A New Era: Changes In Governance Structures And Processes Of Canadian National Sport Organizations

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Aim of the research

With the advent of Canada's new Not For Profit Corporations Act taking effect on July 31st, 2017 affecting national sport organizations' (NSOs) governance structures and processes, today's sport managers face unprecedented realities (e.g., economic difficulties, technological advances). How these organizations respond to these governance challenges will impact them, their sports, and society. We therefore seek to understand NSOs' new governance structures, processes and dynamics.

Theoretical background

'Sport governance' is concerned with governing or steering the overall sport, which includes governing the inter-organizational stakeholder network (García, 2009) and the intra-organizational aspects of key sport organizations within this system, such as NSOs. Although we understand many sport governance structural elements, researchers have been slow to incorporate processes and other managerial considerations (e.g., brand, communications) into our sport governance understanding. There is also no agreement as to what constitutes 'good' sport governance. Hare (2015) argued good sport governance should involve a vision, planning, accountability, monitoring, and resources, while The Sports Governance Observer (Play the Game, 2013) suggested transparency and public communication, democratic process, checks and balances, and solidarity. Thus, democratic standards, leadership, and communication appear important. However, their conceptual interrelationships are poorly understood.

Methodology, research design, and data analysis

Here, we present the results of our pilot study, which included a convenience sample of five NSOs: Athletics Canada, Badminton Canada, Canoe Kayak Canada, Canadian Tenpin Federation, and Water Ski and Wakeboard Canada. For each organization, we first gathered documents associated with the organization's overall governance, such as webpages, strategic plans, board meeting minutes, policies, and by-laws. A total of 162 documents or 914 pages were analyzed. We also interviewed a top executive of each organization to complement document information. The interview questions were based on the sport governance literature and on Koliba, Meek, & Zias's (2011) governance organizational case study building questions. The five interviews lasted between 53 and 65 minutes, were transcribed verbatim, and sent back to the participant for verification. Data analysis included deductive (e.g., accountability, transparency) and inductive/in vivo (e.g., compliance with new Not-for-Profit Act, governance changes) coding, followed by content analysis to lead to higher order themes.

Results, discussion, and implications/conclusions

Accountability, transparency and governance changes occurred in part due to conditions imposed by Sport Canada, as a key funder, and to legislation (compliance with the new Not For Profit Corporations Act). Accountability, as the athletics representative noted, is about accepting "responsibility for our actions and hold[ing] others accountable to act in accordance with our core values"; it is accountability for performance. Degrees of accountability differed internally, with formal accountability/reporting frameworks, versus externally, through stakeholder reporting.

Governance changes included new organizational structures and hires, bylaws, reporting/evaluating, and establishing formal roles/fiduciary responsibilities for Board members, whose performance is then evaluated. "In complying with the Not for Profit Act the operating and strategic committees were realigned. The changes are form follows function recognizing the increased capacity of [Athletics Canada] staff to take on some of the roles that volunteers used to have." (Board Minutes, February 21, 2015). Boards became governance focused instead of operationally focused. Proper executive leadership was thought critical to ensure a culture of good governance.

All five NSOs have professionalized, with paid staff operationalizing strategic plans, linking leadership, accountability, performance, and transparency. NSOs also communicate with their members and the multitude of other stakeholders (e.g., sponsors, athletes, coaches). Two-way communications were thought critical; NSOs felt they "can't go far without someone calling you out" (water ski and wakeboard representative). However, NSOs felt challenged in their communications, especially the use of social media in a

bilingual context. NSOs also struggled with stakeholder heterogeneity in agendas and needs, capacity, and coordinating their processes and their sport across a large geography.

There remains some variety in governance structures, including who their members are (e.g., provincial versus local organizations), full-time staff (2 to 17), and part-time staff (0 to 12). Notwithstanding, the governance differences appear less noticeable in these five NSOs than in the kitchen table to executive office (Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992) continuum.

Forced by key stakeholders and legislation, NSOs are applying 'good governance' practices, regardless of size. But, leadership is needed to ensure a culture fostering good/democratic governance, which, in turn, is enacted through two-way communications with stakeholders. This pilot study therefore demonstrates governance legislation can have on organizations and highlights the need to revisit Kikulis et al.'s (1992) NSO archetypes. Future research will expand the study to all Sport Canada-funded NSOs for a landscape analysis of the situation, and include a stakeholder social network analysis.

References

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