

A Case Study of Servant Leadership in the NHL

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Received: 4 September 2016 / Accepted: 15 December 2016
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Abstract An examination of the organizational culture of the Vancouver Canucks of the NHL provides exemplars for all learning institutions. A culture connected directly to a servant-leader philosophy was identified through a cumulative qualitative case study of key personnel within the organization. Data included transcribed interviews, archival research, and personal observations over a 7 year period (Jan. 2009 – Feb. 2016) plus thematic analysis. Particular attention was focused on elite athletes Henrik and Daniel Sedin. In the context of a highly competitive major hockey league, the culture of the Vancouver Canucks emphasizes consistent commitment to service within and outside the formal organization. This identified culture provides examples of valuable approaches for leadership in educational and sport environments.

Keywords Culture · Servant leadership · Sports · Sedins

Background

Culture is the glue that holds organizations together. Historically, Schein (1984) suggested that culture was a set of values, beliefs, and understanding that was shared by members of an organization. Sankar (2004) maintains that these shared values are demonstrated and communicated to new members recruited to the organization. As well, Morgan (1998, 2005) describes organizational culture as the set of beliefs (opinion or conviction), values (relative worth), and norms (standard, model or pattern), together with symbols that represent the unique character of an organization, and provides the context for action in it and by it. I use descriptors

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as a framework for the examination of the concept of organizational culture in this study. The growth of culture follows three consecutive steps: Step #1, the basic cultural foundation of values, beliefs, and norms are identified and initiated by someone or a group; Step #2, the cultural foundation is disseminated throughout the organization usually by some internal leader(s); and Step #3, the cultural identity is reinforced consistently and intentionally over time by experienced persons and demonstrated/modelled for newer people to the organization. In this paper I investigate organizational culture of the National Hockey League (NHL) Vancouver Canucks as is exemplified by four hockey players: the late Pat Quinn, Trevor Linden, and Henrik and Daniel Sedin. This paper includes attention to the philosophy of servant leadership; a brief background and introduction to Quinn, Linden, and the Sedins; a rationale for qualitative research and case study approach in this study; the findings in response to the research questions of the study and cultural influence demonstrated by the four men during their time with the Canucks. The paper concludes with conclusions about the potential impact of demonstrations of consistent and ongoing cultural leadership within the Vancouver Canucks (referred to as Canucks in remainder of paper) and what difference such exposure may make to schools and sport in general?

The Context

If one collectively accepts the explanations and comments related to organizational culture from Schein (1984), Sankar (2004), and Morgan (1998, 2005) as the reference point/framework for an analysis, then issues of people, beliefs, values, norms, and dramatized events provide evidence of the cultural legacy during the research study time period 1999–2016. In order for the cultural aspects to “stick” to an organization, they must be reinforced continuously both on and off the ice. The Canucks’ culture is disseminated and reinforced in many ways, some of which are: radio, television, newspaper, celebrations of significant people or events, in-person game attendance, and social media. In addition, there are external/community connections through charity functions, trips to other communities throughout the province of British Columbia (BC) for exhibition games or off site training camps, and maintaining support for all forms of education (sport, literacy, special needs, and social-emotional development and mental health) in the community. Obviously, the number of variables in such a large organization is many and all cannot be directly addressed. Although not an exhaustive list, issues such as player injuries, traded players, wins-losses, equipment, game schedule, time of year, lock out, and coaches are not included. Instead, the opinions, comments and actions made about/from key Canuck leaders plus two media contacts (Murphy, MacIntyre) will dominate the discussion related to the organizational culture, especially Daniel and Henrik Sedin. Sports writer Ed Willes (Feb 28, 2016) quotes Canuck General Manager, Jim Benning, in the *Victoria Times Colonist*, B. 3: “It’s impossible to weigh their value as leaders and role models. If anything, their importance is increased as the Canucks’ lineup gets younger. They’re our culture carriers.”

Servant Leadership

Today, there is a modification in the leadership/direction within organizations that impacts the culture. Sankar (2004) explains,

One of the most fundamental shifts is movement away from the authoritarian hierarchy to the new lateral structures, lattices, and small teams where people manage themselves. The new corporate design will therefore create a new corporate culture that is more humane, value-based, dynamic, and creative (p. 26).

