

# **INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS EXPLAINING CHANGE AND STABILITY IN A PROFESSIONAL SOCCER CLUB**

**Hallgeir Gammelsæter**, Molde University College, Norway, hallgeir.gammelsater@himolde.no

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper an institutional approach is employed to explain longitudinal organizational change and stability in one of the biggest soccer clubs in Norway, SK Brann of Bergen. Despite keeping an incontestable position as the club of the second biggest city in Norway and drawing one of the large crowds in the country, Brann has not lived up to the expectations of its enthusiastic followers. In spite of their repeating pre-season optimism, the club has not won the league since 1963. In trying to explain this curiosity commentators have often pointed to organizational and management problems characterizing the club.

## **FINDINGS**

The paper takes as its starting point a mapping of the historic structural and managerial changes of the club as well as its performance record. Interview data is used to construct a description of the actors', i.e. the management's, understanding of what has caused the pattern of change and what are the connections between the club's sporting performance and its organizational record. It is argued that the management problems to a large extent derive from an institutionalized conception held by the (shifting) management of the club's history, management record and its relationship to the community. The management problems tend to reproduce this conception creating a vicious cycle that makes it difficult to build a winning team.

## **APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

Rather than dealing with a single incidence of change the paper sets out to understand the dynamics that produce longitudinal change and stability. We believe that this enables us to capture the specificity of change in the soccer club better than if the focus was on a single change process. After all, professional soccer clubs meet a lot of pressures and undergo changes constantly (notably in personnel) of which only a few are reflected in changes in formal structure. Hence, many clubs are characterized by a high level of turbulence and discontinuity, yet with a low level of radical structural change.

To understand such features a longitudinal approach is employed. The study relies on earlier studies of the club (secondary sources), statistics and interview data and on the interviewee's responses to a narrative created by the author on the basis of the mentioned data.

## **THEORY AND CONTRIBUTION**

Institutionalism in social theory hinges on the idea that actors are social, meaning that they are embedded in institutions. Accordingly their actions are viewed as extensions of institutions. Although being part of a broader tradition (cf. Scott 2001), in organization theory institutionalism has for a long time now primarily been associated with the so-called new-institutionalism which locates organizations in fields of institutional pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Within this strand, change in individual organizations is explained as responses to external institutional pressures.

One common critique towards the new-institutional approach has been that this idea of embeddedness blurs the understanding of action itself by depriving the individual actors of interests and organizational capacities as a basis for taking action (Oliver 1991, Greenwood and Hinings 1996, Gammelsæter 2002, Tempel and Walgenbach 2007). Hence, students of institutional change have attempted to develop approaches that take

into account the interplay of external and intraorganizational dynamics (Oliver 1991, Greenwood and Hinings 1996). To avoid environmental determinism, these approaches are directed towards understanding how internal actors or groups of actors have to deal not merely with exogenous pressures but also with internal interests, values and cognitive schemes in bringing about change.

Studying such processes in the context of professional team sport may highlight how current approaches to institutional change can be applied to sport organizations, how sport organizations both resemble and differ from other kinds of organizations and hence how studies of sport organizations may enrich our understanding of institutional change.

## **LITERATURE**

DiMaggio, Paul and Walter W. Powell (eds.) (1991). *The New Institutionalism in Organisational Analysis* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gammelsæter, H. (2002), *Managers and Consultants as Embedded Actors*. In L. Engwall and M. Kipping (eds.), *Management Consulting: Emergence and Dynamics of a Knowledge Industry*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Greenwood, R. and Hinings, B. (1996), *Understanding radical organizational change: Bringing together the old and the new institutionalism*. *Academy of Management Review*, 21, 1022-54.

Oliver, C. (1991), *Strategic responses to institutional processes*. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 145-79.

Scott, R.W. (2001). *Institutions and Organizations*, 2nd Edition, Sage.

Tempel, A. and Walgenbach, P. (2007), *Global standardization of organizational forms and management practices? What New-Institutionalism and the Business-Systems approach can learn from each other*. *Journal of Management Studies*, 44, 1-24.