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## LEARNING CAPABILITIES OF VOLUNTARY SPORT CLUBS ASSOCIATED WITH AN EXTERNAL ADVISORY PROGRAM

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Abstract:

### AIM OF THE STUDY

Despite urgent problems and challenges, sport clubs do not always succeed in initiating and executing change management processes. Therefore, clubs increasingly demand for external advisory services by sport federations. However, it can be observed that standardized advisory inputs lead to differences in implementations of structural changes and solutions to current problems. Differences in processes of organizational change depend crucially on the clubs' learning capability and ability (Argyris & Schön, 2006). Existing findings reveal that sport clubs often react defensively if they feel something is imposed on them from the outside (May, Harris & Collins, 2013; Skille, 2008). Furthermore, specific structural conditions of sport clubs restrict organizational learning (Thiel & Meier, 2004). However, there is only little knowledge about how sport clubs deal with (external) advisory inputs, which conditions support successful organizational learning, and what promoting as well as preventing factors associated with change processes do exist. That leads to the research question: Which organizational factors can promote or hinder learning processes in sports clubs associated with external advisory?

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In general, organizational learning can be understood as a change process of the organizational knowledge basis, the improvement of the problem solving competencies, and the change of the common reference framework for and of the club members. The concept of the learning organization assumes the structure and the processes to change in interdependency with the learning members of the organization. The learning process of the organization takes place in a loop on different levels: "single loop learning" includes incremental

adoptions on the existing structure, while “double loop learning” implies fundamental structural changes (Argyris & Schön, 2006). Furthermore, within the organizational learning process a selection of structurewise change occurs caused by organizational defenses. This can be seen as a specific learning strategy aiming to fend off any hazards, which could harm the organization as it is. The necessity of such defense learning strategy results from the organizational structures specific to sports clubs (Thiel & Meier, 2004). Thus, it becomes clear that it is easier for sport clubs to refuse external impulses than to incorporate them.

#### METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

First, the conception of the advisory program entitled “More volunteers in football clubs”, developed by the Swiss Football Association in order to tackle existing problems in volunteer management in football clubs and to come up with new solutions, will be described in more detail. Secondly, learning processes in eleven selected football clubs are analyzed in relation to this advisory program by using a case study design (Skille, 2013). Before, during and after the program, questionnaires and guided interviews were conducted with the project teams of the participating football clubs to assess different learning processes regarding promoting and hindering factors. The interviews were analyzed on the basis of qualitative content analysis. Due to the narrow theoretical framework, the analysis is based above all on a deductive approach in the form of a structured content analysis. As a first step, general promoting and hindering factors are worked out of all cases and secondly, an in-depth analysis of three selected, representative cases focuses on interrelations between these factors according to learning capabilities.

#### RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that learning processes in football clubs occur differently. Some provide customized solutions by implementing the advisory inputs successfully. Others, however, fail, or are much less successful in their change efforts. Regardless the success, promoting and restrictive factors can be identified over all clubs. Furthermore, promoting factors can be identified that sustain the learning processes: internal support, an engaged project team, proactive communication, specific adaption of external inputs and effective internal working processes. In contrary, restricting factors can prevent change in the football clubs: lack of internal support, an uninvolved project team, unintentional communication, low processing capacity and a lack of resources. With regard to the concept of the learning organization it can be stated, that promoting and hindering factors either sustain or prevent short-term measures (single loop learning) and the adaption of the aims and the strategy of the volunteer management (double loop learning) depends on the impact of the factor.

The findings contribute to a clearer understanding of major sources of restrictions as well as promoting factors associated with organizational learning processes in sport clubs. This knowledge is crucial for developing sustainable advisory concepts by sport associations. Furthermore, sport managers can deal effectively with resistances in order to ensure processes of organizational change proceed successfully. Additionally, the functionality of learning barriers associated with the implementation of advisory impulses should be taken into

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account in order to redefine advisory programs for sport clubs.

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