the NHL's strategy for sustained success and profound societal impact. As the league continues its journey, guided by visionary leadership and strategic alignment, DEI remains a cornerstone for shaping a more inclusive, vibrant, and impactful future for hockey and its diverse community of fans worldwide.

# Section 4

# 4



## Stakeholders and The System

### Stakeholder Identification and Mapping

Transitioning from our exploration of the NHL’s DEI initiatives, we now delve deeper into the interconnected network that forms the backdrop of these efforts. This chapter aims to unravel the intricate web of relationships and dynamics that shape the NHL’s approach to DEI across different levels of interaction.

Building on the foundation laid in the previous section, we begin by identifying and analyzing the diverse stakeholders that play pivotal roles within the NHL ecosystem. This involves not just the players, teams, and league officials, but also fans, sponsors, community organizations, and broader societal entities. The objective is to understand how each group influences and is influenced by the league’s DEI strategies, creating a complex and dynamic environment.

Employing the ecological systems theory (Perron, 2017), notably conceptualized by Urie Bronfenbrenner, I adopt a structured approach to dissect this environment. This theoretical framework, typically applied within developmental psychology, offers a powerful lens through which to examine the NHL’s system. It enables us to categorize the

**Figure 15** The NHL – System Levels

<b>Micro</b>	This level delves into the immediate, personal experiences in the NHL, particularly focusing on the NHL Players’ Association’s (NHLPA) role. The NHLPA is instrumental in advocating for players’ rights, fostering an environment of respect and support among players, and ensuring that principles of equity and inclusion are upheld in day-to-day player interactions and decisions. Their advocacy and support play a key role in maintaining a culture of inclusivity and respect within the teams and the league as a whole.
<b>Meso</b>	At the core of the NHL’s operations, the Meso Level is where the vision and reality of DEI initiatives often clash. Owners, Franchise Senior Management and NHL Commissioner and NHL Senior Executives strive to integrate DEI into league operations, team cultures, and community outreach. However, this level is also where tensions and challenges emerge, as varied interests, views, and goals intersect. Balancing the commercial aspects of the league with the moral imperative of DEI is a complex task, often leading to conflicts and negotiations as different stakeholders push for their objectives and interpretations of what DEI should mean in the NHL.
<b>Exo</b>	The Exo Level is where the NHL’s DEI efforts meet external perceptions and expectations. Sponsors, media partners and fans play a significant role in shaping the DEI narrative, but this space is also marked by diverse and sometimes conflicting viewpoints. Sponsors and media can both amplify and critique the NHL’s DEI initiatives, while fans’ diverse reactions to these efforts can range from enthusiastic support to skepticism or resistance. This level reflects the complex interplay between the league’s intentions and the public’s varied responses to its DEI actions.
<b>Macro</b>	The NHL’s DEI initiatives at this level interact with broader societal movements, policy-makers, cultural institutions, community organizations and public expectations, mirroring the complex dynamics with entities like the Black Lives Matter Movement. The league’s efforts to align with these societal forces are often met with challenges, highlighting the gap between societal ideals and NHL practices. This level emphasizes the NHL’s evolving role in the social context, influenced by changing norms and values.
<b>Chrono</b>	Here, the NHL’s DEI journey is viewed through the lens of time, involving historians, futurists, strategists and schools. It acknowledges the league’s historical DEI challenges and envisions a future where DEI is deeply integrated. This perspective underlines the importance of learning from the past and evolving continuously, marking the NHL’s path towards a more inclusive and equitable future in sports.

league's ecosystem into distinct layers or scales: micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono. Each of these layers represents different degrees of directness in their influence on individuals, creating a dynamic and interconnected picture of the system as a whole. Understanding stakeholder interactions across each level is crucial for effective policy-making, organizational strategy, and community planning, as interventions at one level can have cascading effects across the system, as DEI is implemented. From the micro system level, where individual players and coaches interact and the NHLPA advocates for rights and respect, to the meso level's operational heart with Franchise Senior Management and Senior Executives balancing DEI and commercial goals, and further to the exo level where external perceptions from Sponsors/Media and Fans shape the DEI narrative, and the macro level aligning with societal movements but facing challenges in practice. The Chrono level considers historical context and future DEI trajectory, emphasizing continuous evolution. This approach provides clarity on how DEI is actualized within the league. To better understand the system we must start with an overview of each system level. As illustrated, figure 19 provides a summary of each stakeholder and the power and knowledge they carry within the system.

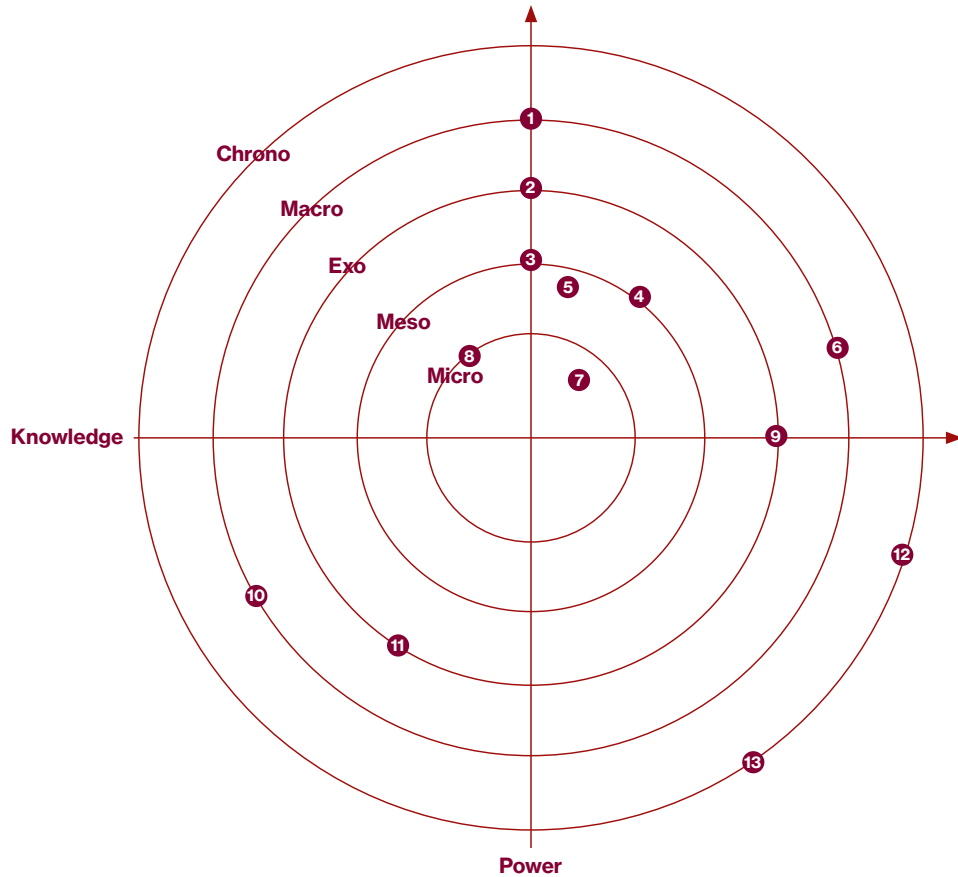
As mentioned, the stakeholders were identified in both the develop and define stage of the project which encompassed environmental scanning and conducting semi-structured Interviews. The NHL Commissioner and Executives shape overarching strategies, guiding the league's future. Franchise Owners and Senior Management are key in implementing these strategies, nurturing team cultures, and ensuring smooth operations. The NHLPA advocates for players, crucial for a healthy player-league relationship. Players themselves, as the sport's core, influence both its competitive and cultural dimensions. Community Organizations, Schools, Fans, and Local Communities are essential for grassroots engagement and public image. Historians, Strategists, Futurists, Government/Policy Makers, and Sponsors/Media Partners offer wider perspectives and sway. This intricate network of actions and motivations is pivotal in steering the league towards either a diverse, inclusive future or upholding the status quo. For enduring change, DEI has to inform all systems and interactions – internal and external. It cannot be a series of discrete activities operating in isolation, because organizations are composed of dynamic, interconnected systems internally and inextricably connected to the external environment (Anand, 2021). The Stakeholder map seeks to assess the quality of their connections.

