

## Rapid Response Transcript – Sarah Hirshland

### “Overcoming institutional hurdles”

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Beijing will be a very, very different games from what we saw in Tokyo. So as we think about creating safe environments, the best way is to have everyone vaccinated and to minimize the risk.

In a CEO role, you have to go in understanding that you are never going to keep everybody happy. What do we want the message and the legacy of these games to be, and how is it going to drive the future of sport culture in the United States?

This is our moment to set a new standard for environmental sustainability, to set a new standard for social impact, transparency, and to set a new standard for the governance of sport.

We're small, and we have to be scrappy. But we have a very powerful brand and an incredibly important mission and purpose. And so, we have to make sure that we're using that purpose and that mission.

**BOB SAFIAN:** That's Sarah Hirshland, CEO of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee.

Sarah recently made a controversial decision to mandate that U.S. athletes be vaccinated against COVID-19 to participate in the upcoming Beijing winter games. That's only the latest of her in-the-moment adjustments.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Sarah because she's been drawn into so many of the key business and cultural issues facing leaders today: pandemic disruption, social action protests, sexual misconduct scandals, mental health stress, and more.

The Olympic Committee is like a startup, with each new Games unique. But it is also a legacy organization with almost superstitious rituals.

Sarah has been motivating her team around an evolving mission, to reflect not just where America is as a country today but where it's going.

Winning medals alone, Sarah says, can't be the driving metric of success – though medals of course remain important.

Sports are like business, she notes, in that they impact culture in resonant ways. By supporting athletes in the right way, she believes, she's also supporting the future of the country and setting a model for the world.

### **[THEME MUSIC]**

**BOB SAFIAN:** I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Sarah Hirshland, CEO of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee. Sarah is talking with us from their headquarters in Colorado Springs as I ask my questions from my home in Brooklyn. Sarah, thanks for joining us.

**HIRSHLAND:** Thanks for having me, Bob. It's great to be here.

**SAFIAN:** So it's been a busy three plus years since you came aboard at the USOC, which is what it was called before – before you changed the name to include Paralympics. You inherited a sexual misconduct scandal, then COVID-19 delayed the Tokyo Games among other complications. You had to deal with political protests from athletes, with Simone Biles' mid-competition withdrawal. And now we're about 100 days from the Beijing Winter Games, which is a much faster turnaround between games than usual. And you've put in place a vaccine mandate that could theoretically alter the team the U.S. puts forth.

So that's a lot of rapid response. I hope we'll get to dig into all of it. But first I wonder if you'll reflect on the full journey so far. Is there any single overriding lesson you've taken away from this experience, from this roller coaster?

**HIRSHLAND:** It's a terrific question. It is an incredibly challenging role to be clear, but what an amazing honor: To stand with the team, and to be able to do that on the biggest global stage in sport, and feel like you contribute in some part to that success is pretty humbling. Certainly more humbling than anything I've done in my life.

**SAFIAN:** Your organization obviously represents all of America, and America's quite polarized right now about a lot of things, including vaccines. You made the decision to require COVID vaccinations for U.S. athletes. I'm curious what prompted that.

**HIRSHLAND:** The motivation for us is to be able to balance health and safety, which is number one priority with the ability to drive competitive excellence and opportunity for these athletes. And so as we think about creating safe environments in our training

centers, in our offices, around the competitions as well, the best way to balance those two things is to have everyone vaccinated and to minimize the risk. And that's exactly why we did what we did.

**SAFIAN:** Some athletes have expressed some frustration with the decision. Can you share any examples of how you handle the pushback?

**HIRSHLAND:** Well, we're in the very early stages. We do expect we'll have some exemptions and have put in place processes for those ideally small number of folks to ensure that there's a pretty deliberate testing protocols in place and that we're continuing to maintain that very sort of low-risk environment.