I would suggest that this is a more *humane, value-based, dynamic and creative* culture that seems to resonate with the leadership philosophy: servant leadership. The philosophy of servant leadership (Greenleaf 1970) illustrates the values of character, the belief in putting others first, of working collaboratively, and making wise decisions in an organization and using experiences of the past to show foresight in the present and future. It lateralizes leadership within an organization. Greenleaf (1970) calls this *primus inter pares*-first among equals. The formal leader demonstrates humility, caring, and respect for others in the group (Hayes and Comer 2010). Greenleaf (1991) states,

A servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test is, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what of the least privileged in society: will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived? (p. 15).

Previous academic papers (Crippen and Nagel 2013; 2014) have established the service first, servant-leader (Greenleaf 2003; Sipe and Frick 2009; Spears 1998) attitude of Daniel and Henrik Sedin within the Canuck organization. Specifically, the Sedin twins displayed evidence of *The 7 Pillars of Servant Leadership* (Sipe and Frick 2009). They include:

1. Person of character
2. Putting the needs of other people first
3. Being skilled communicators
4. Compassionate collaborators who build teams and community
5. Have foresight to take decisive action
6. Are system thinkers
7. Display a moral authority including responsibility and creating a culture of accountability (Crippen and Nagel 2014).

The analysis of the Sedin interview transcripts and interview comments from Linden, Murphy, and MacIntyre suggest that these servant-leader qualities are replicated in part. Importantly, Greenleaf (Sipe and Frick 2009, p. 38) explains the

term *servant* in servant-leader as one who consciously nurtures the mature growth of self, other people, institutions, and communities—the objective of which is to stimulate thought and action for building a better, more caring society.

Briefly, the four hockey players are introduced. First, the late Pat Quinn (1943–2014) was a player, coach, general manager, and president of the Canucks until 1997 and set the cultural foundation for the Canucks. And second, Trevor Linden, the current President of Canuck Hockey Operations, was a mentee of Quinn's. Linden's ongoing influence as a player, team captain (Linden was just 21 years of age when Quinn appointed him) is important because he was “a two time” Canuck (1988–1998 and 2001–2008). Linden left the Canucks and retired in June 2008. On April 9, 2014, Linden was named President of Hockey Operations for the Canucks. The fan response was immediate and positive. Linden has a huge picture of his mentor, Pat Quinn on the office wall at Rogers Arena. Linden has known the Sedins since they arrived in Vancouver. One could say that Linden is the man in the middle—between Quinn and the Sedins—and his comments bring a valuable understanding to the history and present culture. Henrik and Daniel Sedin (b. 1980), are identical twins born in Örnsköldsvik, Sweden. They were selected to play with the Canucks in 1999 while elite players in Sweden. They have remained with the Canucks ever since. Daniel and Henrik began organized hockey at the age of eight, but did not play on the same hockey line until they were fourteen. They reside in Vancouver and return to Sweden each summer to spend time with their extended family. Daniel and Henrik are known for their effectiveness in playing off one another. Henrik is a skilled passer and playmaker, while Daniel is a natural goal scorer. Henrik is classified as an Ironman, having played over 600+ games in a row and is the Captain of the team. In 2011, Daniel, Assistant Captain, won the most outstanding player in the league as voted by the NHL Players Association and the Art Ross Trophy for the point-scoring leader. Both Henrik and Daniel have yet to win a Stanley Cup and that remains their goal.

The Study

My world view is that of a constructivist and as a qualitative researcher, I often use archival investigations plus 1:1 interviews to gather narrative data to make meaning. Creswell (2009) explains, “Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Creswell provides a clear description of the case study approach as a strategy of inquiry in qualitative research, in which the *researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity process, of one or more individuals. Cases are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time* (p. 13). Although I initially became aware of the Sedins in December 2009, I did not formalize the data gathering process until spring of 2010, that continued until February 2016. This cumulative case study (Stake 1995; Yin 2009) provides a method for in-depth analysis of the organizational culture of the Canucks through the voices of four key hockey players. The Sedin's philosophy had been articulated in previous

investigations (Crippen and Nagel 2013, 2014) and identified their particular leadership style, as servant leaders. However, a further examination of their broad contributions and cultural connections has not been formally documented and thus provides evidence for this paper. All interviews were approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board and Vancouver Canucks management. All participants in the study signed letters of consent. There was no conflict of interest in this research study. No compensation was provided in any form. (Certification Approval CRIPPEN#15-048 Dated March 5, 2015.)

