SPORT WAITĀKERE

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

A Developing Ethnic Leaders Insight Study
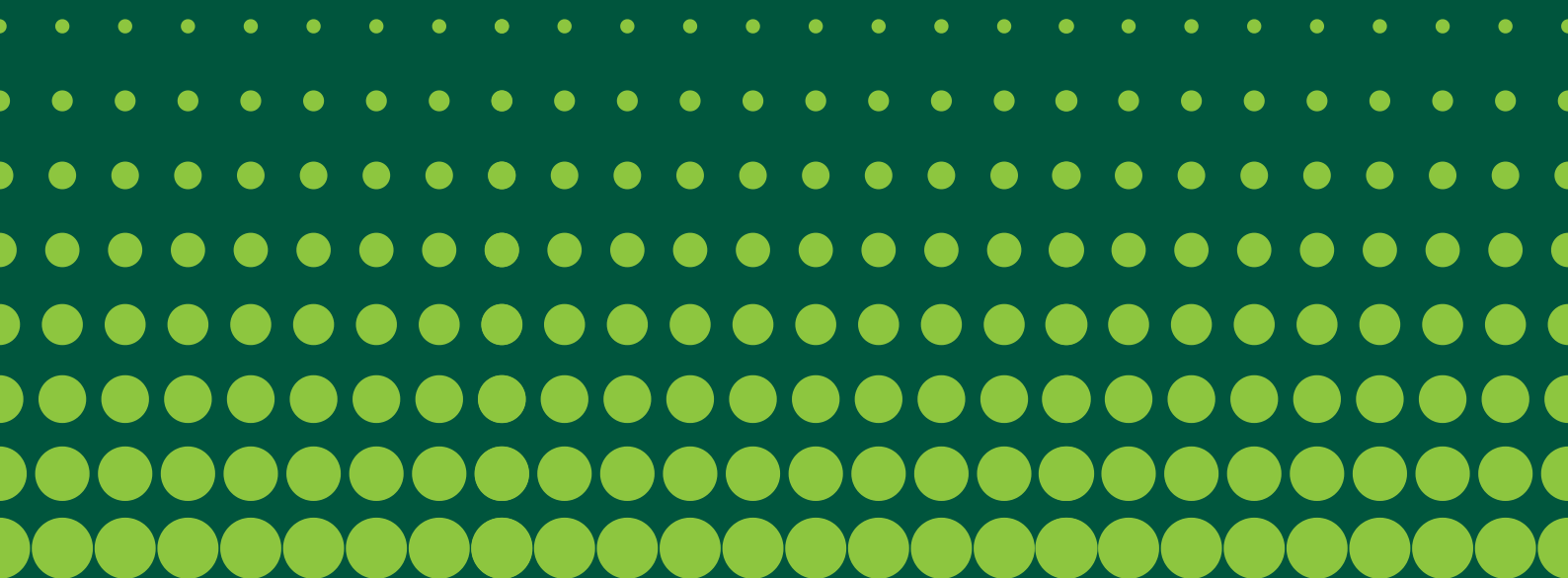
Jason Li and Javeed Ali

