



September 16, 2009

Dear 2010 and Beyond Panel Members,

We are very pleased to submit this letter in response to the Panel's invitation to chart a course for high performance sport in Canada that builds on our current successes and sets a bold vision for the future.

As partners in the Centre for Sport and Law we have over 75 years of combined experience in helping sport organizations better manage the issues that stand in the way of achieving their objectives. Over the past 18 years, we have witnessed first-hand the challenges and risks that sport administrators face. Equally, we have been exposed to exemplars and innovative solutions, which are proving to help these organizations proactively manage, rather than merely cope with these issues more effectively. As such, we have increasingly employed strength-based approaches with our clients in the hope that this will not only help them reduce the risks they face daily, but provide them with the knowledge, tools, and expert advice that they require to more effectively fulfill their mandates.

For many of our clients, the challenge is how to meet objectives, not how to establish them. Therefore, this submission was prepared taking into consideration not only *what* a world-leading Canadian high performance sport sector looks like beyond 2010 but also *how* it should operate.

Based on the recommendations from the Panel, we are presenting our thoughts and recommendations as a series of broad principles, which would then guide the implementation of strategy and detailed actions. We then suggest characteristics of a world-leading sport nation based on some of the outstanding practices we have come across over the years.

In our opinion, a world-leading high performance Canadian sport system is one that is connected from grass roots to podium in a seamless, coordinated, and strategic manner. It is our belief that the principles that govern high performance sport excellence are deeply connected to community sport. Therefore our submission also makes reference to the "whole system" as we believe the "whole system" is part of a continuum that supports high performance excellence.

PRINCIPLES

We believe that the following five principles can guide sport leaders as they develop a world leading Canadian sport system – one that involves an appreciation of, and an investment in, both on and off the field performance excellence:

Progressive

What we mean by progressive is that the leadership and governance structure of the sport organization is one that takes into account both the external and internal environment, continually scans the landscape, and deliberately adapts to changes. The dawn of the 21st

century is calling on all of us to think differently about what we do and why we do it. “Chaordic” organizations are masters of adaptability, considering the benefits of short-term actions and opportunities but not at the expense of longer-term sustainability. Chaordic, a term that combines two inherently contradictory ideas – chaos and order - means embracing the chaos inherent in every ordered system and harnessing that energy to find better ways to achieve stated objectives. In practical terms, being progressive means that an organization does not slavishly adhere to long-term plans or historical practices in the face of unexpected opportunities, but rather is open to change when change is called for. Progressive systems are adept at scanning, adapting, and innovating – characteristics that are necessary for performance excellence.

Innovative

What we mean by innovative is that we have the desire and ability to continually improve as a system, as organizations, and as people (athletes, coaches, officials, administrators and volunteers). Thriving networks embrace the unknown and invest in the early seeds of ideas that may take years to flourish and blossom. There is a willingness to “stand still to move forward”. There is a system in place that allows researchers, academics, and practitioners to share knowledge, exchange ideas, and co-create. There is a continuum of strategic approaches that range from “thought experiments” to deeper and more thorough longitudinal studies. Innovation also includes providing people – both on and off the field - with the opportunity to continually learn. Other sectors and professions regularly invest in their people in a cycle of continual professional development and improvement. Currently our investment in continual improvement is limited to on the field performance excellence, which we pursue through elaborate programs to develop athletes, coaches and officials (the ‘front end’ of the sport house). There is no comparable effort to develop volunteers and administrators who perform essential work at the ‘back end’ of the sport house. One way to leverage our assets and to foster innovation is to make an explicit commitment to continual learning and to invest in the administration of sport through planned professional development opportunities for sport administrators and volunteers.

Responsive

What we mean by responsive is that we know and understand who the consumers of sport are, we put in place the required services and supports to meet their needs, and in so doing, to promote the value and benefit of sport to society. A responsive sport system is one that focuses squarely on the mission that Canadians care about, and supports the mandates of the sport organizations and the communities through which sport actually takes place. A highly responsive enterprise communicates clearly and offers services that are seamless, coordinated, consistent, relevant and timely. In practical terms, this principle supports a different leadership structure at the national level for sport in Canada: one in which the national funding partners (Sport Canada, Podium, coaching associations, Games organizations, and others) coordinate and consolidate their programs through a single agency operating more independently of government. Such an agency could move beyond a simple funding role (and financial watchdog) to being a true vested partner in the development and implementation of sport policy. We believe that such a structure could increase the level of sport literacy within sport organizations and the Canadian public, could promote a culture of shared understanding and could ultimately lead to exceptional and sustainable sport results.

Values-driven

In our opinion, a world leading high performance sport system needs to adopt a holistic and integrated approach to the ongoing and sustainable development of athletes who are consistently meeting international standards of excellence, and are doing so, in a fair and ethical

manner. These are not mutually exclusive goals but are often interpreted as such. A world-leading high performance sport nation invests and pays attention to not only the results achieved but also *how* those results are achieved. This means continuing to invest in the long-term development of athletes at all stages of development and continuing to invest in the long-term development of coaches to support on the field performance excellence. It means supporting high performance training institutes that provide world leading specialists in the areas of nutrition, sport science, mental preparation, and career counseling. It also means investing in the long-term professional development of sport administrators to ensure that sport is managed competently. This means taking into account the “whole system” whereby grass roots sports are seen as the foundation of high performance sport, taking into account existing systems such as schools, municipalities, clubs, and high performance centres.