In undertaking this system mapping, I took into account both interviews with key stakeholders and scholarly research, integrating their insights to paint a comprehensive picture of the NHL's DEI landscape. This approach not only highlights the significant role each stakeholder plays in the DEI narrative but also underscores the complexity and interconnectedness of the system as a whole. Numerous individuals, organizations, and institutions make up and influence the high-performance sports context. Operating at different levels within sports, they have different goals as subsystems within the overall sports system. Here I provide a summary of each stakeholder alongside the power and knowledge they carry within the system.

## **Stakeholder Themes**

Through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders within the NHL, interview data was scrutinized for themes using a grounded theory approach (The Practical Guide to Grounded Theory – DeVe, n.d.). I was able to uncover recurring themes that provided valuable insights for a needs analysis concerning viable DEI implementation in the league. This exploratory process was instrumental in identifying the strategic needs and expectations of different stakeholder groups, ranging from Owners, Corporate Executives, Players and Team Management to Fans and Community Organizations.

**Figure 16** The NHL – Stakeholder Map



Stakeholder	Description of Power and Influence
<b>1 Government/ Policymaker</b>	Influence the NHL through regulatory measures, mandating accountability and inclusive practices within sports governance.
<b>2 Sponsors/ Media Partners</b>	Shape public perceptions and narratives around hockey, promoting diversity and inclusivity to influence the broader NHL culture.
<b>3 Commissioner</b>	As the league’s top executive, oversees DEI initiatives, setting the tone for an inclusive culture across all operations and community engagements.
<b>4 Owners/Board of Governors</b>	Hold financial and strategic control, crucial for resource allocation and setting DEI goals within the league.
<b>5 NHL Senior Executives</b>	Shape league-wide policies and strategic direction, including DEI efforts, impacting all stakeholders from franchises to fans.
<b>6 Cultural Institutions</b>	Collaborate with the NHL to leverage their expertise in fostering inclusivity, enhancing public engagement, and influencing cultural shifts towards equity.
<b>7 NHLPA</b>	Represents player interests, playing a key role in DEI policy shaping and negotiation related to player conditions and safety.
<b>8 Players</b>	Influence DEI through their visibility and public stances, serving as role models and advocates for inclusivity within and beyond the NHL.
<b>9 Fans</b>	Both the traditional and future fans influence how culture is driven. Therefore impacting culture change.
<b>10 Community Organizations</b>	Bridge the NHL with local communities, focusing on using hockey to promote community development and inclusivity.
<b>11 Local Communities</b>	Central to the NHL’s support base, influencing the league’s public image and the effectiveness of its DEI initiatives.
<b>12 Historians, Strategists, and Futurists</b>	Offer insights that guide the NHL’s long-term DEI strategies and anticipate future trends and challenges.
<b>13 Schools</b>	Introduce DEI concepts to young sports enthusiasts, enhancing NHL partnerships to foster inclusivity in early sports education.

The process itself suggests an inductive methodology where data itself informs the emerging theory, rather than testing an existing hypothesis. This approach is suitable for DEI in the NHL due to its exploratory nature, allowing for the identification of patterns and themes directly from stakeholders’ narratives without preconceived notions.

The process involved:

- **Open Coding:** Initially, raw interview data was examined to identify key concepts and categories, labelling them with descriptive codes. These codes represent surface-level themes such as “scope of DEI work”, “media representation”, and “positionality and DEI strategy”.
- **Axial Coding:** These initial codes were then interconnected to find relationships, leading to more consolidated themes. For example, combining insights from the NHL’s strategic framework with DEI with challenges in implementing across the hockey ecosystem.

The final themes, refined through axial coding, include **End-to-End DEI Frameworks, Organizational Strategies, Grassroots and Community DEI Synergies, Agency in DEI, and the Evolution of DEI in Sports.** These themes encapsulate the multi-dimensional approach the NHL has taken towards DEI, suggesting an evolving, strategic commitment to inclusivity.

Figure 17 End-to-End DEI Frameworks

**Theme**

**End-to-End DEI Frameworks**

This theme integrates CRT principles, emphasizing the use of an ‘intersectional lens’ in DEI efforts to address the interplay of race, class, and gender. It promotes ‘counter-storytelling’ to challenge prevailing narratives and expose inequalities within sports. The concept of ‘interest convergence’ suggests aligning the goals of marginalized communities with those of the NHL to enhance inclusivity, while the ‘permanence of racism’ highlights the ongoing need for robust strategies to dismantle systemic barriers and foster diversity consistently.

These quotes come from a range of positions in Marketing, NHLPA, and Executive levels across the NHL.

“

The greatest challenge (systemic) to implementing and elevating DEI is resources – people and money. Having an official budget for DEI is new.

“

Every team has their regional interest and every team has their set audience.

“

In terms of the outbound consumer-facing stuff, it’s far less codified. It’s more having a diverse group of people working on things together. I think almost naturally, it’s like a water filter that takes out some of the impurities in the water as it goes through the filter. You’ve got, you know, an Asian designer working on something that then passes through someone that is of the LGBTQ2S+ community, then passes through a couple more people and through every phase of that process, people are like, okay, so how do we think different communities are going to react to this.

“

Hockey has such a major influence on Canadian culture in particular.

“

DEI training from head office is good because some clubs were doing nothing so it established a baseline understanding.

“

My org is passionate about DEI but the NHL has historically repealed avenues to champion DEI causes.



**Figure 18** Organizational Strategies for DEI

**Theme**

### Organizational Strategies for DEI

Emphasizing CRT’s ‘liberatory consciousness,’ this theme encourages entities to reflect on their privileges and biases. It stresses ‘reflexivity’ in leadership, compelling leaders to confront and address inherent inequalities. ‘Racial realism’ acknowledges deep-seated societal racism, urging the NHL to actively implement anti-racist policies. This theme also promotes ‘transformative resistance,’ advocating for change that reshapes power dynamics within the organization and extends to the community.

These quotes come from a range of positions in Player Management, NHLPA, and Executive levels across the NHL.

