

Reputation Driver Assignment

*An analysis of the Chicago Blackhawks' conduct
in regard to their overall reputation*

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Conduct Meaning and Relevance

Reputations are at the forefront of all industries, but conduct drives the actions and perceptions of an organization. Looking at the hockey world specifically, the view on one's reputation, whether the player or the team, can severely impact a hockey organization's overall function, dynamics and playing status. Fans, media, sponsorships, and employees are all affected by a team's actions and ultimately work to determine its reputation status. According to Reptrak, conduct refers to how an organization behaves in terms of fairness, ethics, openness, and transparency. These values are significant for the National Hockey League and its franchises. The teams and athletes involved in the NHL are viewed on the world's stage, representing some of the best in the hockey business. With these ideals in mind, the actions of the teams and their players determine their reputation, emphasizing the importance of practicing fair business while remaining transparent and open about their affairs.¹

Company Overview

The Chicago Blackhawks were established in 1926 as one of the first U.S. expansion franchises by the NHL, making them one of the original six teams of the sport. Following their debut, the Blackhawks had some early success but ultimately began a pattern of ups and downs where they established "the worst stretch of play in team history."² The team did experience a renaissance in the 1960s, which became overshadowed by the struggles of the 21st century, whereby their ownership established the beginning of issues within the organization through their poor personal decisions and alienation of a large swath of its loyal fan base. Regardless of their long history and economic advantages of their city, fans viewed the Chicago Blackhawks as the "worst franchise in professional sports."³ Despite the setbacks, the Blackhawks appeared to make a turn for the better in the 2010s as their team gained elite players who made them Cup contenders and eventual champions. The era of success did not last long, as the truth about the 2010 Championship run came to light in 2021 and revealed the horrible actions of management and their disregard for player safety and open transparency.

The 2010s era of the Chicago Blackhawks marked the team's rebirth. They had an "unimpeachable reputation," introduced by their role model players and franchise that had risen from the mismanagement of previous years and became three-time Stanley Cup winners.⁴ The Blackhawks' reputation remained in good standing until 2021, when the truth about the franchise came to light, exposing internal failures and improper conduct that had been hidden from the public for almost a decade.

In 2021, Kyle Beach filed a lawsuit against the franchise after he had reported to the team's management that former video coach Brad Alrich had sexually assaulted him. Beach had brought the allegations to the skills coach in 2010, who brought it to upper management. The Blackhawks' leadership met with seven staff members who ultimately decided to do nothing with the reports and waited until after Chicago had won the Stanley Cup before passing the allegations to human resources. Additionally, instead of conducting an investigation, management provided Alrich with a resignation to keep the situation hidden from the public.

¹ <https://www.reptrak.com/>

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chicago-Blackhawks>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://theathletic.com/3732410/2022/10/26/blackhawks-jenner-block-report-nhl/>

Beach was not the only player to come forward about the team's mismanagement of handling sexual assault claims about Alrich.⁵ As of 2023, two other players have filed lawsuits about the Blackhawks' unethical conduct and their ability to put "Stanley Cup championship aspirations ahead of the welfare of its players and provided a cover to a sexual predator."⁶ The lack of transparency demonstrated by the franchise increased mistrust when the public discovered John McDonough's conduct was based on secrecy and fear. The management built a "winning culture" that dominated everything else. His control over the franchise also revealed the toxic attitudes of some of the franchise's "star players" who allegedly participated in bullying, homophobic comments and ignorance of a teammate's safety.⁷

The conduct of the Chicago Blackhawks resulted in massive reputation damage and a loss of trust amongst their fans. The post-McDonough era of the team has taken significant steps to "detoxify hockey culture" and make the Blackhawks more transparent. The current management has introduced a new code of conduct and several training seminars surrounding mental health, reporting incidents of assault and misconduct, and workplace culture to create a safe space for all players and employees.⁸

After the last few years of misconduct exposure and franchise reforms, the Chicago Blackhawks seemed to be moving in a better direction. They secured the 2023 first-draft pick, Connor Bedard, who brought global attention to the team with his superstar skills and abilities. The team was set up for a refashion and on its way to a potentially successful season. However, this all turned around in November 2023 when an incident made headlines, leading to speculation, rumours, and another reputation mess for the Blackhawks.

