Moving from values inaction to values-in-action: An exploration of how values can be managed intentionally by National Sport Organizations

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Abstract

The study examined the intentional use of National Sport Organizations’ (NSOs) stated values. Positive Organizational Scholarship was applied to an Appreciative Inquiry approach of interviewing NSO senior leadership. Data were collected from nine NSOs through multiple-case studies analysis of interview transcripts, websites, and policy statements. Results indicated that most NSOs operated from a Management by Objectives (MBO) approach rather than a Management by Values (MBV) approach. Ten emergent themes from the case studies analysis contributed to the development of a ‘5 I Framework’. The framework revealed that NSOs’ intentional use of values deepened as the organization’s values saturation level increased. Further research should explore how NSOs can align values with performance objectives. One intention of this paper was to bridge a connection between academia and practitioners, and in so doing, highlight the gap between values inaction and values-in-action.
Introduction

Increasingly turbulent and complex work environments have affected organizations across all business sectors, rendering traditional management structures inadequate for coping with today’s challenges and rapid change (Cheverton, 2007; Crutchfield & McLeod Grant, 2008). Dolan, Garcia, and Richley (2006) suggest that successful organizations manage on the basis of identifying what is equally good for business, employees, and society. According to these authors, values can play an instrumental role in managing the tensions among the three perspectives. For instance, a growing number of once-peripheral social and natural crises (e.g., investment in human capital, environmental sustainability, and ethics) are now large issues that are becoming increasingly relevant to everyday management practices in each of the non-profit, private, and public organization sectors (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007). Values help to clarify what matters most to an organization by stimulating dialogue and by engaging all people in the process (Dolan et al., 2006). Values are likened to the glue that connects an organization’s mission to its vision and can serve as a platform upon which shared understanding emerges. Investigating how sport managers think about and use their organization’s values can further our understanding of approaches used to achieve success and optimize effectiveness, which constitutes the ultimate goal of this research.

Theoretical Framework

Research into organizations has generally focused on efforts to understand and improve organizational effectiveness (Daft, 2007). One such example is a relatively new perspective called Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) that is “contributing to the body of work that seeks to understand the excellence and flourishing that organizations can enable but that has been
frequently overlooked by scholars” (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004, p. 828). Rather than focusing on negative behaviours and theories (e.g., unethical behaviours, ineffectiveness, problem solving) or even normal operational forms of behaviour (absence of negative behaviours), POS focuses on the virtuousness inherent in organizations (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). While still in its nascent stages, POS signals a move towards a more strength-based approach to organizational scholarship away from more traditional models of problem solving or deficit-based modes of thinking (Dutton & Glynn, 2008). Clearly, the important role of organizational values is reflected in the three core aspects embedded within a POS perspective including a concern with flourishing, a focus on the development of strengths or capabilities, and an emphasis on the generative, life-giving dynamic of organizing (Dutton & Glynn, 2008).

Values have been described as core beliefs about end-states or desirable conducts that transcend specific situations, guide the choice and evaluation of our decisions, and become an integral part of our way of being and acting to the point of shaping our character (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Argandoña (2003) distinguished between personal values and those that are held at different levels within a group, all of which shape the extent to which the values are declared or espoused and/or practiced or lived. Dolan et al. (2006) categorized different values based on the following three dimensions: (1) ethical social values that connect to one’s belief about conduct; (2) economic-pragmatic values that relate to efficiency, performance standards, and discipline; and (3) emotional-developmental values that provide motivation for personal fulfillment. Together, these three dimensions form the essence of Management by Values (MBV): “the importance of identifying core values both at the individual and organizational level; the centrality of aligning core values with specific objectives; and illuminating the leader’s personal interest in wanting to manage by values” (Dolan et al., 2006 p. 28).
Management by Values (MBV) is a relatively new approach to governance and organizational practice concerned with developing management systems that are capable of integrating values into organizational strategies, policies, procedures, and programs (Dolan et al., 2006). Since 2000, Dolan et al. have written extensively about MBV as a strategic leadership and management tool that can have immensely practical results for organizations. They suggest MBV acknowledges the complexity inherent in the environment by helping to focus and harness the often untapped potential of individuals towards an organization’s vision (Dolan et al., 2006). They further postulate that MBV can facilitate the redesigning of the organization’s culture along more humanistic lines and enables leaders to emerge (Dolan et al., 2006). Finally, MBV provides the organization and its leaders with an opportunity to intentionally and explicitly communicate the organization’s commitment to living its values. Once embedded into the organization’s culture, Dolan and his colleagues postulate that MBV is a process to more effectively leverage organizational resources by placing values at the core of the organization. As such, MBV is a contemporary management philosophy that might be employed within nonprofit organizations. It is postulated that, when fully integrated within the organization’s management system, organization leaders can implement MBV to leverage resources and to generate creative responses to the challenges, issues, and risks associated with an increasingly complex environment (Dolan et al., 2006).