“  
Bad leaders are recycled by bad leaders so the system stays bad in some cases, and as long as we continue to recycle them, i.e. they get fired from one team and hired by the next team, fired by that team, hired by another team, we’re never going to get fresh thinking.

“  
George Floyd was a wake-up call that we did not have the infrastructure to be leaders in this space.

“  
How can we help with educational sessions, training, etc and what type of platform do you have? You know, how can you use your voice? A lot of guys, you know, they don’t speak out because they, they don’t know, they, don’t want to be criticized by the media for, you know, saying something that, oh, they didn’t mean, or they said it in the wrong way.

“  
NHL is not taking part in TIDE reporting but every other sport is.

“  
Maybe being at the top of a franchise there has to be certain buckets, not just winning hockey games.

“  
Bans and restrictions don’t impact us because DEI is 365 work in and outside of the rink.

**Theme**

### Grassroots and Community DEI Synergies

This theme advocates recognizing ‘community cultural wealth’ to challenge the deficit perspective traditionally held by dominant groups. It underscores ‘cultural humility,’ a commitment to continual self-assessment and mutual respect in interactions, facilitating equitable community engagement. ‘Mutual reciprocity’ supports two-way learning and benefit exchanges, while ‘spatial justice’ calls for fair access and representation in all areas of hockey.

Many interviewees discussed the significant role of sports organizations in community engagement. These quotes come from a range of positions in Senior Management, NHLPA, and Executive levels across the NHL.

“  
I guess that the NHL does make recommendations, but at the end of the day, each franchise is its own.

“  
Does hockey and will hockey be a force in that space do they want to be a leader and are they going to put their money where their mouth is.

“  
I think that without D.I. initiatives or objectives you cannot grow the game of hockey as it is today The success of the business of hockey really relies on D.I. Diversity equity and inclusion I Mean we released our stars at the NHL. I think on ice and off ice were 84% white So for us to really grow, we have to connect with communities that are in a part of our game today, or seeing, or communities that don’t see themselves in our game today.

“  
Heritage nights within games or on the same day with educational components ahead of them.

“  
We don’t have to lead it all – the community does some but it’s mostly driven by our effort.

Figure 20 Agency in DEI

**Theme**  
**Agency in DEI**

This theme amplifies CRT’s ‘voice,’ empowering marginalized individuals to share their experiences, challenging existing sports narratives. It fosters a culture of accountability and perpetual learning within the NHL, ensuring all community members are both contributors to and beneficiaries of DEI efforts.

Interviewees shared personal stories and beliefs about DEI, revealing how individual experiences influence perceptions and actions within the sports industry. These quotes come from a range of positions in the Senior Management, NHLPA, and Executive levels across the NHL.

“  
 A Russian player who still has family in Russia may not want to be viewed as endorsing that social cause because it may cause them problems with their families back in Russia, where we don’t control anything and there are lots of things going on. That’s kind of a systemic thing, okay? And it’s a very personal thing.

“  
 I’ve been racially profiled in the arena just coming into work.

“  
 It takes a long time to change culture and and I would also say it takes a long time to change.

“  
 The city is historically and currently very segregated and many people are comfortable with that.

“  
 I think it would be hypocritical if they want to focus externally when they’re not even at the point of having fully developed stuff, other than performative things internally.

“  
 What keeps me in the role is that I can really impact change in my environment.

Figure 21 Evolution of DEI in Sports

**Theme**  
**Evolution of DEI in Sports**

Drawing from ‘historical contextuality,’ this theme stresses the importance of understanding the historical and cultural impacts on DEI development. It calls for ‘institutional accountability’ within the NHL, advocating for proactive dismantling of systemic racism and inequalities. The endorsement of ‘pragmatic pluralism’ supports using varied DEI strategies that adapt to societal changes, ensuring the league’s initiatives remain relevant and effective.

These quotes come from a range of positions in the Senior Management and Executive levels across the NHL.

“  
 We have to continue to make decisions that allow players to be allies.

“  
 We believe in working with indigenous communities, consultants and tribes.

“  
 Pre Floyd, these DEI roles never existed in clubs.

“  
 Events highlighting black players of past and heritage night within a hockey game/same-day .

“  
 We are here to win hockey games, but winning is also the greatest way to connect to people around the community.

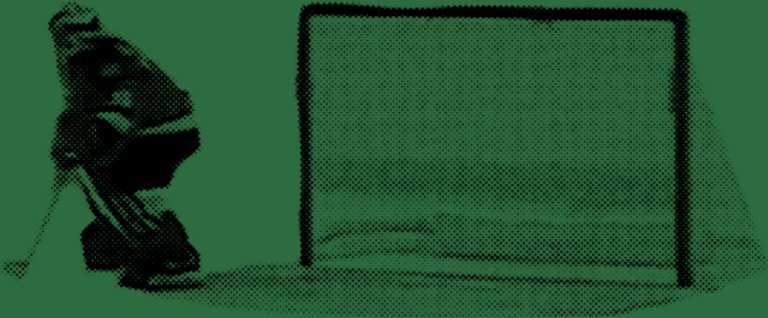
“  
 70% of DIB initiatives are employee-driven 30% are top-down driven.

“  
 Club level DEI work is community restorative work.

Reflecting on the insights gleaned from our previous discussions on the dominant DEI themes within the NHL, we recognize the intricate and multifaceted nature of cultural transformation. The foundational work outlined thus far sets a robust backdrop for this next crucial phase: assessing the ability of the NHL's DEI initiatives. As we transition from theoretical frameworks to the practical application of these concepts, we carry forward the understanding that change is a process akin to gardening – requiring time, patience, and continuous nurturing. This perspective underscores our approach to evaluating the league's DEI strategies, not as static plans, but as living, evolving structures that must be tended to with care and foresight.

As we transition to the next chapter on creating a viable system for DEI in the NHL, it's crucial to understand that real change, especially in the context of DEI, is akin to cultivating a garden rather than simply rearranging furniture. Change requires planting seeds, nurturing growth, and allowing time for roots to spread and strengthen. This process involves patience, attention, and consistent care, ensuring that each new initiative or policy can grow, adapt, and thrive within the organization's ecosystem.

# Section 5



## The Viability of The System

In this section, we delve into a viable system study to assess the league's capability to implement DEI and change hockey culture. Here, the primary question is whether the NHL can adapt and evolve, maintaining relevance and leadership in DEI amidst shifting societal norms and internal dynamics. Can this organization adapt, evolve, and remain effective in meeting its goals amidst internal challenges and external pressures (Byrd & Sparkman, 2022)?

This viability study extends beyond mere survival, probing the league's foundational structures to ascertain if its DEI efforts can withstand the tests of time and transformation.

This involves a comprehensive evaluation bridging DEI theory with practical implementation, scrutinizing the league's strategies for their long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

The subsequent analysis, rooted in the principles of the VSM, positions the NHL as a complex, adaptive system facing multifaceted DEI challenges. By employing the VSM, we aim to illuminate how DEI can be seamlessly integrated throughout the NHL's operations, enhancing its capacity to navigate and thrive amidst DEI-related challenges and opportunities. This approach not only ensures that DEI initiatives become enduring elements of the league's infrastructure but also underscores the NHL's unique potential to set a benchmark in incorporating diversity as a core component of excellence and innovation.

