An Investigation of Strategic Capacity Building in Community Sport Organizations

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Organizational capacity is an important indicator of the ability of community sport organizations (CSO) to attain their goals and meet the needs of their members (Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014). It is important, therefore, to understand the mechanisms through which these small nonprofit voluntary organizations build their capacity. Despite the growing body of literature on organizational capacity in the nonprofit and voluntary sector, there has been limited consideration of the processes and conditions involved in building that capacity (Sobeck & Aguis, 2007). Capacity building represents a strategic approach to improving an organization’s ability to utilize its resources in order to successfully respond to new or changing situations (Aref, 2011).

CSOs form the basis of grassroots sports participation by providing sport and physical recreation opportunities at the community level (Cuskelly, 2004), and are characterized by their local focus, modest budgets, almost exclusive reliance on volunteers, and relatively informal structures (Doherty et al., 2014). The study of CSO capacity has received increasing attention (see Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009, 2013; Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Hallman, 2013), which has furthered understanding of the challenges they experience in addressing the needs of their membership. These challenges relate directly to gaps in organizational capacity; for example, an over-reliance on informal planning (Misener & Doherty, 2009) and limited revenue diversification (Wicker & Breuer, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the conditions and processes involved in strategically building the capacity of CSOs. Specifically, the study examines: (1) The extent to which, in the face of some stimulus, CSOs assess their existing capacity and consider their readiness to build capacity; (2) How CSOs generate and select the strategy(s) that is implemented; and (3) Whether and how CSOs assess and maintain the outcomes of capacity building.

This investigation follows a process model of capacity building in nonprofit and voluntary organizations (Authors, 2013). The model was developed to address a gap in the literature regarding the conceptualization of capacity building as a comprehensive process that may be prompted by organizational needs, that depends on critical organizational and environmental factors, and the outcomes of which may be viewed from multiple perspectives. Derived from the literature (cf. de Groot, 1969), the theoretical model posits that successful capacity building begins with an assessment of capacity needs in response to a given internal or external environmental stimulus. Capacity needs are expected to vary with the particular stimulus, and become the basis of the capacity building objectives. Readiness for capacity building is then considered with respect to the objectives and alternative strategies. Specifically, organizational readiness, strategy congruence with organizational processes and systems, and capacity to build and sustain change are considered. The generation and ultimate selection of a particular capacity building strategy(s) is based on the organization’s readiness to implement that strategy(s). The successful outcomes of capacity building are ultimately dependent on the extent to which the organization is ready to implement a strategy that addresses its capacity needs, and can be known in terms of both immediate impact (objectives have been achieved) and whether the built capacity is maintained.

Two CSOs were purposefully investigated (Patton, 2002) – one that experienced successful capacity building that enhanced the organization’s program and service delivery, and one that experienced unsuccessful capacity building where organizational needs were not effectively addressed. Three sources were used to triangulate data (Stake, 2006): (1) organizational documentation pertinent to the capacity building initiative (i.e., meeting notes, policies and procedures, strategic plans, operating regulations, mission and vision statements); (2) semi-structured interviews with volunteer board members in key management positions (president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer); and, (3) semi-structured interviews with a sample of coaches and general volunteers responsible for program delivery that provide additional perspectives on capacity building in their organization. The interview guides for both groups addressed the initial stimulus for capacity building, the factors that bear on readiness to build, strategy selection and
implementation, and the influence of that readiness on built and maintained capacity. Data were subjected to a priori coding according to concepts in the model, and emergent coding based on the identification of further themes pertaining to capacity building (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The findings contribute to a greater understanding of capacity building as a strategic process in CSOs, and in nonprofit voluntary organizations more broadly. The examination of both a successful and unsuccessful capacity building initiative reveals the conditions and processes that contribute to the relative success of such efforts, and the insights have important implications for both practice and further research. The study also offers empirical verification of the concepts outlined in the proposed process model of capacity building (Authors, 2013), providing a comprehensive framework for future research and practice.

References