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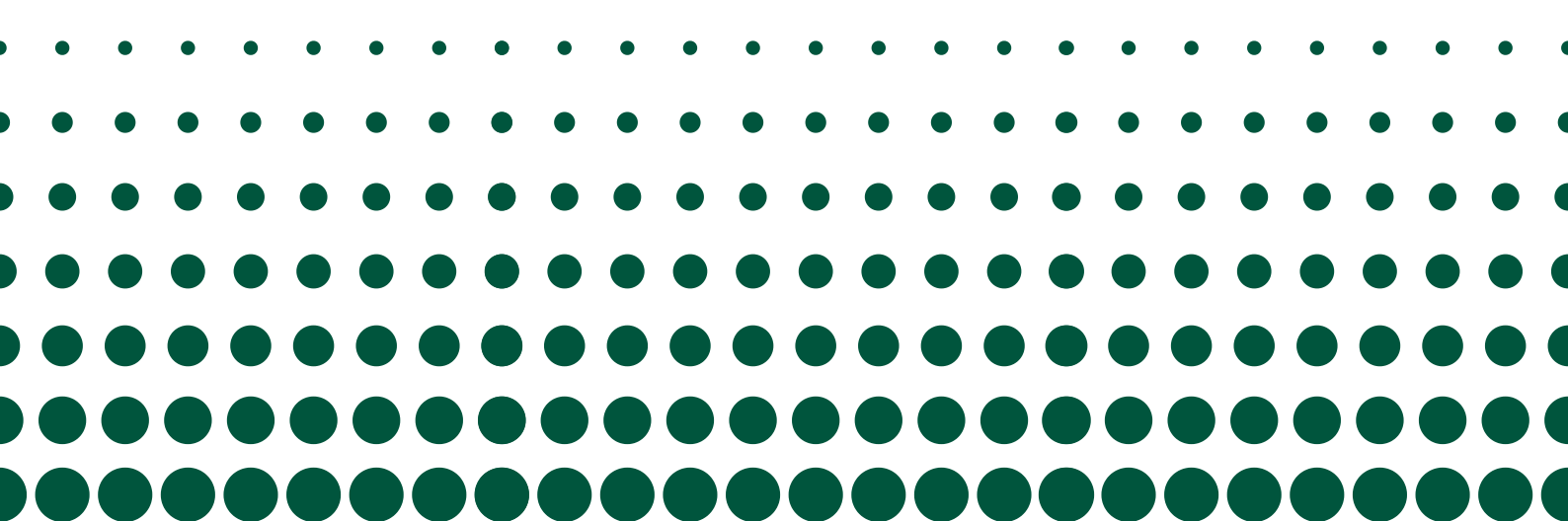Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

43% of Asians intend on volunteering in the next 12 months, which is higher than the general population (Sport NZ, 2019)

The Project
This insight report is a segment of the work Sport Waitākere is undertaking within the ethnic diversity and inclusion space. The project aims to support the development of Asian members (or parents of members) to become more knowledgeable, competent and confident to participate in formal leadership roles (board/committee/executive members) within community sport organisations. It is well known that those who have a representative voice at the decision-making table are likely to reap the full benefits of the organisation.

About the Authors

Jason Li is the Community Sport and Recreation Advisor at Sport Waitākere supporting the West Auckland Asian community to participate more in Play, Active Recreation and Sport. He also builds capability within the Asian community to allow them to continue to participate in Play, Active Recreation and Sport, navigating things such as becoming an incorporated society and applying to contestable funds. Finally, he also supports community sport organisations to engage with and become more inclusive of Asian communities, especially the Chinese community.

Javeed Ali is the Community Sport and Recreation Team Lead at Sport Waitākere managing a diverse team who work across multiple aspects of the Play, Active Recreation and Sport sector. He has previously worked with the South Asian community in a similar role as Jason Li. Javeed is passionate about community sport organisations developing an inclusive environment for the growing diverse population of not only West Auckland but Auckland and New Zealand.

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Executive Summary

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal
Leadership within Community Sport

Introduction
This insight report provides an in-depth investigation into the low participation of Asians in formal leadership. The report identifies barriers for Asians stepping into formal leadership roles. This report concludes with recommendations for wider sector development.

Key findings
Barriers to participating in formal leadership roles in community sport are:
1. Lack of time
2. Cultural and language barriers
3. Lack of effective and efficient communication
4. Formal leaders are a regular group of people
5. Racism and discrimination
6. Lack of essential knowledge
7. Perceived to not be suitable

Understanding of diversity and inclusion and its benefits
It is commonly believed by respondents that being diverse and inclusive will lead to better outcomes for all parties involved. Clubs receive better community engagement through an ethnically friendly environment while ethnic people treat it as a terrific opportunity to adapt and integrate into New Zealand society.

Recommendations
1. Provide further information about the tasks and responsibilities of formal leadership roles
2. Provide mentors
3. Use alternative communication methods
4. Identify and promote professional development opportunities
5. Value what diversity brings

"We need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out WHY they're falling in" – Desmond Tutu

Background

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership
within Community Sport

At the 2018 Census, there were 442,671 residents in Auckland identified as Asian (28.2% of Auckland's population). This is an increase of 135,447 people, or 44.1%, since the 2013 Census. The Asian population has grown more rapidly than the wider Auckland population. Over two-thirds of New Zealand's Chinese, Indian and Korean populations live in Auckland, compared to 25% of those who identify as European (Auckland Council, 2020).

Based on the 2018 census, 23% of the West Auckland population identified as Asian, up from 17% in 2013. The Asian population is growing significantly and becomes the second largest ethnic group following NZ European/Pākehā. In addition, national population projection indicates the Asian population will remain the second-largest ethnic group, making up 23% of NZ's total population in 2038. The projected increase, in terms of Asian population percentage, for the West Auckland region is 33% by 2038. The Asian ethnic group is primarily made up of Chinese (33%), Indian (39%), Filipino (9%) and Korean (4%) communities.

There are 151 entities in the sport and recreation industry on the Sport Waitākere database. Community groups without legal status or organisations not actively operating are not recorded on this database. From our knowledge, fewer than 10% of those entities have Asians in formal leadership roles (governance, executives, committees etc). For example, one community sport organisation has one Asian member in their management team yet have over 400 members who are mainly Asian. Furthermore, the Sport NZ Active NZ Survey found that 43% of Asians intend on volunteering in the next 12 months, which is higher than the general population (Sport NZ, 2019). Whilst there is no identification of the type of volunteering Asians would like to participate in, the intention highlights that there is an opportunity here.

As population stastics continue to shift in New Zealand, questions and concerns emerge from sport and recreation organisations on how to respond to those changes to ensure equity and equality in sports, play and active recreation. A search was conducted that few studies or reports targeting the engagement between ethnic communities and sport service providers as well as the lived experience of ethnic leaders and sports club members in New Zealand. Also, few research studies were able to indicate the link between overall satisfaction and diverse and inclusive leadership and governance in club settings.

In the West Auckland region, analysis was undertaken to understand how representative boards/committees/executives were of their membership. Of the eight clubs analysed Europeans made up approximately 50% of the membership yet accounted for over 80% of those who held formal leadership roles. Whereas Asian communities made up almost 25% of the membership, but only 10% of formal leaders had an Asian background. Whilst this is a small sample, this over-representation can lead to making members feel excluded as their needs may not be met.

With all the observations above, the Community Engagement Team at Sport Waitākere decided to conduct insight research into the diversity and inclusion matters in the system, with the aim of identifying problems and providing advice to the sector on developing diverse and inclusive leadership and governance teams. This would ensure equity and equality in physical activity, advocating for and increasing awareness of physical literacy, building community capacity and capability, and strengthening cross-sector collaboration in healthy lifestyles.

Methods

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

Survey

A short survey was developed to understand what ethnic club members knew about formal leadership, barriers to participating in formal leadership, and what would encourage them to participate in formal leadership roles in community sport.

Six responses were received, all were male, all were South Asian, and were aged 36-55.

Interviews

A semi-structured one-on-one interview approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of the lack of ethnic diversity in formal leadership within community sport.

Ten interviewees were recruited. The interviewee needed to satisfy all the requirements for eligibility.

The interviewee is/has been:
- Of a minority ethnic background
- A member of a sports club, sports association, regional sports organisation or national sports organisation
- A committee/board member of a sports club, sports association, regional sports organisation or national sport organisation

Findings & Discussion

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

1. Barriers to participating in formal leadership roles in community sport – A member's perspective

1.1. Lack of Time

Over 90% of our respondents mentioned a busy personal life limited their ability to participate in formal leadership roles. This was strongly emphasised by those who came to New Zealand as first-generation migrants. Those first-generation immigrants generally spend a couple of years settling into the country before considering joining a sports club. On average, it took interviewees three years to get their affairs in order including social-economic matters such as immigration status, employment, housing and cultural.