Two research questions guided the study:

Question #1 How have Henrik and Daniel Sedin influenced the organizational culture of the Vancouver Canucks?

Question #2 What possible difference could the Canuck organizational culture make to the educational and sports community?

According to Creswell (2016), *interviewing is a popular form of collecting data in qualitative research. It enables individuals to provide personal perspectives and allows for follow-up questions. Often the interviewer becomes a learner and not only the expert* (p.127). Gaining access for interviews was simplified because of the previous Sedin interview in 2011. During the archival process (see dates below) I received open access to the archives, game practices, the Rogers Arena in general, the press box, the Sedin box suite, and appreciated the many informal conversations with several management personnel. Data sources included: face-to-face interviews with Henrik and Daniel Sedin—Nov. 14, 2011; Iain MacIntyre, sportswriter from the Vancouver Sun—Jan. 30, 2014; Dan Murphy, Sportsnet announcer for televised Canuck games—Jan. 30, 2014; and Trevor Linden, President of Canuck Hockey Operations—April 6, 2015. All interviews were conducted at Rogers Arena in Vancouver, British Columbia. Additional materials were gathered from Canuck archives spanning a period of 1999–2015 plus a collection of recent (2015–2016) assorted printed documents related to the Canuck organization, and my written observations from hockey games during Dec. 2009 until Feb. 2016. Also, I personally attended three games and observed two team practices at ringside of Rogers Arena.

The recording of conversations with Dan Murphy and Iain MacIntyre were conducted in the arena, the press box, and in the hallway/corridor outside the entranceway and were arranged through prior e-mails. Contact with Trevor Linden was arranged by his VP of Hockey Administration, Entertainment and Content, TC Carling who had arranged my first meeting with the Sedins in 2011.

As a qualitative, archival researcher I am used to the slow, tedious work needed to sift and cluster artifacts, photographs, newspaper clippings, and recorded narratives, and I was comfortable with that process. Creswell (2009) states:

The data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper into understanding the data (some qualitative researchers like to think of this as peeling back the layers of an onion), representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data (p. 183).

Coding, searching and reviewing themes, and naming themes forming the analysis of such a massive amount of data has taken nearly two years to complete. The triangulation of various sources of information helped provide reliability and validity to my findings. The consistent perspectives of the Sedins, Linden, Murphy, and MacIntyre in the collection of data constructed a holistic cultural impression. The data provided opportunity for their voices to be heard and several direct quotes are included in this paper to illustrate the cultural connections and dominant themes. Thematically, there were three areas of emphasis: hard work, integrity, and caring for all within and outside the organization.

Canuck Culture and Findings

The inspiration for the cultural foundation within the Canuck organization can be traced to Pat Quinn. Before the arrival of the Sedins, Quinn's role can be seen as the initiator of the beliefs, values, and norms of the current Canuck organization. Quinn's experience and understanding of the game were very clear. Quinn's career was often linked to great successes in professional hockey in Canada. The direction or cultural foundation Quinn set for the Canucks was significant, as articulated eloquently by Linden (Trevor Linden, personal communication, April 6, 2015).

Pat was trying to build something special, not only on the ice but off the ice, and he wanted players who cared about working hard and being diligent and dedicated on the ice and having that same attitude within the community. And that was really Pat's vision. And it's interesting, Pat passed away, but the culture that he created 28 years ago, that he started to create, we still live by today, very much so. And it's been carried on for decades.

The following direct quotes from the interviews were selected to illustrate the themes categorized under three headings: hardworking, integrity, and caring. Linden stated his personal perspective on Quinn's leadership skills and integrity to build trust within the organization (Trevor Linden, personal communication, April 6, 2015).

Pat was a mentor to me because heroes or mentors you always feel good when you're around them. They always inspire you; they make you feel better; they always challenge you and bring energy or life to the situation or the scenario, and I think also when you're looking for direction or help, they can always kind of point you in the right way. You trust a mentor, so Pat was always that for me, and I think he was for this organization a hero, a tremendous leader, because he took this organization from obscurity and brought it back to relevance.

