
FREEDOM UNDER PRESSURE: PERCEPTIONS AND INFLUENCES OF YOUNG LEADERSHIP AT THE 2012 WORLD SNOWBOARDING CHAMPIONSHIPS

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Synopsis:

Abstract:
AIM OF THE PAPER

While research within the area of leadership has increased considerably, leadership exercised by young people is still a little explored field. Aiming at obtaining knowledge of young leadership at sport events, a field study was conducted at the 2012 Oslo World Snowboarding Championships (WSC). Snowboarding is characterized as a youth driven lifestyle sport; thus by its search for independence and freedom, snowboarding challenges the establishment and key agents in sport, as represented by IOC and FIS (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). At the WSC, a number of young people were involved in the organization; the WSC therefore serves as a relevant case for studying how young leaders can be innovative and influence decisions made in conjunction with the event. The research question is: to what extent were the young leaders at the WSC able to influence the institutional practice during the event.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The young leaders' influence on the institutional practice within the WSC was analyzed by the application of the neo-institutional concepts of isomorphism and translation. When a new organization (as the WSC) is established, crucial requirements of homogenization with isomorphism arise as a result. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) defines three mechanisms which influence an organization and contributes to institutionalization; coercive- (forced), mimetic- (imitative) and normative (influences of professions and education) isomorphism. The concept of translation provides a framework for analyzing change in organizations (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). New ideas are combined with existing

institutional practices and translated into new practices to varying degrees (Campbell, 2004). The WSC is a new concept and the strategy of having young staff in the WSC organizing committee could result in greater pressure to introduce new institutional solutions to the field of major sport events. In this context the study explores how leaders perceive and solve tasks within a hybrid organization such as the WSC with weak institutional frames.

METHODS

An explanatory case study was conducted chosen as approach with the rationale to provide insight into a topic which is little explored to date. Data was collected before, during and after the event. Interviews with seven young leaders (24 to 29 years old, department and volunteer team leaders) serve as the main source. Questions were formulated based on neo-institutionalism (including operationalized references to the following concepts: structure, isomorphism, translation, entrepreneurship and pluralization). For example, the interviewees were asked about boundary conditions given by their leaders (institutional structures) and about new ideas which had been created during the event and how these new ideas had been received by the CEO (isomorphism and translation). In order to capture the sentiment of the young leaders executed vs. perceived leadership from both the top and bottom leadership perspectives, the CEO and ten volunteers of the WSC were interviewed. Throughout the event, the author conducted observations at meetings before and after the event in which the WSC was established and then evaluated. Observations and informal interviews resulted in 26 pages of field notes. Documents (e.g. evaluation report, web-pages, social media sites) served as complementary sources and a validation check (Maxwell, 2009). Following Kvale and Brinkmann's guidelines for coding, the analysis was conducted in two steps; open- and inductive coding.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results show that the young leaders' perception of the possibilities to influence changed as the event evolved. The young leaders build their department with normative knowledge (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and institutional practice was translated (Campbell, 2004) from the leaders' experiences from former organizations. Uncertainty related to weather conditions, economic problems experienced by the event organizers, as well as critical time management (inter alia) lead to several ad hoc tasks, contra orders and restrictions upon the young leaders' ability to influence. Challenges within the event top leadership prior and during the event caused negative experiences amongst the young people w.r.t. performing their leadership position. The young leaders perceived a high degree of responsibility and freedom to influence their own job at the beginning. However, as the event evolved, the freedom was withdrawn with coercive pressure by the CEO.

Despite internal constrains within the organizing committee external actors perceived as a huge success by spectators, the snowboard scene, athletes and the media w.r.t the creativity and implementation. Despite of this, the young leaders' contribution to the event played an important role in the overall success, also in fields in which their influence was limited. By obeying coercive

pressure from the top management, using their normative knowledge, translating institutional practice and networking with former working organizations, the young leaders managed their obligations and survived the disorder (Campbell, 2004; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The implications of this study can give a contribution to how young leaders can gain real life work experience and exercise a “youngish” leadership style within a hybrid organizational context.

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