

Senior Leaders Forum 2008 Discussion Synopsis

A. Introduction

The Senior Leaders Forum is organized periodically by Sport Canada in order to share information and to initiate discussion on specific topics important to its on-going work. It is intended to be a ‘different kind of exchange’ – as compared to typical consultations on a specific topic – where there is a discussion of important issues related to more than one program or activity area. This year two Forums were held on the topic of *Building Sustainable Capacity*: one in Calgary held in conjunction with the Sport Leadership Conference on November 7, and a second in Ottawa on December 8. A discussion paper was distributed to participants in advance.

Approximately 25-30 people attended each session, with the November Forum having a greater participation by Provincial/Territorial sport community stakeholders while the December Forum participants were primarily from National Sport Organizations and Multisport Service Organizations. The themes and topics brought forward at each session were strikingly complementary. Because of the inter-relatedness of the discussion topics, similar themes were often evident from each of the general, system and people discussions. Therefore input has been integrated into the document as a whole, but has not been repeated into each section.

Both Forums followed the same format. Dan Smith, Director of Policy and Planning, presented an overview, and then groups broke into discussions about (1) sustainable capacity, (2) effective systems or effective people, and (3) key recommendations. Sport Canada staff assisted in facilitating the conversations and took notes.

A group of youth attending the ACTIVATE Connections program held in conjunction with the Sport Leadership Conference also attended the presentation on November 7. This group discussed the topic of capacity, and later discussed their engagement in the sport system in the context of systems and people. Their perspectives are included in the “effective people” section.

The discussions at the two Forums, which are summarized in this document, provided rich and valuable information regarding sport community capacity issues and needs, as well as potential approaches to enhancing capacity. The content of this document reflects the views of the participants, not necessarily those of Sport Canada. The information gathered will inform on-going work, including the development of the next Sport Canada Strategic Plan, and future SFAFs.

B. Session Organization

Overall, Sport Canada has received strongly favourable reviews from participants about the discussion on “Building Sustainable Capacity.” However, while holding the 2007 Forum in conjunction with the Sport Leadership Conference worked well for attendees, the schedule and circumstances in 2008 proved problematic for many, including a large number of National Sport Organizations. Consequently, a second session was organized for a later date.

Participants noted that they appreciated the choice of topic and the opportunity to discuss issues related to capacity. As well, new ideas about capacity, its sources and effects, were explored as a result of these sessions.

Considerations for the future

- Investigate options for the scheduling and location of future Senior Leaders Forums, including in close consultation with the organizers of the Sport Leadership Conference and/or other sport system stakeholders.

C. Building Sustainable Capacity

Capacity was generally understood by participants as the ability of organizations to effectively deliver on their mandates and manage unplanned opportunities and challenges. Capacity was typically described as the work “behind” the program or service delivery that enables this to happen and/or improves quality and efficacy.

Lack of capacity was seen as an ongoing issue throughout the sport system. While it was acknowledged that national organizations face significant capacity issues, it was equally recognized that community and P/T organizations encounter heightened stresses to their capacity,¹ mainly due to issues around access to funds and delivery demands. These gaps furthermore do not exist in isolation; national capacity has an impact on members/delivery partners of national organizations, and vice versa.

Throughout the discussions there was a sense that collectively the sport system has come a long way, and that because of this progress participants are better able to identify the challenges that lie ahead. The information gathered through the Senior Leaders Forums provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to continue this improvement.

Capacity Drivers

A number of components were identified as being drivers of capacity within the sport system. These include:

- Leadership and coordination, within/for the system as a whole as well as for a sport or organization
- Administrative and operational systems, including economies of scale
- Good governance and effective management
- People’s skills and competencies
- Sport infrastructure – includes facilities as well as potentially the “system infrastructure” of centres, service providers, common service delivery
- Financial resources to support the above and program/service delivery

It is worth noting that the components identified – which are expanded upon below – were remarkably consistent across groups, as well as being inter-related. For example, leadership was seen as critically important to realizing good governance and strong operational systems, while economies of scale were seen as important to increasing management effectiveness, and decreasing demand on human and financial resources.