Linden stayed with the Canucks until 2008 and he disseminated the cultural components instilled by Quinn. MacIntyre (Iain MacIntyre, personal communication, Jan. 30, 2015) remarked that *Linden is a very special person who causes a visceral response from the fans and community*. So, we can see the foundation established by Quinn and the dissemination of the Canuck culture by Linden was

ongoing in ways that MacIntyre could identify and comment on. Next, we move to Henrik and Daniel Sedin and identify how they continue to build on that culture of hard work, integrity, and caring in their contributions on and off the ice, that is, how the Canuck culture has been socially constructed. Linden speaks highly of the Sedins and is sensitive to the tough criticism Henrik and Daniel have endured over the years and of their strong work ethic on and off the ice.

The stereotypical things that were said about them back then, they're soft, they're red-headed Swedish boys who aren't tough. I identified in a second none of that was true, because I saw them play; I watched them play; I saw them practice. They never got intimidated. That was the biggest bunch of crap. So, I recognized them being special when I first got here, and they have only gotten, because they have worked extremely hard off the ice, their game on the ice has gone to the next level. I couldn't be happier, because you want good people to have good things happen to them, and they are the complete player on/off the ice family. Pat Quinn would have drafted and wanted them, regardless of what nationality they were or what colour their hair is. That's the type of player that you want as part of your organization and the fact that we have two of them. I could go on for hours about all the things they do without looking for attention, without asking for it, without wanting credit. They just do it because that's who they are. (Trevor Linden, personal communication, April 6, 2015).

The Sedins are not intimidated nor thrown off their goal: to win each game. They continue to work hard on ice in Vancouver or during the summer in Sweden. Fellow past and present team mates often comment on the twins' relentless push to be better athletes, i.e., Tanev, Burrows, Prust, Hansen, Naslund, Virbata, and Linden (Asand, Naoko, Jan. 26, 2015). Regardless of their age, 36 years, Henrik or Daniel have not slowed down. Players reflect upon the Sedin's consistent effort and how it makes you realize there's so much hard work ahead of you and this is helpful to the developing young players. The example of the Sedins strong work ethic sets a high standard for the players.

The two external interviewees speak volumes about the Sedins' cultural norms of integrity and accountability:

Their leadership is very simply by example. It's to do the right things, to say the right things, to be the right people. In terms of a hockey leadership it means always doing their best on the ice, never complaining about what the role is, never making demands of an individual nature that would put those demands ahead of the teams' objectives. It means working harder every year so that each season following they're in better shape (Iain MacIntyre, personal communication, Jan. 30, 2014.)

And,

I think it's probably the respect has grown over the years again. And I think a lot of that has to do with that once—I mean just not players but media members—once you cover them for a bit you understand how accountable they

are; and I think that when you see that they've generally played for more than a decade here without missing many games—I think respect has grown from other players as well (Dan Murphy, personal communication, Jan. 29, 2014).

The importance of earning respect, that there is no free ride, drives the Sedins to excellence. They use their celebrity to demonstrate the caring and giving culture of the Canuck organization to the community. Iain MacIntyre describes the large donation Henrik and Daniel made to the Children's Hospital of BC. (Iain MacIntyre, Personal communication, Jan. 30, 2014).

You know, when they do things like donate—I think it was 1.5 million to Children's Hospital, and they were going to do that on their own. They didn't do that because they thought, well, we should have some sort of charitable initiative that we're part of. They just wanted to help Children's Hospital and it was only because of Children's Hospital realizing that that kind of leadership would encourage other people to donate (obviously not 1.5 million, but maybe \$15), that's why the Sedins agreed to be public about it to help further donations. They didn't do it for any sort of recognition or to show people they were giving back to the community. They are, as far as I can tell, completely unaffected by their success in this league as two of the premier players for a long time now.

