Understanding Artifacts in a Sport Organization from the Perspectives of Multiple Stakeholders

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The training environment where a sport takes place, such as a figure skating arena, is a manifestation of the sport club’s organizational culture (Martin, 2002; Schein, 1992). The layout, décor, and artifacts that make up this environment all contribute to a feeling or image when one is in the organization. Within the physical setting of a sport club are artifacts, such as banners, bulletin boards, photos, and trophies (Slack, 1997), which are often created or introduced by a small group of adults on behalf of the larger membership. It cannot be assumed that everyone will perceive artifacts as was intended by those who originally displayed or created them (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). For example, while some youth participants may be inspired by adult-designed public displays of competitive success in sport clubs, others may be marginalized or intimidated by them (Mills & Hoeber, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to compare key stakeholders’ understandings of artifacts in a sport organization. Rafaeli’s and Vilnai-Yavetz’ three dimensions of artifacts (2004) will be used to frame the stakeholders' understandings of artifacts. Martin’s three perspectives of organizational culture (1992, 2002) will be used as a framework to compare and contrast the perspectives of key stakeholders (i.e., coaches, executive members, parents, and youth sport participants).

Artifacts consist of instrumental, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). Instrumentality refers to the use or function of an artifact, aesthetics refers to the sensory experience that comes from interacting with an artifact, and symbolism encompasses the meanings associated with the artifact (Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2006). It is expected that stakeholders in an organization will focus on different dimensions of the artifacts, or different artifacts altogether.

Martin (1992, 2002) suggested that stakeholders interpret organizational cultures from at least three different perspectives: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. The integration perspective is characterized by assumptions of consensus, clarity, and consistency in understandings and meanings. The differentiation perspective recognizes that smaller subcultural groups in an organization may have conflicting meanings of organizational culture manifestations, like artifacts. The fragmentation perspective suggests that ambiguities are inevitable within organizations and subcultures because there usually are tensions, contradictions, and silences around the meanings of elements of an organizational culture.

This presentation is phase two of a two-part project examining stakeholders’ perceptions of artifacts in a figure skating club. During phase one, photo-elicited interviews (Collier, 1957; Samuels, 2004) were used to understand skaters’ perceptions of artifacts. A combination of participant and researcher photographs was discussed during the interviews. Results showed a variance between the artifacts photographed by the skaters and those identified by the researcher. Skaters focused primarily on the instrumentality of artifacts whereas the researcher focused more on the symbolism associated with them (Mills & Hoeber, 2009).

In phase two we are examining parents’, executive members’, and coaches’ perspectives of the organization’s artifacts. These stakeholders are often directly involved in selecting, displaying or creating the artifacts found in the arena. Data collection includes observations, fieldnotes, and photo-elicited interviews with each participant. Each interview will consist of two parts. Initially, the participants will be given an opportunity to discuss artifacts around the arena in an un-probed fashion. Next, they will respond to photosheets of an array of artifacts, which were created during phase one of the project (Mills & Hoeber, 2009). This second part of the interview follows a semi-structured format whereby participants will be asked about the instrumentality, symbolism, and aesthetics of the artifacts (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004).

The data will be analyzed in two phases. First, a priori coding will be used to identify instrumental, aesthetic, and symbolic comments made by the participants (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). Second, the data from all stakeholders
(skaters, parents, executive members, coaches) will be analyzed using Martin's (1992, 2002) framework to see where there is consensus, differentiation, or ambiguity relative to their understandings of the artifacts.

Studying artifacts provides a window into organizational culture (Gagliardi, 1990; Martin, 1992; Schein, 1985). While artifacts are often overlooked or taken for granted by management, they may be sending unintended messages to those who interact with them (Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2006). Research into artifacts may provide insight into the meaning of the sport club to its stakeholders (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). This insight may help executive board members and staff to make conscious decisions to develop, enhance or remove artifacts to create an environment that matches their club's goals and intentions and is meaningful to their members.