"For me, to be honest, I don't have much capacity for my club. And I think this is quite common among Asian immigrants. We are too busy with our personal life. And we are called 'hardworking Asians"

Anecdotally, it is widely known that the wider Asian community contribute to the Small Business sector extensively as owners and operators. Two respondents from the survey indicated that their businesses took priority, and any remaining time was limited.

"Now a little time poor due to starting new business"

"Limited time can be given within a timeframe because of business"

1.2. Cultural and Language Barriers

All first-generation migrants reported they experienced culture shock and language barriers when arriving and settling into New Zealand. New Zealand born Asians also reported that they are confused about the terminology that is often used within leadership and governance, exacerbating self-doubt to step up into formal leadership roles in their clubs. Chinese respondents struggled to understand the sporting system in New Zealand since it was completely different from their home countries. Also, there had been a strong indication that lack of language capability had hindered Chinese members, especially those retired professionals, participating in formal leadership.

"I am happy to play badminton in the club because there are many Chinese players. But I don't feel comfortable sitting surrounded by a group of white people. Also, I am not confident about my English ability."

Findings & Discussion

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

1. Barriers to participating in formal leadership roles in community sport – A member's perspective

1.3. Lack of effective and efficient communication between clubs and their members.

The data collection process highlighted contrasting views regarding communication between clubs and their members. Members claimed communication was poor and they did not receive up-to-date information about their club, including Annual General Meeting (AGM) details, upcoming vacant formal leadership positions, and club policies. In contrast, respondents who are in formal leadership roles reported that they sent out club newsletters to their members about upcoming events, elections, and committee or board updates. However, the responses to these communications were low and the AGM attendance rate was significantly low.

"I have been coaching in our club for four years. And I think I am ready to step up as a committee member. But I do not receive any information about upcoming vacancies in the committee." (A member from a club)

"We have posted the AGM details and elections on our social media. But for our last AGM, we only had 25 people attend. This is really low as we have over 600 members." (A committee member from the same club mentioned above)

1.4. Formal leaders are a regular group of people

Four interviewees suggested their board/committee had been dominated by a regular group of people meaning there were very limited spaces for new people to join. From the evidence gathered, it is evident that formal leadership roles within sport are generally held by middle-aged Pākeha men. Two respondents claimed that their chair of the club had served over 20 years.

"Dominance of other communities"

"Those positions are dominated by a regular group of people. [There is] no space for joining in the group. Not to mention the committee."

Findings & Discussion

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

1. Barriers to participating in formal leadership roles in community sport – A member's perspective

1.5. Racism and Discrimination

One respondent reported they experienced racism in their club due to their colour of skin. However, other kinds of discrimination were mentioned by some interviewees. This includes being treated differently, unfriendly language, and being ignored.

> *"It was at a club meeting before the election. I was running for the election for the position of chair of the club. There was another candidate who accused me of not being a Kiwi and therefore not being qualified for the position."*

Many migrant communities take many actions to fit in. Many East Asians anglicise their names to support their integration. However, looking or sounding different are still barriers.

'You don't speak English. You don't know people. You are not Kiwi.'

Another interviewee shared their experience of discrimination. They were threatened that their kid would be excluded in competitions if they kept complaining about the management team.

