

## Managing change in voluntary sport clubs – an autoethnographic study

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Synopsis:

This paper deals with the question: how to manage change in voluntary sport clubs? It uses an autoethnographic approach. It will highlight issues that might inspire future research.

Abstract:

### AIM OF ABSTRACT/PAPER - RESEARCH QUESTION

Amis, Slack & Hinings (2004) argue that dealing with organizational change has become an important managerial task for sport organizations. As a consequence of this, we can find a number of studies in the general field of sport research. However, as noted by scholars, a large portion of this research concerns national sport organizations and not clubs (Papadimitriou, 2002; Slack, 1996). Thus, we lack in-depth studies on change processes on club levels. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the field by an autoethnographic study of VSC attempting to implement a number of changes. The research question is: how to manage change in voluntary sport clubs? As an autoethnography it explores from the inside what happens when club management responds to external pressures by attempting a number of changes. It details the activities, struggles, successes, and so on, experienced during a number of years, in search for ways to achieve change.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OR LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper departs from classic discussions on planned change (Lewin, 1947; 1951; Bennis, Benne & Chin, 1969) including normative prescriptions on "how to" succeed with organizational change. It also however adds perspectives from more recent research, including ideas of change as something continuous (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995) and change processes as something rather chaotic (Stacey, 1992; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). These discussions are then linked to the setting of VSCs. While change is perceived as something difficult in all kinds of organizations, there are suggestions that it might be especially difficult in the context of VSCs. It is argued that there is a general scepticism in sports against change (Gilmore & Gilson, 2007), even if Taylor (2004)

distinguishes between voluntary sport organizations that regard professionalism as a threat and those that are more business-like. As Garrett (2004) notes, club history often is very important in sports. A central characteristic of club operations thus is to preserve traditions. These perpetual forces making change in sport clubs difficult is nicely illustrated by Ogbonna & Harris (2013). While their study concerns a professional sport club, we might assume similar preserving forces in VSCs. One reason is that since VSCs often rely on a few core volunteers (Kirk & Macphail, 2003) or 'long standing members' (Byers, 2007) we could assume that it is difficult to achieve more widespread and/or radical changes. Since usually rather few people are involved in running a VSC, it could also be assumed that the 'receiving capacity' for new ideas and resources is rather low (Byers, 2009). There is not enough time, money or people to work with change. Suggestions that VSCs can be characterized as loose, flat, informal and non-hierarchical, also support the notion that change is difficult. Traditional topdown-driven change processes seem unlikely to succeed (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). From this follows that finding alternative ways of managing change is vital.

#### METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

This paper is an answer to calls for in-depth studies on the experience of participating in sport club management (Doherty, 1998) and rests upon an autoethnography from a ten-year-long in-depth study of a Swedish voluntary sport club (VSC). For five years the researcher participated in the club as board member and coach. For a further five years the club was followed at a distance. Due to the confessional nature of the paper, I purposefully conduct a 'bending back upon myself' in order to achieve reflexivity (Steier, 1991).

#### RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

Results, discussion and implications are currently not finished. There are some choices to be made regarding what to include in the final paper. This will be finalized in due time before the conference. One of the preliminary results is that there is a lot of toggling between top-down and bottom-up strategies. This toggling enables key actors to handle demands from different stakeholders. To know when to use which strategy is essential – but difficult.

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