Long-term athlete development was cited as a good example of collective sport system leadership – an initiative to get all organizations pulling in the same direction. Building awareness and clear communications were seen as important components of this

¹ Interestingly, the November 7th participants – predominantly P/T stakeholders – tended to identify the biggest capacity gap as being within community organizations. Participants at the December 8th session were more apt to highlight the challenges faced by P/T organizations, noting that in many cases it is clubs or local organizations that drive the successes within a jurisdiction.

leadership. Podium Canada could be considered another example, albeit for a subset of the sport community. However, participants also expressed that this kind of leadership needs to be long-term and to encompass the entire scope of the sport community and its needs. Leadership was seen as being important to a “seamless” system, with clear roles and responsibilities, and common partnerships and levels of service Canada-wide.

Noting a certain tendency within the sport system to create new structures and/or organizations, some groups discussed whether Canadian sport is (or should be) entering into a phase of “mergers and acquisitions.” The idea is that consolidated leadership and resources would create efficiencies and promote partnerships with new stakeholders (e.g. more or different universities, corporations) through more coherent approaches and leverages, a more understandable system to non-stakeholders, and decreased fragmentation. It was also acknowledged that there are different lenses used for proliferation/non-proliferation of sports; for example, there is one organization for the four cycling disciplines, one for the three gymnastics sports, and four organizations for the aquatic ones. Sport Canada has, from time to time, promoted integration (as in the case of Paralympic sports, or the proactive encouragement of Waterski Wakeboard to remain together), while it is also argued that some funding criteria may actually encourage spinning off new organizations.

Administrative and operational systems were identified as a prime area where system-wide savings of both money and effort could be realized through economies of scale. An association model was described as being the desired state, with the community’s buying power and leverage being exercised through the association. Several participants noted that the old Canadian Sport and Fitness Administration Centre offered some centralized services (e.g. translation, telecommunications) at a reduced rate to resident organizations, and that these economies are missed. Services provided through an association would be “common overhead” items, potentially ranging from translation and printing services to volunteer development; from human resource advice and benefits packages to shared technology platforms. Participants also highlighted as an example the partnership that has enabled the development of the Pointe Claire clubs as a powerhouse in aquatics clubs: a municipally led collaboration between the recreation department and sport clubs, where the clubs provide the programming and the recreation department manages registration and is the employer, thereby significantly lightening the administrative load and permitting an increased focus by the clubs on programming and service delivery. There may well be economies of scale for overhead given the number of Pointe Claire clubs involved.

Good governance and effective management, as a capacity driver, speaks to the need to have solid decision-making structures in place in order to attend to the work of the organization. Good governance is described as the culture and ability to make decisions and provide leadership, foster collaborative relationships between staff (the “professionalization of sport”) and volunteers, and deliver aligned programs and services. This element tended to be described in negatives (for example, that there are too many inherent conflicts of interest in representational governance systems), suggesting that

there are a number of barriers and/or that this is an area that could particularly benefit from future work.

Solid planning is another aspect of good governance stressed by participants. It was noted that long-term *and* strategic planning is critical to effective use of an organization's capacity, and that long-term and strategic planning is not the same thing. Long-term planning will ensure that organizations can build on current activities over time (i.e. not continually re-invent the wheel) and strategic planning will promote the use of resources where most needed and increase the ability of an organization to take advantage of the right environmental factors for its advancement.

Individuals' skills and competencies are also seen as being critically important to sport system capacity. As people make things happen, having the right people in the right places at the right times is essential for the success of an organization. Skill set mismatches, as well as counterproductive behaviours, can create unnecessary issues. As one participant (a provincial ED) put it: we need to be thinking about what's best for our sport, not just what's best for me – if the best person is from another province, that's who I should support. Matching of individuals' interests, competencies and needs is an essential balance for organizations to create and maintain, through their structures, systems, development and informal management.

Sport infrastructure is about the access to the facilities and services required by an organization. This might mean the availability of "where sport happens" (e.g. rinks, tracks, pools, courts) as well as access to specialized sport services such as athletic trainers, sport psychologists or testing equipment. Some participants observed that they (or their organizations) tended not to fully use the resources currently available (i.e. services provided by MSOs or CSCs) given ongoing delivery pressures and the time needed to develop beneficial working relationships.

