An Examination of Individual, Organizational, and Systemic Level Performance Change in National Sport Organizations

Patti Millar, The University of Western Ontario
Julie Stevens, Brock University
Dina Bell-Laroche, Sport Law and Strategy Group

Abstract 2012-038  11:40 AM

The current Canadian sport landscape presents a unique context to examine the management of change. Several recent initiatives, including renewal of the Canadian Sport Policy, the surge of the Canadian Sport for Life movement, the implementation of the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, and the augmentation of Own-the-Podium high-performance programs, present challenges for Canadian national sport organization (NSO) managers. One response that assists NSO managers to better navigate this dynamic terrain is a training program called the Risk Management Workshop (RMW). The RMW utilizes a novel organizational development approach that emphasizes an individual-level training environment. The intent of the RMW is to connect training to individual, organizational, and systemic level performance changes. Due to policy and funding mandates, Canadian NSOs rely heavily upon sector-wide standards to define organizational priorities (Senior Leaders Forum, 2008). As such, training in Canadian NSOs must not only improve individual and organizational performance, but also generate systemic level performance change.

There is a general consensus in human resource management literature that, in order to be worthwhile, all training practices must ultimately improve individual and organizational performance through the transfer of training (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Holton, Bates, & Ruona, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 1996). However, despite this claim there is little focus on the progression of both short and long term performance change within training evaluation literature (Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2009). Consequently, the purpose of this research project was to examine the impact of training according to three levels of change within Canadian amateur sport – the individual performance change of NSO managers, the organizational performance change of a NSO, and the systemic level performance change of the NSO sector.

A two-phased mixed-methods approach was utilized for this study. First, the quantitative phase involved a quasi-experimental longitudinal design. The Risk Management Workshop (RMW), a two-day training program, was administered to the senior staff and executive volunteers within Canadian NSOs. A total of eight workshops were included in this study, with a total sample size of 35 (N=35). Workshop attendees completed the same training evaluation survey at three time series: prior to, immediately following, and three months after the RMW. The survey included demographic items and 85 items to measure learning (understanding and applicability), individual performance, and organizational performance outcome factors, as well as motivation to transfer, training design, and organizational climate mediating factors. Second, the qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with the Executive Directors of twelve NSOs that participated in the RMW (n=12). The interview was held 16-months following the RMW which provided a significant timeline for the ED to observe the impact of training at individual, organizational, and systemic levels. In addition, the 16-month follow-up interview provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on both short-term and long-term changes in performance.

The results from the quantitative data are consistent with several models of change progression and change evaluation (Giberson, Tracey, & Harris, 2006; Goodman & Dean, 1982; Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993). These models exhibit a progression through the outcome variables associated with training, beginning with knowledge acquisition and finishing with a change in behaviour at the organizational level. More specifically, the data in this study indicated a similar change progression, with learning (understanding and applicability) as the first stage of performance change, followed by individual performance, and concluding with organization performance. The findings from the qualitative data demonstrated a multi-leveled impact of training and supported both sequential and non-sequential change. While the participants acknowledged an initial impact on their own performance, and the performance of other staff and senior volunteers who attended the RMW, it was reiterated that over the course of 16-months, the training impact extended more broadly throughout their NSO and the NSO sector.
The findings of this study facilitate a discussion that addresses why training may change a sport manager’s performance (individual), why training may change a NSOs performance (organizational), and why training may change ways of framing performance within the broader NSO sector. Three key theoretical frames explain each level of training-related change. First, Vroom’s expectancy theory (1964) describes the processes through which individuals are motivated by the expected outcomes of behaviour (Smith, Jayasuriya, Caputi, & Hammer, 2008) and provides an appropriate lens to discuss individual level training-based change. Second, organizational systems and organizational adaptation theories prioritize the interrelationships within a system and provide an effective platform to understand the transformation of NSO structures and procedures as a result of training (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Last, institutional theory (IT) posits that action is constrained and shaped by an institutional context (Strang & Sine, 2002), where routines and protocols that are dominant in shaping that context become institutionalized norms (Elsbach, 2002). IT provides a broader perspective to explore the manner by which a training initiative such as the RMW can generate change by challenging taken-for-granted beliefs about performance within Canadian NSOs (Oliver, 1992; Senior Leaders Forum, 2008).

While this study highlighted training as a trigger for individual and organizational performance change, it also demonstrated that training may initiate change at a systemic level. The quantitative data revealed an organizational performance change three months following the RMW. However, the qualitative data provided a greater understanding of how this performance change occurred, and revealed the impact extended beyond an individual manager and NSO to permeate the NSO sector as a whole. Evidently, increasing amounts of training at the individual level can trigger multi-level change and provide many benefits to the amateur sport sector.