Recently, Daniel Sedin played in the NHL All Star Game in Nashville and his share of the winnings was \$125,000 U.S.. Daniel immediately donated this money to the Canuck training staff. This was his way of honouring them for all they do for the players. When asked about word association to the Sedins, one hears words such as, *integrity, understated, sense of humour, perseverance* (Dan Murphy) and *respectful of team mates, comfortable in the spotlight, determined to win* (Iain MacIntyre). They try to inspire and model a positive approach to the game, the officials, and the new players and take their roles seriously. Stories are told by many that both Henrik and Daniel will be *the last men standing* after a game loss.

The Sedins came out and talked and stood in the middle of the room—and there must have been at least 50 reporters in the room; there were only three or four players—and one or two of the other players would kind of come and go; you know, someone would be there for five minutes and they'd go, then someone else would come... The twins stood there for about half-an-hour and the Canucks had gotten bombed that night but they just felt that it was their responsibility to be accountable.... and accountability—I haven't mentioned it—accountability is a huge part of leadership and professionalism and they (Sedins) are not only available front and center when things are great; they are front and center when things aren't great, and they're taking their share of responsibility for that and answering every question (Iain MacIntyre, personal communication, Jan. 30, 2014).

Quinn was a huge proponent of hard work on and off the ice and Linden acknowledged that this mind set stayed with him (Linden) as a player also. Linden recognizes that the Sedins have carried such beliefs forward and they pass it on to

younger players, which insures this cultural sequence continues. Linden strongly suggests that caring about your team mates and your community is necessary if one wants to play with the Canucks—if players don't care, Linden suggests they go elsewhere. This is non-negotiable. The culture of the Canucks has been driven over the 16+ Sedin servant-leader years toward hard work (Clipperton Dec. 12, 2015, *Times Colonist*), being respectful, accountable, mentoring, caring about each other and infusing their concern for the greater community, i.e. mental health, autism, Children's Hospital. Because of their lengthy stable history with the team and the Canuck organization overall, the original beliefs, values, and norms established by Pat Quinn and then disseminated by Trevor Linden during his time as a player, team leader and now as an executive, the legacy continues today through the filtering and modelling to the players especially by the Sedins' behavior. The culture is passed on to and embodied by the young players.

It is understood that the Sedins were drafted by the Canucks for a particular purpose. Quinn's mission was to build them into the cornerstones of the team that believed strongly in hard work, integrity, and caring. Their practices of these hallmarks of team leadership reflect a consistent, thoughtful, understanding of the game and they invest time as mentors to ease the young players into the cultural norms of the Canucks. Linden says it is not enough to try and tell young players how to work, but when they see it, they know it, and they copy it. That's how young players learn. *Culture is how things get done, without people having to think about it* (Laloux 2014, p. 225). A strong organizational culture takes time to build that includes: initiating the foundation; disseminating the values and beliefs; and consistently reinforcing this culture over the years.

The previous interview responses provide clarity to the cultural aspects of the Canucks. The voice of each Sedin delivers additional validation to their beliefs and values (first interview session (Nov. 14, 2011).

Henrik—You prepare in the mornings or the day before and when the time comes it's time to go out and perform. I mean if you need to say a lot at that time, something's wrong, I think. You want to go out there and show that you've been preparing the right way, and you're ready to go. So, I don't think much needs to be said at that time, because it's more, leave everyone to themselves, and let them get ready.

Both spoke about everyone being involved in the team and that is essential to them that All members feel important and involved to be successful. They acknowledge accountability and responsibility to the team.

Henrik-It doesn't matter if it's someone that works in the building, or in the staff, or trainers, or coaches, or whatever it is. You have to feel important. It doesn't matter what you do, and that's something that I think you've got to take seriously, to say hi to people when you walk by. And that's always been the way we've tried to do things.

The issues of accountability and integrity were stressed by the Sedins in that everyone is accountable to each other; knowing what is expected; admitting

mistakes; taking ownership for errors or losses. That is part of being a leader said Henrik. Their honesty was clear.

Henrik—I don't know how much faster we can get, but there's always something you can work on. Our shots can be better, at least mine. So there's always minor things you can get better at, and I think once you get to a point that you feel that you've reached your peak I think that's the time when you've got to maybe take a look at retiring.

Daniel added, When you start to think that, you can't get any better, I think that's when things start to go the other way. So you always have to look for things that can make you better and that's the only way to stay out there, I think.