Research Context

A significant number of nonprofit organizations exist in Canada and it is critical that they effectively leverage organizational resources. These organizations have a range of purposes, and experience the complexity of today’s challenging environments. According to Imagine Canada (2006), charitable and nonprofit organizations are facing increased competition for public and
private funds. They identified an increased demand for accountability and transparency by government and the public, which forces changes in how nonprofits organize and communicate their work. Crutchfield and McLeod Grant (2008) explored some of the key trends affecting the nonprofit sector and uncovered six practices of high-impact organizations. The authors found that the important role an organization’s values play includes communicating the organization’s commitment to its values, hiring employees according to the company’s values, making decisions that reflect the company’s values, and using the values as a means of inspiring both employees and the members they serve.

One component of the Canadian nonprofit sector involves the over 33,650 organizations delivering sport and recreation. This includes 56 federally funded National Sport Organizations (NSOs) responsible for planning, regulating, delivering, and organizing their sport in Canada through the provision of essential services to athletes, coaches, officials, and member organizations (Sport Canada, 2009). They are members of their respective sports’ international organization, which is termed an International Federation, and have leadership responsibility for excellence and sport participation, along with supporting the broader goals of the Canadian Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2002).

NSOs face rapid changes and turbulent environments and need to proactively develop strategies to better manage through the increasingly complex surroundings if they are to remain competitive. For instance, sport organizations face a growing number of performance pressures from the public, the organizations’ members, and the government. Particularly, NSOs feel pressure to increase revenue, attract more members, provide more services, and produce world champions (Yeh & Taylor, 2008).
Currently, it is believed that NSOs are employing a traditional management model to achieve their objectives (Havaris & Danylchuk, 2007). Although this management philosophy can contribute significantly to the successful achievement of an organization’s objectives, Dolan and Garcia (2002) put forward that it is now insufficient to merely manage according to objectives: “In order to keep a business functioning well and competing successfully in markets that are increasingly more global, complex, professionally demanding, constantly changing and oriented towards quality and customer satisfaction, a new model is required” (p. 101). MBV seeks to acknowledge the personal values held by individuals, encourages an active dialogue to determine the values required in order for the organization to achieve its vision, and facilitates the creation of a culture that is supportive and reflective of these shared values at all levels of the organization. From a sport organization perspective, research has shown that by being intentional about the use of values, a safe, welcoming, inclusive environment can result (Mulholland, 2008). Therefore, this study investigated the extent to which NSOs are intentionally using their organization’s values. One way to examine how NSOs think about and make use of their organization’s values is to inquire into their management practices and examine the approaches they are currently using to achieve their vision.

**Purpose**

This study is concerned with values that are being espoused at the organizational level and the extent to which they are being intentionally managed by the organization’s leaders. Full-time, permanent employees have been found to have the greatest influence on the organization’s effectiveness (Emiliani, 2003). Since senior management influences values within an organization, it is important to assess how values are perceived by the most senior employees.
(Trail and Chelladurai, 2002). Therefore, this study explores the role of values in the management of NSOs and deepens our understanding as to whether or not these values are being used intentionally by NSO leaders. This study will provide the leaders of these organizations, policy makers, academics, and others interested in the role of values in the management of organizations with an opportunity to consider what gives rise to exceptional occurrences within organizations and how values can be used intentionally towards this purpose.

Methods

The research is based on multiple-case studies which investigated the extent to which National Sport Organization (NSO) leaders intentionally used their organization’s values as part of their management approach. While case study research often involves only a single case, there are benefits to multiple-case studies design, particularly because this design allowed the researchers to explore the phenomena through the use of a replication strategy (Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) compared the use of the replication strategy to conducting a number of separate experiments on related topics. Previous research suggests that if all or most of the cases provide similar results, there can be substantial support for the development of a preliminary theory that describes the phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989).

A case study protocol was developed to increase the reliability of the case study by ensuring that the approach was consistently applied across each case. The case study protocol outlined why participation in this study was important, synthesized the review of literature, specified the field procedures with a view of maintaining a consistent approach throughout the study, and identified additional questions for the researchers’ to consider and reflect on throughout the data collection and analysis process. This disciplined approach not only enhanced
the data collection process but also generated insights and findings that may have been overlooked (Yin, 2003).

For the purposes of this study, 56 federally funded NSOs represented the sample population to investigate the research questions. Nine NSOs ultimately participated in the study, with 11 senior leaders being interviewed. In addition, the research benefitted from a case study pilot that provided significant insight into how best to structure the interview guide and capture the data that surfaced.

Employing a qualitative approach, this research provided a deeper understanding of the role that organizational values play in the participating NSOs and offered a rich setting to explore the intentional use of values by each organization’s leader. The research methods included a review of all NSOs websites prior to each interview, semi-structured interviews with the senior leader(s) within each NSO, and incorporated the insights that were captured in the principle investigator’s journal.

The interview guide was based on an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology which served as a platform upon which the interview questions were answered as well as a means to ensure consistency across the multiple-case studies. Appreciative Inquiry suggests that if the inquiry is problem-based, then the answers will reflect this underlying assumption. However, when the inquiry is strength-based, the discussion is often filled with examples of positivity, highlighting the best of the past to move towards the possibility of an extraordinary future (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). This framing provided participants with an opportunity to explore how values can be used intentionally by encouraging storytelling, by drawing from personal accounts, and by providing examples of when they witnessed such occurrences.
The process of analyzing the data began with coding all text material through a combination of concept-driven and data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2007). In order to capture these concept-driven codes in an organized manner, individual databases were created for each case that identified whether the NSO was a declared True Sport member; whether the NSO had established values for the organization; whether examples of values in action surfaced during the interview; and whether the interview candidate knew the organization’s values. The process of analyzing each NSO’s websites and transcripts also expanded our current perspectives and as such, data-driven coding was used to inductively create emergent themes and patterns which were captured in the database, along with additional reflections and ideas that surfaced throughout the analysis process (Gibbs, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Findings and Discussion

Ten themes emerged across the multiple case studies. Collectively, these themes enhance our understanding of how values are manifested within NSOs and provide examples of how values might be managed more intentionally. The themes helped to explain the three research questions and also shed light on other areas that are worthy of further exploration.

The first research question investigated whether values were important in the management of NSOs. The research uncovered five themes that indicated that while values are important in the management of NSOs, they are manifested differently across the NSOs. One explanation that emerged in the findings that explains this difference can be described as the NSO’s state of readiness. This revelation suggests that NSOs are operating at different stages of readiness with regards to how values are defined and lived within their sport, and that even within the NSO, the values are being used at varying levels. This finding contributed to the development of a framework which informs how sport leaders think about their organization’s
values and how the values might be experienced. Labeled the ‘5 I Framework’, the model seeks to inform our understanding of how values can be experienced within NSOs. Values can be described as: 1) inactive: where they might be dormant or not used; 2) intuitive: where values are shared and experienced at the individual level and are leadership dependant; 3) intrinsic: where values are embedded system-wide and evident in policies, practices, and procedures. While still focused inwardly on the organization, the values are known throughout the organization and have begun to extend outwards; 4) inspirational: values at this stage are leveraged intentionally as a strategic communications vehicle to engage and inspire members to achieve a common objective. The values are focused inwardly and outwardly and are reflective of the entire sport; 5) the fifth “I” is intentionality: the process of using the organization’s values to purposefully move from one state of being to the other.

The purpose behind creating this framework, shown in Figure 1 below, is to facilitate the NSO’s understanding of where they are in relation to their organization’s values. It also increases their awareness of how to think more intentionally about what has been defined as the key ingredient in many of today’s most successful companies (Kanter, 2008).

![Figure 1. ‘5 I Framework’](image)

For instance, one of the NSO’s, Skate Canada, recently identified its values through a staff driven exercise that resulted in significant engagement by all national office staff. This story
by CEO William Thompson suggests the importance of engaging people in the process of identifying values as part of the organization’s strategic and operational plans:

We went through an interesting process. It used to be a top-down approach and it never worked. So I met with the manager level (below senior leadership team) and I asked them if they felt values would be helpful because I felt we were drifting a bit and they indicated that they would be. They wanted a set of core values that they could refer to day to day. And they could then see how this ties into the strategic operation of the organization. We wanted to give them a full understanding of the organization to help remove the silos that naturally occur. This helped to give them a grounding that would explain why I’m doing this. So the people drove the process. We gave them some timelines and some capacity from our HR person which helped. They came up with the five core values and they engaged the staff below them and we then broke the entire office into five groups and they then took their value and created a descriptor of the value and presented it at a day session for all staff. It worked brilliantly – they all came up with very creative ideas to bring the session to life – movies, posters, skits. It fostered healthy competition amongst the staff and there was a buzz that was generated and team spirit.