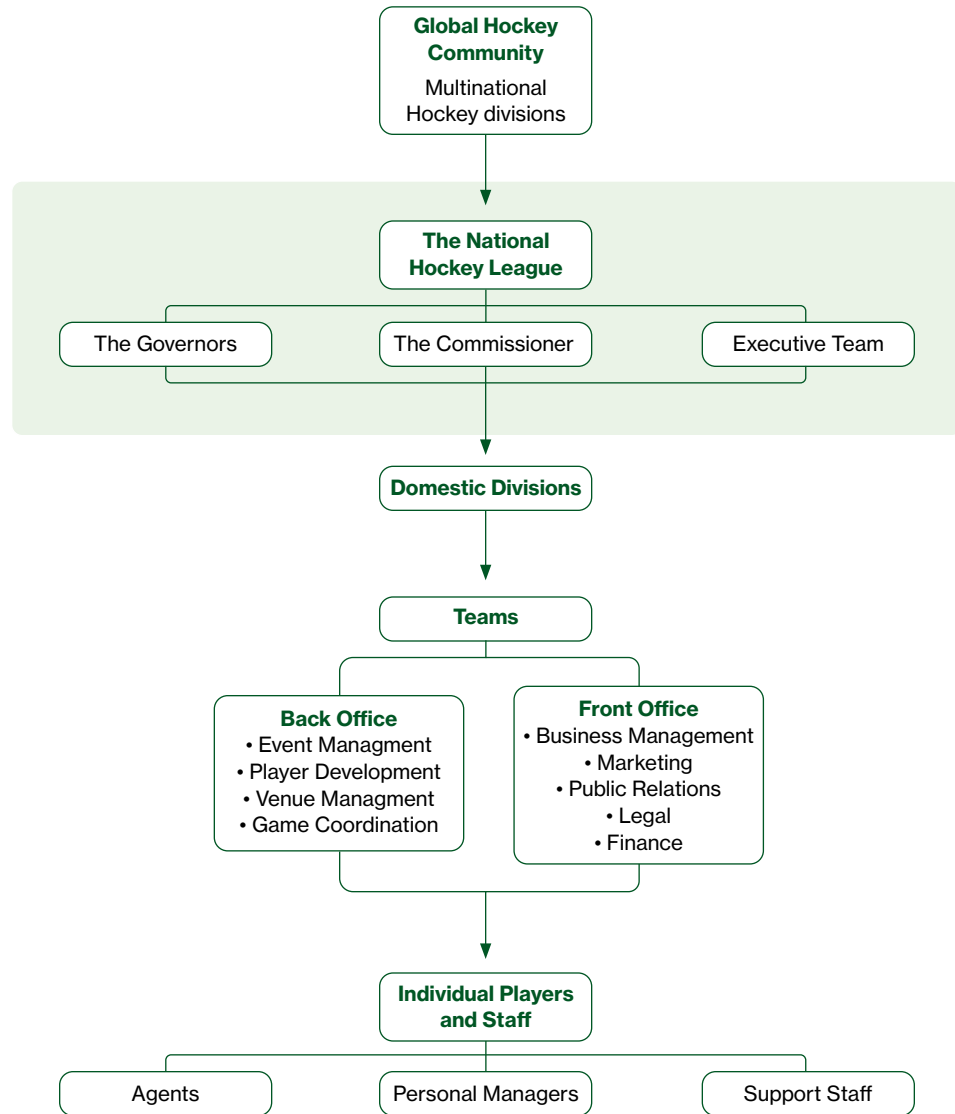
### The Recursive Structure

The VSM, conceptualized initially as a mathematical construct and later rendered graphically, offers a unique lens through which to understand complex organizational structures like the NHL. Central to the VSM is the principle of recursive structure, implying that within any complex system, smaller subsystems exist that replicate the larger system's structure and functionality. This inherent recursiveness ensures that each level of the system can operate effectively while maintaining alignment with the overarching organizational objectives.

Moreover, it's crucial to recognize that the NHL itself functions as a nested system within the broader context of the VSM framework. This perspective underscores that the NHL is not only composed of its internal recursive levels but also fits as a component within larger systems, such as the global sports industry and international cultural phenomena. This dual role highlights the adaptability and interconnectedness required for the NHL to thrive both as a unique entity and as part of larger societal structures.

The recursive structure in the context of the VSM is essential for managing complexity and maintaining coherence across different levels of an organization. In practice, this means that within a large entity like the NHL, there are nested layers or recursive levels, each mirroring the whole's structural and functional attributes. These levels range from individual players and staff, through teams and divisions, up to the league itself and even the global hockey community. This multi-layered approach facilitates decentralized decision-making while ensuring each unit contributes to the league's overall mission and remains interconnected with broader societal and economic systems. The following illustration outlines the recursive structure from which our system in focus, the NHL is set within.

Figure 22 The Recursive Structure



**1 Recursion 1 – Individual Players and Staff:** This level of the ecosystem, focuses on meticulous skill enhancement, mental fortitude, and professional evolution. Individuals at this tier are ingrained with the ethos of perpetual advancement, competitive excellence, and holistic development and upskilling – underscoring the seamless integration of micro-level contributions with macro-level goals.

**2 Recursion 2 – Teams:** Within each team, a comprehensive ecosystem thrives, comprised of front and back office functions that include specialized departments such as scouting, player development, marketing, and community outreach. These reflect the NHL’s overarching goals and demonstrate the league’s strategic depth. In some teams, there exists a centralized model where all operations are run through the front office, ensuring a unified approach to the team’s vision and strategy. Recent history shows that such a model has been instrumental in evidencing cultural change, streamlining DEI initiatives to resonate powerfully with distinct community values and sociocultural dynamics. This not only reinforces the league’s dedication to inclusivity but also enhances local engagement, ensuring that the spirit of diversity and unity is woven into the fabric of each team’s identity.

## The Viability of The System

- 3 **Recursion 3 – Divisions:** Positioned as intermediary strata, divisions set the standard of competition and collaboration, harmonizing individual team efforts with the league's collective narrative. This segmentation facilitates structured rivalry while upholding equitable standards and fostering regional affinity. Divisions epitomize the strategic balancing act of maintaining league-wide consistency in governance and competitive integrity, while nurturing localized fanbases and stakeholder relations, thus strengthening the league's regional footprint without compromising its unified vision.
- 4 **Recursion 4 – The League (NHL):** This apex level delineates the NHL's strategic command center, overseeing the intricate tapestry of operational, tactical, and strategic layers. It encapsulates the comprehensive execution of the VSM, wielding oversight across regulatory compliance, strategic direction-setting, technological advancements, and global marketing initiatives. This tier is instrumental in ensuring that all subsidiary entities – from individual players to entire divisions – operate as cohesively as possible under the league's strategic umbrella, fostering innovation, ensuring regulatory alignment, and spearheading global expansion efforts.
- 5 **Recursion 5 – Global Hockey Community:** This expansive tier extends the NHL's strategic framework into the global arena, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. It embodies the league's commitment to international diplomacy, cultural exchange, and the universal promotion of hockey. By forging alliances with international bodies, nurturing global talent, and standardizing hockey protocols, the NHL amplifies its global footprint, seeding the sport's growth on a worldwide scale. This level not only mirrors the league's strategic priorities on an international stage but also champions the global unification and standardization of professional hockey, facilitating a worldwide community bonded through the sport.

