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Cultural profiles of national sport organisations: Implications for framing and managing participation

V. Girginov², M. Taks¹, B. Boucher¹, M. Holman¹, S. Martyn¹, J. Dixon¹

¹*University of Windsor, Department of Kinesiology, Windsor, Canada*

²*Brunel University, School of Sport & Education, London, United Kingdom*

vassil.girginov@brunel.ac.uk

Background

Sport participation is a specific cultural practice informed by a range of cultural symbols and meanings. A significant number of those symbols and meanings, as well as the practices accompanying them, are created and mediated by National Sport Organizations (NSO). The study of NSOs' cultural profiles therefore, addresses the lived experiences of people and can provide valuable management insights into how NSOs interpret sport participation, understand the participant and give meaning to the importance of sport.

Building on Morgan (1997) it is suggested that the study of NSOs' cultural profiles entails understanding the process of reality construction that allows people to see and understand particular events, actions, objects, utterances, or situations in distinctive ways. Organizations enact their environments as people assign patterns of meaning and significance to the world in which they live. A view of sport organizations as an enactment of shared reality urges us to redefine the role of sport managers and presents them as reality constructors. By doing so they can be seen as agents exercising important influences on an organization's culture. It follows that sport organizations' structures, rules, policies and symbols perform an interpretative function, because they act as primary points of reference for the way people think about, and make sense of, the context in which they work and live. NSOs play a crucial role in this process as they are responsible for all aspects of their sports and for promoting practices that represent the sites where dispositions for participation could be created.

An earlier study by the same authors utilized the Cooke & Lafferty (1989) Organisational Culture Inventory which measures what individuals and groups within NSOs believe is expected of them and will be rewarded and reinforced. The current study, framed by Smith and Shilbury's (2004) multi-method approach, complements this by identifying six recurring themes of culture including change, decision making, competition, history and tradition, symbols and human resource management.

Objectives

To understand how a NSO's cultural profile frames sport participation and its management.

Method

Two Canadian NSOs, Gymnastics and Hockey, formed the focus of the study. These NSOs were previously identified as having two different types of participation culture – mass and elitist respectively. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with three categories of NSOs' members: (a) *executive* (President, CEO, Secretary General, Board members); (b) *department heads* (e.g., sport development, finance, marketing, IT); and (c) *front line staff* (e.g., coaches, volunteers, technical personnel). This categorisation is consistent with Martin's (1992) three perspectives on organisational culture including: integration (a); differentiation (b); and fragmentation (c). Interview questions were based upon the cultural dimensions of sport organisations (Smith & Shilbury, 2004). Data were analyzed with Nvivo 8 software and is ongoing. A detailed report of nine NSOs' profiles is expected to be presented at the conference.

Results

A previous study of the same NSOs with the OCI instrument revealed that both gymnastics and hockey subscribed to a constructive type organizational culture concerned with being supportive of others, resolving conflicts constructively and helping others to grow and develop. The interview data further suggested that Hockey, which has an elitist culture where 'winning gold is everything', struggles to introduce change in making hockey an all year-round participation sport. Decision making was slowed by tradition and followed a top-down approach. Gymnastics was portrayed as 'the ultimate movement experience' but has been trying very hard to make the link between its international success and foundation sport status. A consultative approach to decision making allowed taking into account the views of all stakeholders. Research and organisational archives were used to inform decision-making and to promote both NSOs' image. However, very little has been done to understand the needs of recreational participants.

Conclusions

The construction of a NSO's cultural profile highlights the importance of symbols (i.e., emblems, heroes, practices) which were used to assert organisational identity in a highly competitive market. International success is critical to secure funding but how it is invested - to reinforce elitism or to promote participation - remains a major issue still shaped by the culture of NSOs.

References

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