

Sport and professional socialization: If the raid organized by a company in the CAC 40



Contact

Marie HINGANT

Email:

marie.hingant@gmail.com

Université Paris Est
de Marne la
Vallée (France)

Introduction

There has been a great deal of research on the links between the corporate world of the enterprise and Sports. According to Pierre and Barth (2010, p.2), these links are secular and numerous. The federative role of Sports, the social advantages it procures, the role in training it plays, the institutional communication it enables, its beneficial effects on employees' physical and mental health, and its role as a « social buffer », have also been emphasized by several authors (Ehrenberg 1991, Meignant and Rayer 1991, Sekiou and al. 1993, Barbusse 1997, Fourné 2000 and 2003, Burlot 2001, Pierre 2006, Lefebvre 2007, Bertrand 2008, Pierre and Barth 2010, Pierre Pichot and Burlot 2010). The professionalism of Sports in the 1980's, as pointed out by Barbusse (2009, p.11), contributed even more to the rapprochement between sports clubs and the managerial logic of the enterprise, at the risk, noted by Le Goff (1992), Barbusse (2002) or even Pierre and al. (2010), of encouraging a certain amount of manipulation in Sports. In Sports clubs increasingly liable to be affected by the stakes involved in economic performance, there has also been a shift towards professionalism among volunteers (Loirand 2003, Bernardeau 2004). Between Sports and the enterprise, common interests have also been mutual and multiple. « *Exchanges between Sports and the enterprise are no longer one way. The intermingling of these two worlds has become a reality* », according to Barbusse (2009, p.19). The values of Sports serve the managerial policies of the enterprise and corporate culture; in return, Sports coaches use business methods to optimise their teamwork and organize their matches. While all this research is useful to provide evidence of this "marriage of convenience" and the close links which now unite enterprises to the universe of Sports, there is a subject worth delving into more deeply. Sports also serve to reinforce the professional socialization of employees in their enterprises. According to Dubar, professional socialization represents both the formal and informal processes by virtue of which an individual acquires and develops the typical social and cultural characteristics of a professional group identity. Through its particular action, Sports thus contribute towards the strengthening of social relationships between employees and their enterprises. It also contributes to reinforcing the professional identity of corporate personnel and their attachment to the values of the enterprise. This manipulation, notes Barbusse, corresponds to the priority of optimizing the economic performance of the enterprise at any cost (2002, p.410).

Results

Sports as a vector of professional socialization in the enterprise

The relations between Sports and the enterprise are very old. The first championships appeared in the 1920's. They increased considerably in number after World War II, justifying the creation of the Association of Enterprise Sports Clubs in 1952. Extra-enterprise matches also opened to include enterprises in the 1980's with the appearance of national sporting events such as the Figaro Cross or the Republican Lorraine Cross. It was also during this time that the practice of Sports in the enterprise developed significantly. This was a crucial period, according to Barbusse, when « *the practice of Sports in the world of the enterprise truly began to diversify* » (2009, p.12). International groups such as Apple, Bouygues, Saint-Gobain, IBM, Microsoft, Nike, GDF Suez and the bank, *Crédit Immobilier* of France, opened their own sports facilities for their employees, who were also offered individual training or collective coaching sessions. Intra- and inter-enterprise matches were organized to compete for the Business Cup, the Challenge of the Lily, the Challenger's Trophy, etc. In the case of the Raid organized by the CAC40 enterprise mentioned above and studied in this article, the socializing role of the sporting event has been confirmed by employees interviewed. Analyzing these interviews has thus enabled us to clarify more precisely how the Raid exerts an influence on employees.

How corporate values are appropriated through the Raid

There have been a variety of research articles aimed at evaluating the social impact of intra- and inter-enterprise sporting events in terms of norms and values. For example, Burlot (2001) has analyzed how employees were affected by the opening of a fitness center at Apple. At the scale of the CAC40 enterprise we have studied, it is clear that the Raid is definitely a relay between employees contributing towards the appropriation of group values. Among the 4 categories of values identified by Tribou (2011), this Raid falls under the category of values characterized by « fraternizing sports »; i.e. creating a feeling of solidarity by putting forward the team spirit and group cohesion in a festive and fun atmosphere. Today, this sporting competition is a major event in the corporate culture of this CAC40 enterprise and represents an indispensable tradition within the Group. In 2012, it involved 1800 employees divided into 170 mixed teams coming from some thirty countries. « The Raid », as described on the enterprise's web site, « lasting 4 days, completely and passionately expresses the essential, representative values of our history, our identity and our profession. This annual event symbolically captures the quintessential spirit of the Group ». There is no doubt that these events provide a considerable vehicle for internal communication. The employees we interviewed confirm this relationship. « The Raid clearly promotes group values, so that they can be appropriated more easily », explained Pierre. For Alexandre, « Corporate values: effort, ambition, commitment and cohesion, are more easily adopted during these 4 days. It's also an opportunity to discover the wealth and diversity of the Group and its many subsidiaries. » « These corporate values », says Guillaume, « are precisely those that the Raiders are supposed to adopt ». « It's thanks to the Raid », adds Jean-Michel, « that a great solidarity is created that I never felt before and which has persisted since. » This team spirit is strongly emphasized by the enterprise.

