Going Deep: Leading Culture Change in Public Recreation

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Whether by necessity or by choice, being in a constant state of flux has become an “inevitable feature” (Slack & Parent, 2006, p. 253) for today’s sport organizations. Prior scholarship has investigated change in industry sectors as diverse as national governing bodies of sport (Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992; 1995), community sport (Stenling, 2013; 2014), collegiate athletic departments (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011; 2012), international sport associations (Hanstad, 2008), amateur sport (Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011), professional sport (Gousens & Slack, 2005; Lamertz, Carney, & Bastien, 2008), and youth sport (Legg, Snelgrove, & Wood, 2016; Skille & Waddington, 2006). Existing research either treats the composite nature of major change projects as a methodological side note, or it tends to report on specific organizational processes or features. Such examinations of organizational change leave unanswered the question of how exactly individual members of these sport organizations navigate profound radical organizational culture change projects. This research addresses this gap.

According to Schein (2016), culture comprises three levels: basic assumptions, values and norms, and visible symbols and artifacts. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) proposed a somewhat stricter imagination of culture, which serves as the conceptual foundation of this research: “culture is expressed in language, stories, and myths as well as rituals and ceremonies and in physical expressions such as architecture and actions” (p. 43). Anecdotally, lasting organizational culture change has been considered impossible among management scholars (cf. Schein, 2016), but, curiously, no comprehensive empirical evidence exists to support or contradict this claim. We found evidence that such change is in fact possible, but that it requires extraordinary, and, at times, paradoxical change leadership.

We collected empirical data from 67 employees of a major North American public recreation organization (153 interviews in total, each lasting 20-45 minutes) at four different times over the course of 15 months. Shortly before the start of the study, new leadership devised a variety of changes to the organization’s culture. Interviews followed the principles of practice-based inquiry (Costa & Murphy, 2015) and employed the “two types of coding in a classic grounded theory study: substantive coding, which includes both open and selective coding procedures, and theoretical coding” (Holton, 2010, p. 21).

We found that the organization was able to change its culture along all three of Schein’s (2016) composite elements. Notably, surface-level artifacts proved to be most resilient and resistant to adaptation, which contradicts popular change management consultant lore about the ease of n-step culture change programs (cf. Kotter, 1996). Members of the organization were also resistant to adopt new values and norms, viewing that transition as akin to abandoning their personal roots and histories (cf. Hemme, Bowers, & Todd, 2017). Only once change leadership connected existing narratives to novel expectations did employees alter their physical expressions of the organization’s culture. At the heart of this successful transformation was a careful and intentional willingness of the change agent to consistently revisit, reinforce, and recommunicate culture change along all its facets and to connect all steps of the process to the ritualistic expression of the organization’s identity.