Understanding Conative Change in Sport Organizations: Multiple-Level Analysis and Seasonality

Nicolas Lorgnier, Canisius College
Che-Jen Su, Fu Jen Catholic University
Shawn O'Rourke, Canisius College

Organizational theory/culture
Friday, May 30, 2014
20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Carnegie III)

Abstract 2014-098
9:20 AM
(Carnegie III)

The organization of recreational sport service providers seems to attract growing interest from the international scientific community. Mintzberg’s organizational configurations and Greiner’s organizational revolutions are discussed in an exclusively theoretical manner (Mahé de Boislandelle, 1997; Slack & Parent, 2006; Tribou & Augé, 2006; Chelladurai & Madella, 2006) or applied to sports federations (Madella, Bayle et al. 2005; Zintz & Camy, 2005), in contemporary literature. However, to our knowledge, no authors have used this work to either classify the sports providers or tried to reconcile these theories, even though they are essential to understanding organizational behavior and business strategies (Hatch, 1997; Mintzberg, 1998).

We argue that, although the theoretical justifications and practical implications of the two models may differ, the ideal-types proposed by the authors reveal similar tendencies to act, or conations (Bui-Xuan, 1993). The reflection leads to the idea of conative change, which is studied from a seasonal and multi-level perspective.

Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework

Conation. The word conatus means effort, tendency, inclination but stoics still use the concept to describe the action of the soul on an object, an action in which the result is a physical action (Traupman 1966). The concept was mainly overlooked by scholars during most of the 20th century. However, at the turn of the millennium, scholars seemed to demonstrate a renewed interest in the concept, especially in education science and organization (Bui-Xuan, 1993, Joing, 2010; Kolbe, 1980, Lorgnier, 2011). The framework used for this research gathers approaches from Greiner (1998a, 1998b) on organizational revolutions and Mintzberg (2006) on organizational configurations. Then, potential complementarities are discussed from a conative perspective and working hypotheses adapted from Lorgnier (2011)’s 5 stage model are proposed:

Working Hypothesis 1: Emotional stage. The organization focuses on the creation of the structure. The leader guides its development with authority. The activity is directed by his emotions in a perspective of discovery and aims at structuring material and organizational aspects of the activity (for the creation of the product / service), in order to provide for immediate needs.

Working Hypothesis 2: Streamlining stage. The organization aims at improving its functionality, at expanding the field of possibilities in the existing structure. The leader looks to develop routines (of functioning) that are more and more efficient. For this matter, the research of solutions is mainly internal.

Working Hypothesis 3: Technical stage. The organization research for pertinent information, mainly developed outside of the organization (reports, trainings, etc.) and the direct application of these expert models or techniques. Some employees are highly trained and relay the commands of the manager.

Working Hypothesis 4: Conceptualization stage. The organization aims at adapting to the context, guided by its environment. The leader relies on his/her ability to conceptualize problems reported by his/her team to organize the actions of subordinates. The latter have high skills which allow them to work independently.

Working Hypothesis 5: Innovation stage. The organization is in a permanent research of innovation. The employees are proficient and project teams coordinate together. The manager facilitates the process. The approach is pioneer and always directed towards the development of new responses.

Multiple-level Analysis in Organizational Behavior. Many authors have answered the contemporary call for more integrative, cross-level approach of research in organization science (Rousseau & House, 1994 ; Anderson, 1999). However, to the extent of our knowledge, multi-level approaches have not yet been used to further discuss...
organizational ideal-types. Our contribution proposes to consider conations in a homologous multilevel model (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

Seasonality in Sport and Tourism Organizations. Seasonality of the demand is generally considered to be a major challenge for tourism and sport businesses (Higham & Hinch, 2002). However, to the extent of our knowledge, no study used the seasonality of the activity in order to discuss changes of organizational ideal-types or configurations.

Method

An in-depth qualitative approach was used for the study as it is consistent with our exploratory and descriptive aim (Eisenhardt, 1989). The case study analyzes the organization of nautical sports on a beach in Northern France including three nonprofit organizations. Therefore, it represents an embedded approach (Andrew, et al., 2011) including internal perspectives of the nonprofits and an interorganizational perspective of the supply which allows for findings about the subunits (the nonprofits) and the overall case (Andrew, et al., 2011). Data was collected from a variety of sources, meeting the requirement of “triangulation” (Yin, 2011).

Results and Discussion

The case study revealed four observed types of organization (at the organizational and interorganizational levels; during high and low season) which were then discussed using our working hypotheses (1 to 4). As to be expected, ideal-types differed from the observed types. However, they also revealed striking similarities.

In summary, the research makes two theoretical contributions. First, the originality of the paper stands in the singular triangulation of theories which leads to the definition of the working hypotheses. Second, the paper also brings an unusual emphasis on the variety of organizational levels in which the ideal-types emerge and their seasonality, two factors of change which are rarely studied and which present an alternative to the “one best way” evolution usually associated with the life cycle metaphor of stage approaches (Phelps, Adams, Bessant, 2007).

Practically, this reflection is of main importance as organizational configurations can partially explain organizational performance (Fiss, 2011; Ketchen et al., 1997) and strategy (Hatch, 1997; Mintzberg, 1998). Moreover, the paper suggests three types of strategy for sport organizations: (1) In a defensive strategy, the organization try to comeback to a less evolved conative ideal-type. We can then talk about conative regression. (2) In a stabilisation strategy, the organization « persevere in its being » without conative change. However, in the context of a crisis, this can be destructive. We can therefore propose the idea of (destructive) persistance of the conatus. Last, (3) in an growth strategy, the organization will evolve to a more advanced conative stage.

From a method perspective, triangulating theoretical frameworks brings more support to an emerging theory (Denzin, 2006). Likewise, an in-depth qualitative approach is particularly effective when little is known about a phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989). However, a single case study offers limited external validity (Yin, 2011) and a low potential for analytic generalization (Maylor & Blackmond, 2005 ; Yin, 2011). Thus, comparing results across different settings, groups or events would seem appropriate in order to support or challenge our working hypotheses (Cronbach, 1975 ; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 ; Yin, 2011). Last, we could question the relevance and contribution of each observed variable to the definition of the ideal-types. Indeed, observed variables’ contribution to a configuration can greatly differ (Fiss, 2011).