

# Between institutionalization and authenticity - a theoretical framework for the analysis of young leadership at sport events

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## Aim

The aim of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of young leadership at sport events. The point of departure was an empirical study of leadership at Youth Olympic Games (YOG) and World Snowboard Championship (WSC). It is the first step of a larger study of young leadership at sport events (Bodemar and Skille, 2012). On the one hand the two sport events have different institutional affiliations (YOG with the International Olympic Committee; WSC with several non-Olympic organizations); on the other hand, they both have a clear youth profile.

## Theory

Neo institutionalism emphasizes the taken-for-granted as a hidden power for acceptable behaviour which leads to homogenization of practice within a field (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). DiMaggio and Powell (1991) sketches how rationalized myths spread through three forms of institutional processes: coercive isomorphism occurs when formal or informal pressure is exerted on an organization by actors upon which they are dependent; mimetic isomorphism emerges as a response to uncertainty, where organizations resemble actors which are perceived as successful; normative isomorphism develops by the mechanisms of filtering personnel to certain jobs in the field. Neo-institutionalism is criticized focusing on the un-reflected routine; thus – among other replies – institutional entrepreneurship is launched to reintroduce ‘considerations of agency, power and interests into analyses of institutional fields’ (Hardy and Maguire, 2008, p. 198). Institutional entrepreneurship is defined as ‘activities of actors who have interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones’ (Maguire et al., 2004, p. 657).

Despite efforts to allow more agency within institutions, neo-institutionalism lacks a leadership perspective. Thus, authentic leadership theory is chosen as a supplement. Authentic leadership is defined as

a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internal moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94).

## Methods

Two approaches were employed in order to develop a theoretical framework: first, we based on former theoretical approaches used by two of the authors (neo-institutionalism); second, we searched the sport management literature to add a leadership perspective.

## Discussion and conclusion

The rationale for our choice of theories is based on Yukl’s (2002) identification of four ‘levels of conceptualization for leadership processes’ (p. 14): individual, dyadic, group and organization. The individual level focuses on intra-individual processes of one single individual at a time. The dyadic level focuses on the relationship between the leader and any other single individual in the organization. The group level focuses on how leadership contributes to make a group of people work efficiently together. And the organization level, it is acknowledged that the efficiency of groups has to be seen in relation to the larger system of which the group forms a part.

The organization and partly the group levels are covered theoretically by neo-institutionalism, which focuses on organizations’ (external) dependency as well as (internal) strategy, and merges rather contradicting but not mutually exclusive perspectives (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1991). Moreover, after critique of the theory, stating that reproduction is prioritized instead of change, later developments offer new perspectives. One example of later development is institutional entrepreneurship (Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Maguire et al., 2004). However, although agency is launched or admitted in later institutional theory, leadership perspectives that cover the inner levels of Yukl’s (2002) model are still missing.

The dyadic and individual levels are covered theoretically by authentic leadership theory. Authentic leadership theory focuses on the leader’s (i) self-awareness, (ii) relational transparency, (iii) balanced processing, and (iv) internalized moral perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). The point is that, where institutionalism focuses on the taken-for-granted or “invisible” elements of an organization, authentic leadership theory refers to explicit or more “visible” elements of the leader and the leader processes that take place in an organization. Although newer perspectives of neo-institutionalism allows for more agency among organizational members than classic versions did, the inclusion of authentic leadership theory in our theoretical framework will move that perspective even one step further, with the authentic leadership theory’s focus upon the more positive sides of members of institutions and organizations.

Taken together, it is believed that the respective theories – one which stems from a focus upon reproductive and “invisible” power elements, and one that focus explicitly on transparency and being oneself, can “weigh out” each other’s weaknesses.

This framework for the study of young leadership at sport events, gives some practical implications for the empirical investigation. The construction of an interview guide takes into account both how institutional loyalty and organizational framework influences young leaders’ perception of their own

leadership, and how self-awareness as well as open and balanced processes are parts (or not) of young leaders' leadership. After doing observations and interviews among young leaders at sport events (so far at the YOG 2012 in Innsbruck and the WSC 2012 in Oslo), the experiences of applying a combination of institutional and authentic leadership theories are promising.

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