The Impact of Trust on Sport Organizational Change in China—A Case Study of the Chinese Football Association Reform

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In 2015, Chinese government initiated a football reform program, a policy that aimed to improve Chinese football performance at all levels. A prominent contribution of this program was the introduction of a new organizational structure to the football governing body, i.e., the Chinese Football Association (CFA). By decoupling it from the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC), the governmental governing body of sport in China, CFA is now announced as an autonomous sport association that is no longer a part of the government sport system.

Started off with the question “how did the Chinese Football Association change in response to the policy shift”, the study aims to examine the change process of CFA as a result of the environmental disturbance. In the past, the GASC provided direct funding to the CFA and heavily intervened with the leadership appointment as well as strategic development planning within the association. For a long time, the commercial leagues were not involved in the top decision-making process due to the organization’s hierarchical power relations with GASC, which has caused conflicts between the CFA and the commercial clubs (Fan & Lu, 2013). The football professionals believed the de-administration of the CFA was an effective organizational change taken by the government in response to the football marketization and professionalization. It was also the beginning and exploration of an institutional change within the sport sector in China.

This research adopted case study as a design of inquiry and utilised three methods to generate data. First, policy documents and archival records related to the CFA organizational change were collected; a period of 6 months of participant observation in the organization was conducted to get a closer examination of the change process. Field notes as well as internal meeting minutes were recorded. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 senior managers and junior staff within the CFA. The computer software package Nvivo was used to analyse the documents and interview transcripts. The data analysis process involved both inductive and deductive processes (Bryman, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014)

The findings suggested that as a result of the reform program, changes within the association can be identified and categorized to three dimensions, i.e., changes in the interpretative schemes (e.g., values and beliefs), design archetype (e.g., structural framework) and sub-system (e.g., budget allocations), in alignment with Laughlin’s (1991) Model of Organizations. Given the chaotic and complex nature of the change process within an organization, it was found out that the change within CFA was following a certain track. However, this track was not necessarily fitting into any of the four tracks (rebuttal, reorientation, colonization and revolution) suggested by Laughlin and that was, as evidence suggested, because of the trust people in the organization have had towards the central leadership. Therefore, this study also intends to understand the impact of trust within different levels of staff (e.g., senior managers and junior employees) on the organizational change process.

The finding also suggested that the type of trust identified in this case can be characterized as institutional-based trust (Bachmann, 2001). The institutional-based trust was defined as “the phenomenon that individuals or collective actors develop trust in the face of specific (powerful and reliable) institutional arrangements” (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). The study implied that the institutional-based trust could play a significant role in redirecting the change track of sport organizations change in the Chinese context.