On Nov. 22, 2023, Corey Perry, a well-known veteran player for the Chicago Blackhawks, was scratched from playing against the Columbus Blue Jackets. No context was provided on Perry's suspension, only that it was an "organizational decision" to be kept internally.⁹ Perry's incident involved misconduct, resulting in suspension and eventual release from the Blackhawks. The handling of the Perry situation reflected once again the franchise's improper conduct and lack of transparency. The lack of context for the incident allowed social media to speculate and fabricate a blasphemous rumour regarding an illicit affair between Perry and a family member of their star player, Connor Bedard.¹⁰ Despite the falsified rumour, the franchise allowed the media to control the narrative for nearly a week before sharing a statement on Nov. 28. General Manager Kyle Davidson explained management had investigated the incident and decided to cut ties with Perry, but reinforced that the incident involved no other player.¹¹ Regardless of their statement, the lack of transparency in this incident, from an organization with a history of misconduct and mistrust, further emphasizes the need for reputation management and reconstruction.

Industry Overview

When looking at the hockey industry, it is important to look past the NHL. The entire industry deals with events that damage reputations, and it is important to see how other leagues and major organizations have dealt with events that can damage their reputations. This analysis will use two examples: Hockey

⁵ Ibid.

⁶<https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/07/sport/chicago-blackhawks-sexual-assault-player-lawsuit-brad-aldrich/index.html>

⁷ <https://theathletic.com/3732410/2022/10/26/blackhawks-jenner-block-report-nhl/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹<https://www.hockeyfeed.com>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹<https://apnews.com/article/>

Canada's fallout from the 2018 WJC and Bill Peters's Akim Aliu incident. Kyle Beach is another comparable example, but it involved the Blackhawks organization.

In 2009/10, Akim Aliu was playing for the Rockford IceHogs, the AHL affiliate of the Chicago Blackhawks. Bill Peters, 48, was the head coach at the time. The Icehogs were a good, competitive playoff team, and Bill Peters was known as one of the best coaches in the American Hockey League. He joined the Detroit Red Wings in 2011 as an assistant coach and became an NHL head coach in 2014 with the Carolina Hurricanes. He would move to become head coach of the Calgary Flames in 2018 but would only remain with the team until midway through 2019. Aliu would mostly remain in the AHL during that time, although some would argue his play deserved more merit than it received. In 2019, he was playing for the Orlando Solar Bears of the ECHL.

On Nov. 25, 2019, Akim Aliu made a Tweet accusing Peters of making multiple racial comments, including slurs, during the 2008/09 season in Rockford.¹² Multiple players came out in support of Aliu, including teammates from that 2009 Icehogs team and NHL players who had already had bad experiences with Peters. On Nov. 27, 2019, Bill Peters gave a handwritten apology to Calgary Flames General Manager Brad Treliving. On Nov. 29, Bill Peters was relieved of his duties by the Calgary Flames, leaving in disgrace.¹³

In response to the incident going viral, hockey players of colour spoke up around the professional leagues, telling stories of racism and abuse from all levels of hockey. The NHL immediately increased the budget for their *Hockey is for Everyone* initiative. In February 2020, the NHL announced a new Black History Month campaign. In September 2020, they announced a whole slew of anti-racism initiatives.¹⁴ The NHL and anyone associated with Bill Peters condemned his actions and vouched to work to create a better, more inclusive game. On Aug. 30, 2023, Bill Peters was hired as head coach of the ECHL's Lethbridge Hurricanes.¹⁵ The ECHL is the NHL's lowest-level affiliated professional league. It is also where Akim Aliu was playing in 2019.

During the 2018 World Junior Championship in London, Ontario, a young woman was allegedly sexually assaulted by five members of the Canadian team. The incident happened on June 18, 2018. London police opened an investigation into the matter on June 19, and Hockey Canada hired an attorney that same day. There was no insight into the investigation for three years until May 2022, when Hockey Canada settled a 3.5 million dollar lawsuit with the victim. On Jan. 24, 2024, five members of the 2018 Canadian World Junior Championship team are told to surrender to London Police.

Hockey Canada came under fire for how it managed this incident. It attempted to cover up the story for years. All of the organization's major sponsors left them, including Nike, Tim Hortons, and Scotiabank. In July of 2023, the Globe and Mail reported that Hockey Canada had used public funds (with some coming

¹² <https://www.sportskeeda.com/ice-hockey/news-what-bill-peters-say-akim-aliu-how-former-nhl-hc-s-racial-slurs-cost-job>

¹³ <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1649458243944>

¹⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/hockey/nhl/nhl-highlighting-social-issues-initiatives-anti-racism-inclusion-1.5711330#:~:text=predominantly%20white%20sport.-,The%20league%20and%20NHL%20Players%20Association%20are%20planning%20mandatory%20inclusion,inclusion%20committees%20aimed%20at%20encouraging>

¹⁵ <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/hockey/hockey-bill-peters-lethbridge-1.6951963#:~:text=Bill%20Peters%20has%20been%20hired,during%20the%202009%2D10%20season>

from youth hockey fees) to pay court fees and keep the story out of the papers.¹⁶ A federal audit in 2024 would dispute this, but the Globe and Mail insists that Hockey Canada has used public funds to pay legal bills multiple times. Hockey Canada's reputation took a serious hit because of how it handled this, and the CEO and board of directors resigned simultaneously in October 2022.