We put it back to the staff again and asked them what they wanted to do to make the values live within the organization. How do we keep the enthusiasm alive? They came up with suggestions like laminates, putting them on the walls, employee recognition process, signage in the lobbies, on the website, screensavers, in programs, etc. So we’re in the process of incorporating that now.
The second research question investigated to what extent NSOs are intentionally using their organizational values. The findings for this question surfaced three themes that indicate while participants have a desire to think more intentionally about the role values play within their organization, there is room for improvement. Jean Paul Caron, CEO of Gymnastics Canada, shared that while he believes values are important, he questioned how intentional they were living them within their organization.

We all think values are important but we are not living them intentionally. I want people to be more aware of the values, that we are respecting them when we think, operate, and decide. Even if it’s happening intuitively, I think it’s important for people to reflect on them when they make decisions. If you do it at the planning level it becomes easier to apply it every day.

In addition, the findings suggest that NSOs leaders are increasingly thinking more deeply about how their organization’s values can make a difference in achieving their objectives. Jean Dupré, CEO of Speed Skating Canada, suggested that investing in organizational performance is as important as investing in athletic performance.

If we don’t spend time investing off the field you won’t get on the field performance. You amplify the impact of on the field performance when you invest in off the field performance since the two are so connected. So we spend time educating our Board and on risk management with a view of enhancing the organization’s management system. less time putting out fires means more thinking time for sport stuff.
As well, the participants expressed support for broadening the dialogue to engage their entire sport in a system-wide dialogue on the values the sport needs to fulfill its purpose. William Thompson of Skate Canada suggested that “this might provide us with an opportunity to engage our sections (provincial and territorial sport organizations) in a conversation around the values and the importance of promoting them to their members. I would love it if these five values were posted in every club.”

The third question inquired into whether or not NSOs are employing strength-based management practices such as MBV. The findings revealed that NSOs leaders believe that a management approach that adopts a management by objective and management by values approach offers the ‘full package’ as suggested by CEO of Athletics Canada Joanne Mortimore: “I do think we need a better balance between MBO and MBV. I think being more intentional about our values may help us achieve that balance. MBO and MBV are the full package.” Not only do NSOs need to strike a balance between what they are trying to achieve (MBO) and how they are trying to achieve it (MBV), they also need to factor in the ways in which they promote and nurture the core values that exists within the sport. This study suggests that this is an area worth investing in.

Conclusions

While the review of literature defines MBV as incorporating both objectives and values, the way it was interpreted by the participants indicated that they understood it as a management philosophy that only takes into account the organization’s values. As the purpose of this study was not to fully inquire into MBV but rather to understand how values might be managed within NSOs, the findings reveal that there is tremendous interest from participants to continue to invest
in and explore a management philosophy that incorporates both objectives and values. MBV does just that (Dolan et al., 2006).

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Participants in this study indicated that they wanted to learn more about values and how they might be leveraged more intentionally within their organization. Many made a strong case for continued learning to enhance their organization’s performance. Developing the NSO’s capacity to think about values in a more holistic and integrated fashion will likely result in a more resilient, connected, and trusting culture (Kanter, 2008). As such, the ‘5 I Framework’ will be useful to NSO leaders who are interested in becoming more intentional about using their organization’s values.

Future research might investigate how frequently NSOs should be engaging members in a dialogue on values. It remains unclear how frequently an organization should be reviewing and renewing its commitment to its values.

In addition, what is the appropriate balance that is required between achieving objectives and living the organization’s values? The MBV triaxial model is an instrument designed to help organizations uncover the best possible values alignment based on a number of variables (Dolan et al., 2006). Future research could investigate how this model might be useful to an NSO in determining their values profile, thereby using this information to determine how to bring their values to life in tangible, practical, and inspirational ways.
Finally, it would be interesting to explore whether engraining values at the intrinsic level helps the organization adapt to changes in leadership. Based on the review of literature and supported by this study’s findings, organizations that live their values at an intrinsic or inspirational level are more likely to adapt to changes in the environment and attract new leadership that is supportive of and congruent with the core values of the NSO. Further research to disprove or support this observation would be welcomed.

References