'I just want my kid to have more chances to play. But they threaten me that my kid will not have any chance in games after I had an argument with the managers.'
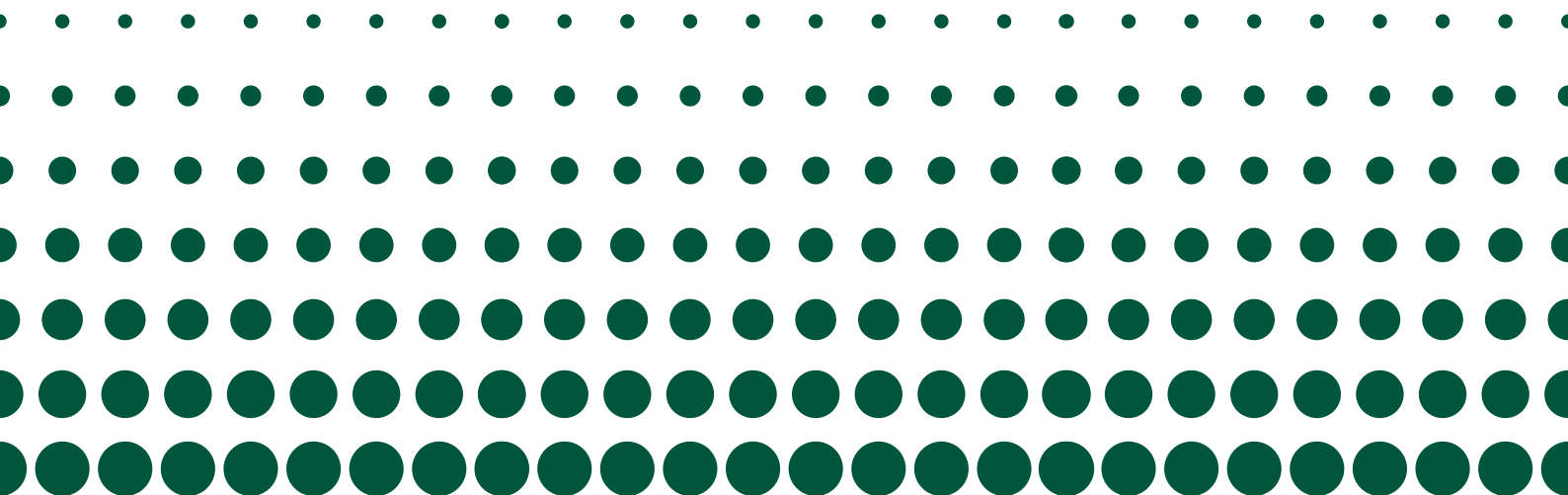
Findings & Discussion

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2 Barriers/challenges to involve Asian members in formal leadership – From a committee perspective.

2.1. Lack of essential knowledge of the process

It is reported that members, especially for those first-generation migrants, lack understanding of the New Zealand sports system. This sentiment is also supported by Asian club members. The way the community sport sector is run in New Zealand differs dramatically from the home countries of new New Zealanders. In some east Asian countries, sport and recreation are completely two different areas. Sports are governed by local or central authorities while there is no management in community recreation. Hence, leadership is either appointed by authorities in sport, or leadership is not needed at all in recreation.

"I spent a lot of time learning the New Zealand sport system, especially about what is a club, and other definitions of board and committee."

"At this point, I'm not sure how to get involved since my kid is just playing [sport] for the club."

2.2 Perceived to not be suitable

An interviewee who was also a coach finds it hard to step up due to a lack of experience in administration and management skills. In an ethnic context, coaches are normally retirees of high-performance sport. In most Asian countries, those professionals started their careers at a very young age. And their whole attention was about professional performance and improvement. None of the interviewees who were coaches reported any significant engagement with administration or management training before they retired. However, in the current system, to be qualified for formal leadership roles, there is a crucial requirement about being able to deal with policy development, writing and editing funding and financial documents, managing human resource, managing public relations, and negotiating and advocating for the organisation or even the sector.

"There are paralleled paths in the system. Coaches are mainly focusing on project delivery. While people with management qualifications take leadership and governance roles. It is really hard for coaches to step into those roles as it is completely another area."

"My husband was a professional player in the national high-performance team. He is now coaching in the club. However, he struggles with all the paper work."

Findings & Discussion

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

3. The benefits of Diversity and Inclusion

During the interview, diversity and inclusion had been translated differently from each person. However, most of them were of a similar opinion. The most common comment was that

"People with diverse backgrounds will be treated the same no matter in what circumstances."

"No racism or discrimination."

"It is very important for both club and members. Especially the young people. The better the engagement with the parents, the better experience the kids will have."

"People with different perspectives can safely share their thoughts and ideas together. And everyone is able to absorb new concepts."

Also, it is commonly believed that being diverse and inclusive will lead their club to have better outcomes for everyone. One respondent shared their observation on coach popularity in their club. They found that as many of their members were Asians, Asian coaches were much more attractive and accepted by members. In addition, Chinese students were keen to have Chinese coaches while Korean coaches were much more preferred by Koreans. Based on this finding, the club intended to engage more coaches with diverse backgrounds to improve their membership base. Whilst the club was not able to engage enough diverse coaches due to several reasons, their insights proved the benefits of diversity and inclusion. And such a direction may be of value to other clubs.

