From Barriers to Bridges: Fostering Collaboration in Community Sport

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The need for more collaboration and integration in the Canadian sport system is captured in the most recent Canadian Sport Policy (2002) that calls for increased “collaboration, communication, and cooperation amongst the partners in the sport community, government and the private sector, which, in turn, will lead to a more effective Canadian sport system” (p.21). The call for enhanced interaction may be grounded in part by the need to bridge the sport-specific silos that dominate the Canadian sport system (Barnes, Cousens, & MacLean, 2007), and by the need to realize the strategic benefits associated with inter-organizational collaboration (Doz & Hamel, 1998).

Enhanced cooperation is recognized as means to influence the control and flow of resources (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001), to muster political power (Gerlach & Palmer, 1981), to manage environmental uncertainty (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1987), to share risk, or to enter into new markets. Enhanced collaboration is also recognized as a means to facilitate knowledge sharing (Kanter, 1994), and foster trust and commitment (Wilson, 1995) among organizations. Collaboration also has the potential to enhance social capital and contribute positively to organization capacity (Sharpe, 2006; Doherty & Misener, 2008).

The benefits of collaboration among sport organizations have also been identified. Stockdale and Williams (2007), in their study of rugby clubs in the United Kingdom, illustrated how cooperative relationships among local, same-sport clubs enabled each club’s volunteers to discuss common issues, to share knowledge and expertise, to engage in problem solving, and to attract new participants. According to these authors “the value of networking as a leadership tool should not be underestimated” (p. 340). Similarly, Nichols et al. (2005) also examined the linkages between rugby clubs and local governments in the UK. Their research suggests that the sport clubs entered into these partnerships to facilitate goal achievement and to ensure the strategic development of their sport.

Despite the benefits associated with collaborative behaviour, barriers to interaction have been identified. Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis (2004) suggested that the under-management of partnerships eroded interactions between sport organizations and their partners. Barnes et al. found that the lack of an administrative structure to coordinate the roles and efforts among organizations also contributed to the lack of integration among sport organizations and their potential partners. Concerns about the longevity of partnerships (Simmonds, 2000), the power imbalances and pressures to comply with the conditions of partners (Nichols et al., 2005), as well as the need to adopt the managerial structures to accommodate inter-organizational relationships (Shaw & Allen, 2006) have also been identified as barriers to collaboration.

The purpose of this research was to identify the conditions that facilitated or hindered collaboration and integration in two community sports: basketball and swimming. These two sports were specifically given a set of comparative criteria including systems of participation, level of competition, breadth of participants, accessibility, and institutional structure. This comparative research used qualitative methods as per Marshall and Rossman (2006) to explore the barriers to, and facilitators of, cooperation among the providers of swimming and basketball in one region of Ontario. Interviews with leaders from 11 basketball and 12 swimming organizations were conducted. A semi-structured interview guide was followed to enhance the consistency of the questions posed, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The line of questioning, for example, involved asking about links with resource providers, as well as about the reasons for or barriers to linkages with other organizations; including other basketball or swimming providers within its own network. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and member-checked by the interviewee for content accuracy. The analysis of the qualitative data consisted of open, axial, and selective coding, wherein each member of the research team read the data to identify codes, patterns, and relationships among words of the respondents.

The results of this research highlighted meaningful variations in the amount of collaboration in each of the two sports, with the providers of swimming having institutionalized several ways to foster cooperative activities on a...
continual basis. Facilitators of collaboration included trigger events that necessitated collaborative action, the use of brokers to negotiate partnerships, the development of managerial competencies to manage relationships, and a growing awareness and culture of collaboration that emerged over time.

By comparison, several barriers to collaboration were uncovered. The barriers including a general lack of managerial structures needed to effectively integrate inter-organizational activities. Additional barriers to linkages included power imbalances among potential partners, the lack of formal organizational structures to manage inter-organizational interdependence, the club’s reliance on normative processes, and rivalry among clubs for resources such as athletes, facilities, and sponsors.

The managerial implications of this research highlight the need for organizational structures (specialization, centralization) that facilitate integration between organizations. The policy implications for provincial governing bodies include, for example establishing a regional framework that will limit club rivalry among existing clubs and create barriers to entry for new clubs. The need for provincial sport organizations to mandate strategic planning by local sport clubs, and to implement requirements for long-term contracts or relationships with facility providers (municipal governments, schools) and/or corporate sponsors were also implications of this research. These findings, along with suggestions for future research will be presented. In addition, points of emphasis for the practicing sport manager will be defined.