When Money Kills the Creativity: Perceptions and Influences of Young Leadership at the 2012 Oslo World Snowboarding Championships

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While research into leadership has increased heavily, leadership exercised by young people is still a little explored area. Aiming at obtaining knowledge of young leadership at sport events, a field study was conducted at the 2012 Oslo World Snowboarding Championships (WSC). Snowboarding is characterized as a youth driven lifestyle sport (Wheaton, 2004). The cultural ceremonial part of snowboard events is just as important as the competing part (Heino, 2000; Popovic & Morrow, 2008). At such events, a lot of young people are involved in the planning and implementation and serves therefore as research arena for young leadership. Considering the 2012 Oslo WSC as the case under scrutiny, the aim of this study is to shed light on how young leaders perceived the degree of freedom and thus possibility to have influence in the decision-making with a focus on the events innovative elements.

The WSC organization can be defined as a hybrid entity where voluntary non-profit organizations cooperate close with commercial organizations and the snowboard industry (for-profit). The concept of the WSC is developed and owned by two international snowboard organizations: the World Snowboard Federation (WSF) and Ticket To Ride (TTR). The vision of the 2012 WSC was: “To create the best snowboarding event to date and demonstrate the potential of independent snowboarding to the world” (Presentation during debriefing at the WSF General Assembly in May 2012).

The young leaders perception of influence in the decision-making within the 2012 WSC can be explained by the application of the theoretical, neo-institutional framework of translation. The concept of translation provides a framework for analyzing change in organizations (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). New ideas are combined with existing institutional practices and translated into new practices to varying degrees (Campbell, 2004). The WSC are a new concept and the 2012 WSC organizing committee consisted of young people with experiences from the event industry (a majority of the leaders were recruited from a music festival organizing committee). The strategy of having young staff in the WSC organizing committee could result in greater pressure to introduce new institutional solutions to the field of major sporting events. In this context it is interesting to see how leaders perceive and solve tasks within a hybrid organization such as the WSC with weak institutional frames.

During the 2012 WSC seven semi-structured interviews of young leaders (between 24 and 29 years old) were conducted. Hereby, leaders are defined as managers at the operational level (such as volunteer team leaders and department leaders classified as the mid-level of the organizational structure). Questions were formulated based on new institutionalism (translation, entrepreneurship and pluralization). For example, the interviewees were asked about frame conditions given by their leaders (institutional structures), about new ideas that been created in the event and how this new ideas have been received by the CEO (translation). This strategy of interviewing on a theoretical basis helps to shed on light on how free the young leaders were to implement their own ideas, hence to influence on the WSC. In addition, questions about educational background, work experience, leadership motivation, facilitation around young leaders, subjective perception of young leaders’ impact and relationship to volunteers were asked. In order to capture the sense of the young leaders executed vs. perceived leadership from both the top and bottom leadership perspectives, the CEO and ten volunteers of the WSC were interviewed.

During the event, the author served as a volunteer (three days) and was present at meetings in WSF. Observations and a number of informal interviews (e.g. top riders, owners of the event, coaches, judges, technical delegates, park shapers, medical crew, media, board members of WSF and TTR, national federations) resulted in 26 pages with field notes. The observations, informal interviews and field notes serve as a validation check by collecting rich data through methodological triangulation that facilitates possibilities to search for discrepant evidence and negative cases as well as respondent validation (Maxwell, 2009). The author was also present at the WSF/TTR General Assemblies.
in 2010, 2011 and 2012 when the WSC was introduced and evaluated by the owners.

At the time of this abstract submission, data analysis is still ongoing. Tentative results of the analysis indicate that the perception of young leadership is directly connected to how the actual outcome of the event was perceived. How young leaders evaluate the perception and influence of their own leadership is depending on whether the event had been recognized as success or not.

There has been a big difference in the perception of the event by participants external and internal the organizing committee. External actors experienced the event as creative and positive. The event was perceived by spectators, the snowboard scene, athletes and the media as a huge success regarding the creativity and implementation (Methodmag.com, 2012; Playboard, 2012; PromaxBDA, 2013). The preliminary analyses of the results indicate processes with both translation and pluralization of the institutional field (Kraatz & Block, 2008).

Conversely, internal actors perceived that possibilities to influence were limited regarding the contribution to the successful creativity of the event. Challenges within the event leadership prior and during the event caused negative experiences amongst the young people w.r.t. performing their leadership position. Economic problems experienced by the event organizers, as well as critical time management (inter alia), lead to restrictions on the young leaders’ ability to influence the event organization. The young leaders perceived a high amount of responsibility and freedom to influence their job at the start, but the freedom was taken away with coercive pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) by the CEO. The discussion in the article gives further explanation of the reasons.

Other theoretical approaches including institutional leadership theory (Selznick, 1957) will be considered in order to highlight the leadership.