There is a strong willingness among ethnic people to participate in voluntary roles. For migrants, they believe it is one of the best ways to have a deep understanding of the new environment and cultural aspects. Also, voluntary work can enhance future job opportunities as it is a good way to learn new skills and especially skills migrants would not necessarily engage in. One respondent suggests they don't have much of a relationship with the leadership in their workplace. But as their career grows, they believe they will need those skills in the future. Learning and practising those skills in a community sport setting is very beneficial to them.

Findings & Discussion

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership within Community Sport

4. Growing more ethnic leaders in community sport

4.1. What support is desired by members to confidently step up as a leader?

Interviewees had different interests in roles if they were to be part of the committee/board. This includes:

- **Leadership and governance training:** half of the respondents reported that they were not sure about the definition, principles, philosophies, and functionality.

- **One-on-one follow-up support:** people with strong interests in leadership and governance training suggested the need for followup support in real situations.

- **Mentors:** One-third of interviewees indicated they would like to have a role model for support and as a sounding board to assist with their development. They would like guidance on how to deal with difficult situations like racism and discrimination as well as as well as positive encouragement to grow confidence and success. Mentoring is seen as an important aspect of onboarding ethnic people into formal leadership roles.

- **A comprehensive and effective cross-sector communication platform:** A platform allows people to share thoughts and experiences, connect with leaders in the sector, and be inspired by successes.

- **Funding and administration training:** This includes funding, club operation and management.

4.2. What support is desired by members to confidently step up as a leader?

- Understanding the diverse communication methods: A more effective and efficient way to communicate with members and share information to ensure messages are seen and heard.

- Workshops for better understanding of New Zealand sports system (targeted at club members).

Conclusion

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership
within Community Sport

New Zealand is a country of immigrants with many ethnicities now making it their home. When migrants come to a new environment, the priority is to secure a position within society economically and socially (Arjona et al., 2012). However, becoming an accepted part of a new society and integrated into it requires a significant amount of effort and resource as social integration is sometimes more complex than the term itself. There are many forms of social integration in both political practice and public discourse (Giménez, 1997). Assimilation is one of the translations and requires immigrants to adopt the cultural norms of origin. Multiculturalism welcomes cultural diversity but sometimes creates a hierarchy. The ultimate widely accepted definition of social integration is a process of social embeddedness of two different sociocultural segments, which allows equal rights and obligations (Arjona et al., 2012).

In many cases, migrants find that sport and recreation provides a shortcut for social integration. In a community context, physical activity can foster respect, cooperation, understanding, communication, and coexistence (Kennett, 2008). It is also found in this study that after a period of time, migrants reconnect with sport and recreation for multiple purposes. This includes physical exercise, entertainment, establishing social networks, and language improvement.

However, the identified barriers in this study are major obstacles for migrants to transition from participants (or supporters of) to leaders and influencers. The barriers can be classified into two groups. These are social integration and organisational and systematic issues. Social integration includes cultural understanding, language proficiency, overwhelmed personal life commitment, racism, and discrimination. Whereas organisational and systematic issues include poor communication, lack of transparency, knowledge of systems and operations. Community sport organisations need to improve their user experience by developing tangible plans to address those barriers. Clubs also need to discuss how to establish an effective information pathway for better communication. In addition, foster cross-organisational cooperation to generate or share a resource to improve understanding of system operations.

Several studies and research have confirmed the benefits of being diverse and inclusive (Banham, 2018; Brannon, 2018; Leroy et al., 2021).

