

# Understanding organisational change in sports organisations

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## Introduction

Organisational change is one of the few constant factors in the management of sport services. It requires 'things to be different' in that managers have to seek out and identify management practices, organisational procedures and services that need to be altered in order to respond effectively to changing factors in their operating environments. The magnitude and diversity of changes that have not only affected sport organisations in the commercial sector, but also those in the public sector (Robinson, 1999) and the not-for profit sector (Kilkulis, 2000) means that academic and professional interest in understanding how change can be managed has increased markedly in the past two decades.

The research discussed below evaluated the usefulness of one approach to understanding organisational change - the contextual approach to strategic change developed and utilized by Pettigrew (1985). Pettigrew argued that the analysis of organisational change must take account of the organisational environments, the type of change under consideration and the development of change programmes. From this multi-faceted stance, Pettigrew developed the analytical model that was utilised in the research described in this paper. This is a three-dimensional model which requires the researcher to focus on the context, content and process of change and the interactions between them.

The three concepts are used by Pettigrew to organise the analysis of change as they provide a structure for considering why a particular change has occurred within a particular organisation. The context of change refers to the environment within which the organisation operate, the content of change refers to the particular change that is occurring, while the process of change refers to the actions of parties within the organisation as they move the organisation from its present to its changed state. Thus, the approach developed by Pettigrew (1985) provides the opportunity to consider key environmental factors, but also allows these to be placed in the context of the historical, political and individual influences on the organisation. This allows managers to not only develop a holistic understanding of why particular change occurs, but also highlights the relationships that have an influence when change is being planned.

Academic perception of the contextual approach is positive. Johnson (1993) noted that it allowed the complexities that managers faced to be objectively explored, Walsham (1993) discussed its value in analysing complex change, while Lawton and McKevitt (1995) utilised this approach in their research as a result of its strength in providing a holistic analysis of change. Spurgeon and Barwell (1993, p.45) noted how the contextual approach captures the "richness and complexity of real organisational change."

Spurgeon and Barwell (1993) went on, however, to outline what they perceived to be limitations of the approach. First, they considered the analysis of the context of change to be too broad with its emphasis on social and demographic factors, in the external environment and organisational structure and culture in the internal environment. As a result, they felt that Pettigrew's approach does not consider individuals to be contextual factors i.e. drivers for change. Individuals, within the model, only become paramount once the need for change has been established. Second, and more significantly, Spurgeon and Barwell (1993) along with Collins (1998) considered the predictive value of the contextual approach to be limited, arguing that it is not possible to predict the direction of future organisational change primarily because the approach does not suggest alternatives to the existing change.

In response to these criticisms Dawson (2003) noted how this perspective has been used successfully in research and consultancy. Indeed, Pettigrew is one of few researchers to have carried out large-scale research in both the private and public sectors, using the contextual approach to understand changes that occurred within ICI and the UK National Health Service. More importantly, however, the research reported in this paper was concerned with understanding how and why the process of change occurred, not

in developing prescriptive recommendations. Moreover, the comments of Johnson (1993), Lawton and McKeivitt (1995) and Walsham (1993) suggested that Pettigrew's approach provided an appropriate conceptual framework for investigating how this new approach to public sport and leisure management had emerged.

### **Method and Results**

This article is based on research carried out with UK public sport and leisure managers. The research aimed to establish why quality initiatives, such as ISO9002, TQM and customer care programmes had been introduced into the management of multipurpose sport and leisure facilities. The introduction of these management practices into sport and leisure provision occurred during a period of multiple environmental change for UK public providers. The processes by which these different forces of change led to the specific introduction of quality initiatives in many local authorities - and did not do so in others - was unclear. The research was not concerned with how quality initiatives were implemented, rather with why and given the explanatory nature of the research, a framework that allowed the analysis of the significance and potential complexity of the multiple factors that provided the context and stimulus for organisational change was required. This is why the contextual approach to change (Pettigrew, 1985) was considered to be an appropriate theoretical framework for this research.