When I asked them how they wanted to be remembered in hockey and in life, here were their responses:

Henrik—Hockey, you have a talent, and you do your best to be the best player you can be, but, without that talent growing up, it's tough to get somewhere, so you get a lot of things for free in hockey. But as a person, I think that's where you can make the biggest difference, in a community or with your friends, or teammates. I think you want to treat everyone else like you want to be treated yourself, and you want to be remembered as someone that cares, and makes a difference. If it's a big difference, or a small difference, or it's just showing that you care about people or whatever, I think that's more important.

Daniel—Yeah, I think if teammates and people say that they enjoyed our company and that we made them better people... I think that's good enough for us. It's important to us that they respect us. I mean, you don't have to like us, but at least respect us as human beings.

Ultimately, although 36 years old, Henrik and Daniel maintain their goal to win a Stanley Cup. It is the one prize that has eluded them in their outstanding careers. They continue to lead and support their team members with a positive outlook and relentless drive.

Conclusion

In this paper I have gathered evidence about the culture of the Canuck organization from the opinions and perspectives, the voices of: Trevor Linden, Henrik and Daniel Sedin, Dan Murphy, and Iain MacIntyre and other team players in answer to the research questions.

Research Question #1 How have Henrik and Daniel Sedin influenced the organizational culture of the Vancouver Canucks? The evidence of continuous and lengthy alignment, to the cultural values, beliefs and norms of the Canucks, i.e., hardworking, integrity, and caring is clearly demonstrated by the Sedins. The Sedins

epitomize the culture of the Vancouver Canuck organization. They are the *culture carriers* of the organization and acknowledge their responsibility as such.

Research Question #2 What possible difference has the Canucks organizational culture make to the educational and sports communities? Trevor Linden, Henrik and Daniel Sedin comfortably demonstrate and illustrate both a servant-leader philosophy and a civil, caring, humble, yet competitive, sportsmanship as representatives and ambassadors of an NHL hockey team. Youth, aspiring professional hockey players and those involved in hockey and sport in general, may be influenced by the willingness to serve the team and their community through relentless hard work, integrity and accountability, and caring for children, special needs, and outreach to the local and provincial community. This is a significant, yet hopeful contribution, to the public and often overlooked. A common perception mentioned over and over is that Henrik and Daniel conducted themselves as gentlemen, without complaint, humble, and professional. Over the hundreds of Canuck hockey games on television, and of those I personally witnessed at Rogers Arena, I noticed the humility exemplified by Henrik and Daniel and their ability to focus and listen to officials (Crippen and Nagel 2014). A constant compassionate attitude and servant-leader ethos is reflected in the attention they give to each other and particularly to the player on the first line with them. Northouse (2016) states that *servant leadership does not occur in a vacuum but occurs within a given organizational context and particular culture* (p. 231). They have influenced the organizational culture by maintaining a solid work ethic, a humbleness, respect, plus responsibility and accountability to themselves, their team, and the Canuck organization. Their reaching out to the community, especially children, over time, through civic donations, is indicative of their helpful/caring outlook. Henrik and Daniel Sedin articulate the culture of the Vancouver Canucks through thought, word and deed. They walk their talk (Crippen and Nagel 2013). What difference does this make to hockey in general? They are examples of positive, well prepared athletes whose civility and respect define them on and off the ice and they are the legitimate cultural carriers for the Vancouver Canucks and its legacy for good.

Implications and Recommendations

This case study provides evidence that organizational culture takes strong leadership to build and considerable time to establish. Culture is a work in progress. One person may initiate the culture but others are needed to reinforce and stabilize that culture throughout the organization and over the years. In particular, sport and school organizations need to identify their values and beliefs and what is important to them. It is essential to understand how a culture can permeate a community for the betterment of all.

Additional research into the perceptions of youth toward the Vancouver Canucks or the Sedins and/or additional hockey organizations could prove valuable to those groups involved in hockey as coaches and leaders. Generally, the investigation of other team sports could provide rich data as to their impact on youth and

community. We need to hear the opinions of young people today. What impressions are our organizations and culture leaving on them?

Thank you to Trevor Linden, TC Carling, Henrik and Daniel Sedin and the Vancouver Canuck Organization for their ongoing support of this research study.

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