

ICI VIEWPOINTS

June 21, 2021

WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert on Building Relationships

Succeeding in the world of sports is like succeeding in any other big business: you have to be able to develop and nurture strong relationships. At ICI's 2021 General Membership Meeting, Cathy Engelbert, former Deloitte CEO and current commissioner of the Women's National Basketball Association, spoke with ICI Chairman and CEO of J.P. Morgan Asset Management George C. W. Gatch about managing a growing professional sports league during a challenging time.

Engaging with Key Stakeholders

Although she was up for a challenge, neither Engelbert nor anybody else could have known the full scope of the job. "I knew there was a huge transformation needing to happen—not just at the WNBA but in women's sports—and I thought it was a good fit," she said. "What I didn't know is we'd hit a global pandemic affecting live sports in a big way, and a racial justice crisis in the middle of a divisive political time."

While her current focus is growing fan loyalty, the first order of business when Engelbert became commissioner was hammering out a collective bargaining agreement with the players, who were unhappy with their pay and benefits. She walked out of her first meeting feeling positive because, unlike many union negotiations, the stakeholders all wanted the same thing. They wanted to advance the league and pay the players more. The only problem was that they didn't have the money.

After hammering out an agreement that tripled the pay of top players and provided holistic family planning resources, Engelbert had the stable foundation needed to grow the business operationally in collaboration with the union. And then the pandemic hit.

Responding to a Crisis

Engelbert said her years at Deloitte left her well prepared to handle the pandemic. "The first thing I knew is that a crisis tends to accelerate and deepen issues that existed before the crisis," she said. "But it's also an opportunity to fix problems."

By foregrounding the health and safety of players, the WNBA held a successful season that boosted average viewership by 68 percent, despite performing in a crowded sports landscape. Engelbert and the league are looking to maintain that momentum as the pandemic recedes by looking for ways to get as many fans back into the seats as safely as possible.

Leaders Must Know How to Listen

The pandemic crisis wasn't all smooth sailing, however. After the murder of George Floyd, the league launched a social justice council to ensure players' voices were heard. "I probably learned more in the last year and a half being in the WNBA, with the most diverse workforce I've ever been with, than my 33 years prior to getting there," Engelbert said.

The league focuses on inclusivity, which Engelbert described as building a pipeline of diverse talent so that they're available to fill positions that come up in front-office jobs. But she recalled a moment after the Jacob Blake shooting when she had to force herself to take a step back and listen more carefully. "All of a sudden our players walked off the court and I was there that night in our bubble in Florida, trying to convince them to play," she said. But while she was thinking of contracts with sports broadcasters, her players were in a very different mental and emotional space. "One of our players who has a six-year-old son turned to me and said, 'Cathy, this could be my son in 10 years,'" Engelbert recalled. "And that's when I literally said, you know what? We're not playing a game tonight."

Relationships Are the Key

Regardless of the stakeholders, the key principles of building solid relationships are the same. Engelbert recalled a chance meeting with a Google executive who appeared with her on a panel in February 2020 who turned out to have been a one-time Olympic rower. They kept in touch throughout the summer off and on, touching base throughout the pandemic. Now, the league has inked a major sponsorship deal with the search company. "Just like when I was at Deloitte, every touchpoint with a client is important to build a relationship," she said.

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