Intersectorial Partnership in Disability Sport: A Case Study Examination

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Sport organizations often seek to develop strategic partnerships or alliances with external organizations. The preconditions driving the formation of these strategic partnerships or alliances include the desire to achieve common goals in addition to goals specific to each strategic partner, the ability to manage uncertainty in the operating environment, and the desire to facilitate enhanced performance and competitive edge (Kennelly & Toohey, 2014; Turner & Shilbury, 2010). Further, the need to gain access to additional resources is a key driver to the formation of a strategic alliance (Wittman, Hunt, & Arnett, 2009). Through these alliances, organizations are able to advance their current positions by accessing resources that were previously unavailable to them or difficult to obtain on their own (Das & Teng, 1998), thus providing both entities with advantages over their competition (Das & Teng, 2000; Hardy, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2003; McCarter, Mahoney, & Northcraft, 2011).

Three areas of focus have been applied to the study of strategic alliances, including those formed by sport organizations. These areas include the preconditions that serve to motivate the formation of an alliance and subsequent collaboration, the structures and processes put into place in alliance formation, and the outcomes that result from formation of the alliance (Gray & Wood, 1991). These three foci have been applied to evaluation of strategic alliances within the context of sport organizations (Kennelly & Toohey, 2014). However, the complexity surrounding the development of strategic alliances can be increased when such partnerships occur across industry sectors, forming intersectorial partnerships. These intersectorial partnerships have unique demands compared with those occurring within the same industry segment, as a result of differing organizational missions and goals (Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Oppen, Sack, & Wegener, 2005). In a sport context, intersectorial strategic alliances can be formed, for example, between for-profit and nonprofit organizations and between disability sport and nondisability sport organizations.

When evaluating the structure and processes involved in strategic alliance formation, the quality of relationships, including trust and clear expectations between organizational department and/or individuals, has been identified as critical to the success of these partnerships (Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Devine, Boyle, & Boyd, 2011; Misener & Doherty, 2013). Strategic alliances are judged as successful if the outcomes of the alliance meet with the intended objectives of both involved partner organizations. Within non-profit sport organizations, positive outcomes associated with successful interorganizational partnerships include potential cost savings, organizational learning, higher quality service, program growth, increased revenue, building a stronger sense of community, and greater public accountability (Kennelly & Toohey, 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2013).

Evaluation of strategic alliances within the context of disability sport organizations has thus far focused only on evaluation of sponsorship activities (Cottingham, Gearity, & Byon, 2013; Macdougall, Nguyen, & Karg, 2014). Evaluation of intersectorial partnerships within the context of organizational operations has not been examined within the context of disability sport. As noted by Misener and Doherty (2014):

What has become evident is that managing disability sport also has implications for managing sport generally. People with disability are part of the sporting family and need to be considered across all organizational aspects not just a historical focus on people with disability as athletes or participants in sporting activities, as has been the focus in much of the literature (p. 6).

In an effort to address this gap in the literature, this study utilized a case study design to better understand the unique needs associated with managing intersectorial sport partnerships for a disability sport organization. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the formation and support associated with the strategic alliance of an
international disability sport organization (IDSO) with various strategic partners (both for-profit and non-profit) in the non-disability sport industry. The goals of this study were to better understand those preconditions that motivated this IDSO to establish strategic alliances with other non-disability sport organizations. Further, we evaluated the processes and structures of such alliances.

Based on the literature available regarding intersectorial partnerships in sport organizations, the following research questions guided this case study analysis:

1. What preconditions support the development of strategic alliance formation between this IDSO and other non-disability sport organizations?
2. How are alliance processes (operating structure, relationships among partners) formed and supported in strategic alliances with this IDSO and other non-disability sport organizations?

Method
Data were collected in two forms: i. document analysis, ii. semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight members of the IDSO. The interview guide was developed expressly for the purpose of evaluating the research questions guiding the study. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo qualitative software. Data were analyzed through a review of the documents provided by the IDSO to the research team and extraction of key themes from the interview data, based on the research questions.

Initial Results
The following themes emerged during preliminary analysis of the data: importance of establishing and fostering trust between partners, communication and transparency of mission and objectives of the partnership, presence of an organizational advocate for pursuing a strategic alliance, and recognition of complementary corporate social responsibility initiatives. Findings from the study contribute to an emerging line of research that examines intersectorial partnerships and how these relationships can enhance outcomes for sport organizations supporting athletes with disabilities.