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My Travels with Jackie – A Sabbatical Story

Todd C. Harris

“*Unhappy the land that needs heroes.*”

Bertolt Brecht, German Dramatist, *Life of Galileo* (1939).

I have no reason to doubt the wisdom of Brecht’s words, but nonetheless, Jackie Robinson is and will always be one of my heroes. In an event of profound and enduring cultural, historical, and social significance, on April 15th, 1947, Robinson, born in Cairo, Georgia in 1919, became the first Black Major League Baseball player in the modern era, starting at first base and batting second for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Although Robinson went hitless that day, the Dodgers beat the Boston Braves 5 to 3. More importantly, the 26,623 fans in the stands at Ebbets Field saw the tectonic plates of American society shift. On the field, the journey that Robinson started that day would lead to seven All-Star Games, a Rookie-of-the-Year Award, a Most Valuable Player (MVP) Award, a World Series Title, and would culminate in his enshrinement in the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962. Robinson’s post-baseball career continued to be meaningful, as he spent time in the business world, serving as the Vice President of Personnel for the Chock full o’Nuts coffee company and starting a bank and housing development company. He also advised local and national politicians and was highly active in the Civil Rights Movement. Robinson died at his home in Stamford, Connecticut in 1972.

Sabbatical Goals

While Robinson was undoubtedly a figure of immense significance in American life, his relevance to my work as an associate professor of management may not be immediately clear.

My sabbatical occurred during the spring 2021 semester. Going into it, I had a group of goals, including:

1. Explore a topic that I had a genuine, intrinsic interest in.

2. Work in an area that I could connect to my undergraduate and graduate teaching.
3. Address a subject that I would enjoy speaking and writing about, and that had the potential to yield continuing scholarship opportunities.
4. Extend my primary research program, which is an amalgam of business, history, and psychology.
5. Examine an issue that was important, either within my chosen academic discipline of management or more generally.

After considering and discarding several topics, most of which were either impractical, uninteresting, or both, I stumbled across a possibility. I came to the realization that the case of Jackie Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball was a historically important example of organizational change. Organizational change, in turn, is a topic of immense significance to companies and those who study them.

Organizational Change: What It Is and Why It Matters

Within the management literature, organizational change refers to planned or unplanned transformations in an organization’s goals, structure, technology, or people. The contemporary business climate is characterized by rapid advances in technology, an unpredictable economic environment, evolving governmental regulations, and a fundamental reordering of the employer-employee relationship. Thus, both the prevalence and importance of organizational change is increasing. Within organizations, senior leaders in particular are often judged by their ability to conceptualize, initiate, and execute change, doing so in a manner that is both acceptable to employees and enhances the effectiveness of the organization.

The topic of organizational change is a fundamental part of the academic discipline of management in general and its subdisciplines of organizational behavior, leadership and human resources management. For example, of the 12 peer-reviewed articles appearing in the June 2019 edition of the *Academy of Management Journal* (one of the premier scholarly outlets in the field of management), six addressed the issue of organizational change to some degree. From a more practitioner-oriented perspective, *McKinsey Quarterly*, a business magazine for senior executives, published by the consulting firm McKinsey, often spotlights the issue of organizational change. Given the increased volatility of the contemporary business environment, with its accompanying shifts in technology, markets, and consumer demands, organizational change, once considered a luxury, is now a necessity. Quite simply, organizations that can cope with change will survive and prosper, while those that cannot will disappear. Leaders and others in positions of authority within organizations have a particularly critical role to play in change efforts, and a company's human resources function is often deeply involved with large-scale change efforts, such as downsizing, restructuring, and mergers and acquisitions.

Theories about how organizations change have used the same basic model for decades. In 1947, social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, proposed an “unfreeze-change-refreeze” approach to change. During the “unfreeze” stage, employees become aware of their values and beliefs. Next, the “change” stage occurs, in which employees adopt new values, beliefs and attitudes. The change process is capped by the third and final stage, “refreezing,” during which the new attitudes and values are reinforced and stabilized.

Organizational change can vary in type as well. For example, it is possible to differentiate between “episodic” change and “continuous” change.



Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey (National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum).

Episodic change is infrequent, discontinuous, and intentional. It often occurs in response to external pressures, is often launched with much fanfare, features senior leaders clearly spearheading the process, and is often slow because it is large in scope. Continuous change is an ongoing, evolving, and cumulative organizational change defined by small, continuous adjustments, created simultaneously across units, which add up to consequential change. In companies adhering to the continuous change approach, the change is much more likely to be improvised, often occurs rapidly, and organizational members accept change as a constant. Barriers to change can occur at the individual level (e.g., fear of the unknown, economic uncertainty, etc.) and at the organizational level (e.g., structural inertia, past unsuccessful change efforts, etc.). Harvard Business School professor, John P. Kotter, has estimated that over half of corporate change initiatives do

not deliver their intended results, often due to a lack of strategic vision and communication. Quite simply, change is hard.

The Sabbatical Research Process: Safe at Home and then on to Cooperstown

Consistent with my primary research program, my sabbatical project employed a qualitative research design (Rogelberg 2004). Qualitative methods can include procedures such as observation, interview, case study and analysis of diaries or written documents. In the disciplines of management and organizational studies, qualitative research approaches have been used since the fields' inceptions. The use of a qualitative research method is often most appropriate when (a) context is central to the research question, (b) depth and richness of data are essential, and (c) the research is exploratory in nature (Lee

1999). Although there is little guidance on its unique methods and techniques, historical research, commonly known as historiography (Zickar 2013), can also be a valued qualitative research paradigm. Historical research methods are critical parts of most scientific disciplines (including management) and can aid scientific understanding by helping scholars examine practices, models and theories in a different context and era.

