Have Things Really Changed? Understanding Governance Changes in Canadian National Sport Organizations

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Contemporary National Sport Organizations (NSOs) face unprecedented challenges as a result of globalization, commercialization, and professionalization. They must manage increasingly complex governance, economic, marketing, and technological (e.g., the emergence of the internet and social media) realities impacting their operations and performance. Economic constraints have led NSOs to shift towards a more business-oriented approach (cf. Barnes et al., 2015; Slack, 2004; Whiteside et al., 2011).

These challenges require NSOs to demonstrate credible self-governance and good ethical leadership standards, by building trust among various stakeholders while also managing governance expectations from key funders (e.g., Sport Canada) and other stakeholders (e.g., international sport federations, athletes, sponsors, media, etc.), albeit with limited human, financial, and material capacity. While Parent, Naraine, and Hoye (2018) explored the types of governance changes occurring in Canadian NSOs today, this study’s purpose was to examine in greater depth the nature and impact of governance changes on NSOs’ activities and performance.

Method

Data were collected via 38 semi-structured interviews and strategic and policy documentation from 19 Canadian NSOs. Interviews were conducted with one senior executive staff member and one member of the Board of Directors in each NSO. At the time of abstract submission, data collection was ongoing (expected completion date: February 2019). To date, 14 of 38 interviews have been completed. Once interviews are transcribed verbatim, Leximancer data analysis software will be used to undertake a thematic analysis of all data. Should deeper ‘storytelling’ be needed, we will undertake content analysis with NVivo qualitative data analysis software, following Corley and Gioia’s (2004) method.

Preliminary Results, Discussion, and Contributions

Preliminary results support those of Parent et al. (2018): the existing archetypes (i.e., kitchen table, boardroom, executive office) created by Kikulis et al. (1992, 1995) may no longer be applicable in describing current Canadian NSO governance structures. NSOs have undergone fundamental changes in governance structure, process, and accountability. Our results highlight the distinction between the types of decisions made by the Board of Directors – who are largely focused on creating policies, developing the strategic plan, approving the organization’s budget, and appointing the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) – and the CEO/staff who are ultimately responsible for developing and implementing (operational) plans. While the goals outlined in NSO strategic plans still focus in part on international success vis-à-vis the executive office archetype, they now also encompass broader “business-oriented” goals (cf. Stevens, 2006).

Critically, many NSOs continue to face significant human and financial resource capacity issues, impacting their ability to engage in new goals/projects and manage stakeholder expectations, which in turn affects their overall performance. Thus, while they have invested in improved governance, there is a need to further understand how these new governance changes and practices affect NSOs’ ability to deliver their services and programs effectively and efficiently, given their importance in the Canadian sport system. Further research is needed to understand the impacts of NSOs’ mission and governance changes, as there appears to have been few significant improvements in core pain points, most notably capacity issues.