Assessing an Amateur Ice Hockey League Corporate Community Involvement Initiative

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Organizations seeking to differentiate themselves from competitors are utilizing corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a strategy to do so by incorporating social and environmental concerns into their business operations and interactions with stakeholders. Both researchers and practitioners alike have identified the sport industry as an advantageous field to engage in CSR due to the unique characteristics inherent within sport (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006). However, insufficient funding and resource constraints, such as human resources, knowledge, and expertise, are significant obstacles to overcome for the successful implementation of CSR-related programs (Anagnostopoulos & Shilbury, 2013). Consequently, researchers are calling for a more strategic approach to CSR (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008) and have encouraged engaging in cross-sector partnerships to address important social needs within the community (Hess, Rogovsky, & Dunfee, 2002). While previous research has shown CSR is becoming much more common within professional sport leagues (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006), limited research has examined the use within amateur leagues, where resource constraints are often intensified.

A particular component of CSR is strategic corporate community involvement (CCI), which typically involves aligning an organization’s social initiatives with their core competencies and long-term strategies (Hess et al., 2002). Many of the social needs these programs aim to address are present, and even exacerbated, in smaller communities where professional teams do not exist (e.g., rural community health issues). To date, the assessment of CCI initiatives has received minimal attention both in the literature and in practice (Kihl, Babiak & Tainsky, 2014). Chen (2005) recommends the use of theory driven evaluation, where the needs of various stakeholders can be taken into consideration, to determine whether the program has been successfully implemented as planned, thus identifying any shortcomings in the process and ensuring resources are being used in a strategic manner. Research conducted by Kihl et al. (2014) suggests that Chen’s (2005) program theory evaluation is one means in which a CCI initiative can be assessed. However, a shortfall of the theory lies in the fact that a feedback loop, which identifies problems and provides recommendations to the implementing organizations, is implied and is not explicit. There is a dearth of research that has utilized program theory to evaluate a CCI initiative and none has explored one that is situated within a non-professional sport league setting. The present research aimed to fill this gap by evaluating the design and implementation of a CCI initiative and its various partnerships within an amateur sport league setting. Chen’s (2005) program theory model was adapted to include an explicit feedback loop, thus recommendations could be directly reported to the various stakeholders.

The CCI initiative assessed in this study, called Hockey Fans in Training (Hockey FIT), was a weight-loss program designed for overweight male ice hockey fans in collaboration with their local Major Junior ice hockey organizations. Forty fans from two organizations, for a total of 80, volunteered to participate in 12 weekly sessions hosted in the local hockey club facilities. The program involved a collaboration of cross-sector partners including the educational institution engaged in this research project, a non-profit charity organization that provided research support, a for-profit fitness organization that provided access to their facilities, a community sponsoring organization that provided financial support, and two amateur sport organizations. Following the completion of the program, each stakeholder’s perspective was explored through a qualitative approach. Two focus groups were conducted, one per team, which consisted of fans who completed Hockey FIT. Eight fans volunteered to participate in the first focus group and ten fans participated in the second. Questions pertained to why they decided to join Hockey FIT, what motivated them to continue to attend, aspects of the program that they found effective, and what areas required refinement. Ten people, who were involved in the delivery of Hockey FIT, will be interviewed to achieve an understanding of how the CCI initiative was designed and executed, as well as the communication strategies among delivery agents.
program effectiveness, motives for each partner’s involvement, and whether the program that was carried out was congruent with the initially planned program. Through the use of program theory, the researchers aimed to determine whether the intervention was successful, as well as how and why. Interviews with the remaining stakeholder groups are presently being conducted and thematic analysis is in progress.

Preliminary findings from this research suggest that amateur sport organizations possess the desire to engage in CSR and to give back to their fans, but they lack the available resources to do so. Cross-sector partnerships allowed Hockey FIT to overcome this crucial constraint to the benefit of partners involved as well as the broader community alike. Interestingly, the program had little influence on the fan’s overall perception of the club, as many were already highly identified with their respective team, but fans acknowledged it as a means of protecting the brand’s image during organizational staff turnover. The community sponsoring organization saw the initiative as an opportunity to engage in cobranding with a significant community sport organization and one that aligned with their own CSR agenda.

This research has practical and theoretical implications. It demonstrates the efficacy of amateur sport organizations contributing to social change, as they are more prevalent within communities than their professional counterparts. This research also explores the unique opportunity for local organizations to sponsor a CCI initiative as a way of exhibiting their CSR within the community through partnerships with local sport organizations. Finally, this research answers the need identified by Kihl et al. (2014) to determine the generalizability of using program theory in different contexts and the efficacy of including a feedback loop within Chen’s (2005) model.