

CANADA'S PERFORMANCE IN THE POOL: SINK OR SWIM?

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Context

Swimming is a highly popular sport in Canada. The most recent *Sport Participation in Canada* study ranked it as the fourth highest participant sport among Canadians over 15 years old, behind golf, hockey, and baseball, with 4.6% or 1.1 million respondents reporting participation in the sport within the last 12 months prior to the study (Statistics Canada, 2000). Swimming/Natation Canada (SNC), the governing body for swimming in Canada, has been the recipient of significant dollars from the Government of Canada, representing about 40% of its annual budget (Swimming/Natation Canada, 2002). Between the years 1997 and 2001, for example, SNC received the greatest federal funding of any national sport organization (NSO) in Canada, and was the second highest recipient for the two years prior.

Regarding the competitive environment, such as Olympic, Commonwealth, and Pan American competition, Canadian swimmers have earned more medals than any other Canadian athletes (Swimming/Natation Canada, 2002). Canada has also been quite successful relative to other nations at these international competitions, especially during the late 1970s to mid 1980s. For example, the 1984 Olympic Games marked Canada's most successful Games ever, placing second overall with swimmers winning ten medals, four of which were gold. Unfortunately for Canadians, their Olympic success was short-lived, as Canada dropped dramatically to twelfth place overall with just one silver and one bronze medal in 1988. The gap was further realized in Sydney 2000 when Canada plummeted to sixteenth place, winning just one bronze. The difference was even more pronounced at the most recent 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, where Canada produced no medals in the pool, for the first time since 1964. It is not surprising that the effectiveness of SNC, Canada's national governing body for swimming, has been questioned. The purpose of this study was to examine the organizational effectiveness of SNC.

Method

As the viewpoints of multiple constituents/stakeholders represent best the effectiveness of an organization (Chelladurai, 1987; Connolly, Conlon, & Deutsch, 1980; Papadimitriou & Taylor, 2000), the opinions of 11 major stakeholders (staff, board members, coaches, athletes, consultants, officials, media, and sponsors) were obtained by conducting open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to comment on the current and past effectiveness of SNC, contributing and limiting factors to its organizational effectiveness, and strategies to improve it. A review of written documentation supplemented the interview information.

Results

Five constituents believed that SNC was not an effective organization, basing their opinions on the poor performance results in international competitions. Three constituents believed that SNC was effective in some ways (e.g., sponsorship acquisition, media profile), but could be much more effective in other ways (e.g., high performance results). The only participants who believed the organization was effective were the senior administrators. All constituents believed SNC had faced change in the past five to ten years. Three believed the change was positive (i.e., via increased effectiveness), attributed to improvements in people, areas of spending, and internal governance. The remaining eight believed that the organization had changed for the worse, due to lack of sound leadership and decreased effectiveness of the high performance training centres.

Only five individuals suggested there were contributing factors to SNC's organizational effectiveness, citing the professional staff at head office, its large budget, the organization's strong vision and action plans, the strong club system, and the belief that Canadians placed an importance on the sport.

In regard to the limiting factors of SNC, leadership within the organization was the most common concern. The CEO's position had seen rapid turnover in the past several years, whereas the National

Team coaching had seen little turnover in almost twenty years. Several individuals indicated that leadership at both the CEO and Board levels needed to be stronger in terms of strategic planning and communication; some suggested that a change in the National Team coaching position was necessary. A few participants indicated the Board of Directors should be reduced in size. Five external SNC constituents referred to Canada's uncoordinated, inadequate training centre approach as a limitation. The lack of financial resources available to SNC was a major concern for the five internal interviewees. Finally, five participants viewed the current unsupportive sport culture in Canada as another limitation.

Discussion/Implications

Based on the results of this study, three recommendations were made for SNC. First, leadership must be addressed. A new CEO with proven leadership capabilities and a corporate background must be hired. On completion of this task, the National Team coaching leadership role must undergo change. Second, the external operation should be restructured. A priority must be placed on the national training centre structure to ensure swimmer development. The national swim centre structure has not shown recent improvements in performance, causing the deterioration of the once successful club system. There are currently too many centres (eight) to gain full advantage of this structure. It is recommended that fewer be operated. Additional resources may then be allocated to the system, increasing support to fewer athletes. Third, additional funds need to be secured. It may be difficult to attain resources in the corporate world, but the organization must become less dependent on the public purse, and seek private support.

This research was conducted prior to the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Canada's performance in Athens was the most dismal since 1964. The paper will also discuss the follow-up to the Athens Olympics, in particular the media reaction, the hiring of a new coach and CEO, and a review of the SNC.

References

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