The system in focus here is the NHL recursion 4. In focusing on the NHL, this research utilizes the VSM to delve into how the league's structure and operations reflect the principles of adaptability, and sustainability. The NHL, established in 1917 and now a global entity, showcases its mission through its engagement with fans worldwide and its dedication to building vibrant communities. By applying the VSM, we can dissect the NHL's organizational ecosystem, understanding how each recursive level contributes to its overarching goals, particularly in the realm of DEI. The NHL's journey in embedding DEI initiatives at every level of its recursive structure offers profound insights into the complexities and opportunities of fostering an inclusive, equitable, and vibrant sporting community.

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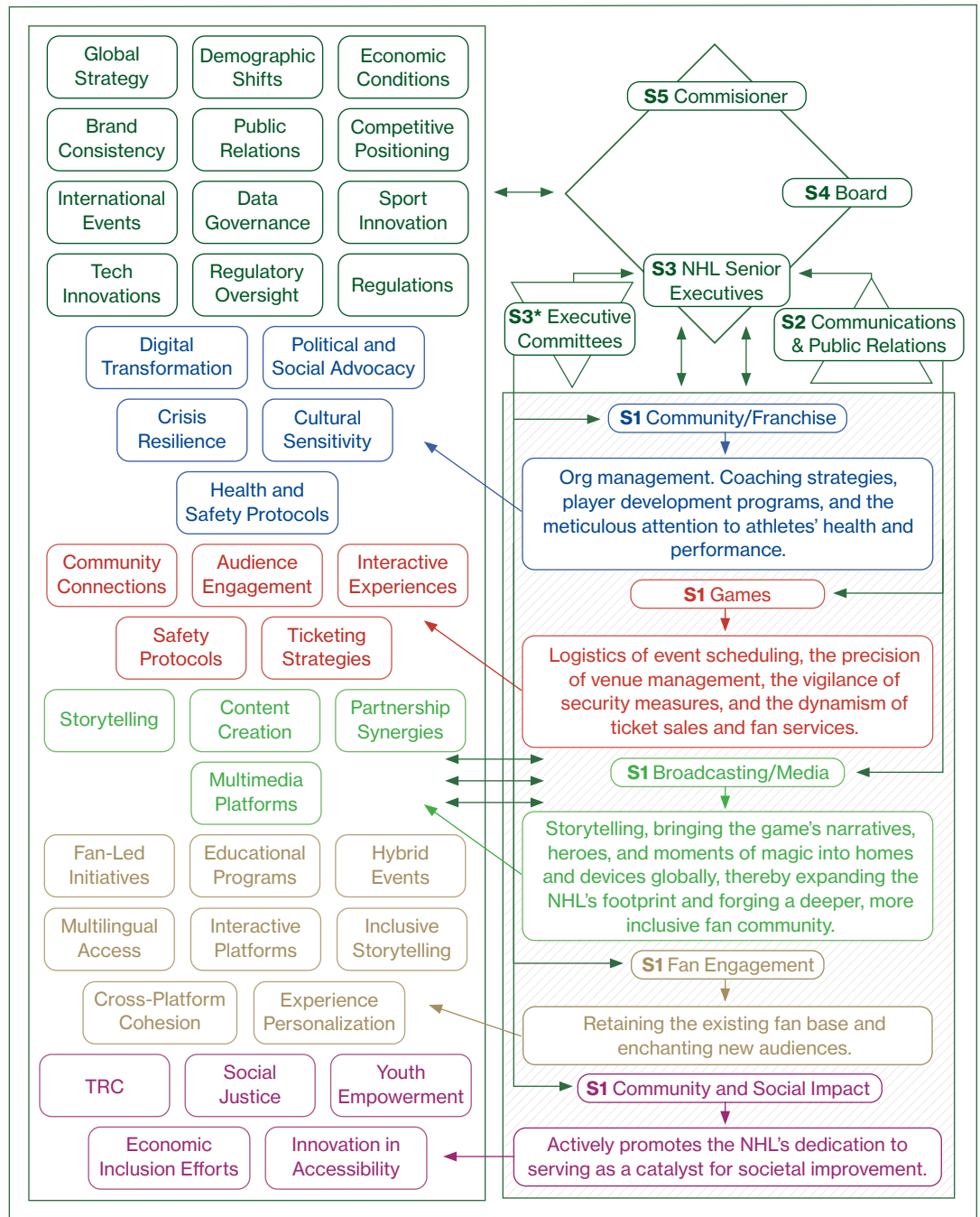
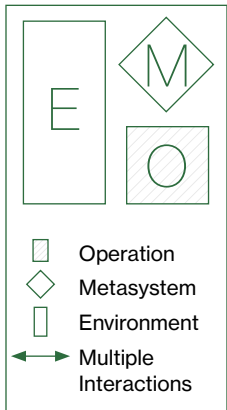
## The System in Focus

Since its establishment in 1917, the NHL has evolved into a global entity comprising 32 member clubs and showcasing a player base from over 20 countries all vying for the esteemed Stanley Cup. As a cultural phenomenon, the NHL engages over 670 million enthusiasts annually, leveraging extensive broadcasts in more than 160 countries and a robust digital ecosystem to unite a worldwide audience (Franklinclarc, 2023).

The NHL is driving to build healthy and vibrant communities using the sport of hockey to celebrate fans of every race, colour, religion, national origin, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (Sinclair, 2023).

The VSM divides the NHL's organization into three main parts: the Operation, handling day-to-day activities like production and distribution, the Metasystem, ensuring the entire organization operates cohesively and the environment, in which all of this

Figure 23 The Viable System Model



takes place. Looking at figure 18 and figure 19 we see how various operational units support each other in the pursuit of shared goals, specifically impactful DEI that will change hockey culture.

Although tensions may arise due to resource constraints, existing organizational culture, performance issues, and societal cultural norms. These challenges offer opportunities for strategic growth and adaptation. For example, the integration of the Seven Dimensions of Excellence in Inclusion into the NHL's operations signifies a bold commitment to a more inclusive and equitable environment. As discussed in previous chapters, this dynamic framework involves all league facets, supported by the Meta Systems oversight, ensuring that strong DEI principles are woven into the league's very fabric, not tied to a person but ingrained in the day-to-day operations.

Based on stakeholder interviews conducted with NHL executives, Owners, and



Senior Managers across franchises, organizations and scholars well versed in hockey culture, these are the operational units in the NHL: Franchise, Games, Broadcasting, Fan Engagement and Community and Social Impact. Note, that these Operational Units are the operational units in the NHL: Franchise, Games, Broadcasting, Fan Engagement and Community and Social Impact. Note, these Operational Units are smaller embedded Viable Systems; recursions of their system.

To ensure the NHL's vitality and expansion, the seamless interaction between its operational units and the Metasystem is paramount. Consider, for instance, the Franchise Operations, responsible for fostering a winning culture while orchestrating captivating game events. When these units align under the Metasystem's strategic guidance, the NHL can effectively navigate the dynamic landscape of professional sports.

