

# WHAT CHARACTERIZE THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN SUCCESSFUL ELITE SPORT ORGANIZATIONS? A STUDY OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN THE NORWEGIAN SKI ASSOCIATION AND THE NORWEGIAN BIATHLON ASSOCIATION.

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## Abstract

### Objective

Everyone participating in elite level sports has the same objective; to win. A key to success is the role of national sports associations in facilitating and supporting development of elite athletes. Previous research within elite sport systems has emphasized the importance of structure to achieve international success. Furthermore, international comparisons show that there has been a convergence of national elite sports systems among developed countries over the last 20 years (Houlihan & Green, 2008). With the existing research on elite sport as a point of departure, this paper goes beyond the structural aspects of elite sport and argues that despite that there has been a convergence in elite sport systems, this cannot explain why some nations and/or sport associations managed to sustain successful. The paper argues that it is less likely that structure and design can explain why some sport associations manage to sustain high levels of success. More precisely, the paper analyzes how the organizational culture (top sport culture) within two successful sport associations in Norway (the Norwegian Ski Association (NSA) and the National Biathlon Association (NBA)) might have influenced their ability to reproduce success over a period of 15 years. An important aspect of studying top sport culture relates to how leaders and coaches facilitate a top sport culture and how the culture influences the levels of sustained success. This is the core of the paper.

### Theoretical background

In my opinion, there is a lack of scientific research on the importance of organizational culture within the field of elite sport systems. As the elite sports systems have become more and more similar in terms of structure and design, the organizational culture might play an important part in explaining why some sport organizations manages to

achieve and sustain international success. To answer the research question; "what characterize the organizational culture in successful elite sport associations?" the paper draws upon literature developed by studying organizations that because of their low rates of serious failures are termed High Reliability Organizations (HROs) (cf. Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Examples of HROs are nuclear power plants, air traffic control towers and air craft carriers. The organizational culture within HROs is distinguished from how Edgar Schein (1991) defined organizational culture (how we do things here) by emphasizing the importance of not being deadlocked in one way of solving problems – which is reflected in the phrase "what we expect around here" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001:122). The organizational culture in HROs is further characterized by a continuous updating of routines and practices (e.g. Standard Operating Procedures), and a culture for reporting deviations (small failures) that might lead to organizational failure is thus highly valued (Weick, 1987; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

### Methodology

The study was designed as a set of related qualitative case studies, in which this is one of four cases. The case study contains 4 units that will be analyzed (cf. Gerring, 2004); 1) the NSA men elite team, 2) the NSA women elite team, 3) the NBA men elite team, and 4) the NBA women elite team. The analysis is conducted on the basis of a total of 24 in-depth interviews, distributed among athletes, coaches and sporting directors within NSA and the NBA which have been competing or working within the associations in the period 2002-2010. In addition, persons at the Norwegian Top Sport Centre (Olympiatoppen) who have been working with NSA and/or NBA have been interviewed as this organization is likely to have influenced the organizational culture in NSA/NBA.

### Results, discussion and implications

As the interviews recently has been finished, only preliminary results exists. However, these findings suggests that despite some differences in the organizational culture between NSA and NBA, there are some important similarities that might explain why these two associations have managed to sustain successful. When the paper is to be submitted 1st of July, these findings will presented in more detail and a more comprehensive discussion will then be developed. The paper thus present an alternative explanation to elite sport success than previous research within this field.

References:

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