Olympic Circuits of Power: The Influence of Key Stakeholders on the Planning and Organization of the Games

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Research on planning and organizing of international sport events has permeated the event and sport management literatures over the past decade. Some work has examined the relevance of event stakeholders in the successful planning and implementation of sporting events. For example, Parent (2008) identified different groups of sport event stakeholders and the variety of issues they managed during the hosting process. Parent, Rouillard, and Leopkey (2011) examined issues encountered and strategies used by the various levels of government in the coordination of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, not only is it important to identify stakeholders impacted by the event process, but it also critical to understand the role they play in the organization of the event. That being said, little research has investigated the power and authority of the central event stakeholders and the influence they have on the local organizing committee. As such, the purpose of this presentation is to examine and compare the power and authority of various central stakeholders (e.g., government, National Olympic Committees [NOCs]) and their impact on the planning and implementation in two editions of the Olympic Games, namely Sydney 2000 and Vancouver 2010.

In attempting to understand the authority of various Olympic stakeholders in the organization of the Games, Clegg (1989) offers a useful template for examining and explaining organizational power relations. His framework suggests that organizational power flows through three interdependent but overlapping circuits and can be used to highlight the relational and dynamic nature of power in organizations. The three circuits are episodic (power as agency), dispositional (power as relationships) and facilitative (power as discipline) (Bathelt & Taylor, 2002). The episodic circuit concentrates on the causal characteristics that shape organizational power relations. In this stage, the standing conditions that shape power relations need to be understood (Clegg et al., 2006). For instance, who controls organizational resources and the nature of those resources (e.g., human, financial, technological, informational). Dispositional power refers to the rules that govern organizations and their membership (Clegg, 1989). This circuit of power works through the creation of rules and regulations that are required to be followed if one is to remain a member of an organization or institution. The third circuit is facilitative power. This is where the positive and strategic aspects of power relations are sketched and collective effort combines to produce positive organizational outcomes (Clegg et al., 2006).

Case studies (Sydney 2000 and Vancouver 2010) were used in order to compare the roles and experiences of the central stakeholders involved in two editions of the Olympic Games. The comparison of these two cases allows us to understand the contextual similarities and differences between the roles of central stakeholders at different editions of the event. Both in-depth interviews (63 interviews in total were undertaken between 2002 and 2012) and archival materials such as candidature files, multi-party agreements, final reports, and web site content were used as sources of data. Data analysis occurred in the form of a content analysis using qualitative data assessment software that facilitated the coding and retrieval of the data by allowing the researcher to highlight themes that appeared in the archival material. Emerging patterns are discussed below.

Power as Agency

In this stage, positional power and therefore organizational authority needed to be considered. The findings show that the formal authority of the local NOCs (e.g., the Australian Olympic Committee [AOC] and the Canadian Olympic Committee [COC]) were institutionally interdependent, firstly on the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as the event owner of the Olympic Games, and secondly on the legal and political structures of the various levels of local governments involved in the staging of the events (e.g., the New South Wales Government in the case of Sydney 2000 and the Canadian Federal Government and Government of British Columbia in the case of
Vancouver 2010). These governance structures formed the foundation of the NOCs organizational power within the local organizing committees.

Power as Relationships

Dispositional power includes the power of status and membership and the influence they afford in power relations (Bathelt & Taylor, 2002). For instance, as bidding NOCs, the AOC and the COC accepted the rules and regulations established by the IOC, through its Olympic Charter. Likewise, the various levels of government as the other key stakeholders not only had to agree to the rules and regulations established by the IOC but also committed to the rules and regulations presented by the AOC and the COC, respectively, as the IOC’s representative in Australia and Canada. This power was particularly expressed through the Endorsement Contract signed between the AOC and the NSW Government in 1991 and the multi-party agreement signed in 2003 between all major stakeholders of the Vancouver 2010 Games.

Power as Discipline

Organizational power relations in this stage are viewed as more than ‘power as relationships’. Rather, this circuit addresses an organization’s ability to exploit resources in new and novel ways in order to obtain a competitive advantage. In this stage “standing conditions no longer stand. Rule fixing, meaning and memberships are changed … potent uncertainty and dynamism [are introduced] into power relations” (Clegg, 1989, p. 236). For instance, a central (and unintended) consequence of a key decision made between the AOC and the NSW Government stripped authority from the Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) for a crucial Games planning function. The AOC through the formation of an independent agency called the SOCOG Sport Commission (SSC) gained power to organize and deliver the Olympic sport program at Sydney 2000. This decision allowed the SOCOG Board to be focused on other organizational work that consumed a lot of time, such as bringing in revenue and containing costs. Due to this transfer in decision-making power, the AOC through the SSC had the power and resources to make several decisions during the lead-up to and following the Games (Frawley, 2010).

It is evident that the power and authority of the central stakeholders of an edition of the Olympic Games can have a significant impact on the planning and delivery of the event. Moreover, Clegg’s (1989) circuits of power framework provides a solid foundation for the exploration and explanation of the power relations between these stakeholders. Both theoretical and managerial implications from this research will be presented.