What Difference Do Volunteers Make? The Impact of Human Resources on Organizational Capacity in Community Sport

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The notion that volunteers are critical to community sport is indisputable; their role and presence in the community sport system is well-documented (e.g., Cuskeley, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Doherty & Misener, 2008). Simply stated, we know who they are, the roles they fill, and why they are involved, or not (e.g., Cuskeley, 2004; Doherty, 2005a; Dorsch, Riemer, Sluth, Paskevich, & Chelladurai, 2002a,b; Leisure Industries Research Centre, 2003; Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007; Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009; Shibli, Taylor, Nichols, Gratton, & Kokolakakis, 1999). Research has also provided insight into the nature and outcomes of volunteer management practices at the community sport level (e.g., Cuskeley, Taylor, Hoye, & Darcy, 2006; Doherty, 2005b; Leisure Industries Research Centre, 2003). However, we have less understanding of volunteers’ specific influence(s) on the operations and performance of the community sport organizations (CSOs) that provide local recreational and competitive sport opportunities. Greater insight into what are perceived to be volunteers’ most important attributes, and what difference they make, will have implications for volunteer recruitment, training, deployment and retention in that context.

Hall et al. (2003) contend that human resources are fundamental to overall organizational capacity, or the ability of an organization to draw on various assets and resources in order to achieve its goals. These other assets and resources, according to the model of capacity in the nonprofit sector (Hall et al., 2003), include financial capacity (e.g., budgeting, stability), infrastructure capacity (e.g., communication, organizational culture, rules and regulations), planning and development capacity (e.g., strategic planning, program design, innovation), and relationships and network capacity (e.g., relationships with members, sponsors, suppliers). The multidimensional model argues that human resource capacity influences the nature and extent of these other four key dimensions, and together they determine organizational performance (also Letts, Ryan, & Grossman, 1999; Light, 2004; Sowa, Selden, & Sandfort, 2004). For example, various aspects of human resource capacity (e.g., skills, attitudes, deployment) may impact the ability of an organization to budget effectively, plan strategically, and form effective partnerships with external stakeholders. Hall et al.’s model provides a useful framework for systematically and comprehensively examining the dynamic between human resources and other dimensions of organizational capacity. In a study of nonprofit organizations based on this framework, Hall et al. found that human resource capacity, and particularly the availability of skilled volunteers, was linked to all four dimensions. In research specific to the community sport setting, Misener and Doherty (2009a) found evidence in one CSO of the influence of human resources on financial, planning, and relationship/network capacity in particular. In a broader survey study, Misener and Doherty (2009b) found that management and technical skills (operational competence) were critical to effective interorganizational relationships. Sharpe (2006) also reported that human resource capacity had implications for developing and leveraging CSO relationships and networks. This finding was echoed in research examining community-level partnerships in sport (Cousens, Barnes, Stevens, Mallen, & Bradish, 2006; Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004). These studies provide some insight into the specific impact of human resources, yet further investigation is required in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what difference volunteers make in the community sport context.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the nature and extent of the impact of human resources on the perceived financial, infrastructure, planning, and relationship/network capacity of CSOs. As part of a larger study examining organizational capacity in community sport, 13 focus groups were conducted with 51 presidents of CSOs in 6 communities across the province of Ontario, Canada. A semi-structured interview guide based on Hall et al.’s (2003) framework was used to generate insight into the key strengths and challenges of each of the five dimensions, with the intention of identifying the most critical elements of organizational capacity in this setting. The audio-recorded focus groups were transcribed verbatim. As part of the inductive analysis of the transcripts (Krueger, 1998),

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evidence of the impact of human resources on each of the four remaining capacity dimensions was noted during the coding process.

With regard to financial capacity, participants described the impact of volunteers’ particular attitudes, skills, and efforts on fundraising, grant funding, and maintaining fiscal responsibility. With regard to relationship/network capacity, participants noted that volunteers’ backgrounds and specific skills were important for forming partnerships and maintaining those relationships through engagement and trust. They also discussed the importance of volunteers to the establishment and maintenance of sponsorships in particular. Participants focused on the planning process and plan implementation in general as key elements of planning/development capacity. In doing so, they noted the impact of volunteers’ planning-related skills, personal agendas, and effort on the ability of CSOs to plan. They also described the impact of coach turnover in particular on the ability to plan for the future, and the impact of volunteer retention in general on the continuity of ideas. Volunteer attitudes, effort, and retention were also described as influential in the implementation of plans. Finally, with regard to infrastructure capacity, participants described the importance of specific skills and volunteer efforts to establishing and maintaining a formal club structure and related documentation (e.g., policies, procedures), and to effective communication within the club. They also noted the impact of volunteer turnover on internal communication. Further, maintaining a website was perceived to be influenced more by lack of volunteer time than skill. Detailed findings will be presented.

The findings contribute to our understanding of organizational capacity in community sport by highlighting the complexity of human resource capacity in terms of its varying impact on the other dimensions. The specific dynamics uncovered in this paper have implications for strengthening CSOs. Specifically, an increased understanding of the impact of certain volunteer skills, attitudes, and efforts can inform volunteer recruitment, training, deployment, and retention practices with the intention of sustaining and building financial, infrastructure, planning/development, and relationship/network capacity in CSOs. The findings can also inform future research on community sport volunteerism and volunteer management, and enhance the continuing investigation of organizational capacity in community sport.

Select References:


