

The implications of professionalisation for sport administration: a case study of the ACT Brumbies Super Rugby Club

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Aim

Sport is no longer considered just a past time activity; sport is big business. The industry has consistently expanded over recent decades and is currently estimated to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually with continued growth foreseeable (e.g. Bryson, Frick & Simons, 2015). This increasing commercialism of sport overtime has been accompanied by pressure for sport organisations to become (more) professional. These shifts in the way sport is administered and delivered demanded by the pressures of commercialism and professionalisation have been coined metaphorically as moving from kitchen table management to the executive boardroom. This project examines the challenges professionalisation processes present to sport administrators (including the Board-of-Directors, managers and operations staff) and their organisations.

Literature review

Professionalisation has been studied in sociology disciplines since the 1930s however it's a relatively new area of research for sport managers. Dowling et al. (2014) recently provided a conceptual framework for understanding the professionalisation of sport that identified three key aspects to the professionalisation process. Organisational professionalisation is associated with internal changes in sport organisations related to the nature of employment relationships, constitution of boards, and changes in policy and procedures designed to move toward business-like processes. Systemic professionalisation refers to forces external to sport organisations causing change within an organisation or system. Occupational professionalisation is concerned with the legitimisation of an occupation within society.

Operating within the conceptual framework of Dowling et al. (2014) to understand the impact of the professionalisation of sport necessitates consideration of strategic change management and governance. Change management refers to the renewal of organisation direction, structures and servicing of clients through an optimisation of performance (Moran and Brightman, 2001) whereas governance refers to the expectation of accountability, transparency, and responsibility in reporting (Hoye and Cuskelly, 2007).

Innovation in structure and policy stemming from organisational professionalisation pressures creates an avenue to move towards the executive office archetype. The expectation upon administrators is a professional approach challenging previous kitchen table or boardroom methods that may be ingrained in accepted values within the organisation. Priorities must be reassessed to give correct value to business decisions. Change needs to be analysed at multiple levels of the organisation and accountability needs to be provided to stakeholders.

To date, the review of Dowling et al. (2014) shows that while considerable work has been conducted under the banner of the professionalisation of sport, there has been limited research

that has provided a holistic lens to the subject or that has synthesised change management, governance, and professionalisation. This research provides a first step in providing redress to this situation.

Research design

This research used the ACT Brumbies rugby union club in Australia as a case study. Within the organisation two events occurred in the transition between the 2013 and 2014 seasons which provided a catalyst for substantial change and form the context for this research: the resignation of the head coach and the CEO. More generally, the club is transitioning towards a more professional model. A purposive sample of ten key stakeholders including operations staff and members of the Board-of-Directors participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were required to meet specific qualification criteria, based on participation in the organisation during the contextualising events, to ensure the lived experiences recounted in interviews were relevant, informed and useful. A total of 313 minutes of interview data was obtained and analysed using a grounded theory approach ensuring all possible themes were considered.

Results and discussion

Four key themes representing the major impacts of professionalisation changes emerged from the research: Leadership change; internal communication; strategic planning, and; finances. Leadership change is discussed regarding governance policy, procedures and structures bought in by the employment of new professionals in the organisation. Internal communication/information dissemination was identified as a recurring issue for stakeholders. Strategic planning and an employee's understanding of their role in achieving the goals and objectives of an organisation are discussed. The fourth theme detailed the systemic financial pressures being applied to the organisation and how this impacted on administrators. With regard to specific operational matters, the results of the research reveal five major considerations for sport managers when managing professionalisation changes: Succession planning; business modelling; communication; the financial environment and; their place in and relationship with the system and associated governing bodies. These matters fall within the management of the four key themes identified. By considering these matters and themes appropriately, managers will be better equipped to plan for the implementation of change; however, managers should be aware that the professionalisation process can be lengthy, if ever completed.

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