This integration doesn't merely facilitate operational efficiency; it forms the bedrock for embedding DEI initiatives into the league's essence. By ascertaining how these operational units and the Metasystem coalesce within the broader environment, the NHL is taking action to weave DEI principles deep into its organizational fabric, shaping a more inclusive and resilient sporting community. Based on stakeholder interviews and across the NHL and scholarly insights, here we review the optimization of DEI across a focused system, the NHL in a VSM framework:

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## **Viable System Model Insights**

### **System 1: Franchise Operations:**

Franchise Operations stands as the heartbeat of the NHL, where the magic of professional hockey comes to life. It transcends the prowess displayed on the ice, delving into the intricacies of coaching tactics, player development initiatives, and comprehensive health and performance management. At the core of this system lies a singular, profound goal: to hoist the Stanley Cup, an emblem of hockey supremacy, while fostering a culture steeped in resilience, collaboration, and perpetual growth (How Three "fringe" Hockey Departments Operate, and What Teams Use Them For, n.d.).

The orchestration of game events within this system is a monumental endeavour, transforming arenas into pulsating stages for the finest displays of hockey. It intricately weaves together the logistics of event scheduling, the precision of venue management, the vigilance of security protocols, and the dynamism of ticketing and fan services. Each game is meticulously crafted to deliver an immersive experience, captivating fans from the opening face-off to the final buzzer. This operational backbone not only amplifies fan engagement but also serves as a cornerstone for driving substantial revenue streams vital for the league's economic sustainability (The Hockey News, 2021).

### **System 2: Public Relations, Broadcasting and Media**

In an era where content is king, this system serves as the NHL's megaphone to the world. Managing broadcasting rights and partnerships with media giants requires a strategic blend of negotiation acumen and content innovation. This system is the conduit through which the thrill of hockey reaches millions, from traditional television broadcasts to cutting-edge online streaming platforms, and engaging social media content. It's about storytelling, bringing the game's narratives, heroes, and moments of magic into homes and devices globally, thereby expanding the NHL's footprint and forging a deeper, more inclusive fan community. Effective public relations management plays a crucial role in this process, ensuring that each message aligns with the league's brand values and resonates with diverse audiences. It involves meticulously crafting campaigns, managing public perception, and handling communications crisply during high-stakes events – skills that amplify the impact of every broadcast and social media interaction (C. B. U. Today, 2021).

**System Level 3 Resource Management and Allocation**

Amidst the intricate tapestry of the NHL, lies a pivotal system dedicated to the judicious allocation of resources. Stakeholders including financial officers, HR managers, and senior franchise executives converge to orchestrate a meso-level strategy, meticulously managing internal resources. Analysis reveals the critical importance of effective resource distribution in fostering equitable implementation of DEI initiatives across teams.

At its core, the strategic imperative of this system is to balance resource allocation, harmonize support for DEI initiatives with overarching strategic objectives. In 2019, the league embarked on a transformative journey by establishing the Executive Inclusion Council, helmed by Sabres owner Kim Pegula and NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, alongside three other pioneering committees. Under the stewardship of co-chairs such as P.K. Subban and NBC analyst Anson Carter, the Player Inclusion Committee convened current and former NHL players, as well as women's national team representatives.

The establishment of the Fan Inclusion Committee and Youth Hockey Inclusion Committee underscores a resolute commitment to developing action-oriented solutions that enhance access, opportunities, and experiences for underrepresented groups within the hockey community.

**System Level 3\* Executive Committees:**

This system acts as a critical checkpoint, ensuring the authenticity and efficacy of the league's DEI endeavours. The strategic imperative drive in this system is continuous evaluation. By continuously assessing the impact of DEI initiatives, gaps can be identified, strategies can be adapted, and areas requiring additional national attention can be pinpointed. This iterative approach ensures that the NHL remains dynamic and proactive in its pursuit of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Illustrating these efforts, Senior Human Resource Officers spearhead engaging DEI training initiatives, transcending mere box-checking exercises to foster genuine cultural transformation. Partnerships with external organizations like RISE that facilitate immersive in-person training sessions, involving post-COVID, involving not only employees but also parents within the youth hockey community.

**System Level 4 Strategic Leadership and Stakeholder Engagement Division**

This dynamic system is where the NHL's brand vibrancy and market penetration are actively cultivated. Through targeted digital marketing campaigns, merchandise strategizing, and immersive fan festivals, this unit works tirelessly to elevate the NHL's brand allure. It's a realm of creativity and interaction, where fan loyalty is both celebrated and deepened through personalized experiences, loyalty programs, and community-building initiatives. This system's success is measured by its ability to not only retain the existing fan base but also to enchant new audiences, weaving them into the fabric of the NHL family (Lemire, 2022).

**System 5: Policy Governance and Normative Leadership**

At its core, this system embodies the NHL's commitment to being a force for societal good, recognizing that the league's influence extends far beyond the rink. Here, DEI isn't just a program; it's a principled stand woven into the very ethos of the league, driving policies and practices that champion inclusivity, respect, and equity. Through philanthropic endeavours, partnerships with NGOs, and community programs, this system leverages hockey's universal appeal to make tangible impacts in communities, advocating for change, and inspiring the next generation.

Conversely, the operational units within the NHL function much like balancing feedback systems (Lawson, 2015), for better or worse. They tirelessly work to uphold

## The Viability of The System

equilibrium and harmony throughout the league, demonstrating how they swiftly adjust to counter deviations from the desired state. These units serve as the sturdy pillars supporting the league's day-to-day operations, ensuring its resilience and adaptability. Their role is pivotal, providing the stability necessary to address immediate challenges while staying aligned with the NHL's long-term vision. This alignment isn't arbitrary; it epitomizes the NHL's commitment to DEI. As we delve deeper into the dynamics of organizational change within the league, understanding system archetypes becomes crucial. These archetypes help illuminate recurring patterns and behaviors that can either support or impede the effective integration of DEI initiatives. By leveraging insights from system archetypes, we can more adeptly navigate the complexities involved in implementing sustainable change and fostering an inclusive culture throughout the league.

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## The System Archetypes

The NHL's DEI journey is not an isolated endeavour but one that moves within a greater ecosystem of influences and reactions. This observation leads naturally into the realm of system archetypes as developed by the MIT System Dynamics Group (Kim & Pegasus Communications, Inc., 2008). These archetypes are deeply embedded in the minutia of organizational change, directing how change is implemented. Moreover, these archetypes are more than theoretical constructs; they are reflections of the lived reality of institutions like the NHL, decoding and revealing recurring patterns. In the context of this research, the archetypal symptoms will be used to identify a system archetype to then assess what is propelling their organization forward or keeping it tethered to the status quo.

Looking at figure 24, I will now explore the various system archetypes, consider how they might manifest within the NHL DEI efforts, and then reflect on the implications of each for effecting transformative change.

