The Ties that Bind: A Case Study of Community Sport Partnerships

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

Abstract 2014-162
3:10 PM
(Carnegie III)

Interorganizational relationships appear to be a critical means for community sport organizations (CSOs) to obtain many of the resources needed to fulfill their mandates of sport and physical recreation program and service delivery (Misener & Doherty, 2009). Recent research indicates CSOs partner with a variety of organizations in the nonprofit, public, and commercial sectors for a range of resources, including physical (facilities, equipment), financial (grants, cash, in-kind donations), and human resources (technical expertise, support) (Misener & Doherty, 2013). It is important to understand the nature of those relationships, and the factors that influence their success. Consequently, there is a growing body of work that has examined interorganizational relationships in the community sport context (Alexander, Thibault, & Frisby, 2008; Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2009; Cousens, Barnes, Stevens, Mallen, & Bradish, 2006; Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004; Maclean, Cousens, & Barnes, 2011; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013; Shaw & Allen, 2006; Vail, 2007). The focus of that work has been, varyingly, relationship formation, management and outcomes. However, only a few of those studies have focused in depth on a single linkage which may provide more comprehensive insight (Alexander et al., 2008; Shaw & Allen, 2006); a perspective that Frisby et al. (2004) called for in their early work.

The current study builds on this work to date by examining a single case of a successful relationship between a junior football club and the university football program in the same city. The relationship, which began in January 2012, includes resource exchange in the form of coaches and players, and resource sharing, including infrastructure and fundraising opportunities. Two years into the relationship, both parties have seen positive outcomes, particularly with regard to player development and competitive performance. It is seen as a model for promising practice, garnering considerable interest and media exposure across the province while still in its early development.

The study is founded on Cousens et al.’s (2006) framework for understanding sport and recreation linkages. The framework contends that a successful interorganizational relationship is a function of the type and strength of the linkage between two organizations (exchange, partnership, strategic alliance, joint venture, merger/acquisition; Faulkner, 1995), the nature and extent of shared values and beliefs (Kanter, 1990), the resource investment by each party (physical, financial, human), and the evaluation of that linkage (Cousens et al., 2006).

The purpose of this study is to extend our understanding of community sport partnerships by examining the characteristics of one successful linkage between two sport organizations. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the type of linkage between the two organizations, and how has this evolved?
2. How strong is the linkage, and how has this evolved?
3. What resources are exchanged in the relationship?
4. What are the shared values and beliefs, if any, among the two organizations?
5. How is the relationship monitored and evaluated, if at all?

As a case study of the linkage between the two organizations is the unit of analysis, it is important to gather indepth insight from both parties (Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005). Data collection is underway. To address the research questions, primary data is generated from personal interviews with a purposeful sample of key members of both organizations who are well-positioned to speak about the formation and maintenance of the linkage (e.g., board presidents, head coaches). Secondary data is generated from the organizations’ websites and relevant public documents (e.g., media sources, press releases). The audio-recorded interviews are being transcribed in full. Transcripts with data from the secondary sources are also being prepared. Data analysis will consist of a priori coding in relation to the research questions, followed by emergent coding to capture any subthemes that arise regarding the type and strength of the linkage, resources, and values and beliefs (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Any contrasting narratives about the interorganizational relationship, from within and across the two organizations, are equally valued and will be taken...
into account. The outcome will be a “case study story” about the successful linkage between the two distinct football programs, presented chronologically and thematically (Patton, 2002).

The findings are expected to provide valuable insight into the nature of a successful relationship, with implications for best practices that may be considered in the “partnership management plans” (Frisby et al., 2004, p. 123) of similar organizations. The findings will also advance understanding of interorganizational relationships in community sport context.

References


