The New Canadian National Sport Organization Governance Landscape

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Problem, Literature, and Purpose
Since Slack and colleagues’ (e.g., Amis & Slack, 1996; Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1995; Kikulis, Slack, Hinings, & Zimmermann, 1989; Slack & Hinings, 1994; Thibault, Slack, & Hinings, 1992, 1994) work on structure, design, strategy and organizational change in Canadian national sport organizations (NSOs), the managerial landscape has changed due to processes of globalization, commercialization and professionalization, as well as the emergence of the Internet, social media, and other new technologies.

Sport organizations, in Canada and internationally, are under increased scrutiny from various stakeholders regarding their credibility to self-govern, to demonstrate appropriate ethical leadership standards, and to maintain the trust of their members, sponsors and other stakeholders. In the context of this contribution, ‘sport governance’ refers to the governing or steering of NSOs (Hoye, 2017), including governing their inter-organizational stakeholder network (García, 2009) and the intra-organizational aspects of their operations.

Canadian NSOs must manage governance expectations from Sport Canada, a key funder, and other stakeholders (e.g., the international governing body, sponsors, athletes, and the media). To strengthen their position in society, NSOs must attract new members, retain existing ones, and increase corporate and media support.

As such, we find a growing need to examine these organizations’ governance practices in light of societal trends. Thus, the purpose of this presentation is to understand NSOs’ current governance structures, processes and dynamics. Understanding these practices will help NSOs maximize their potential to meet their funders’ and stakeholders’ expectations, and to grow their sport.

Methodology and Data Analysis Timeline
We used a landscape survey approach (see O’Reilly, Beselt, & DeGrasse, 2014), examining a large number of organizations, as opposed to a single case. This comprehensive analysis allowed for more transferable recommendations to other (Canadian) sport organizations and other non-profit organizations. More specifically, to gain a system-wide perspective on NSO governance, an online survey was sent to all 60 NSOs funded by Sport Canada. To get internal and external perspectives, we recruited the senior executive and the president/chair of the board of directors of each NSO, so two potential respondents per NSO.

We collected baseline data regarding NSOs’ governance practices, including the type of board (e.g., strategic or operational), size of the organization, budget, number of offices across the country, and defining performance, accountability and transparency. We also included a section on the nature of NSOs’ stakeholders, given stakeholders’ role in governance. At the time of writing the abstract, we were in the data collection process. Two weeks into the process, we received positive responses from 35 sports (48 individuals, with 21 participants having completed the survey thus far). Data collection will end mid-November, with data analysis to be completed by January 2018. We will use SPSS for descriptive statistics, and NVivo 11 for content analysis following the Corley and Gioia (2004) method using inductive and deductive coding to lead to higher-order themes.

Preliminary Results, Discussion, and Implications for Theory and Practice
Responding NSOs included small (from 1 full-time and 1 part-time staff) to large 30 full-time and 40 part-time staff). Budgets ranged from small ($295,000 CAD) to large ($25 million CAD). The number of board members spanned 4 to 11 members at the time of responding, with 33% being women. Initial results indicate 90.48% of NSOs felt changing governance is an important issue for them nowadays. This is supported by NSOs reporting they have
undergone a number of organizational changes in the past five years, especially in regards to new hires (96.15%), changes in board bylaws (88.46%), organizational structure changes (84.62%), and formalization of procedures/systems (84.62%). Canada’s new Not-for-profit Corporations Act and Sport Canada were seen as the two primary sources of pressures to adopt new governance practices.

Common primary stakeholders for all NSOs (i.e., critical for the NSO’s survival, cf. Clarkson, 1995) included the federal government (100%), athletes (96.15%), coaches (96.15%), officials (96.15%), volunteers (96.15%), provincial/territorial sport organizations (96.15%), and paid staff (full- and part-time, 88.46%). Of these, the federal government was perceived to have the most influence on NSOs (33.33%), followed by provincial/territorial sport organizations (28.57%) and Own the Podium (23.18%). Stakeholder demands on NSOs were perceived to have increased over time, with 100% of respondents indicating somewhat, high or very high increases in demands. 52.63% the NSOs indicated stakeholder representation on their board from stakeholders, including athletes, officials, provincial/territorial sport organizations, and national sponsors. Some NSOs had board committees that also included these stakeholders, as well as staff, international federation representatives and Sport Canada (federal government) observing or participating. In addition, respondents indicated managing stakeholders was problematic (i.e., 71.43% responded “sometimes” to “always”).

Most NSOs defined performance first as meeting organizational objectives (50%), followed by athletes’ performances internationally (31.82%) and financial results (31.82%). NSOs’ internal accountability included administrative (for the degree of organizational transparency, 100%, and timely dissemination of information, 95.24%); performance (for reaching organizational goals, 90.48%); financial (for use of financial resources, 100%, for accurate/timely reporting, 95.24%, and reporting back to funders, 95.24%); legal (90.48%); and personally/professionally (for staff responsibilities/performance, 95.24%, and fairness in decision-making, 95.24%) accountability. Externally, accountability focused on performance (reaching organizational goals, 95.24%, and athlete performance, 95.24%), financial (use of financial resources, 85.71%, and reporting back to funders, 90.48%) and legal (95.24%) accountability. Board and staff accountability were perceived to be different in 80.95% of the cases, as were board and organization accountability in 57.14% of the cases. Strategies to support transparency included: presenting at annual general meetings (100%), publishing key documents on the NSO’s website (95.45%), and having organizational bylaws (95.45%).

Overall, 85.71% of NSOs perceived external pressures have steered NSOs to take on similar governance structures. More refined analyses will be conducted over the next few months to glean deeper insights from the data. However, at this stage, it is clear the former kitchen table, boardroom and executive office archetypes for NSO governance structures from Kikulis, Slack and Hinings (1992; 1995) need revisiting. While the kitchen table appears to be disappearing, another archetype, beyond the executive office, may be appearing. This study will therefore contribute to the literature by increasing our understanding of how societal processes have affected (Canadian) NSOs’ contemporary structures and processes. It will also help managers by elucidating governance best practices.