Major impact on internal cohesion

While the recourse to sporting events for the purposes of management and internal communication has been pointed out many times (Cegarra, 1990, Jallat and Mestressat 1995, Burlot and Pichot 2004, Pierre 2009), it is in part to demonstrate how Sports promote internal cohesion. « *As an instrument to mobilize human resources, Sports essentially represent a strategic tool of management for HR* », according to Barbusse (2009, p.12).

As such, this internal cohesion does not necessarily persist after the event, or in any case, it essentially remains confined to team members. « While the Raid », recognized by Jean-François, « recreates the context of the enterprise with much stronger bonds », the closeness it promotes primarily concerns only the former teammates of the Raid. Since these latter are then often scattered in their different departments, it is difficult to ascertain how their complicity could benefit the company. As Charles explained: « *I am not more involved with my company. There is no emotional attachment between me and my company. During the Raid, you meet people and it is with these people that you develop an attachment, but not with the company itself.* » This being said, it still seems undeniable that the Raid contributes towards creating friendly relations between individuals, and the enterprise can take advantage of these in its internal policies.

The Raid as a factor in attenuating hierarchical relationships

While a great many authors address the dynamic of Sports, its effect on internal cohesion, its usefulness as a relay for corporate values, few tend to study its impact on hierarchical relationships. However, one of the consequences of an internal sporting event seems to us to be the promotion of a real « attenuation of hierarchical boundaries » (Pierre and Tribou, *op. cit.*). Sports provide a way to reduce hierarchical distances, according to the authors, by the simplicity and proximity of human contacts that the ad hoc event renders frank and direct. By loosening the hierarchical structure governing professional relationships, « these particular situations », added Pichot, « modify the configuration of the contractual relationship of the employee to his enterprise » (2007, p.241).

Our interviews confirm these authors' conclusions. For Morgane, one of the employees interviewed, « *the Raid puts everyone on the same footing, whether you are an executive or not, we are all on the same teams and going through the same trials* ». For Hugues, who only recently began participating in the Raid, « *There is a great federating side to it, without any notion of hierarchy, the structure of the enterprise is set aside to create a more even playing field to be enjoyed, really and truly for fun.* » For Arnaud, « *it's a very sociable time when we can talk to the CEO because he is very accessible. He comes to see us the last day and takes part in the award ceremony. He is there with his employees. I even got the chance to talk to him and have my photograph taken with him.* » Most of the employees we interviewed said that this new closeness facilitated by the sporting event is a golden opportunity which makes management more human and accessible.

The emotional attachment to the enterprise

In their Human Resources policy, the employers' objective, noted Barbusse (2002, p.409) is not only to improve the health of their employees, but also to improve their productivity. It is intended to encourage the employees to develop a feeling of belonging to the institution and to become more emotionally attached to the enterprise. The employee must not only be linked to his enterprise by a work contract (Taylorist vision), he must also be bonded by a common feeling of belonging. To this end, Sports play a vital role. Pierre and Tribou wrote of this emotional attachment linked to the sporting event: « *Exposure to a sporting event is liable to generate a dynamic state of excitement and thus provoke an emotional attachment of the participants, both outside and inside the enterprise to which the sporting event is associated* » (2013, p.121). These collective adventures, noted Pichot, therefore contribute to reinforcing the « *emotional transfers* » (2007, p.234) between the sporting event and the enterprise organizing it. Consequently, it seems to be well established by the authors mentioned above, that the management and participation of employees in a sporting event generates an informal attachment to the enterprise, which is more and more appreciated by its hierarchy. This emotional side effect is mentioned by our interviewees, who nevertheless remain lucid about the extent of the attachment: « *I had the feeling of belonging to one big family* » explained Hugues. These experiences, he added, made me look differently at things. « *There is without a doubt an emotional side to the Raid* », said Pascale, « *especially from the human point of view. I have become very good friends with all the participants. We feel like friends because the last time we spoke together, we were very passionately involved in the Raid, sharing common values, all the things people share on a Raid and that we remembered at work* ». Many of the people we interviewed, however, minimized the emotional impact of the event (such was the case of Pierre and Guillaume), which remains, in their eyes, very exceptional and not obviously connected to the enterprise. Nevertheless, the presence of the CEO and his clear accessibility during the Raid and at the award ceremony was a real opportunity to bond and to generate the attachment of the employees to their enterprise.

Conclusion

Among the possible functions of Sports in the enterprise, we have chosen to insist on those which have an impact on the socialization of its employees. Insofar as internal communication policies are concerned, Sports is clearly a « *communicational product for the enterprise as well as a resource for the employees* » (Pichot, 2007, p.232). Of course, as we mentioned above, that does not at all exclude the temptation to manipulate, the sole objective of Sports thus becoming an obsession to improve economic and managerial performance. But keeping only this dimension in mind is too simplistic. The sporting event is also a wonderful way for the enterprise to reinforce social bonds with their employees and to create new conditions for greater internal cohesion and a really permanent feeling of belonging to the institution. The internal logic of the Raid organized by the CAC40 enterprise falls under this category. Not only does the Raid convey the particular values of the enterprise, but the emotional attachment and the rapprochement between hierarchy and employees it enables and catalyzes, seems to be real even if not all the employees interviewed agreed. Although we can reasonably assume that this bonding effect fades with time, the sporting event represents a « before » and « after » for its participants. The succession of sporting events year after year also brings back memories and keeps them alive in the collective consciousness.

