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# “Scandalous!”: Reputation, impression management, and employee assistance programs (EAPs) in the NBA

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## ABSTRACT

This case study explores how the National Basketball Association (NBA) can rebuild its reputation in response to recurrent player scandals. The case centers on a reputation management firm that has been contracted by the league. The firm has been asked to develop programs that will permit players to make better decisions in their personal lives. NBA commissioner Adam Silver believes such programs will curb the likelihood of future player scandals, thereby enhancing the players' lives and limiting their ability to damage the league's reputation. To commence the process, the firm has been invited to sit-in on a meeting with Commissioner Silver and a group of NBA staff members who have past work experiences assisting players with their transition to the NBA.

This reputation management case study is positioned in two key areas: impression management and employee assistance programs (EAPs). Upon reading the case, answering the provided questions, and completing the activities, students should come to a better understanding as to how to proactively manage corporate reputation. While fictitious names are given, the case study is based on actual interviews with current NBA staff members. The case is ideal for courses pertaining to strategy, policy, organizational behavior, and human resource management. The case could also be useful for sport marketing and sport finance courses if adapted to investigate how the created programs are important for branding and value.

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## Teaching note

Corporate reputation is an area that is arguably understudied in sport management literature. A case focusing on managing corporate reputation in response to scandals presents instructors with the opportunity to bring this issue to the forefront. Based on actual interviews with National Basketball Association (NBA) staff members working for the league's Rookie Transition Program (RTP), the case offers students the opportunity to better understand how organizations can manage their reputation in response to scandals. Specifically, students will view the case study through the lens of a reputation management firm. The firm has been asked to develop programs that will permit players to make better decisions in their personal lives, thereby enhancing the players' lives and limiting their ability to damage the league's reputation.

The following sections provide applicable literature and the theoretical underpinning from which the case is based. This discussion will allow students to arrive at a better understanding of corporate reputation. The section thereafter contains an

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activity that will require students to immerse themselves into relevant literature with the hope that this will better equip them to develop solutions for the case. Given the nature of the activity, this case may be best suited for graduate students. Lastly, the case is ideal for courses pertaining to strategy, policy, organizational behavior, and human resource management. The case could also be useful for sport marketing and sport finance courses if adapted to investigate how the created programs are important for branding and value.

### 1. Corporate reputation

Corporate reputation is a social construct based on individual judgments and opinions (Highhouse, Brooks, & Gregarus, 2009). In recent years, numerous researchers have discussed the formation of corporate reputation. One view holds that corporate reputation is formed when there is an agreed collective perception by customers, investors, employees, and the general public (Ferris, Blass, Douglas, Kolodinsky, & Treadway, 2003; Highhouse et al., 2009). Similarly, another view maintains that corporate reputation is based on peoples' experience with a corporation, their relationship with a corporation, and other means such as word of mouth and mass media (York, Gambus, & Lilley, 2008). Sims (2009) suggested corporate reputation is also formed by in-house structures and policies (e.g., mission statement and defining codes) that demonstrate what an organization stands for. Lastly, and important for this particular case, corporate reputation also emanates from past behaviors and what the public says about these behaviors (Fombrun, 1996). In sum, the common link between each of these definitions is the role stakeholders play in forming a corporation's reputation.

So, why is this important? The significance is witnessed by the numerous benefits that are associated with being thought of as a reputable corporation. Existing research demonstrated that encompassing a positive reputation can improve the following: customer satisfaction and loyalty, employee attraction and retention, firm equity and investor awareness, bargaining power, and the ability to add value to a corporation's products or services (Fombrun, 1996; Roberts & Dowling, 2002). Eccles, Newquist, and Schatz (2007) added that a positive corporate reputation permits an organization to charge premium prices for their services or products, while still maintaining customer loyalty. Based on the aforementioned, we can begin to understand why corporate executives want their organization to be viewed as reputable by their stakeholders.

Discussion questions related to the discussion above would be:

1. How do you conceptualize "reputation"?
2. How would you define "stakeholder"?
3. Who are the NBA's stakeholders? What role does each play in forming the NBA's reputation?
4. As current, former, or future patrons of the NBA, what are your general perceptions of the league? Furthermore, what factors played into you forming these perceptions?

### 2. Scandals

While it could be argued that scandals occur no more than they did in years past, the mechanisms through which the world can become privy to the scandals has increased. For instance, 24-hour news coverage (e.g., television, Internet, social media) gives the public and stakeholders much more access than decades ago. Despite this reality, corporations continue to act in scandalous ways. Chances are that many of us can name recent scandals occurring in numerous organizational contexts. So, why do corporations continue to transgress? From a scholarly perspective, the intense coverage given to corporate scandals has ushered in a new era for scholars to answer this question. For instance, numerous scholars have devised and tested models that provide a better understanding of the underlying factors behind corporate scandals (e.g., Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004; den Nieuwenboer & Kaptein, 2007). Nevertheless, Sims (2009) claimed there have been relatively few attempts from corporate reputation scholars to demonstrate how corporations rebuild their reputation following scandals. In responding to Sims, we suggest that corporate reputation scholars look to organizational impression management (OIM) literature when attempting to illustrate how to rebuild reputation. We believe OIM provides corporations with a strategy they can utilize to not only rebuild their reputation, but also limit future causes of a damaged reputation. The section below discusses OIM and how it applies to rebuilding reputation.

Discussion questions related to scandals would be:

1. How would you define "scandal"?
2. Think of recent NBA player scandals? How (if at all) did these scandals alter your view of the NBA?
3. What role did the media play in generating the narrative about the scandal?
4. How did the NBA address these scandals?

### 3. Organizational impression management (OIM)

Impression management (IM) is defined as "efforts by an actor to create, maintain, protect, or otherwise alter an image held by a target audience" (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008, p. 1080). Extending PR frameworks, IM is dyadic in

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