We also know now that the Beijing organizing committee has also put in place very stringent vaccine requirements, that those who are not vaccinated will have a very onerous 21 day quarantine process, which frankly is pretty untenable in an athlete's life. To spend 21 days in an isolation environment before a competition is really ... Untenable is the best word I can use. So we think we're in a really good place, but we still have a couple of months before we really understand the magnitude of the exemption requests and/or those who make a decision to say, this is just not something I'm going to do.

**SAFIAN:** How much do you struggle? I mean, when you make a decision like this, obviously you know that there are going to be people who have other perspectives. How much do you struggle with the idea of keeping everybody happy because you're representing the whole country versus feeling like there's an opportunity or an obligation to lead?

**HIRSHLAND:** I mean, it's a constant struggle, right? And in a CEO role, you have to go in understanding that you are never going to keep everybody happy, and you're going to have to make decisions that some are not going to like – and may have actual justified reasons not to like those decisions. And so you look at it on balance, you look at it on scale, you stay very focused. And then you manage the outliers and you manage those who have a really difficult time with those decisions as best you can.

**SAFIAN:** I'm thinking back. I remember you issued some reprimands back in 2019 against two athletes who took social justice stands at the Pan Am Games. Was that a difficult decision? I mean, that was implementing a rule, but you knew not everyone was going to be happy.

**HIRSHLAND:** Yeah, perhaps the most difficult decision I've had to make in this chair, recognizing that those two athletes were speaking about things that were very, very deeply personal and deeply important to them. And at that time, whether I believed personally or not that what they did felt right, I had a duty to uphold the rules that we set out. We subsequently, as you know, went on to say to both of those athletes and to others, we owe it to all of us to look at the rules and to gather input and to make a determination, so that we have rules in place that feel right to us. And we did that, and

I'm incredibly proud of not only the athlete population, but the community that we operate in for how that process came about.

**SAFIAN:** So many complicated issues you're navigating starting out with the sexual misconduct scandal. I know that that litigation continues. And so you're constrained in what you can say in some ways. But I'm just thinking about recent news about the National Women's Soccer League and allegations there which have forced their commissioner to resign and reinforced, unfortunately, that these challenges persist. You spent a lot of your career in sports. Do you think sexual misconduct troubles are more acute in sports for some reason, or just a reflection of broader societal issues?

**HIRSHLAND:** Let me start by saying, it is really, really powerful that so many survivors in the sports community have had the bravery to speak up. It speaks to the power of sport in empowering individuals. In this case, largely empowering women and young women to use their voice. And that's something we should all really not take for granted because it's changed the game, if you will, for all of us, and the way we operate. What's important to understand, number one, as you said, this is a societal issue, right? This is not unique to sport, but it's also important for those of us in sport to understand that there is a dynamic in sport that puts coaches in a very powerful position of authority, puts medical providers in a position of authority and a very trusted environment.

And so anytime you have an environment where there is a power dynamic, you are naturally creating a culture that allows and/or can enable dangerous individuals or mal intent to thrive. And so we've got to be conscious of those dynamics, and we've got to be thoughtful about how you put structures in place to ensure that individuals can't thrive in that kind of environment. We don't want to say nobody should trust anybody in this world, right? That's not the right answer. But you do want to say, let's make sure that we have checks and balances in place, and that we have empowerment in place where when individuals speak up, number one, we believe them.

And that there's a zero tolerance. There is no acceptance of any kind of behavior of that sort.

**SAFIAN:** As you're managing these social, societal issues, as well as running your organization and competing, when you look at a game, when you look at the Tokyo Games, how do you quantify what success is? Medals, finances, other factors?

**HIRSHLAND:** Yeah, for sure. It's a combination of metrics. But number one, our mission is to empower these athletes to shine. To have sustained both competitive excellence, but also wellbeing. And to make sure that this experience for them is all it should be. There are not a lot of individuals in the world who have this opportunity, and you want that opportunity to be an amazing experience that really not only inspires others, but also sets the stage for the future of their individual lives and journeys.

That may or may not mean a medal, but their goal going in there is to be the best they can be. And have we done everything we can as an organization and as a community? Did we do everything we could do for them to reach their fullest potential? And was the experience for them everything it should have been? And if that happens, generally speaking, the support from the community, the finances, all of those other things, are great ancillary benefits that come out of that.

**SAFIAN:** And when you see an athlete that may not be performing at their best, that may be facing certain stresses, I'm referring here to Simone Biles and potentially other athletes as well, how does that fit into how you operate?

**HIRSHLAND:** We put, over the last three years, more emphasis on mental health – perhaps than any other single factor – around really changing the culture and massively reducing the stigma. And we started to see that play itself out on a very visible and public stage in Tokyo. That's both, I would say a rude awakening for all of us to see this be so visible and to say, "Wow, this is real."

I'm incredibly proud of the work that we did and had in place to support those athletes. But there is also a long runway ahead of us in continuing to ensure that people understand and recognize that their mental health and their physical health should be thought of in tandem.

**SAFIAN:** In sport, I guess, there's been a, I don't know, a premium in some ways on being, like, stoic. I think this happens in the workplace too, for businesses also, you're supposed to do your work and leave your emotions at home. I guess what you're saying and what we're learning is that it may not be healthy for everyone and may not bring out the best results in the long run.

**HIRSHLAND:** Well, I think that's exactly right. And many of the things we see and work on in sport apply to the business world, apply to life for others.

Having a little bit of space and a little bit of grace to allow each other to be the imperfect human beings that we are. I mean, the rollercoaster goes both ways. We ride down, but we also ride up. We want to be there for each other when we're in really great places and be able to share that with other people as well.

**SAFIAN:** Our audience is largely business people and founders. And it occurred to me that in some ways, each Olympic games is like its own startup, that you're starting from scratch each time. Do you think about it that way at all? Like how is your role like that of a startup CEO?

**HIRSHLAND:** Yeah. Well, 75% of our team tend to be first-timers and one-timers. And the ones that we tend to know the most are the ones who come to the games more than once, but the vast majority of athletes only ever compete in a single Olympic or

Paralympic games. And so it is in that way, a whole new cast of characters. It's a brand new city every time. It's a brand new operating organization that's putting on the games every time. So there are a lot of aspects to it that are a start fresh and start over.

That said, for us, we do have a lot of what I'll call institutional process and operating procedures both in our organization and at each sports national governing body that allows us to not have to start with a clean slate, and to go in with patterns and things that work. And let me tell you, there are everything from very logical protocols and processes in place, down to crazy superstitions that you just got to do because it's worked for us in the past that we're going to keep doing it.

**SAFIAN:** So how is planning for Beijing different than it was for Tokyo? I know we talked about the vaccine questions, but are there different political constraints, business challenges, safety concerns? Are there any episodes of adjustment that you've found yourself making?

**HIRSHLAND:** Sure. Absolutely. Some of it functionally is the winter games and the summer games are fundamentally different in scale, different in the footprint of what we're navigating. And so you have to start with the sort of operational foundation and framework. We'll have three distinct, I'll call them clusters, where competitions are occurring, that are 60 to 120 kilometers apart.

So we will physically be operating in quite a different structure. We're operating in a very different country. And that does absolutely have impact. Where you are, the time zones, the nature of the country that you're in, all of those things, the climate, are things that have to be taken into consideration. When you're talking about sport and competition, we're often talking about the difference in fractions of a second. And so we think of it as absolutely every little detail matters. And Beijing will be a very, very different games from what we saw in Tokyo for a number of reasons.

In this case, COVID will be the common denominator ironically. And so we have actually a lot of experience now with what we did in Japan.

That'll be a common denominator that I think we're ready for. Safety and security is a very different picture for a U.S. delegation going into China than it probably was in Japan. So we have to take those things into consideration. That'll be a heavier focus for us, for sure.

**SAFIAN:** Are you bringing the same groups of people that come to China as to Japan? Are there other restrictions in that way?