Finally, financial resources are necessary to support the above activities. Several participants noted that they had previously tended to think about capacity as being only a money issue, rather than in terms of those components that facilitate capacity. The important element to keep in mind therefore is that financial resources are a tool used to achieve the goals of the sport organization, be it through direct spending, in partnership/association, or in order to utilize or leverage the resources of another organization. Access to financial resources in a usable form was identified by participants as being of the utmost importance, given increasing trends towards targeted and restricted funding.

Capacity Barriers

There was also common agreement amongst participants regarding barriers to capacity. Five major categories of barriers emerged:

- Funding sources and restrictions
- Timeliness of receipt of resources

- Misalignment and duplication of effort
- Resistance to change
- Municipal focus on recreation

With respect to funding, there are three major challenges for sport organizations. The first is that – with a few notable exceptions – sport organizations experience difficulty in accessing private sector funding. Many obtain their funding largely from the public sector and users. And as more governments use assessment tools for funding, organizations find themselves pursuing elements that will improve their funding scores. In some cases these efforts are clearly beneficial to the organization (e.g. putting in place a dispute resolution policy), while in others the effect may be unintentionally problematic, as in the case of a national organization discouraging two chapters to amalgamate despite the positive sport and business case, because of the negative implications for funding points. Furthermore, funding models tend to reward independent initiatives, not partnerships, even if these address a mutual issue or create economies of scale.

The second funding challenge for sport organizations is that there is a trend towards funding becoming increasingly directed. In general, funders are increasingly looking to make a direct contribution towards programming and services, avoiding “administration” and “overhead” – yet these are typically pre-requisites for successful delivery. As one participant put it, “administration should not be considered a dirty word.” At the same time there are rising demands for accountability for funding, leading to growing reporting requirements. From the point of view of recipient organizations, the reporting process is highly inefficient as many are asking for the same or similar information, but each funder has requirements that are just different enough (e.g. format or timing) that significant work is required for each individually. In contrast, the Quebec example of using a single application for five different athlete bursaries was cited as a positive alternative.

A third barrier related to funding is the timeliness of receipt of funds. Expectations that work is on-going prior to the receipt of funds (particularly an issue with governments given the amount of time that can be required to “get money out the door”) can be particularly problematic, particularly where there are special initiatives or periodic activities involved. When funds are distributed prior to the end of the fiscal year, with the condition that spending occur prior to year end, these expectations can be particularly unrealistic. Organizations may also incur unnecessary expenses in order to ensure cash flow for ongoing activities.

Misalignment within the sport system is another barrier to strengthening capacity. While there are general understandings within the sport system about who does what, these roles may also vary significantly based on current resources or priorities, perceived needs, programming gaps, or strategic positioning. For example, while NSOs are generally responsible for ensuring standards and common tools for national championships, a PSO may decide to create an on-line registration system. If no such system currently exists, this can be of significant benefit to the sport as a whole once shared; if a parallel system exists, it may be creating a duplication of effort and competing systems that can be ill-

afforded within the sport. Lines can also be blurred between clubs and P/TSOs; clubs and NSOs; NSOs and MSOs; NSOs, P/TSOs and CSCs, and so on. It should also be noted that duplication itself can also be a cause of misalignment, as well as being an effect. For example, the use of different age or skill divisions across the country can lead to disconnects in athlete development pathways. NSOs seem to be particularly concerned about the variations across the country/within different jurisdictions and the challenges these present to consistent pan-Canadian sport development.

The “way we’ve always done things” can be a powerful barrier to capacity. Regardless of the reasons for resistance to change, with the sport environment changing as rapidly as it is, there is a requirement to adapt in order to effectively deliver programs and services. The necessity for change might include keeping pace with technology, the need for new approaches to volunteer recruitment and retention (given changing expectations), different working conditions and so forth. Sometimes over-reliance on traditional methods or approaches can even lead to investment in activities not strictly a part of an organization’s mandate – an important consideration in times of particular capacity challenges. What might have seemed like a good idea at the time might have also out-lived its usefulness (for example, what should CYA’s ongoing role be regarding boating safety?). One participant shared how his organization has introduced a “not to do” list.

