

Understanding the culture of a Football in the community programme through action research: The role of researcher in facilitating change

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Aim of paper and research questions

Football in the community (FitC) programmes have been identified as organisations that can attend to a range of social issues (Watson, 2000). The relationship between football and its communities has become more obscure and challenging. With a 'real' need for a more coherent strategic framework to inform English football's approach to community engagement (Football Foundation, 2006). This paper concerns an evolving collaboration between Everton Football in the Community (EITC) and the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University. The paper aims to illuminate the subtleties of researcher-client interactions in the facilitation of effective change in the work place through the utilisation of prolonged action research.

Literature review

There has been an increasing amount of community work undertaken by FitC schemes, which has typically lacked sufficient guidance (and/or evidence) to promote positive health change (Football Foundation, 2006). Sport and football oriented interventions have not had coherent procedures in place to evidence 'real' behavioural change (i.e., observed, articulated, measured and evaluated) (Jackson et al., 2005; Coalter, 2007). A more bespoke evaluation may provide feedback for the development of future strategies. Action research encourages the researcher to gain knowledge of the workplace (i.e., environment, culture and practice) (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), and to create and disseminate new knowledge through practitioner reflection with the aspiration of facilitating positive changes in working practice (McFee, 1993; Gilbourne 1999; 2001; Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004).

Research design and data analysis

This study is framed within a longitudinal collaborative action research oriented methodology that engages a series of 'reflective cycles' (Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004). Following an extensive reconnaissance phase a 'change strategy' was agreed between the researcher and senior management of EITC. During this action phase the researcher adopted ethnographic principles whilst undertaking prolonged fieldwork and extensive observations within the natural setting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) (typically 2 days per week from June 2007 to September 2008 and 5 days a week from September 2008 to present). Contextual and situational data was collated through informal conversations and meetings alongside reflective field notes (Ely, 1991). The results offer the critical (but not exhaustive) issues that emerged from the expansive data collected.

Results

The agreed change strategy involved the development of a quality assurance (QA) model for coaching staff. As the action phase began it became evident that a number of political and situational barriers and challenges existed. The adoption of a 'top down' approach by senior management presented difficulties and contradictions to plans formalised between the researcher and practitioner. The subsequent ability to *deliver* on changes raised ethical concerns regarding requisite authority and/or empowerment of senior management. As a result of this, the researcher was required to re-evaluate the viability of the initial change strategy and subsequently navigate a series of 'cycles of change'. The main focus of developing a QA model was never lost, however changes in direction, scale and importantly the key 'change personnel' in the action phase were revisited. It was evident that the coaching staff were unaware of the context of the change itself, as there was little or no consultation regarding the change strategy by senior management. The subsequent change cycles embraced the coaching staff more fully. Enabling them to become more informed and empowered in the development of the QA model.

Discussion and conclusion

By being 'on the ground' with the coaching staff the researcher was able to better understand the coaches' perceptions of what a QA strategy entailed. Moreover, the researcher recognised that these practitioners needed to (and wanted to) be more engaged in the change process. The researcher sensed that the senior management appeared to lack an understanding and/or appreciation of the reality of the practitioners' (i.e., coaching staff) day-to-day existence. Ultimately, any change in practice was going to impact the practitioners' day-to-day existence and consequently they needed to be involved and consulted more explicitly. The empowerment and/or discretion bestowed to this group of practitioners (Cooper, 1973; Wilkinson, 1998) enabled a sense of ownership, which facilitated the development of a QA model, which was readily understood and accepted within the workplace. It became evident that the deliverable nature and sustainability of the change appeared to be a hostage to the 'skill-base, aspirations and willingness' of the practitioners and therefore could not be imposed by the management.

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