A Case Study of the Organizational Cultures of Two Canadian Winter National Sport Organizations

Jess Dixon, University of Windsor
Marijke Taks, University of Windsor
Vassil Girginov, Brunel University
Scott Martyn, University of Windsor
Margery Holman, University of Windsor
Bob Boucher, University of Windsor

Organizational theory/culture
Abstract 2010-077
June 4, 2010
8:30 AM
25-minute oral presentation
(Sandhill Crane)

The benefits of participation in sport have been documented by many. Yet, despite years of coordinated policy interventions, sport participation rates in many countries, including Canada, remain low (The Conference Board of Canada, 2005). In an effort to combat these low levels of sport participation, Sport Canada established The Canadian Sport Policy in 2002. Through the establishment of this policy, Sport Canada anticipates that by 2012 “a significant higher proportion of Canadians from all segments of society [will be] involved in quality sport activities at all levels and in all forms of participation” (p.16). The Sport Participation Development Program (SPDP) was one of the primary vehicles implemented by Sport Canada to achieve this end. Fundamentally, the SPDP was an attempt at producing a cultural change in the manner by which sport was being delivered to, and experienced by, participants throughout the country.

National Sport Organizations (NSOs) play a critical role in the process of devising and interpreting sport policies, as well as in providing perceptual (i.e., awareness, attraction, and motivation) and social (i.e., socializing opportunities, program content, and management policy) access to sport. NSOs shape the cultural context in which interested participants can become engaged in sport. Building upon Becker’s (1963) observations of acculturation, it is argued that sport participants must overcome three significant hurdles before they become sport participants. These hurdles include educating oneself about: the appropriate way(s) of doing sport; how to perceive and identify the benefit(s) of participating in sport; and defining the effect(s) of sport as being a positive or pleasurable experience. Hence, sport represents a specific cultural practice, which is informed by a range of cultural symbols and meanings. Defined this way, NSOs can be seen as cultural agents that play a valuable part in creating, interpreting, and mediating these symbols and meanings through their policies and practices. Thus, the implementation of the SPDP poses a number of challenges to the existing organizational cultures of Canadian NSOs because it involves the creation of shared systems of meaning that are accepted, internalised, and acted upon at every level.

As part of a larger, ongoing, collaborative research initiative, the purpose of this study is to examine the organizational cultures of two Canadian winter sport NSOs relative to their commitment to sport participation. Investigations into the culture of sport organizations are scarce (e.g., Choi & Scott, 2008; Colyer, 2000; Girginov, 2006; Smith & Shilbury, 2004), and are virtually non-existent relative to the subject of sport participation. Despite this 'gap' in the literature, research on organizational culture has flourished in other settings, resulting in numerous perspectives and operationalizations. For the purpose of this investigation, we relied upon Smith and Shilbury's (2004) conceptual framework to gain an understanding of the organizational cultures of the selected NSOs. These authors identified twelve dimensions (and 68 sub-dimensions) of organizational culture (including change, competitors, customers, decisions, goals, heroes, history and tradition, risk, rituals, symbols, values and size) based on research involving a sample of eight Australian sport organizations.

Two winter NSOs were purposively selected for inclusion in this study from a subset of nine organizations that received funding from Sport Canada to support SPDP initiatives. The aim of purposive sampling is to intentionally seek organizations and people that meet the required criteria for inclusion in the study (Palys, 1997). In this case, Alpine Canada and Hockey Canada were specifically selected because of their shared involvement in the winter sport landscape and the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver, which are expected to leave a lasting participation legacy. Moreover, these organizations boast unique organizational histories, constituencies and structures, and varying degrees of commercial viability and professionalism, which make them appealing for the purposes of examination. Canadian NSOs have been under increased pressure from the government in recent years to become more professional by demonstrating improved self-sufficiency, effectiveness and performance on an
2010 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2010)

international stage (Amis & Slack, 2002; Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Slack, & Hinings, 1992). The emphasis on performance is especially true for winter sport NSOs in the build-up to hosting the 2010 Olympics Winter Games. The mandate for elite performance is particularly evident in the ‘Own the Podium 2010’ program that was launched by the Canadian winter sport NSOs and their major funding partners in 2005. This initiative is intended to help Canada’s winter athletes secure the most overall medals at the Olympics and to place in the top three nations (in gold medal count) at the Paralympic Games (VANOC, 2006). With such an emphasis on performance in these winter sport NSOs, one might expect to witness organisational cultures that neglect (or at least downplay) the values of broad sport participation in favour of those that support performance at an elite level.

Data for this study were collected via semi-structured interviews with senior executives and the SPDP representative within each participating winter sport NSO. Interview questions were based upon the cultural dimensions of sport organisations previously developed by Smith and Shilbury (2004) and were conducted in-person during the spring of 2008. Responses were coded and analyzed according to these same cultural dimensions using QSR NVivo 8 software. Indicators from Sport Canada’s SPDP Monitoring Reports and the personal observations of the researchers during their site visits were used to establish participation rates and the nature of participation for the NSOs under investigation.

Our results indicate that these two winter NSOs are ineffective in promoting the aims and values of broad sport participation and the SPDP, which remain largely unknown to participants (and to a degree, the executives). In the view of one executive at Alpine Canada,

...if you have a successful program that is generating interest and energy and enthusiasm through a winning team internationally [then] people [will] want to join. That’s a great sport participation model and we’re living it right now because that’s what’s happening in Alpine skiing. Whereas if you focus on trying to chase people to participate...good luck. It’s the wrong focus. (A1, personal communication, June 10, 2008)

Similarly, an executive at Hockey Canada suggested that “...results really impact what we do as an organization and ultimately we are...a results oriented organization and often times I think our planning revolves around how we do internationally” (H1, personal communication, June 23, 2008). When asked to describe the main traditions of Hockey Canada, another representative exclaimed: “Winning. Gold. Nothing less is acceptable. In Canada, you don’t win silver, you lose gold” (H2, personal communication, June 23, 2008).

With respect to the general public’s knowledge of its SPDP initiative(s), the same Alpine Canada executive suggested that “I think they don’t even know it exists. But the public typically knows our organisation exists” (A1, personal communication, June 10, 2008). These sentiments were echoed by one of the Hockey Canada participants who indicated that “They haven’t a clue that it exists; unaware, for the vast, vast majority. I’m probably not supposed to say that, but yeah, unaware for the vast majority” (H1, personal communication, June 23, 2008). It follows from comments like these, along with our independent observations, that these two NSOs were somewhat ineffectual at demonstrating a ‘participation culture,’ which we argue is essential to promoting the values, policies, and services necessary to engender the behavioural changes needed to spawn increased sport participation.

The overall objective of this research is to better understand and ultimately improve the effectiveness of policies aimed at promoting sport participation in Canada. Specifically, it is our hope to enlighten key NSO personnel and policy makers about the relationship between organisational culture and participation in sport. In doing so, these individuals will be in a more favorable position to implement changes within their respective organizations such that the ultimate goal of the Canadian Sport Policy (i.e., increased sport participation in Canada) may be achieved.