The fifth challenge highlighted by participants is getting access to sport facilities given a tendency towards a municipal focus on broad-based recreation, sometimes to the exclusion of high-performance sport. The example of partnership in Pointe Claire is seen as the happy anomaly, rather than the rule. The focus on recreation extends to facility design, which is increasingly geared towards drop-in public use, which could even mean that fields are not regulation size, pools can’t accommodate starting blocks or more than a couple of lanes, or that tracks do not include throwing or jumps areas. For the recreational user these would not pose issues, but once athletes reach a certain stage in their development, lack of access to appropriate facilities can hinder their advancement.

Considerations (raised by Forum participants)

- Sport Canada’s and others’ leadership within the sport system
- Setting out general sport system roles and responsibilities
- Agreeing on pan-Canadian delivery standards or stretch targets
- Clarification of parameters for support of separate or integrated organizations
- Coordination of a pan-Canadian strategy to re-integrate local sport and recreation
- Balancing general administrative/operational and targeted funds
- (Continue to) Improve funding processes to deliver contribution funds in a timely manner
- Harmonizing funding application and reporting tools with other funders
- (Re) Examination of funding assessment frameworks
- Creation of incentives (rather than disincentives) for cooperative delivery
- Creation of “association” services, e.g. translation, human resources services

D. Effective Systems

The discussion on effective systems can be summarized as putting in place the virtual infrastructure to ensure that the business of the organization is delivered smoothly – and, to borrow a phrase often heard in the context of LTAD, that it happens on purpose and not by accident. A common refrain expressed by Forum participants is that we tend to be good at design but less good at delivery, and this is where we collectively require improvement. In order for this to happen, there need to be a number of components in place, notably:

- A governance structure in place that is enabling to the aims of the organization;
- Clear, operationalized strategic direction;
- Aligned linkages and reciprocal accountability with delivery partners;
- Networks that support delivery and allow the organization to take advantage of available services.

To be realized, each of these elements requires that an organization has a strong mandate which is well understood by its stakeholders. While this may seem self-evident, it is not always easy to achieve, as the barriers to capacity outlined in the previous section would suggest. Furthermore, an effective system will strongly link activities to the organization’s mandate, focusing resources and helping to avoid the addition of “good idea” projects which may not be directly applicable. It should also assist organizations in determining what kind of relationship it wants with which funding partners: if funding conditions are misaligned with strategic direction, an organization may well decide to not pursue the relationship because its net gain could actually be negative.

Governance emerged as an important component to be regularly reviewed, particularly in the case of an organization in a state of change. Several participants spoke of the governance journey, and noted that significant governance change may need to go through a series of steps before an organization gets it right – for that point in its development. It is worth highlighting that governance in this context includes both volunteer and staff leadership, as well as their working relationships.

As at the 2007 Forum, participants expressed concerns about representative governance models. This time the concern revolved around a lack of “reciprocal accountability” where the delivery partners of the organization (e.g., in the context of NSOs, its P/TSO members) are accountable to the organization as well as the organization being accountable to its partners/members. In a representative model, it is particularly challenging to establish this reciprocal accountability given the decision-making structure.

A number of different types of networks to support delivery can be established and developed. The concept behind a useable network is that it can be called upon or activated in order to address challenges, extend delivery or strengthen programs. This might include a virtual network, as in the case of resource call list (411/911: I need information on or about something, or help!), or a network of deliverers, as in the case of

coach or LTAD coordinators. Furthermore, a network might extend to other platforms for sharing, such as a virtual resource library. All networks require some front end investment, as well as maintenance to keep up to date. There is also often the idea of reciprocity; the outreach is seldom in just one direction (e.g. use the resources, add into the library; ask about a service, offer a service).²

Some NSOs noted that they did not think that they fully took advantage of the services provided by MSOs (or, potentially, other groups). In part, this may be due to the time and commitment needed at the outset to create the connection, but a part of it appears to be a lack of awareness about the availability and types of services available. One idea put forward by a number of groups was to create a virtual network/web-based platform that would have an index of available services within/for the sport community, and that could additionally support the exchange of information. It was also suggested that Sport Canada could play more of a “broker role” in setting up connections between funded organizations.