**HIRSHLAND:** We will have what we described in Tokyo, essential personnel. That will be consistent. So the Beijing delegation will be essential personnel only. And that

essentially is those who are interacting and directly supporting athlete performance. You take out any support of sponsors, donors, the community more broadly.

This is a smaller group of sports, in terms of national governing bodies, a smaller number of athletes. So the scale is a little bit smaller and therefore a little more manageable in that regard. But as I said, the geography is a little more complicated. It's a trade-off.

**SAFIAN:** COVID forced changes in the ways a lot of organizations operated, yours among them. I was thinking, as you were talking about fundraising, which I'm sure had to have changed. I mean, you couldn't offer to bring sponsors to the game and have them hobnob with the athletes, which I imagine is usually quite effective. What did you do instead? How are the finances impacted by all of that?

**HIRSHLAND:** As you can imagine, going into this COVID environment, it was initially some sheer panic thinking, oh no, the donor community is an incredibly important resource for us as an organization. And not being able to take them with us to Tokyo, and now not being able to take them with us to Beijing is really difficult. What we did was we pivoted and said, well, let's have the best viewing parties we can think of, and create as much of a stateside experience as we can.

So over the course of the Tokyo games, we had 17 different U.S.-based, I'll call them viewing parties, for the donor community. Some bigger than others. We were at the LA Coliseum, and actually lit the cauldron at the LA Coliseum as part of one of those parties. And others were very intimate gatherings in the homes of some of our donors for a really fun, but smaller scale celebration.

And we have been so fortunate to continue to see incredible, incredible results. That is in part a credit to the foundation team that we have, who are just tremendous fundraisers, but it's really the generosity and the support of the American people who understand that we are entirely privately financed. We're the only Olympic and Paralympic committee in the world that is completely financed privately and not from the government.

## **[AD BREAK]**

**SAFIAN:** Before the break we heard U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee CEO Sarah Hirshland talk about the challenges of vaccine mandates, sexual harassment scandal, and the pivots required to do fundraising in a pandemic environment. Now she turns to opportunities, including why the 2028 games in Los Angeles can have special impact around the world. She offers lessons about building what she calls a modern workplace, and talks about the inspiration she draws from athletes. The essential tool for all of it, Sarah says, is communication – and even overcommunication.

So I'm told you talk with the individual athletes quite frequently. What do you talk about? Is it things on your mind? Is it things on their mind?

**HIRSHLAND:** It's both. My job is to listen, but to be effective in listening and learning things that are valuable to me in my role, I also have to ask really good questions. And so I try to go into those conversations and ask thoughtful questions that will allow them to share things with me that I can act on, right? That I can actually use in planning the organization and our strategic work. So at times I talk with athletes about the competitive support that they're getting and the resources that they're getting. At times, I talk with them about life transition.

One of the single most difficult things for elite athletes is that realization as you come into the recognition that you are special, that you are better than most, being in that place. But then there is inevitably, there's an off ramp of being an elite athlete. And so what does that look like, and how does that transition happen, and what is the next phase in life, and how do we as an organization provide support and resources around that moment? For some it's very sudden. For others, it's years in the making. And that's a place where we've got a lot of work to do to really think about how to help support that. So I ask a lot of questions of athletes about their personal experiences in those ways.

**SAFIAN:** I saw a photo of you on one of the last days of the Paralympics hugging Oksana Masters at the cycling venue. Can you explain what was going on in that moment, how that happened?

**HIRSHLAND:** I can, and I'll tell you, my first interaction with Oksana was when we asked her to be there with us the day I took the proposal to change the name of the organization to our board of directors, which was pretty early in my tenure. And the board of directors was going to vote on whether or not to agree to change the name of the organization. And of course we were hoping that they would vote yes. And we asked Oksana to be there for the announcement of that. That was my first interaction with her. And at that moment, she was very, very powerfully moved by that recognition. And had said to me, "This is the first time in my life I've felt seen." And that was a pretty powerful moment.