Sport Waitākere is a registered charitable trust under the Sport New Zealand Regional Sports Trust network. It has been serving and leading West Auckland communities since 1991. With continuous effort in diversity and inclusion space, Sport Waitākere received the national award of leadership in diversity and inclusion. This achievement is underpinned by its strategies and policies. With a diverse and inclusive environment where staff can comfortably and confidently exchange thoughts and ideas, the organisation has a higher level of performance and achieves greater outcomes (Armstrong et al., 2010; Flood et al., 2008). There are 41 staff at Sport Waitākere with a diverse ethnic make-up, including East Asian, South Asian, Pacifika, European, and South American. The success of Sport Waitākere reflects some of the findings of this insight report. A worry-free environment for people with diverse backgrounds is the foundation of success and greater outcomes.

Recommendations

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal Leadership
within Community Sport

01 Provide further information about the tasks and responsibilities of formal leadership roles.

Aligning with volunteer management best practice, community sport organisations must prepare accurate job descriptions for each of the roles on boards/committees/executive. Not only does this identify the requirements of the role, but it will also highlight which skills they can transfer from their life experience and will clarify the required time commitment. This will help alleviate any misconceptions regarding the demands of the role.

02 Provide mentors

Mentors are widely used, across many roles in the commercial and not-for-profit sectors to support the development of leaders and individuals. It is recommended that outgoing members of executives/committees/boards or independent mentors be engaged to support those new to the role. The mentors would act as a sounding board for any issues they may face, support their development, and support the new member to navigate issues such as racism and discrimination.

03 Use alternative communication methods

In the current climate communication methods used by community sport organisations generally include emails and social media. However, insights gathered here suggest that these are not the most effective methods to connect with members, especially when it relates to formal leadership and AGMs. Whilst individually phoning each member may be time-consuming, it is worthwhile for community sport organisations to understand which communication methods are commonly used by their diverse community. For example, WhatsApp is popular with the South Asian communities whereas, East Asian communities commonly use WeChat. Also, notwithstanding that shoulder tapping potential executive/committee/board members is widely encouraged as the Asian community may not willingly put themselves forward. Ethnic communities have highlighted that they want opportunities to participate in formal leadership. However, if these are not communicated effectively these opportunities are lost.

04 Identify and promote professional development opportunities

Programmes such as the Sport NZ Governance 101 and other similar programmes should be actively promoted and shared with not only formal leaders but also with those that the community sport organisation has identified as a potential leader in the future. In the first instance, it supports the development of all members of executive/committee/board members but also fills the knowledge gap that may be present for potential leaders.

05 Value what diversity brings

Whilst clubs can engage with their members and encourage them to participate in formal leadership roles, if community sport organisations do not understand the value diversity brings to the running of their organisation, the recommendations will likely be a tick-box exercise. It is important to understand that having an ethnically diverse leadership in an organisation that is ethnically diverse, or services an ethnically diverse community is a priority. This not only shows members and the community that they are guided by people of the community or membership, but it also brings issues or opportunities to the fore that may not have been otherwise identified. This can include catering for food, cultural or religious needs but also leveraging relationships within those communities for commercial purposes.

Limitations

Barriers to Asian Participation in Formal
Leadership within Community Sport

This study has two limitations. Firstly, our respondents are mainly from West Auckland. Demographic issues should be taken into consideration. Over half of the Asian people reside in East and North Auckland. And it can be assumed that sports clubs/organisations in those two areas will have a higher percentage of Asian leaders compared to those in West Auckland. This is also partially proved by our data. There are three interviewees in the committee/board criteria and two of them are from the North Auckland area. Unfortunately, due to capacity, the interview does not recruit any respondents from East Auckland, where over 60% of the population is Asian. Secondly, the social-economic background of the interview participants is not classified and thoroughly considered. Previous studies suggest that social-economic status will impact participation in sport and recreation (Maniam V, 2017; Nezhad et al., 2012). Future studies with greater attention on those two areas will have a deeper insight into this space.

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It is commonly believed by respondents that being diverse and inclusive will lead to better outcomes for all parties involved. Community sport organisations receive better community engagement through ethnically friendly environments while ethnic people treat it as a terrific opportunity to adapt and integrate into New Zealand society.

This insight report provides an in-depth investigation into the low participation of Asians in formal leadership, identifying barriers to them taking on formal leadership roles and concludes with recommendations for wider sector development.