

Strong beliefs – ambiguous feed-back signals: How elite skiers engage in critical self-reflection

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Aim of paper

All elite sport organizations are facing the same fundamental challenge; how to develop teams and athletes to achieve excellence and win major international competitions. They are consistently engaged in making the best even better. To succeed they need to identify talents, employ different types of expertise and experienced coaches. On the other hand, to develop individual talent, athletes must take advantage of the resources and support available to them. At the same, they are the most important source of information about how and to what extent training methods can be successfully adapted to their individual needs. For this reason it is important to understand the challenges that athletes face when reflecting upon their own practices. Their capacity for reflection and communicating experiences to coaches, team-mates and other support personnel is a key to sustained success. The aim of the paper is to shed light upon how athletes on the Norwegian elite cross-country skiing team reflect upon their own practices (experiences) in implementing the training plan, and how such reflection is influenced by coaches, team-mates, and others within the elite sport organization.

Theoretical background

It is the individual athletes that engage in reflection. Mindful organization foster reflection to strengthen reliable experience-based learning (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). To be mindful implies the willingness to use new information (experience) to make new distinctions. More precisely, it is a mindset that emphasizes the conditional nature of knowledge by continuously question underlying assumptions in light of new experiences (Langer, 2000). Mindful organizations seek to stimulate reflection on all levels. The extent to which organizations succeed may vary, but for organizations involved in developing world class athletes, stimulating mindful reflection is central. Key elements in reflection are sensemaking and interpretation (Weick, 1979). Sensemaking consists of noticing signals and framing. Signals are situational cues that athletes become aware of, whereas frames serve as cognitive schemes intuitively adopted in the noticing process. Interpretation, on the other hand, involves a process of evaluation and a search for

significant patterns in light of beliefs and expectations embedded in the plan.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The research was designed as a qualitative case study (Yin, 2009). We wanted to understand how athletes reflect in every-day training, and how self-reflection may influence the potential for individual development. This includes both commonalities across individuals and differences between them. Individual athletes may be viewed as observation units that provide insight into self-reflection, which is the unit of analysis. However, we were also interested in how such reflection may be influenced by the wider organizational context. Through a stepwise coding process, testing our own expectations and hypothesis, we identified four types of athletes regarding how they engage in critical self-reflection: the 1) conformist, 2) the brooder, 3) the experimenter, and 4) the analyst.

Results, discussion and implications

Common for all four types is a shared a set of beliefs about critical success factors, which to a large extent is institutionalized within Norwegian elite cross-country skiing. However, there is considerable variation between the types regarding what they notice, and how they interpret their own experiences in the training situation. The *conformists`* reflection is often not critical (tend to search for signals that confirm the beliefs embedded in the plan), the *brooder* tend to be too critical (questions the plan and the implementation of it), whereas the *analyst* engages in reflection over aspects that do not indicate how the athlete responds to the training. The *experimenter* is in many ways different than the three other types; this type continuously reflects over to what extent the plan is properly implemented. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that the experimenter is more likely to sustain successful. We also found that the wider organization play different roles in relation to the four types.

The paper has three major contributions: first, it represents a unique empirical insight into how the most successful athletes in their sport engage in self-reflection. Second, it identifies general mechanisms for reliable learning that may be of great importance to practitioners. Third, it illuminates how organizational factors play a key role in facilitating critical self-reflection and thereby reliable learning.

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