Challenges to Facilitating Distributed Leadership (DL) in Community Sport Organizations

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Background
A growing body of literature has linked sport programs, organizations and events with various dimensions of community development. While previous research has focused primarily on the outcomes associated with these initiatives, more recent studies have directed attention to the “process” of development. For example, Schulenkorf (2010) presented a conceptual framework related to sport-for-development (SFD) projects aimed at promoting sustainable community development through sport programs and events. Similarly, Misener and Schulenkorf’s (2016) asset-based community development (ABCD) perspective focuses specifically on the role of sport events in mobilizing existing resources and building on the strengths of communities.

One of the primary contributions of these contemporary models is a conceptual shift from “top-down” to “bottom-up” approaches to leadership. Rather than providing “off-the-shelf” programming to communities, scholars have emphasized the importance of facilitating community-led development (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). This entails engaging community members in decision-making and developing the physical and social infrastructure to foster distributed leadership (DL) processes. From this perspective, leadership is a relational rather than individual trait which emanates from ongoing interactions between diverse stakeholders, and is distributed among the collective (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino, 2016).

Purpose
DL shifts focus from the attributes and behaviors of individual leaders (e.g., charisma, intelligence) to more holistic perspectives that account for multiple systems and actors (Uhl-Bein, 2006). However, leader-centered perspectives continue to pervade the sport management field, with far less attention to forms of DL in sport organizations (Welty Peachey, Damon, Zhou & Burton, 2015). Addressing this gap in the literature is critical for sport-based community development research, as building and sustaining collective leadership processes is highlighted as one of the most difficult challenges associated with community empowerment (O’Hare, 2011). Indeed, issues such as resource deficiencies and entrenched social divides can significantly influence the likelihood of facilitating DL in underserved communities (O’Hare, 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study was to analyze the challenges associated with facilitating DL in a community sport organization. To facilitate a multi-level approach to analysis, a single case study approach was utilized to focus specifically on individual-, organizational-, and community-level challenges to promoting DL.

Methods
To provide sufficient analytical depth, a single case study approach was considered an epistemological fit for this study (Yin, 2009). Wakefield Sports Center (WSC), a community sport organization, was purposively selected based on their organizational philosophy and location in an underserved community. Data was generated through a combination of semi-structured interviews with the commissioner, board members, and all head coaches (n=8), observations of selected public meetings, document analysis, and an open-ended parent survey. Inductive thematic analysis was used to code the data and identify emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results
The results are organized according to the three primary levels of analysis:

Individual
Most individuals volunteering with the organization were interested in sport-specific duties, such as coaching, but far less interested in leadership roles within the organization. As Joe, a board member, explained, “if you tell somebody we need you out here every third Wednesday to pick up trash, or put up the fence, or line the fields, they go nah that’s okay.” As a result, the organization has struggled to identify and promote leaders outside their athletic teams, or transfer sport-specific leadership into other non-sport areas. In addition, many volunteers were motivated by past experiences with sport, but did not possess alternative skills or knowledge that might contribute to DL. As Jason, a board member, stated, “we can say we are going to try and get grants or some sort of external funding, but that requires skills and resources to write grants a certain way…and we don’t really have that.”

Organizational
WSC has limited connections with other community organizations, as Tom, a coach, stated, “that network, that’s one thing we don’t have.” This limited reach has hindered attempts to connect WSC leaders with other community institutions. In addition, although WSC’s decentralized management approach was conducive to recruiting volunteers, their lack of formalization made it difficult to train volunteers in leadership roles. Rather than promoting DL, this actually had the reverse effect of concentrating leadership among actors. As Joe explained, “when you’re there all the time and you don’t see it you get frustrated and you just say, well I’ll do it myself.”

Community
The economic disadvantages faced by community members created barriers to further engagement in the program. For example, Tyler, a head coach, explained that many families struggle to get their child to the facility, “we have to understand that it’s hard for…players in single-parent homes [because] some parents might be at work, some might have car issues.” In addition, board members indicated that the growing emphasis on competitive sport has made it difficult to engage parents in non-sport leadership activities. Greg, a board member, stated that one of the biggest challenges in engaging parent was, “getting them to look past the sports side [and] quit focusing on sports as the primary reason why WSC is around.”

Conclusion
While sport organizations present potentially viable contexts for promoting DL, these results highlight intriguing challenges related to the process. Importantly, this study reveals challenges related specifically to sport organizations. For example, data suggests the preeminent focus on sport-specific roles was precluding engagement in other leadership areas. Moreover, the parental emphasis on competitive aspects of sport inhibited their involvement in non-sport activities. In addition to informing practice, synthesizing challenges that are unique to sport organizations is essential to developing sport-focused leadership theory (Welty Peachey et al., 2015).