Strategy, Leadership And Stakeholder Management In Sport

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Management Challenges And Required Management Actions In Sports Clubs Employing Their First Professionals

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Theoretical background and aim of the research

Professionalization has been seen as a necessity for sports clubs to fulfil their purposes as organizations providing sports services (Nagel et al., 2016; Thiel & Mayer, 2009). Professionalization can be identified in many dimensions (Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014), but employing professionals in coaching or management has been one central solution to increase quality in sports clubs. This change requires sports clubs to professionalize their management as well. Several scholars have noted that business management concepts often mislead sports clubs from the management requirements of voluntary-based organizations (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). Yet it is not very clear what are the practical management actions related to sports clubs' professionalization.

This study aimed to identify the management challenges and required management actions in Finnish sports clubs employing their first professionals in various tasks. As a theoretical framework, Thiel and Mayer's (2009) heuristic model of the characteristics of voluntary sports club management was utilized.

Methodology and data analysis

The data were collected during a project that aimed at creating a practical guide for sports clubs employing professionals. The data consisted of three parts: (1) a survey of sports clubs receiving funding from Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture for employing a professional (n = 160); (2) a thematic questionnaire of the challenges and success factors in hiring processes, answered by experts working in the area of sports club development (n = 10); and (3) five case studies of hiring processes in sports clubs. The clubs in data represented various sports. The size of sport clubs in data varied widely, but typically the clubs hiring first professionals had 500–1,000 members.

The data were examined with theory-based content analysis, utilizing Thiel and Mayer's (2009) heuristic model of the characteristics of voluntary sports club management. The research focused on the dimension of organizational structures, which is divided into three segments: human resources, communication channels and decision programmes.

Results

Our research data showed that the need to hire professionals mostly emerged due to challenges in relation to the large size of the clubs or low quality in a club's services. A central aim in hiring a professional was to support the human resources working on clubs' central tasks. But, as Thiel and Mayer (2009) have suggested, human resource decisions create much uncertainty in sports clubs. This uncertainty was also observed in our data, and the relevant management actions that were identified included well-designed recruitment processes (1) and detailed job descriptions (2).

Communication channels in sports clubs determine the distribution of tasks, hierarchies and processes. These are often vaguely defined and thus decisions are made collectively (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). In the data, such unclear communication channels were seen as a major problem in sports clubs employing professionals. The distribution of tasks (3) among honorary posts, other volunteers and professionals was seen as critical management action. To develop a decision-making system, the honorary posts also were seen as being more efficient and supportive to the professionals when directed to specific tasks. In addition, a planned orientation period (4) for the professional was seen as important.

The data also showed that a shared view of a sports club's main purpose, central tasks and future goals (5) was considered critical in ensuring that the club would benefit from hiring a professional. The shared view

forms a basis for defining the job description of the professional and for monitoring and supporting their work. In Thiel and Mayer's (2009) model, the club's purpose, the central tasks and future goals refer to the club's "purpose program", which along with a "conditional program" construct "decision programs" in sports club management. The conditional program defines the procedures for specific situations. In our data, this emerged as the need for some type of rulebook (6) in sports clubs. Since a rulebook contains guidelines, it can overcome the challenges presented by the personalization of decisions (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). The experts in sports club development saw personalization as a particular threat to the sustainable development of sports clubs.

Conclusion

This study showed that in order to successfully employ professionals, sports clubs need to develop their management practices in many dimensions. It was also found essential to apply management models specifically developed for non-profit organizations. In our study, Thiel and Mayer's (2009) heuristic model of voluntary sports club management was highly applicable for identifying and structuring the critical management challenges and actions in sports clubs that are hiring professionals and taking their first steps towards professionalization.

References

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