More specifically, my investigation of Jackie Robinson and organizational change used the biographical approach (Smith 1994). In biographical research, the focus is on a single individual, with lessons from the life of that individual used to illustrate points that have impact and relevance today. Consistent with best methodological practice, I sought to emphasize primary source materials, such as Robinson's personal written communications with Dodgers' General Manager, Branch Rickey.

In January 2021, working at home, I began my research with a literature review. My starting point was Jules

Tygiel's 1983 book, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*. Tygiel was a professor of history at San Francisco State University, and his book remains essential in any consideration of Robinson and the desegregation of baseball. Other key texts that warrant special mention include Arnold Rampersad's 1998 *Jackie Robinson: A Biography*, which is the definitive Robinson biography, and Robinson's own 1972 autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*, co-authored with Alfred Duckett. These three books would serve as the foundation upon which my sabbatical research was constructed. In addition to books such as those just highlighted, the literature review also included peer-reviewed journal articles across multiple disciplines, such as African American studies, anthropology, communications, economics, history, law, political science, and sociology. Interestingly, with few exceptions (e.g., Austin 1997), scholarly investigations of Robinson and the integration of baseball from my own academic

discipline of management theory and practice were comparably lacking. The last step in my literature review was the examination of contemporaneous newspaper and magazine accounts of baseball's integration, with a special focus on the work of pioneering Black sportswriters such as Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and Sam Lacy of the *Baltimore Afro-American*. It bears mentioning that Smith and Lacy were themselves integral to the desegregation of Major League Baseball through their eloquent and impassioned pleas to end the color line in one of America's most important and culturally central activities.

In June 2021, I moved on to the second phase of my sabbatical research. I traveled to Cooperstown, New York to visit the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. The Baseball Hall of Fame is the world's foremost repository of baseball information. I spent three delightful days in Cooperstown, working with a variety of archival materials, all focused on Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the integration of Major League Baseball. The materials that I examined included books, periodicals, personal correspondence, photographs, manuscripts, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, team publications and statistical information. If I was not in a personal and/or professional heaven, I was undoubtedly adjacent to it.

In August 2021, I braved the heat and humidity of a Washington, D.C. summer to visit the Library of Congress, where I was able to work with the original copies of the Jackie Robinson papers and the Branch Rickey papers. The Robinson papers, spanning the years 1934 – 2001, and donated by Robinson's widow, Rachel, in 2001, feature correspondence, memoranda, telegrams, fan mail, speeches, writings, congressional testimony, baseball contracts, subject files, financial and legal records, military records, printed matter, and other papers relating chiefly to Robinson's career as a baseball player

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Jackie Robinson (National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum).

and corporate executive, and to his participation in political activities, religious and civic organizations, the Civil Rights Movement, and media affairs.

The Rickey papers, covering the years 1890 – 1969, hold correspondence, family papers, speeches and writings, memoranda, scouting and other reports, notes, subject files, scrapbooks, and other papers, chiefly from 1936 to 1965, documenting Branch Rickey's career as a Major League Baseball manager and executive. The "Baseball File" of the Rickey papers contain the minutes of Board of Directors and Stockholders' Meetings of the Brooklyn Dodgers' Baseball Club from 1945 to 1950. These particular documents shed invaluable light on the decision-making process behind Robinson's promotion to the Dodgers.

The research staff and librarians at both the Baseball Hall of Fame and the Library of Congress were wonderful collaborators, in all cases being unfailingly collegial, knowledgeable, and highly responsive. Given the size,

scope, and complexity of the archival materials that I was working with, if it were not for their able assistance, I would have struck out.

The third and final phase of my sabbatical research project was undertaken primarily during the fall 2021 semester and featured personal interviews with individuals who either knew Jackie Robinson or were playing professional baseball in the early years of the game's integration (roughly 1945 to 1955). These conversations were a delight and added interesting depth and context to my knowledge of Robinson and the profound changes that were occurring in baseball at the time. For example, during a conversation with someone who was a player in the Brooklyn Dodgers' minor league system in the late 1940s, I learned about acts of overt racial discrimination, enmity between players from northern and southern parts of the U.S., and the fierce competition for jobs, especially as players were returning from World War II and were anxious to reclaim their former positions.

Results and Reflections

My investigation of Jackie Robinson and organizational change yielded a number of interesting scholarly findings, which I have presented at both internal university conferences (e.g., the 2022 CARS May Celebration) and at external, peer-reviewed conferences (e.g., June 2022's Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture, jointly hosted by SUNY-Oneonta and the Baseball Hall of Fame).

Forces both "internal" and "external" to baseball drove the 1947 integration of the Brooklyn Dodgers and Major League Baseball. Externally, the passage of "fair employment" legislation, public pressure from citizen's groups, politicians, and the Black press, and baseball's importance in the national narrative set the stage for change. Internally, Branch Rickey, the General Manager of the Dodgers, created a compelling "case for change," by highlighting the positive competitive and financial impact that Robinson's signing would have. Rickey also meticulously planned for the change, identifying potential obstacles ahead of time and putting strategies in place to neutralize them.

Organizational change initiatives often founder because the wrong people are chosen to lead them. In Jackie Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers had a person of rare athletic, intellectual, and temperamental gifts. One might even call this combination of gifts heroic.



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