

Collaborative Dynamics and Processes Among Nonprofit Sport Organizations

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Aim and Research Question.

Collaborations have become commonplace for sport organizations. Although, the scholarly activity in collaboration within the sport management field has importantly evolved over the past decade, Babiak, Thibault and Willem (2018) recently noted that the mechanisms of interaction and processes of collaboration remain insufficiently examined. Understanding the dynamics of collaboration— how collaboration occur and work – ultimately remains an important question. This is indeed a critical in understanding how collaboration sustainably evolves over time. Furthermore, identifying mechanisms and micro-processes that make up the stages of implementation may be a way to overcome implementation difficulties (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). Therefore, these may be important factors explaining why some collaborations succeed and others fail (Babiak et al., 2018). This study examines collaborative dynamics and processes among nonprofit sport organizations (NPSOs). There is a relative paucity of research in the field of nonprofit management research on collaboration on nonprofit collaboration processes (Guo & Gazley, 2015). In the sport literature, few studies have examined collaboration among nonprofit sport organizations (Sotiriadou et al., 2017). Noticeably, like their professional sport and business counterparts, NPSOs increasingly engage in collaborations to handle community and societal needs. However, the existing literature falls short in uncovering the collaborative mechanisms among NPSOs in the delivery of programs that are not core organization’s mission. In reality, most research on collaboration for social responsibility has examined NPSOs as recipients of these partnerships (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). This article addresses these knowledge gaps by examining the key factors underlying collaboration process among NPSOs for social responsibility programs. This research addresses the following research question: how do collaborations among NPSOs occur and evolve?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The present study is fundamentally guided by partnership implementation and management theory. Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2015) identify key components of the collaborative process and structures (i.e., trust and commitment, communication, legitimacy, collaborative planning, contextual influences, ambidexterity, leadership, governance, technology and collaborative capacity and competencies). Seitanidi and Crane (2009) propose three stages important in the development of process models of implementation. Their model identifies micro-processes of selection, design and institutionalization that typically feature in collaboration for social responsibility. Selection involves deciding associational form, assessing the partners’ options, assessing the risks. Design includes experimentation, adaptation and operationalization. Institutionalization refers to relationship mastering and personal familiarization. Sport-related research (Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Sotiriadou et al. 2017) found that informal control mechanisms often dominates informal control of nonprofit collaboration management.

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study builds on single case study research design. This study examines dyadic interorganisational relationships between sport federation and its sport member-clubs. Data

were collected by means of interviewing 14 key informants in Belgian hockey national and regional sport federations and its member-clubs involved in the implementation process of CSR programs through collaborations. The interview guide addressed the motives for collaborating, the nature of the collaboration, the purpose of the collaboration, the type of resources exchanges, the structure of the relationships, the role and responsibilities of the actors. The data are complemented by one observation at a program meeting and organizational documents as well as organizations' websites. Building on the related literature and employing an abductive approach, data were content analyzed using the Nvivo Software.

Results and Discussion

This research identifies key mechanisms of selection, design, and institutionalization that feature nonprofit collaboration process. Overall, this study showed that findings from cross-sectoral collaboration may not necessarily apply to collaboration among NPSOs (Babiak & Thibault, 2008), while the nature of the collaboration induces differences with collaboration for core mission (Sotiriadou et al., 2017). In particular, the findings revealed that the federations and the clubs are engaged in a top down and bottom up process through both formal and informal control mechanisms. Committed individuals – champions – as well as boundary spanners with strong personal or network of contacts have enabled the institutionalization of the collaborations. Besides, flexible structures and coordinated balanced management were crucial to adjust to different changes across the life cycle of the collaborations. Importantly, organizational learning to partner, from partners, and from unsuccessful experiences have importantly contributed to the adaptation and the sustainability of the collaboration.

Conclusion and Implications

Collaborations have been one of the most challenging implementation mechanisms to deliver social responsibility efforts. To date, the literature has mostly examined one type, namely cross-sectoral social partnerships. We contend that this organizational challenge is also evident in collaboration among NPSOs for social responsibility programs.

By the time of the conference, this ongoing-research intends to suggest a model reveals key management mechanisms and factors driving collaboration among NPSOs for social responsibility. This model will deepen the understanding of how such collaboration rise and evolve. Furthermore, this may have broader implications for the sport and nonprofit collaboration literature calling for such efforts (Babiak et al., 2017; Gazley & Guo, 2015).

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