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Risk management in an Olympic team: Norway at the 2010 Winter Games

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Aims of the paper

The literature on events is an important area of sports management. This relates to the project management literature. One aspect of this is related to risk management. Leopky and Parent (2009a, 2009b) summarized earlier research and identified a number of risk categories in major international sports events and how they involved and affected different stakeholders. They had a host perspective and stakeholders were actors involved in realizing different aspects of the host role. Interestingly, the participating national teams were not treated as stakeholders.

This study represents a down-up perspective on major events, following the preparation and participation of a national team in the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games. More specifically, the aim of the paper is to analyse how all risk factors that could threaten optimal performance for the Norwegian Olympic team were eliminated or reduced as much as possible.

The study relates to the literature on major sports events, but addresses a more general question about how project learning relates to the dynamic capabilities of an organization (S?derlund et al., 2008) characterized by mindful learning (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001; Andersen, 2009). The background is an earlier study of a similar process relating to the Torino Winter Olympic Games in 2006. In the latter case, a number of factors did not work out as planned (Hanstad, 2006).

Methods

The main data source was semi-structured in-dept interviews. 16 people in key positions were interviewed a few weeks before the Games. After the Games six single interviews and one group interview (six people of the OT) were carried out.

Data were systematized through *open and theoretical coding*. Theoretical saturation was achieved as new interviews did not introduce new elements that could refine or challenge emerging interpretations and their implications (Charmaz 2006, Silverman 2005).

Findings and discussion

Through our interviews we identifies five different generic risk areas: (i) Practical aspects; including living conditions, transport, (ii) Health; including illness, injuries, nutrition and accidents, (iii) Mental factors; including goal setting process and high expectations, (iv)

Coaching and leadership; including collective sentiments and relationships in the whole team, and (v) Media; including access to athletes and media coverage.

First, risks related to living conditions, food and hygiene were reduced by simply taking advantage of the facilities in the Olympic Villages. Rather than choosing special and independent locations, this now became the rule rather than the exception. When locations outside the Olympic Village were chosen (biathlon, alpine skiing) the system was quality assured by OT.

Second, three central areas of improvements reflected an increased focus and capacity in ongoing training and development work. In this sense the experiences from Torino changed the basic organization. The increased emphasis on nutrition, mental training and the competence and roles of the coaches provided the Top Sports program with new capacities in preparing for the Vancouver Olympics.

Conclusion

The overall impression is that the Vancouver Olympics was a successful project, demonstrating positive learning effects and the ability to pursue these lessons in preparations and implementation. The experiences from Torino Olympics became a focal point for learning and improvement. Risks were identified, measures were taken to prevent negative events. The result was a relatively smooth implementation, with some tensions and problems, but not more than can be expected. In terms of medals, the Norwegian team was back on the trend from the early 1990s. From a learning perspective it is important to notice, however, that some of the improvements were already implemented during the Beijing Summer Games in 2008.

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