Figure 24 The System Archetypes

System Archetype	Symptoms	Positive Loop Example (+)	Negative Loop Example (-)	Implications
<b>Limits to Growth</b>	Initiatives start strong but face various limitations (ex: resources, cultural acceptance) that halt progress.	Rapid early growth in DEI awareness and various initiatives.	Eventual stagnation or reversal of progress as various limits are reached.	DEI efforts require rigorous evaluation like stress testing to ensure sustainable growth and impact can be achieved.
<b>Shifting the Burden</b>	Short-term solutions or quick and easy wins.	Immediate relief/impact from DEI-related issues through quick fixes.	Neglect of deeper underlying issues, leading to recurring problems.	Balanced and methodical approaches to DEI are crucial for long-term success.
<b>Eroding Goals</b>	Standards are adjusted to align with culturally acceptable (status quo), potentially diluting the original DEI objectives.	Short-term achievement of lowered DEI standards.	Gradual lowering of DEI ambitions reinforces the problem it seeks to solve.	Maintaining high DEI standards is essential for true progress and culture change.
<b>Escalation</b>	Teams might rapidly implement DEI programs not for their intrinsic value but to appear more progressive than rivals, leading to destructive escalation.	Initial gains from competitive DEI initiatives.	Exhaustion of resources and goodwill.	Collaborative rather than competitive approaches will promote league wide improvement.
<b>Success to the Successful</b>	Resources are allocated to successful initiatives, neglecting areas that may need more support.	Enhanced performance in areas receiving more resources.	Neglect of less successful but vital DEI areas due to unequal resource distribution.	Ongoing assessment of DEI initiatives ensures support across all DEI efforts, thereby fostering a holistic environment for success that is adaptable to the unique needs of each initiative.
<b>Tragedy of the Commons</b>	The overuse of shared resources by individual teams, leading to quick and sudden depletion.	High utilization of shared DEI resources.	Depletion of DEI resources, leading to burnout and decreased efficacy.	Shared DEI resources must be managed to prevent overuse and ensure availability for all teams.
<b>Fixes that Fail</b>	Multiple quick fixes that resolve issues but cause more severe problems in the long-term.	Temporary alleviation of DEI issues.	Long-term exacerbation of DEI issues due to short-sighted solutions.	Systemic DEI solutions should be prioritized over quick fixes to prevent cyclical problems.
<b>Growth and Underinvestment</b>	Failure to invest in capacity leads to performance issues, negatively affecting growth.	Initial investment in DEI growth.	Lack of sustained investment leads to performance bottlenecks.	Continuous investment in DEI capacity is key to achieving and maintaining growth.
<b>Accidental Adversaries</b>	Collaborations turn competitive due to perceived threats, destroying collective gains.	Collaboration on DEI goals.	Mistrust and competition harm true progress in DEI.	Open communication and shared objectives are vital to prevent the breakdown of partnerships.
<b>Attractiveness Principle</b>	Multiple competing problems with equal urgency, force difficult choices about which to address first.	Priority is given to the most impactful DEI initiatives.	Less 'attractive' DEI issues are neglected, possibly exacerbating them.	Strategic prioritization and management of DEI initiatives ensure that all issues are addressed.

Understanding system archetypes within the NHL's DEI efforts has revealed the dance of dynamic interplays where positive loops drive growth and negative loops signal caution. This duality of forces is an intricate part of systemic change, where balancing feedback mechanisms play a critical role in maintaining its stability. Yet, their influence is double-edged. While feedback mechanisms can support the league's evolution, they can just as effectively resist it, particularly when change efforts run counter to entrenched systemic norms and behaviours. Here, the root of successes or failures frequently lies in the tenacious grip of these balancing feedback loops on the system's current state, manifesting through deeply embedded attitudes and objectives of key stakeholders.

For transformative change to be realized within the NHL, it is imperative to not only initiate but to accurately direct efforts toward the root causes that underpin the system's resistance to change. Recognizing and harnessing the unique roles of both the Meta-system and the operational units, the league can forge a path where DEI principles are intricately interwoven into the organizational ethos. It's about more than just hockey; it's about creating a community where every voice is heard, every individual is valued, and every fan feels a part of something greater than themselves. This is what is at stake. This is the transformative work of DEI.

# Section 6



# 6



## Recommendations

Transitioning from a thorough analysis of the NHL’s DEI environment to charting a path forward, we’ve harnessed insights from methodologies such as the Viable System Model (VSM) and the Innovation Ambition Matrix. This exploration not only sheds light on the league’s current DEI positioning but also emphasizes the critical need for innovative, bold steps and collaborative efforts across the board to propel meaningful cultural transformation.

Now, we pivot to strategic recommendations, seamlessly integrated with the initiatives currently unfolding throughout the league’s operational and executive branches, as well as its franchises, steering the NHL towards a future anchored in equity. These strategies are based on commonalities found across existing efforts and propose forward-thinking recommendations around community partnerships, immersive DEI training, and leveraging data analytics and AI to drive cultural shifts within the NHL’s ecosystem. The recommendations also seek to apply several positive feedback loops identified from the NHL DEI system archetype assessment.

Imagine the NHL as the DEI gold standard in sports, where advanced analytics and forecast trends are enabling every team to embody inclusion. Picture a league where VR empathy training deepens understanding among players and fans, and community-driven initiatives allow fans to shape a more inclusive game actively. Envision the NHL leading global DEI efforts, sharing strategies to uplift communities, and pioneering research labs where innovation meets inclusivity, pushing hockey toward a more equitable future.

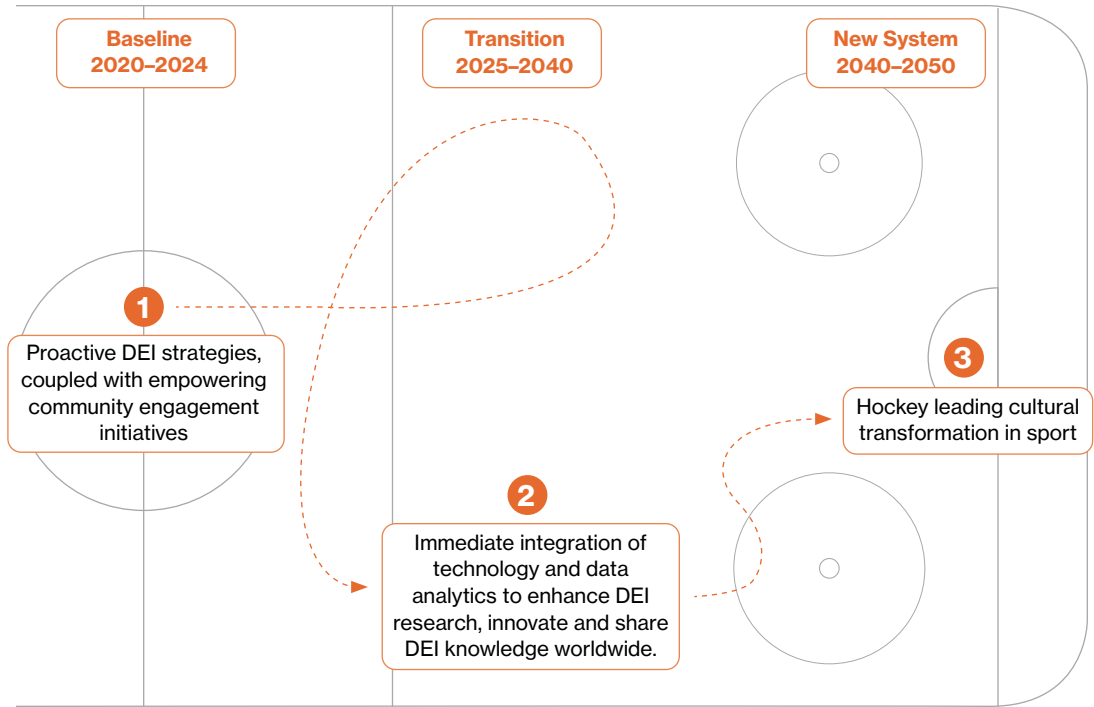
These visions transition from our thorough analysis into actionable strategies for accountability, impact, sustainability, and the NHL’s DEI evolution. By embracing these recommendations, the NHL is not only transforming its culture but also leading by example, fostering a legacy of inclusivity, equity, and innovation in the sporting world and beyond.

