The Organizational Culture of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games: Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Stakeholder Influences

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Organizational theory/culture
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Typically, people within organizations continually contribute to building (consciously or unconsciously) and refining the organizational culture; a key element in determining effectiveness and efficiency within organizational life (McShane & Steen, 2009). However, what happens in the case of temporary, ephemeral organizations, such as major sporting events? How is organizational culture built, and to what extent does it truly impact effectiveness and efficiency? We use the case of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games to begin to answer these research questions. As well, the study of organizational culture can be problematic. For instance, an external perspective is said to not truly “understand” what goes on within the organization. At the same time, a researcher using an internal perspective may be too close to the data/context to truly provide an appropriate analysis. Is it possible to use the best of both approaches in studying organizational culture? Our purpose is to combine an internal perspective with an external view in examining the organizational culture of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games and its impact on effectiveness and efficiency. This study therefore provides a significant contribution to the literature in terms of (a) an innovative methodology which combines the internal data gathering perspective/understanding with the external analysis/reflection; (b) examining organizational culture within a temporary organization; (c) suggesting how organizational culture can be built in temporary organizations, through the influence of stakeholders; and (d) linking organizational culture (in a temporary organization) with the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency.

An organizational behaviour perspective for major sport events is not new. Previous studies have examined human resource management (planning, issues, and strategies) regarding both volunteers and staff (e.g., Chanavat & Ferrand, 2010; Getz, 2005; Parent & Slack, 2007; Pauline & Pauline, 2009; Xing & Chalip, 2009). Yet, little has been done explicitly regarding organizational culture within a major sport event context. One exception is McDonald (1991) who described her experience as an employee of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games Organizing Committee and its organizational culture. As well, no study has truly linked organizational culture and performance (defined here as effectiveness and efficiency) within major sporting events.

Organizational culture can be defined (classically) as the “underlying values, beliefs and principles that serve as a foundation for an organization’s management system” (Denison, 1990, p. 2). Although much debate surrounds the most appropriate means by which to examine culture (cf. Sackmann, 2001), most scholars agree that the values engendered within an organization have profound implications (cf. Schein, 1985). Indeed, in sport management research, values have been shown to influence leadership, decision making, human resource management and other strategies of significance in organizational operations sometimes producing subcultures within the greater organization (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005; Skinner, Stewart & Edwards, 1999; Smith & Shilbury, 2004).

The first author was seconded to the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC) for four months, from November 1st 2009 to February 28th, 2010, as a protocol and language services manager. Every day, daily notes regarding what was happening, discussions among colleagues, and overall impressions were noted via tape recorder. These resulted in 155 pages of transcribed text (102,826 words). Further data were collected from VANOC and its stakeholders, such as posters, books, ceremony participant boxes, policies and procedures, and planning and operating documents. While the initial reason for the data collection was not to examine organizational culture specifically, this issue clearly emerged from the data. In order to not bias the analysis, the second author, who was not involved in the 2010 Games, conducted a first pass of data analysis independently of the first author. A full review of transcriptions generated open codes, axial and selective coding (inductive), which produced emergent, higher-order themes (i.e., timeline, emergence of values, operational issues) (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994) grouped according to both espoused organizational values and perceived values from the first author. These results were then member checked with the first author, as well as former VANOC colleagues of the first author to ensure reliability and validity.

First, we found that there was an overall VANOC culture, as expected, but also different and competing subcultures between the different functions (pre- & during Games time), and then added competing venue subcultures (during Games time), which the VANOC workforce had to navigate to perform their duties (operational issues). Second, different stakeholders helped form and impacted VANOC’s culture and the varying subcultures differently based in part on previous Games experience as well as anointed leadership within the temporary divisions. Third, we found differences between espoused values (e.g., team, trust, sustainability, excellence, creativity, legacy, and safety) and perceived values (e.g., formalization, hierarchical control, safety, knowledge transfer, social bonding, environmentalism, history, volunteerism, adaptability, and possible outcomes of importance).
Our findings indicate that organizational culture within sport event management are formed by the leaders, but also by the stakeholders involved in the various games modes/functions. As well, stakeholders have an impact on the formation of subcultures. While VANOC was seen as a generally “well functioning” organization, with a very successful event result, the issue for the workforce was to navigate these different subcultures, which had varying pockets of responsibility, and created communication issues, challenges regarding coordination, decision making inconsistency and power relation issues. As well, many technical problems seemed to prevent an efficient flow of information and timely resources to be shared, thereby showing how subcultures can impact effectiveness and efficiency within major sporting events. In conclusion, we find organizational culture to have a great impact on the functioning and outcomes of a major sport event organizing committee. Future research should examine how top management can not only create, but control, the different subcultures, which can be argued to actually be necessary for the planning and hosting of a major sport event. The presentation will discuss the results and implications for sport management further.