The sport manager as mediator of meanings

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Introduction

This papers presents work which is part of a programme of research investigating the role of national culture in the interpretation and practice of sport management. More specifically, it examines the sources of guidance from which sport managers draw in making sense of what happens around them. As far as can be ascertained, no study so far has analysed the role of prevailing cultural values on the behaviour of sport managers in particular contexts.

The study was informed by the work of Smith and Peterson and their associates (2002, 2000, 1996, 1990) on sources of meaning, organisations and culture. They contextualized managers' work as participation in a social process of making sense of a series of events. Here an event is defined as an element in a social situation that is constructed and given meaning by a social actor. A central claim of this approach is that managers do not simply tackle situations as they arise rather, they interpret events and shape others' interpretations of events in continually changing situations. It is also concerned with establishing whether managers from different cultures handle various events in similar ways. Therefore, knowledge about the sources of guidance used in different cultural environments would enable sport managers to better understand their own and the position of other managers.

Method

The study is based on a sample of 22 sport managers (Chefs de Mission, assistants and sport leaders) from Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco and San Marino, who took part in the Games of the Small States of Europe (GSSE) held in Malta in June 2003. A questionnaire was administered with those managers comprising eight working events, which occur in sport organisations in all countries. These events were (i) choosing a new subordinate to work with your, (ii) rewarding your subordinates when they do good work, (iii) dealing with your subordinates when their work is unsatisfactory, (iv) deciding how to use resources more effectively, (v) improving co-ordination with other departments, (vi) improving team work within your department, (vii) changing work procedure used by your subordinates, and (viii) improving the quality of work in your department. Respondents were asked to rate on 5-point scales "to what extent the actions taken are affected by each of the following…"

Eight sources of guidance were identified including (i) formal rules and procedure, (ii) unwritten rules as to "how things are usually done around here", (iii) my subordinates, (iv) specialist outside my department, (v) other people at my level, (vi) my superior, (vii) opinions based on my own experience and training, and (viii) beliefs that are widely accepted in my country as to what is right. The data was processed using SPSS.

Results

Table 1 summarises the results from the questionnaire, which present the culture means by country and the indices representing reliance on various sources of guidance for all working events together. The table provides an overall picture of the culture for each typical source of guidance. The response rate and the sample size, however, particularly for Monaco, Malta and Luxembourg were not sufficient to allow for generalisation.

Table 1. Grand means (standard deviations) for each source of guidance by country

Source of Guidance	Cyprus	Monaco	San Marino	Malta	Luxembourg	Iceland	Sig.
Formal rules	3.67 (.64)	4.75	3.64 (.46)	3.50 (.70)	3.87 (.17)	3.10 (1.11)	.203
Unwritten rules	3.42	4.25	3.07	3.25	2.43	2.72	.129

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	(.84)		*(.46)*	*(.70)*	*(.44)*	*(.89)*	
Subordinates	2.45	4.00	2.53	2.06	3.18	2.85	*.044** *
	(.60)		*(.53)*	*(.97)*	*(.44)*	*(.70)*	
Outside specialists	1.86	4.13	2.66	1.95	3.75	2.40	*.085*
	(.83)		*(1.14)*	*(1.00)*	*(.35)*	*(1.01)*	
Other people	2.09	4.00	3.35	2.28	2.62	2.70	*.036** *
	(.73)		*(.45)*	*(1.29)*	*(.70)*	*(.91)*	
Superior	4.04	4.88	3.43	2.95	3.75	3.45	*.145*
	(.44)		*(.91)*	*(1.00)*	*(.17)*	*(.77)*	
Own opinion/expertise	3.89	3.88	3.60	2.97	4.12	3.52	*.642*
	(.81)		*(.64)*	*(.50)*	*(.88)*	*(.85)*	
Widely accepted beliefs	3.99	3.88	2.58	3.81	2.56	2.77	*.046** *
	(.13)		*(.69)*	*(1.67)*	*(.79)*	*(1.02)*	
N	5	1	7	2	2	5	

* 1-influence to a very great extent, 5- not at all; ** Mean differences statistical significance at p<.05.

Discussion

The findings of this study provided evidence that the values hold by sport managers could predict their reliance on sources of guidance. Great similarities were found in reliance on formal rules and procedures across the six countries, which were not considered by managers as the most effective way of handling of work events. This could be attributed to either the absence of well-established rules or to the dynamics of organisational life, which cannot be reduced to a set of ready available procedures.

Interesting differences were recorded in the use of outside specialists in resolving working situations. The Cypriots and Maltese managers, who live in collectivist cultures where volunteers run sport, relied heavily on outside experts. In contrast, managers from more individualistic cultures like Monaco and Luxembourg were less likely to employ outside services partly because of the financial implications for the organisation.

Reliance on widespread beliefs in one's nation as to what is right appeared to be relatively salient in San Marino and Luxembourg, but were largely discounted, particularly in Cyprus and Malta. Smith *et al* (2002) found similar differences in a 47-nation study. Despite its limitations the present study has a practical relevance for the planning and organisation of international events and multicultural undertakings as knowledge about cultural sources of guidance would help sport managers understand and predict the behaviour of their colleagues.

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