It can be concluded that organizations within the hockey industry deal with incidents that damage their reputation often and poorly. If Hockey Canada has multiple public fund banks readily available to dip into in defence of its players, then the organization most likely expects an event to happen. The NHL makes visible strides to combat its negative reputation. The organization uses public events, charity events, advertising campaigns, and other strategies to change the narrative surrounding it. Some would say that this has not been successful. Still, for the average casual hockey fan, the NHL seems like an extremely ethical organization because of its successful work in reputation management.

Media Coverage

The media coverage of the Chicago Blackhawks over the last 12 months has reflected negativity regarding the franchise's internal structure and handling of misconduct. Reputation rebuilding of trust and credibility began in 2021, following the release of Kyle Beach's lawsuit, the organization immediately began restructuring its internal management and team culture. Yet, in the era of social media, actions had to speak louder than words, especially with the situation's sensitivity.

The current Blackhawks management has taken steps to change the culture within the organization. Still, with more players coming forward with reports on the abuse hidden away for the prospect of a championship, the negativity towards the franchise has furthered.¹⁷ CBC reported that, in light of Chicago receiving the first draft pick for 2023, some fans felt they did not deserve it due to the team's controversies. The article stated that other organizations, such as the Arizona Coyotes and New Jersey Devils, faced penalties for violating league protocol, while the Blackhawks' actions, whose conduct harmed many young players, received no reprimands. The opposing view of the Blackhawks received even broader implications when NHL legend Wayne Gretzky commented that "parents should be concerned about their young son's safety if drafted to Chicago."¹⁸

However, the Blackhawks received the most sought-after star for 2023, Connor Bedard, providing them with a "cover" from the negativity as the excitement of his upcoming position on the team overshadowed the additional narratives of the franchise. Despite Bedard's quick success, his skills could not protect the team from media backlash and scandals. The Corey Perry incident reflected the improper mishandling of conduct within the Blackhawks organization. From the start of the incident, the media immediately set out to find out what had happened to the former player. Yet, with no official team statement, it led to speculation and "salacious rumours."¹⁹ Not only did significant media outlets pick up on the rumours and Perry's incident, but social media ran wild with the "theories," resulting in unnecessary negative publicity for Perry, the Blackhawks, and the unfortunate victim, Connor Bedard.²⁰ Overall, the Perry incident highlighted the need for greater organizational transparency and a review of their crisis plan.

¹⁶ <https://globalnews.ca/news/10273307/hockey-canada-world-juniors-sex-assault-case-timeline/>

¹⁷ <https://theathletic.com/3732410/2022/10/26/blackhawks-jenner-block-report-nhl/>

¹⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/nhl-draft-chicago-scandal-1.6837773>

¹⁹ <https://torontosun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/details-emerge-about-incident-leading-to-perry-release>

²⁰ https://www.espn.co.uk/nhl/story/_/id/39014871/corey-perry-apologizes-blackhawks-seeking-professional-help

Reputation Impact

The Chicago Blackhawk's reputation had already been damaged by the 2010 Kyle Beach incident and the Akim Aliu incident of 2019. Fans had zero trust in the organization's transparency before the Corey Perry media circus. The Blackhawks are arguably the laughingstock of the NHL, with fans considering them the league's darlings, being protected by Gary Bettman and the NHL. The fans showed their distaste for the franchise after the Blackhawks were awarded the first overall pick and showed it vehemently. The rhetoric around the league considered Connor Bedard to be a distraction from the Blackhawk's damaged reputation. Possibly a fast pass back into the fans' good books.

It remains to be seen whether the fans will let this incident go or whether the Blackhawks will make obvious strides to improve their reputation as the NHL did with Akim Aliu and Bill Peters. It is possible to fix their reputation with a star like Connor Bedard as the face of the team. If he can do a good job representing the brand's identity, then it will be much easier for the organization to manage its reputation. The organization has all the tools necessary to fix its reputation. It is just a matter of making an effort.

PR Recommendations

Reflecting on the Chicago Blackhawks' actions over the last 12 months, the following recommendations should be made to reinforce better conduct management in the areas of transparency and ethics, which will, therefore, rebuild their reputation:

- 1) Reconfigure the crisis plan to include the necessary solutions, such as press releases and statements, that can be sent out in a timely manner.
- 2) All future communication and company affairs must be focused on transparency to rebuild trust within the industry.
- 3) Make all plans of action and codes of conduct publicly accessible to promote transparency and demonstrate fair practices.

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