The research was carried out with seven UK public sport and leisure services departments and utilized an embedded, multiple case design. The case studies were selected via a focused sampling method and the findings were based primarily on 40 semi-structured interviews carried out with senior sport and leisure professionals within the chosen local authorities. The research also made use of documentary analysis in order to verify and support the information obtained in the interviews.

For a greater discussion of the findings of the research see Robinson (1999), however, managers included in the research felt that the biggest change required of them during this period was the need to become competitive in the sport and leisure market. This had come about because of increasing consumerism and competition, but most importantly because of government legislation. The legislation required managers to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their facilities and to improve standards of customer service and quality. Managers, having identified the need to become competitive determined that quality management and quality programmes were the vehicles for improving organisational competitiveness and improving services, resulting in the introduction of quality management as a consequence of the professional nature of the public sport and leisure industry.

### **Discussion**

By following the framework of the contextual approach to change the research concluded that quality management has come to be present within public leisure facilities as a consequence of the need to be competitive that was identified by sport and leisure professionals. This conclusion came from a consideration of the actions and interactions of significant variables within the operating context of public sport and leisure facilities, the content of quality management and the process of changing. The ability of the contextual approach to allow these interactions to first, be identified and second, be investigated, was fundamental to this research as it was apparent that the decision to implement quality initiatives was not 'rational' - rather it had been shaped not only by factors within the operating context, but also by the change process itself.

The use of this framework was particularly appropriate for this research because of its ability to allow an exploration of how factors within the operating context affected and were affected by the use of quality management techniques and the process of implementing quality initiatives. It was also valuable in its ability to analyse how individuals within an organisation went about the process of choosing quality management to respond to the environmental context. Much more importantly, however, the contextual approach to change is unique in its suggestion that quality management itself impacted on both the individuals within the organisation and their response to the operating context, and that the use of quality initiatives can affect the operating context, rather than simply being a response to it.

The explanatory nature of this research required a framework flexible enough to deal with the possibility of a multitude of influencing factors and this flexibility was a key strength of the contextual approach to change (Pettigrew, 1985). The flexibility of the approach, however, has the potential to present difficulties for research. Unlike more prescriptive approaches to understanding change, such as Organisational Development (Burns and Stalker, 1991), Pettigrew (1985) offers researchers little detailed guidance as to the issues that should be considered in the content, context and process of change. The decision of what exactly to investigate is therefore at the discretion of the researcher, which has the potential to introduce bias into the research. Thus it is important that the use of the contextual approach in primary research follows a broad and extensive review of the theoretical literature in order to identify relevant and appropriate research concepts. Without this, it is likely that the research will fail to generate the richness of detail that makes the contextual approach of value in understanding the operation of sport organisations.

Liked to this Spurgeon and Barwell (1993) have criticised this approach for its broad analysis of the context of change, arguing that Pettigrew's (1987) approach does not consider individuals as drivers for change. This research did not support this, as it was clear that sport and leisure professionals in the organisations under study had first, identified the need for change and second, ensured that quality initiatives were introduced into their services. Their second criticism, regarding the poor predictive value of the approach was not investigated by this research, as it was not the purpose of the research to try and establish future changes. If it had been, questions about the future of the organisation could have been integrated into the research.

Of greater significance is the claim that this approach to understanding change is of little value to those practitioners who are responsible for implementing change (Collins, 1998; Spurgeon and Barwell, 1993). The research reinforced those claims as it showed that use of the contextual framework did not particularly facilitate the development of recommendations or practical advice for practitioners. Although the research highlighted a number of issues that practitioners need to consider when introducing change and provided detailed explanations of organisational transformation, the prescriptive value of this approach is indeed limited. This is primarily because the contextual approach does not easily lend itself to the large, multi-organisation studies that are required to develop valid recommendations for practitioners. It is more value to those who wish to learn why change occurs within organisations, rather than how to implement changes.

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