So fast forward, me getting to watch her compete and win in a sport that was fairly new to her. And having worked really, really hard to train and compete. And she just absolutely performed incredibly on that day.

And so she said to me, I saw her before she went out on the track, and she looked at me and said, "Oh my God, you're here. Now I really have to do well." And I said to her, "Oksana, no, you have to go out there and have a really good time. Go have fun." Of course, she then proceeds to annihilate the field, win the gold medal, and was just, I think, as surprised in her own ability as anything. And so that was a moment of her

saying, thank you for seeing me. Thank you for hearing me. Thank you for giving me the resources to do what I just did.

**SAFIAN:** The decision to change the name or to try to change the name, which was relatively early in your tenure, why was that an early priority?

**HIRSHLAND:** Number one, it was so inherent to the values and culture that I wanted and needed to create in this movement around being an organization that was truly inclusive and really fostered a sense of belonging for everybody. It was an enormous barrier to doing that. And you have to walk the walk. One of the very first, very clear issues that I saw in the organization was we were operating an Olympic committee and a Paralympic committee. And those two things were not integrated and were not equal in the way this organization thought about them. And so for me to go out and say, "We're going to be inclusive. We're going to represent everybody in this country. And we're going to mean that," I couldn't do it without starting to take some very clear steps toward walking that walk.

**SAFIAN:** As you're talking, I'm reflecting on you mentioning earlier the legacy nature of the organization. And it sounds like this is something you believed in and you wanted to do, but it was also a tool at the same time to sort of spur and prepare the organization for the future.

**HIRSHLAND:** Absolutely. It was a first step and a signal to say, this is the direction we're going. This is the path that we're going to go build as an organization. And that path is going to be one of setting a standard of what inclusiveness looks like. Not diversity, inclusiveness. Those two things are certainly complimentary, but they are not the same thing. And to be clear, this is a lifelong journey. I will be here for some period of time to advance and move that journey forward. But there's no destination here. This is not a road that ever ends.

**SAFIAN:** In 2028, the Summer Olympics are slated to be in Los Angeles. Does that particular Olympics receive an extra measure of attention? What's different about being the host?

**HIRSHLAND:** Absolutely. 100%, yes. An extra measure of attention, huge opportunity, and also an incredible amount of added work and collaboration because there is now an organizing body who will actually operate those games who become our sister organization, if you will, and we'll work in tandem. Our job is to field Team USA. Their job is to actually put on the games, but those two things, when you're in the same country, become pretty intertwined and very important.

When you are the host country for a Games, you are automatically allowed to compete in all of the events. So we will qualify more athletes across more sports for the LA games than we have probably since Atlanta. So it really is an opportunity for individual sports to

showcase to the world their sport, to showcase the success of that sport, and thereby really spur growth in the sport overall.

**SAFIAN:** Will there be different success metrics for those games? We're talking about the metrics maybe in Beijing and in Tokyo. Is it different?

**HIRSHLAND:** I don't know that I would say the metrics for our organization or Team USA will be different, except that we'll have a broader, as I said, we'll have a bigger team and a broader base. But certainly, the success metrics for what those games do from an impact perspective in the United States is absolutely unique. It really brings all the eyes of sport and the country to bear, and so, you have to decide, what do we want the message and the legacy of these games to be, and how is it going to drive the future of sport culture in the United States?

It will be about how do we continue to grow and elevate Paralympics, and more importantly, change the game for the perception of people with disabilities as a part of that. So, that will be a legacy piece of it. But I liken it to ... as every corporate board and corporate leadership team is sitting out there today thinking about what ESG means to their organization. This is our ESG moment, right? This is our moment to set a new standard for environmental sustainability, to set a new standard for social impact, transparency, and to set a new standard for the governance of sport. How do we think about making sure that we are displaying and setting a standard around transparency, around ethics, in ways that if we're doing all the work now and we're building the foundation for the next several years, we are in a position around the LA Games to then have a microphone to say, this is the way to do it.

**SAFIAN:** No small goals.

**HIRSHLAND:** Why would you have small goals?

**SAFIAN:** As you look ahead to Beijing and beyond, what's at stake at this moment? What do you feel like is at stake right now?

**HIRSHLAND:** Well, fundamentally first and foremost, getting Team USA winter athletes to Beijing safely, keeping them healthy, allowing them to shine. And over the next few months, it will require the resources of this organization to make that happen, so that's what we're focused on. But we're also playing the long game as all organizations do and looking at the long-term pipeline, continuing to evolve culture. Inclusive, safe, and fair culture in sport is critical. And then, we're an organization of bringing everybody along. And so, how do we garner the support of the American public, sponsors, donors, supporters, and get everybody excited about this movement so that we're all swimming in the forward lane on behalf of the U.S.?

**SAFIAN:** And I guess you can't assume that sponsors or the public is going to stay interested in every piece of what the U.S. Olympics are doing unless you're nurturing it as you go.

**HIRSHLAND:** You can't take anything for granted, right? I mean, in business, you never want to take a customer for granted even if they've been a customer for 20 years, we think of it exactly the same. Every constituency that we serve, you have to foster and recognize that they have a choice to make. And every minute and every dollar that they choose to spend with us is one we have to treasure and we have to value.

**SAFIAN:** CEOs often talk about the importance as they're dealing with all these constituents of their own talent as well. And yet, of course, for you, your talent is both athletes outside, like they can take so much of your time and effort. How do you balance what you're going to put towards essentially your internal athletes, your own organization, versus the athletes and all the other partners?

**HIRSHLAND:** It's a great question. In an environment in which talent in the workplace is probably one of the more difficult things all of us as leaders are dealing with right now, the sort of return-to-work post-COVID, is it home, is it hybrid, is it hub, is it remote? How are we going to create an environment that works to attract and retain talent and a lifestyle that people want and like? Add that to the vaccine mandate and the COVID environment that we're all trying to build, add that to the employment nature of the country.

And I'm spending more time on workplace than I have in my three years right now. And trying to ensure that we can attract talent, retain talent, but also create a work culture that's one that everybody is proud of, that is a modern evolution as it can be, but also a highly functioning, highly productive organization. We're small, and we have to be scrappy. And we're a nonprofit, and so, we don't have some of the incentive advantages of for-profit companies in attracting and retaining talent, but we have a very powerful brand and an incredibly important mission and purpose. And so, we have to make sure that we're using that purpose and that mission in our talent strategies as much as anything.

**SAFIAN:** And I guess you have talent that sort of comes and goes with each games, right? Like, okay, I went through a games, it's almost like it's a new tour of duty that you have to sign people up for.

**HIRSHLAND:** You do, you do. And it's exhausting. There's a four-year cycle to the organization that you have to manage that cadence. There's a huge lead up, and a lot of work, and then a huge payoff, but that naturally comes with a little bit of a cliff on the backside that you have to figure out how to navigate.

**SAFIAN:** You mentioned earlier that there's a 75% turnaround in athletes in each games year, which means you and your team have to constantly be open to change in that way. How do you lead a team with consistency knowing that there's going to be that turnaround, that reboot each time around?

**HIRSHLAND:** Well, I will say, I think for us, maybe even more than every sort of typical organization, communication is so critical. And when we stumble, it is almost always because we didn't communicate enough. And so, when you have so many new folks all the time, you have to remember that even though something might be old hat to you, it's new to them, and so, you have to go back and start over, and start with some of the foundational stuff, and communicate over and over and over and over again. And there really is no such thing in this world as overcommunication. And it's always the challenge for all of us, and unfortunately, that's our Achilles heel. And so, we just have to keep going back and saying, let's do it better, and I'm as guilty as everybody, but it's really important.

**SAFIAN:** That's terrific. And thank you for communicating and sharing with us. I really appreciate you taking the time.

**HIRSHLAND:** Well, it's been my pleasure. Thank you for having me, and go Team USA.

**SAFIAN:** Go Team USA.