Organizational theory/culture

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Organizational Change in a Division I Intercollegiate Athletics Department

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Change is a constant in the 21st century business climate, the sport industry included. In today’s turbulent external environment, the pace of change continues to increase exponentially (Katzell & Austin, 1992). For sport organizations in particular to survive and grow, they must adapt quickly and nimbly to changes in strategy, size, environment and technology (Slack & Parent, 2006). However, there is an opposing set of environmental constraints which can inhibit an organization’s ability to adapt and change (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1984, 1989). Employees may also resist change due to a variety of environmental, organizational and individual factors (Ford, Ford, & D’Amelio, 2008; Hackman, 2003; Jick & Peiperl, 2003), or feel ambivalent about it (Piderit, 2000). Despite this prevalence of change within the sport industry, and that the environment of an organization is seen as having a significant influence on organizational change processes and outcomes (Chen, 2008; Head, 2005; Slack & Parent, 2006), there has been little empirical investigation of environmental forces and constraints impacting change, particularly in the intercollegiate context. This gap has led to the initiation of the present study. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate environmental forces influencing, and constraints inhibiting, organizational change in a Division I intercollegiate athletics department. As such, the guiding research questions were: 1) What environmental forces and/or constraints drive or influence change agent decision making in this department; and 2) What environmental constraints influence employee responses to organizational change in this department?

Two environmental theories were tapped as the undergirding theoretical framework for this study. First, Hannan and Freeman’s (1977, 1984, 1989) population ecology theory argues that organizational change is inhibited by eight internal and external pressures/constraints. Internal constraints include sunk costs in facilities and personnel, limits on internal information change leaders receive, internal political constraints, and organizational history and tradition. External constraints are legal and financial barriers to entry and exit from markets, limits on external information change leaders receive, concerns for the legitimacy of the organization, and the problem of collective rationality, or the tendency to believe that what is good or desirable for one organization in a system will be good or effective for all organizations in that system. A second theoretical building block for this study was institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Oliver, 1991; Zucker, 1983, 1987). Compatible with population ecology theory, institutional theorists posit that organizations change their structure to conform to expectations about appropriate design and function. These pressures are brought to bear by regulatory agencies, such as the NCAA or conference affiliations, which create expectations about the most appropriate ways to organize and conduct business (Slack & Parent, 2006).

Within the sport context, external pressures for change can involve fluctuating economic situations, technology advances in manufacturing of sport equipment, globalization of sport, and increased societal interest in sport and leisure (Slack & Parent, 2006). However, change is a paradox. Organizations must change and welcome continuous change in order to survive, grow and remain competitive (Jick & Peiperl, 2003), but as advanced by population ecology theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1977), organizational forms crave stability and need a relatively fixed and assured environment to be viable and successful (Peters, 1990).

The setting for this exploratory qualitative case study was a Division I athletics department at a large, private university in the Northeast with 19 varsity sports. The department had experienced a significant amount of transformational change over the past four years, which included hiring a new athletics director and switching to a new athletics conference. The study encompassed a bounded system of six months, lasting from October of 2008 into March of 2009, to best incorporate the role of time in change research (George & Jones, 2000). As recommended by Yin (1989) for qualitative case studies, data collection methods consisted of conducting two, face-to-face, semi-structured personal interviews spaced three to four months apart with 25 athletics department employees and student athletes from all strata of the department, change leaders as well as change recipients; directly observing 10 department meetings and 10 home athletics contests; analyzing over 70 physical artifacts of the department, including documents, web sites, competition facilities, and office spaces and memorabilia; reviewing department archival records, which included over 125 documents and photographs published between 1920 and 2006; and
inviting study participants to submit three short journal entries reflecting on their experiences with change in between the first and second personal interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Interview questions were derived from a pilot study conducted with four senior athletics administrators at four different Division I institutions. Open, axial and selective coding was employed in data analysis to identify common themes that emerged from the data (Cresswell, 1998; Neuman, 2006).

In terms of results, both population ecology theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) and institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) were helpful in answering the research questions. Findings revealed that the principal forces driving change and change agent decision making included competitive pressures derived from affiliation with a new athletics conference, economic conditions in a turbulent environment, and pressure from alumni, parents and fans who were clamoring for change. Employee responses to change varied from acceptance to resistance to ambivalence. Environmental constraints inhibiting change and influencing employee responses to change as well as change agent decision making were organizational history and tradition of the athletics department, internal politics within the broader institution, the historical lack of support for athletics within the institution, facility and resource constraints faced by the department and the university, and concerns for legitimacy of the organization. A discussion framing the results in the broader intercollegiate context will be provided. Suggestions and implications for future theory development and research will also be elucidated. Specifically, this research should be replicated in other Division I institutions, as well as Division II and III schools, to see if the findings hold and what other forces and/or constraints might emerge in those settings. Along these lines, there has been little research examining the environmental forces and constraints influencing change and responses to change in other sport settings such as professional, international and non-profit sport. Thus, there is merit in conducting studies in other sport environments as well.

The principal contribution of this study is that it addresses a gap in the sport management literature by shedding light on environmental forces and constraints influencing change in a Division I setting. It is hoped that this study can be a stepping stone for future change research, and provide a basis for the generation of a broader grounded theory of forces and constraints influencing change in the intercollegiate context in particular, and sport industry in general.