In the course of discussions, some other services/resources emerged as being potentially important for strengthening effective systems. These include: the development and availability of generic policy templates, support for regional staff/coordination, and mechanisms for association collaboration such as sport marketing or human resource services. With respect to policy templates, organizations acknowledged that very often they are paying (typically the same consultants) to develop similar policies; if there were templates for basic policies, the financial resources could be used for other means or further refinement. Options could be given within the templates to prompt organizations to appropriately customize the policy and/or focus their resources on areas requiring more attention.

A number of participants pointed to the success of regional staff in advancing both LTAD and coaching initiatives, given the added/dedicated human resource capacity that they are able to bring. It was felt that this model could be useful in a variety of areas, including on a single sport basis in certain regions, perhaps most particularly in the Atlantic provinces where there are small jurisdictions and particularly limited sport resources.

A barrier to the sport community creating associations to access common services was often cited as a lack of either a coordination mechanism and/or challenges in accessing funding to support the community as a whole. A few places – Calgary, for instance – have community sport councils in place, which appear to work well in terms of leveraging and advancing the interests of local sport organizations.

It was also acknowledged throughout the discussions that people could compensate for a lack of systems, just as systems can to a certain degree safeguard against problematic behaviour and/or relationships. However, while systematic recruitment of quality people

² Preliminary findings from a Brock University study on community sport and wellness organizations appear to confirm the potential gains from organizations working together. Shared registration, volunteers, administration all serve to reduce overhead and gain efficiency, while allowing for joint initiatives such as collective grant applications.

is recognized as a good idea, a strategy of depending on people to compensate for systems is not, given its high reliance on luck.

Considerations (raised by Forum participants)

- Stretch targets and indicators for clear strategic direction are set for funded organizations, based on generic sport system roles and responsibilities (see section C)
- Strengthen role of the Sport Canada program officer to provide facilitative assistance and referrals to funded organizations
- Development of common sport governance resources, including readiness indicators and a guide to different governance models; support for organizations to transition governance models
- Support development of a web-based “one-stop” resource centre/exchange
- Support the development and distribution of policy templates
- Support “association coordination” for the sport community

E. Effective People

The underlying message regarding developing effective people was clear: value people and their contributions, and treat them accordingly. Recognizing the value, including expertise, that people bring to an organization starts with recruitment and job matching. This allows the available skills and competencies to be “best used” within an organization. Discussion participants talked about intake interviews (perhaps informal over lunch, a phone call to discuss areas of mutual interest), periodic gap analysis of needed skills in order to make the best matches, and clear job descriptions/expectations. It was noted that job descriptions should be matched to expertise; for example, having a coach run a club may limit use or demonstration of technical skills and capability.

In some cases, an organization has more input into who gets involved than in others. Hiring processes generally provide a selection of individuals from whom to choose, and committee appointments allow for broad selection. Depending on the type of governance model that an organization has, there may be varying degrees of input into the slate of nominations. Recognizing the challenges inherent in some parent-volunteers, it was suggested that organizations might want to reach out to other populations to supplement typical recruitment, including retirees, or using community volunteer bureaus.

The volunteer-staff dynamic is a particularly important one in utilizing people resources. For many organizations, this relationship changes significantly over time, as organizations grow, downsize or move from operations delivered by volunteers to operations delivered by staff. Typically the onus is on staff to “manage” volunteers and their contributions – set expectations, monitor activities, coordinate meetings and manage decision-making and/or any issues arising. It was, however, noted that many sport administrators are not prepared for this dynamic, and that it does not seem to be subject directly addressed in sport administration/management education programs.

Once a part of an organization, it is important that people are properly oriented. This includes access to the information and tools to fulfill their roles. Some of this information will be internal to the organization (e.g. policies, operating procedures, minutes of previous meetings), while other information will be more generic about the sport system, board member roles and responsibilities, organizational effectiveness, types of organizations and their strengths and precursors, etc.³ Participants noted that a centralized clearinghouse of information (also see section D) would be useful in terms of sourcing and managing this information.

Furthermore, there are a number of human resource type tools that would be of benefit to the sport community as a whole. These notably include generic job descriptions, feedback and performance evaluation tools (including the training to use them), as well as outlines of staffing processes. Access to human resource expertise was also identified as an activity that could be provided on an association basis.