As we head into the final period of our discussion, it’s clear that the NHL’s journey towards a more inclusive and equitable future is a marathon, requiring endurance,

**Figure 25** Recommendations

Innovation	Implication	Extrapolation
<b>Advanced DEI Integration through Technology and Data Analytics</b>	AI revolutionizes the NHL’s DEI approach for targeted, proactive strategies.	Leads to industry-wide adoption of data-driven DEI models, influencing broader societal norms.
<b>Global DEI Collaboratives</b>	Cross-league partnerships expand DEI’s reach, unifying global sports communities.	Catalyzes an era of sports without borders, where inclusivity is a universal norm.
<b>Virtual Reality (VR) Empathy Training</b>	VR training enhances DEI education, developing empathy among stakeholders.	Sets a precedent for empathy-led sports cultures, impacting societal interactions globally.
<b>Community-Driven DEI Initiatives</b>	Through a commitment to enhancing diversity and inclusion, the NHL’s community-driven initiatives receive escalating support each year, aiming to substantially widen access and enrich the fan base. These efforts are designed to transform hockey into the sport most reflective of societal diversity, affecting every level from the front office to the back office.	Spurs a trend of sports-community partnerships that reshape social engagement models.
<b>Transdisciplinary DEI Research and Innovation Labs</b>	DEI labs generate actionable insights, promoting adaptable DEI policies and practices.	Establishes the NHL as a thought leader in DEI, inspiring change across industries.

**Figure 27** Skating Towards Equity – Pathway to The Future: Recommended Improvements and Innovations across a three-horizon model



not a mere sprint. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a pivotal figure in CRT, reminds us, “The work of anti-racism is the work of actively dismantling systems that uphold racial disparities” (Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More Than Two Decades Later, n.d.). The league confronts a formidable opponent, acting as a system within a broader system, necessitating a strategic breakaway from systemic barriers. This echoes Crenshaw’s imperative for action, calling for strategy, resilience, and a united front to advance equity on and off the ice. Our recommendations serve as a comprehensive playbook, acknowledging the rigorous battles and sacrifices essential for pivoting hockey culture towards diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Tackling this path requires the NHL to gear up for more than just the usual game – anticipating extended plays and the intensity of playoff challenges. In his compelling discourse, “Justice is What Love Looks Like in Public,” Cornel West delves into the intricacies that weave together the concepts of love and justice, presenting them not as distant ideals but as inextricably linked realities. West posits that authentic justice transcends mere legal or social reforms; it is, at its heart, the boldest expression of love in the public sphere – a relentless pursuit of dignity, equality, and respect for every soul, especially those pushed to the margins by prevailing injustices. West eloquently argues that to realize justice, society must embody this love through actions that challenge and dismantle systems of oppression, advocating for policies and practices that uplift the most vulnerable among us (Supernegromagic, 2011). This, according to West, is the essence of a just society – one that openly demonstrates its love for all members through equitable treatment and unwavering solidarity against the forces of inequality.

Derrick Bell, revered as the father of CRT, touch upon a deeply moving contradiction at the essence of his scholarship. He presents the sobering perspective that racism, with its deep roots and enduring presence, may never be fully eradicated. Yet, in the same breath, he passionately asserts the undeniable value and critical importance of tirelessly battling against racism (Taylor, 2004). This duality captures the heart-wrenching yet hopeful journey of striving for justice in the shadow of an omnipresent challenge. The NHL’s commitment to forging a more equitable and inclusive community embodies this profound dedication – a determined stride against prevailing winds, towards a horizon where the ice overwhelmingly welcomes every player.



# Section 7



## Conclusion

DEI is an organizational framework that seeks to promote fair treatment and full participation for all. This framework is dedicated to empowering historically marginalized groups discriminated on race, gender, sexual orientation, and/or disability. At its core, DEI initiatives catalyze a deep, transformative understanding that leads to the dismantling of systemic barriers. Through deliberate strategies, policies, and practices, they aim to cultivate environments where diversity, equity and inclusion are prioritized, valued, and expected, forming the foundation of organizational culture. A genuine commitment to DEI demonstrates an organization's determination to build a community where every individual can flourish, contribute, and realize empowerment.

In this report, I have scrutinized the NHL's 32 teams through the lens of significant social movements – contentious political elections, and a global pandemic – to assess the scope and resonance of their DEI efforts. Evaluating the NHL as a complex system capable of culture change in hockey.

Section 1 tackles the paradox of sport: its potential to unite and divide, to display human potential and, at the same time, to mirror discriminatory ethos. I went on to explore the roots and contemporary realities of DEI which are underpinned by scholarly work of the CRT movement that deciphers the complexities and wickedness of these pervasive problems. This theoretical groundwork was crucial for understanding the nuances of critical race theory and its applications in DEI work.

Before focusing on the NHL's DEI platform, Section 2 centers on the major leagues' strategic DEI advancements in a post-George Floyd world. I scrutinized progress in sports broadly, spotlighting the often-unheralded role of women's professional sports as pioneers in social change – an unequivocally evident trend. The subsequent STEEPV Trend Analysis with a DEI lens captures the remarkable efforts across most major leagues. This analysis transitioned into a 2 x 2 DEI matrix – not for comparison but to evaluate the approaches to DEI initiatives across the major leagues. These leagues, after all, possess vastly different business models, consumers, and front and back offices. More importantly, they have different cultures to transform.

The subsequent sections contemplate the NHL's transition, where every decision is consequential. Therefore, the sections following take a systemic approach to analyzing the viability of the NHL as a complex system, able to change culture.

Before the conclusion, I presented recommendations based on dominant commonalities in existing efforts and proposed forward-thinking recommendations around community partnerships, immersive DEI training, and leveraging data analytics and AI to instigate cultural shifts within the NHL's ecosystem. The recommendations also seek to apply positive feedback loops identified from the NHL DEI system archetype assessment.

This report ends with the critical question of whether the NHL will fully move into this moment to enact tangible drive change. The recommendations provided chart a course toward a future where equity is realized, not merely imagined. I end with the poignant quote from an interviewee, "Will hockey be a force in this space"? (Interview 7). It is a question that reverberates, highlighting the profound significance of every move by the league and its franchises, skating towards equity.

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### Section 1: Introduction

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