Exploring the Utility of Collaborative Governance

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In recent years an emphasis on improved governance has been supported by scholars investigating the status of sport governance (e.g., Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013; Hoye, 2007; Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Shilbury, Ferkins, & Smythe, 2013; Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009; Yeh, Taylor, & Hoye, 2009). Limited attention, however, has been paid to collaborative or systemic governance (Henry & Lee, 2004) as it relates to sport organisations. Few scholars have directed their empirical or theoretical attention to the role of collaborative governance in sport organisations, and in particular to those sport organisations that exist within a federal structure.

Collaborative governance theory has its origins in public administration and more specifically the need for government to work with multiple stakeholders to deliver major projects and services to communities (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Bologh, 2012; Thomson & Perry, 2006). Although grounded in public administration, collaborative governance theory clearly has wider application beyond this sphere as is argued in this presentation. The application of collaborative governance is relevant to national and state sport organisations embedded in a federal system, where each state and territory association is a separate legal entity, yet collectively the states and territories form the national governing body. On the surface, the need for collaborative governance appears obvious in this structure.

Australian national sport organisations are typically composed of separate legal entities at state and territory level, and are thus governing within a federal model. The complexity of sport governance constituted by separate legal entities is further compounded when a delegate or representative form of decision making is a feature of a sport’s governance. This system has traditionally reinforced adversarial decision-making (Shilbury, Ferkins, & Smythe, 2013) with a focus on the interests of the individual member associations at the expense of the greater good of the sport. This tension between individual state interests and the collective greater good of the sport, from a governance perspective, shapes the rationale for exploring the utility of collaborative governance theory in this setting. This study is therefore, one of the first to examine collaborative governance in a federal structure.

In order to learn more about how collaborative governance could contribute to improving governance capability, an 18-month qualitative study investigated how the board of one national sport organisation (Bowls Australia) could develop their governance capabilities. The aims of this study were to a) identify what meaning members of a sport board attach to the concept of governance capability; b) identify what factors both constrain and enable governance capability of sport boards; c) identify what actions can be taken to develop capability of sport boards; and d) consider the implications of such action for governance theory and practice.

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the findings of this research designed in conjunction with the board of Bowls Australia (BA) the national governing body for lawn bowls in Australia. BA is composed of nine member-associations, which includes seven state, and two territory associations reflecting the federal form of Australian government. Each member association is a separate legal entity, but recognise BA as the national governing body. Prior to 2011, the BA board was composed of delegates nominated as representatives of the State Member Associations (SMAs). This is no longer the case, and although the conflicts inherent with a delegate system of governance have been removed, the board is still required to work with and through the SMAs to develop lawn bowls throughout Australia.

An action research approach was employed for the study. Data were generated as part of a collaborative approach between the research team and BA to identify barriers to the governing function, and implement and evaluate actions to enhance board capabilities. Board meetings, planning workshop, interviews, participant observation, and document analysis were the primary methods used to generate, interpret and evaluate data between August 2012 and April 2013.
Data collection involved three phases. The first was the reconnaissance and issue identification phase, which sought to assess the current situation regarding board function, including perceived strengths and weaknesses. The second was the intervention and action phase where proposals for change were agreed and enacted. The final phase was an evaluation, designed to assess the outcomes and impact of change. As part of phase 1, three workshops were conducted to explore board member perceptions of the governing role including strengths and weaknesses, ideal perceptions of a capable board and perceptions of current performance to determine how a gap between the two might be filled.

What emerged from these workshops was an intervention designed to overcome a general feeling of malaise towards governance throughout the sport. It was clear that cultural change was required to enhance governance capability. Education was deemed to be the most likely mode of influencing cultural change, and as a consequence, the intervention involved using the strategic planning process to formulate a plan for bowls in Australia to which all member associations would contribute.

The intervention therefore focused on a collaborative approach to formulating the plan for bowls in Australia, and at the same time developing processes that would enhance governance capability of the BA board. Consequently, the number of research participants grew from the nine BA Directors and CEO, to include the Presidents, Board and CEOs of member associations plus other stakeholders. A series of actions constituting the intervention phase were developed informed by Ansell and Gash's (2008) model of collaborative governance. These actions will be detailed during this presentation.

Using collaborative governance as the underlying theory for this research, this presentation will explain how the intervention phase unfolded and how board member behaviour in response to proposed changes can be explained. This presentation will also capture the outcomes of the final stage of this research through the evaluation interviews. The primary focus of the evaluation phase was to identify ‘change and learning’ (Heron & Reason, 2001). BA board members were encouraged to reflect on the 18-month process and to consider tangible and intangible changes as well as board level and individual learning.

Results demonstrate the utility of collaborative governance to overcome adversarial national, member-state relations for the purpose of establishing a common and unifying vision for bowls, while also enhancing governance capability. Specifically, this study identified the importance of board leadership by the national governing body in setting the tone for the type and nature of governance decision-making throughout the sport. It also highlights future research directions in relation to collaborative governance and board leadership in federal governance structures.