Leading through the COVID-19 Pandemic at One Provincial Sport Organization

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A crisis is “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to the health, safety, environmental, and economic issues and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2014, p. 3). Notably, beginning with the National Basketball Association postponing its season in March of 2020, and followed by the National Hockey League and the International Olympic Committees’ announcements thereafter, sport organizations around the world and at every level are managing stakeholder expectations and frustrations and leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. Non-profit and community sport organizations may be especially vulnerable without the financial capacity to withstand long-term cancellations and behavioural changes among participants (Doherty, Millar, & Misener, 2020). Though empirical research examining these ongoing challenges remains scarce.

Thus, the purpose of this current study is to explore the leadership challenges, decisions, and ongoing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic at one provincial sport organization (PSO) in Canada. Between April 2020 and August 2020, five semi-structured conversational interviews were conducted with a PSO’s Executive Director on the first day of each month. The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes each, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then anonymized and sent to the PSO leader to review their statements.

The analysis is in-progress and follows an open solo coding process outlined in Saldaña (2015). Early emergent themes include: (a) communication challenges; (b) financial challenges; (c) leading innovation; and (d) managing uncertainty. Findings from this research will contribute to the presently scarce literature regarding the real experiences in managing and leading through the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic at the provincial level in Canada.