



Identifying and Addressing Systemic Issues in Canadian Sport

By Owen Bravo and Rachel Nicol, Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada

May 2025

Introduction

The Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner (OSIC) established the Sport Environment Assessment (SEA) process to prevent and address maltreatment, discrimination and other prohibited behaviours related to the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport. During its mandate, the OSIC initiated SEAs in five sport organizations to identify alleged systemic issues and recommend proactive, transparent and preventative measures to cultivate safe, welcoming and inclusive sport environments.

Unlike the OSIC's complaint management process, neither a complainant nor a respondent is present in a SEA. Instead, members of organizations subjected to a SEA were asked by an independent assessor to describe their sport experiences through interviews, surveys and focus groups to gain insight into how members perceived the issues, systems or dynamics within the concerned organization. Following an assessment, a SEA report containing observations, solutions, recommendations and opportunities for improvement to advance safety and inclusivity throughout the sport organization was published. This article highlights common themes and recommendations derived from these assessments.

Improved and Diversified Governance

With respect to governance, many SEA reports cited a need for increased Board oversight to ensure compliance with policies, procedures and by-laws. They also identified a need for organizations to review their existing policies for inequities and to ensure they are being administered correctly. Codes of conduct should place greater emphasis on discrimination as a prohibited behaviour, with a zero-tolerance policy for inappropriate jokes or behaviours, and follow through on consequences. Concerns related to diversity and inclusion in governance were a major theme, with recommendations focused on active recruitment of equity-deserving groups. Overall, greater accountability from senior leaders of sport organizations in ensuring policies are being consistently and fairly applied, with an emphasis on increased diversity is needed. This will help build trust between members and the organization, promoting a transparent and equitable environment for all athletes and staff.

Empowerment of Athletes and Coaches

Unacceptable behaviours and practices can become normalized through cultural standards in sport environments. Individuals may not recognize when they are being maltreated or abused due to this normalization or, if it is recognized, they may not know how to respond to it. To contribute to a safer sport space for all, many SEA reports strongly recommended empowering members, in particular athletes and coaches, through training, workshops and education initiatives. While each sport environment is unique, programs tailored to educate on topics such as safe sport, anti-racism, informal conflict resolution, and equity, diversity and inclusion, contribute to a safer sport environment. Initiatives such as these also act as preventative measures by setting the standard for appropriate behaviour and training individuals to recognize and respond accordingly when instances of conflict, maltreatment or discrimination arise.

The need for organizations to increase dialogue and improve formal communication channels between leaders and athletes, staff and volunteers was also emphasized. Providing opportunities for membership to offer feedback and collaborate in a meaningful way with the senior administrators allows organizations to understand the perceptions of members and empowers these groups to bring concerns forward. Organizations are encouraged to invite members to discuss personal incidents and voice their concerns related to equity and diversity, or uncertainties on how to make a



complaint. By conducting annual surveys, exit interviews and post-event debriefs, sport organizations will be better positioned to improve organizational processes through feedback of lessons learned, concerns raised and communication of future plans. These are all contributing factors to building trust between leadership and members of the organization, enabling a safer, more inclusive sport culture.

Improved Communication Strategies

Many SEA reports identified the need for clearer lines of communication between sport organizations and their athletes, staff and volunteers. There are numerous opportunities for organizations to improve the effectiveness of their public-facing resources and maximize transparency. Organization websites, social media accounts and emails are practical tools that can be used to provide timely communication of organizational updates, policies, events and news. Organizations should be more proactive in encouraging members to visit their website in order to access pertinent information and relevant policies. It is also imperative that new members are offered thorough orientation processes, allowing the organization to communicate clear expectations for conduct and responsibilities.

Unjust and/or discriminatory hiring and promotion processes were identified as a source of uneasiness for sport organization personnel. Due to a lack of transparency in these processes, there is a concern that conflicts of interest exist within higher levels of leadership, which could be holding them back from advancing in their careers. Establishing and communicating clear processes when hiring and promoting employees, and opening direct lines of communication, will instill confidence that decisions are being made fairly and in accordance with policies and rules. Improved transparency will help build trust not only within the organization, but with the sport community at large.

Addressing Concerns and Improved Internal Complaint Mechanisms

A common recommendation amongst SEA reports was the establishment of robust internal complaint mechanisms. It was also suggested that concerns associated with filing a complaint, such as fear of retaliation, costs incurred, conflicts of interest and limitations in support services, are addressed in a meaningful way. The complaint management process should be transparent, enabling members to know where, how and when to file a complaint. Initiatives for clarity on the internal complaint mechanism and its processes may include annual education, timely communication through numerous platforms, and an accessible and regularly updated website that contains relevant information and resources. Additionally, protective measures such as an anonymous reporting system, and consistency in the complaint management process through comprehensive policies that are regularly reviewed, should be implemented and enforced.

To help minimize the escalation of complaints, organizations and their members are encouraged to resolve interpersonal issues through informal conflict resolution practices when appropriate, prior to a formal complaint. This approach will help contribute to positive relationship building, minimize fear of reprisal, and promote constructive dialogue.

Conclusion

While every sport environment is unique, the above measures and solutions are fundamental for all organizations to prevent and address common systemic issues. Cultivating a sport culture rooted in inclusion, transparency, good governance practices and member empowerment are universal practices that contribute to safer sport environments. By learning from these assessments and their recommendations, we can all work towards the betterment of sport in Canada.

To access the SEA reports, please visit the SEA index [here](#).