Understanding the Role of Leaders in Interorganizational Partnerships: A Case Study of a Regional Health Promotion Strategy
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Reducing the prevalence of physical inactivity has become a priority of many public health services throughout the world (Jones et al., 1998; Sparling et al., 2000). This has involved developing organizations that participate in health promotion (World Health Organization, 1986). In Canada, a growing trend of community-based sport and physical activity programs has emerged, designed to increase physical activity levels of community members. These initiatives have been shown to be effective in helping to combat physical inactivity (Cameron et al. 2003; Kahn et al., 2002). Typically, these strategies involve numerous stakeholders such as local governments, community groups, public and private organizations, educational institutions, sport organizations, and health organizations. The development of partnerships among these types of groups represents a new strategy to integrate the activities of the sports, recreation, and health sectors to achieve a range of public health objectives, particularly those related to obesity and other forms of chronic disease prevention (Bull et al., 2004; Sparling et al., 2000).

A partnership is defined as a voluntary agreement between two or more organizations to work cooperatively toward a set of shared outcomes (Gillies, 1998). Interorganizational relationships (IOR), which involve partnerships between not-for-profit, state, and private organizations, have been heralded as an effective way to facilitate participation and empowerment in promoting healthy lifestyles and active community development (Kegler, et al., 2008). Much literature has addressed both the strengths and the challenges of IORs in the sport, recreation, and health sectors (i.e. Babiak, 2003; Babiak & Thibault, 2007; 2009; Best et al., 2003; Frisby, Thibault & Kikulis, 2004); however, one area that remains understudied is the role of leaders in these types of partnerships. Diamond (2002) has argued that leadership is crucial to the success of any partnership. Further, Babiak and Thibault (2009) discussed the importance of leaders in addressing the numerous challenges of multi-sector partnerships. Despite these assertions, little research has addressed the role of leaders and leadership in managing complex interorganizational partnerships.

Purpose of the Study

Stewart (1999) pointed out that collaboration in IORs is more about influencing an organization than an individual. Further, Huxham and Vangen (2000) explained how the frequent ambiguity of collaborative partners can complicate the authority structure and decision-making capacity of collaborative IORs. In this paper, I examine leadership in an IOR focussed on strategically promoting physical activity in Southwestern Ontario. Specifically, drawing upon Huxham and Vangen’s (2000) notion of collaborative leadership, which suggests that leadership is a process in which flexible social order is negotiated and practiced so as to protect and promote the values, I explore the perceptions of interorganizational partners regarding the role of leader(s), leadership activities in the collaboration, and expectations of organizational partners for leadership. In order to do so, I draw upon data collected as part of a larger Case Study examining a complexity of the IOR: Southwestern Ontario in motion.

Method

Low levels of physical activity exist across Canada. In Southwestern Ontario, physical activity levels are lower than the provincial (Ontario) average with 48.6% of the regional population engaging in regular physical activity, compared to 52.9% of the Ontario population (LHIN, 2003). Southwestern Ontario in motion was adopted as a means to address the low levels of physical activity in the region. The intent of in motion is to ingrain physical activity behaviours into the culture and fabric of local communities through targeted programming, promotional campaigns, and general public awareness. This initiative is guided by a non-profit interorganizational community partnership between organizations in three counties: Chatham-Kent, Lambton, and Windsor-Essex. The focus of this study was to examine the development and implementation of this tri-county interorganizational partnership.

As is common in case study research, data were collected using a number of different methods: participant observation, document analysis, and personal interviews (Yin, 2003). I have been fortunate to be part of the
Southwestern Ontario in motion steering committee from its implementation and thus collected participant observation data during meetings and events. Documents relating to the development of this strategy were collected to corroborate observation data and complete the understanding of the historical context for the development of in motion. Semi-structured interviews (n=14) were performed with most of the organizational partners involved in this imitative. The interviews focused on the perceptions of the partners regarding the strengths and challenges of the IOR, roles of partners, perceptions of leadership in the IOR, and overall management of the IOR. All data was collated and manually coded for themes, position paths, commonalities, and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

Results and Discussion

The discussion for this paper focuses on the results that speak to the importance of leadership in the development and maintenance of a complex IOR. A ‘traditional’ champion/leader has clearly emerged in this IOR who attempts to manage the complexity of the partnership arrangement. Two distinct opinions of the role of a leader for the IOR emerged: 1) Facilitator of the collaboration, and 2) Director of the collaboration. Partners with a large organizational stake in the partnership perceived the emergence of a ‘traditional’ leader as both problematic and necessary. The notion of one leader guiding the activities of the IOR conflicted with their own organizational prerogative for the IOR. Yet somewhat paradoxically, they were unwilling to take on a more collaborative leadership approach that meant they had more responsibility for the outcomes of the IOR. Other organizations expected the leader to be the overall driver of the IORs strategy and saw their own organizations as having little to no collaborative leadership role in the IOR. These organizations typically demonstrated less of a commitment to the IOR and sought to be only a peripheral partner in most aspects of the arrangement. This incongruency in the role and understanding of leadership in managing the IOR demonstrates another challenge that further serves to simultaneously enable and constrain the formation, development, and management of partnerships. Future research needs to address the role of leaders and how collaborative leadership is negotiated in complex IORs.

Selected References:


