

AN ANALYSIS OF OPERATING MANAGEMENT PROCESSES IN ELITE SPORT SYSTEMS— PILOT STUDY RESULTS

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Context

The continuous sporting successes of states like the former GDR led to the conviction that a systematic 'breeding of winners', i.e. creating successful elite athletes, is possible. Based on detailed analyses of the elite sport support infrastructure provided there and in other Eastern Bloc states, it is today generally agreed which tasks have to be fulfilled (e.g. identifying talents) and which services have to be provided (e.g. lifestyle support for the athletes) by an elite sport system in order to realise such a systematic creation of winners (Green and Oakley, 2001). Especially the recent development of the Australian elite sport system, in which much managerial know-how from the former GDR has been involved, suggested also that organisational development through organisational learning is possible in the context of elite sport system management.

A wide variety of comparative projects in the field of (elite) sport system management has occurred. The first category of approaches would include authors such as Houlihan (1997) who describe and compare the general organisational design at macro level of different sport systems (e.g., centralised vs. federal) and funding systems (e.g., government-funded vs. market-driven). Other studies, which apply a similar macro perspective, focus more on the social, political, and economic environment in which different sport systems are embedded, and try to explain and predict sporting success based on such factors (Bernard & Busse, 2004; de Bosscher et al. 2003). Both approaches might be able to indicate and explain critical restrictions on creating successful athletes. The information they provide, however, is of limited value for managers in the field as they are hardly able to change such conditions, at least not in the short-run. From the perspective of a manager of an elite sport system, a more fruitful approach is to describe the actual service spectrum provided by successful sport nations (Green and Oakley, 2001). Based on studies following this approach, managers of elite sport systems are equipped today with a fairly precise agenda of tasks they have to fulfil to increase the likelihood of creating winning athletes. But, even though sport managers know now what they have to provide, they are still left with the basic question: How are they supposed to solve the operating problems which occur in the daily provision of the services they have to deliver?

Method

The management tool of benchmarking tries to achieve organisational improvement through analysing managerial practices, which are in place in surpassingly successful organisations. Especially, when applied with a focus on operating processes described above, the approach can have significant potential. To test the potential of benchmarking in the field of elite sport system management, the following approach was developed: (1) to select two to four elite sport systems, considered as providing best management practices - the so-called benchmark subjects; (2) to identify the solutions developed in these organisations for selected operating management problems; (3) to benchmark these solutions against the literature, as well as against each other, to identify similarities; (4) to assess the transferability of these practices; in order (5) to evaluate the potential of the benchmarking approach for elite sport system management. To fulfil the aim to really understand how the operating challenges are solved by successful sporting nations, it was necessary to narrow the focus to investigate specific elements, namely the provision of (i) lifestyle support services, (ii) sport science support and (iii) the organisational design of the squad system.

The investigation was based on semi-structured interviews with key position holders from each system. Up to 9 interviews lasting 1-2 hours, were conducted in each organisation with interviewees selected to gain detailed insights into the different levels of the services provided, as well as to increase data quality through triangulating different sources. For investigating sport science support, for example, interviews were held with the coordinator as a representative of strategic management, with the scientists, who carry out the diagnostics and analyses, and with coaches as well as athletes

(who can be considered as recipients of the services delivered). Documents were analysed to verify and support the information obtained in the interviews using the software NUDIST 6[©].

In the first step of the data analysis, the different benchmark subjects were treated separately and presented as (independent) case study reports. The information was then compared with the literature. In a second step, information from the different institutions was then benchmarked against each other. To validate the scripts intended to guide the interviews, a pilot study with a British sport federation included in the World Class Programme of UK Sport was carried out, involving six interviews totalling 1 over 7 hours of material. The results of this pilot study is the focus of this paper.

Results and Discussion

The examination of the lifestyle support programme revealed, for instance, that the quality of this service varied significantly between the Federation's various training centres. In one of these centres it became apparent that an athlete who has trained professionally for over eight years, and who represented GB at the 2004 Olympics could not remember being approached once in his career by a lifestyle support manager. In fact, it was necessary to explain to him the concept of a lifestyle support unit. But even at those centres where the communication between coaches, athletes, and support manager had developed into a form theorists would suggest, the interviews revealed that the perception, implementation, and communication of lifestyle support by the performance unit's strategic managers might prohibit a complete realisation of the potential of this service, especially concerning reducing the number of drop outs.

Another area, where suggestions could be made to the interview partner was the athlete assessment process that underpins the squad structure. Like so many other sport federations, the partner organisation has to balance keeping its squad system open and flexible in the junior categories, and being strict and rigorous in de-selecting only 'averagely talented' athletes at senior level. This process obviously extends beyond a sport science problem. It is a process with emotional, political, and ethical dimensions. These can only be handled by bringing the process into an appropriately managed, transparent routine. Thus, the processes of the interview partner showed room for improvement.

These two exemplary results show that the case study presented here had been a success as a pilot study for the research approach outlined above. Today's elite sport systems seem to be quite similar in their set agenda (i.e. to create Olympic champions) and the service portfolios they provide. It can be shown, however, that the operating realisation of these tasks lack adequate solutions. The interview scripts have proved to be appropriate tools for such an investigation. As comparing the processes in the pilot study against the literature has already led to substantial recommendations, this raises expectations for the main study, where best practice processes are not only benchmarked against the literature but also against each other.

References

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