³ One NSO ED mentioned that he now has board members read *The Imperfect Board Member* by Jim Brown.

Ongoing development of people who are part of the organization then becomes important. While generational differences suggest that staff and volunteers will be more mobile than ever, the counterpoint to “why invest in people if they’re just going to leave” is “what if we don’t – and they stay?” Collective approaches to people development would not only create economies of scale, but also potentially reduce risks to or create incentives for organizations concerned about expending resources with minimal direct returns.

Both staff and volunteer development is important for creating capacity, and while they may require access to similar information, there are somewhat different skill sets that require development. It is also valuable to recognize that “who needs what development” will change over time, as staff and volunteers change, and as organizations evolve. Different programs have been available over the years, including a mentoring program for staff and a skills development program for volunteers. Some initiatives are already underway: through the Club Excellence initiative there is discussion of resurrecting or redeveloping a volunteer development program; SaskSport already has an on-line volunteer training centre in place,⁴ and Brock University is looking at developing a school for sport capacity focused on community sport.

Discussion participants also talked about the importance of communication. On the one hand, it was widely acknowledged that new technology provides unprecedented opportunities for collaboration – including video/webconferences (SaskSport has a videoconference room available for participation in virtual meetings) and on-line meeting technology such as Microsoft Office Live Workspace or Live Meeting. On the other hand, participants stressed that internet technology can be overused, and often simply picking up the phone and talking is much better than e-mail.

Finally, the retention of staff and volunteers within an organization is also important, in order to take advantage of developed capacity. For staff, salary and benefit packages and job security are important; as one participant put it, “you shouldn’t have to marry well to be able to work in sport.” It was recognized that reward and incentive programs need to change over time to continue to be meaningful; associated activities could include benefits, job security, recognition programs, succession plans (including pathways from local to national to international organizations), mentoring or nominations for community awards. There may also be generational differences, where baby boomers might be motivated by different rewards than Gen Xers, and those at the beginning of their careers might be looking for different experiences than those close to retiring.

While the Activators approached the issue of people capacity from a slightly different angle than their Forum-participant counterparts, the themes raised were strikingly similar. The youth expressed that they wanted to be involved in sport “to make a difference” but that they were often unaware of where to turn to make links with organizations and find the right matches for them. The processes they encountered tended to be characterized as

⁴ See: <http://www.ovtc.sk.ca/>

unencouraging, where responses to their offers were not received, where processes were mysterious, or where their enthusiasm and efforts were actively discouraged. Good practice was described as having access to information, being mentored and supported, being pointed in the right direction and being provided with opportunities to develop skills to be more involved. Active recruitment and recognition that “you don’t need to be athletic to contribute to sport” was also seen to be important.

Considerations (raised by Forum participants)

- Encourage universities/colleges with sport administration or management programs to include volunteer coordination in their curricula
- Support for development of generic roles & responsibilities, organizational and decision-making models, feedback and evaluation tools
- Support for staff and/or volunteer development programs
- Support for volunteer “matching” programs or initiatives (including possible web-based registration/recruitment)

Moving Forward

In this portion of the discussion, participants were invited to share their recommendations for building sport system capacity. With a strong emphasis on both vertical and horizontal integration, the following activities were identified as being particularly important in bolstering capacity:

Program and funding alignment

- Alignment of athlete grants/support programs throughout the system
- Strengthening and alignment of Paralympic-sport development throughout the system
- Funder collaboration, especially for common applications and reporting
- Funding framework incentives for working together – for economies of scale, regional cooperation, cross-sport LTAD initiatives for FUNdamentals, etc.
- Automatic capacity funds added into any new targeted funding
- Support for volunteer and organizational development

Common interactive web-based platform(s)

- Centralized data collection and coordination
- Common service coordination (a “virtual” Canadian Sport and Fitness Administration Centre)
- A resource clearing house of information
- Template policies and tools
- Volunteer registration / “match-making”

Sectoral engagement

- Audit of sport system roles and development of generic roles & responsibilities
- Outreach/mobilization of municipal recreation
- Outreach to universities/colleges, particularly those with sport management/administration programs, to strengthen content for sport system realities
- Collective outreach to private sector