Sustainable

World-leading enterprises are considering the ‘footprint’ they are leaving on the world and many are taking significant steps towards eliminating or reducing their mark. The advent of corporate social responsibility and the current environmental crisis have leaders evaluating the economic, environmental and social effects arising from their products and services. Sustainable sport means that we are considering the broader impact of sport and working towards a holistic and integrated model that supports longer-term objectives. Sustainability as a principle should be reflected in government funding and policies, partnership agreements, and the policies, operating procedures and daily business practices of sport organizations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A WORLD LEADING SPORT NATION

Effective governance

Over 34,000 non-profit organizations plan and deliver sport and recreation in Canada. One thing they all have in common is that they are led by volunteer boards of directors. In our experience, an organization’s success (or lack of it) flows directly from the effectiveness with which they govern themselves. Effective boards manage the inherent tension between fulfilling their stewardship function (through their fiduciary role) and their leadership function (through their strategic role) and enjoy positive board-staff relationships. Effective boards are also explicit in their commitment to do what is best for the organization by seeking, recruiting and developing qualified and competent people and avoiding conflicts of interest. In our experience, good governance goes hand in hand with good planning and policies, effective dispute management, proactive risk management and sound business practices. A world-leading sport system recognizes, supports and rewards effective governance practices within sport organizations. As many organizations are questioning the kind of leadership required to achieve their vision, the idea of ‘generative governance’ emerges as an exemplary practice worth pursuing. Generative governance, as a third model beyond fiduciary governance and strategic governance, provides boards with the opportunity to engage in early thinking on the long-term, big picture problems that organizations face. All forms of governance are important, but we would suggest that those organizations that show signs of generative governance are those organizations whose boards are truly leading.

Planning

World-leading systems create robust frameworks to enable organizations to thrive and innovate. An essential element of sustaining world-leading performances is the ability of the organization to plan. Exemplars in the Canadian sport system at the national level have in place progressive, adaptable, relevant strategic plans that take into account world trends, management trends, sport specific trends and their own organizational capacity to deliver on the plan. These plans are reflective of the policies and procedures of the organization and mirror the organization’s

values. These plans are fluid documents that are used daily and revisited frequently to capitalize on emerging opportunities and identified risks. These plans are powerful management tools that connect current operations to the longer-term vision with clear, measurable, and accountable outcomes.

Authentic leadership

Leadership comes in many forms and is understood in vastly different ways. The literature would suggest that leadership might be described as transactional, transformational, or authentic. It is the latter that in our opinion affords sport the greatest opportunity to move from good to great. Currently, we describe sport as a tool to develop leaders, but this is not done in a strategic or planned way. We might suggest that leaders are developed in spite of the system and not because of it. A world-leading sport system would understand the kind of leadership required to produce successful organizations, and would invest in this form of leadership to help sport fulfill its purpose by attracting, retaining and developing the right kinds of people.

Risk-taking

It is ironic that while athletes and coaches are expected to take risks every day, sport administrators for the most part, and sport organizations themselves, are far more risk-averse. One of the central features of cultures that support and sustain excellence is their ability to identify risks, evaluate them, consider their impact, and determine appropriate actions. There are reasons to believe that the more progressive NSOs are now managing their risks thoughtfully through effective planning, efficient deployment of resources, and deliberate analysis of trends.

Management practices that are human-centric and results-oriented

Research reveals that values can play an instrumental role in managing the tensions between what is good for an organization, its employees, and society at large. For instance, a growing number of social and natural crises are making issues that were once considered peripheral to managers (e.g., investment in human capital, environmental sustainability, ethics) increasingly relevant to everyday management practices. Values help to clarify what matters most to an organization by stimulating dialogue and by engaging all people in the process. Values are likened to the “glue” that connects an organization’s mission to its vision and they often serve as a platform upon which shared understanding emerges. Today’s complex environment has rendered many traditional business management structures inadequate, and this is being felt by the many thousands of non-profit organizations that are responsible for planning and delivering sport and recreation in Canada. In response to the rapid changes in the external environment, sport organizations will need strategies to better manage through complexity if they are to remain competitive. For instance, sport organizations face a growing number of performance pressures from the public, their members, and the government including expectations to increase revenue, attract more members, provide more services, and produce world champions. According to Imagine Canada, charitable and non-profit organizations are facing increased competition for public and private funds; a reduction in the number of volunteers; challenges related to the recruitment and retention of competent and qualified employees; and demand for accountability and transparency by government and the public. Researchers have suggested that **values** can help sport organizations adapt to such changes in the environment and as such, organizations are encouraged to incorporate organizational values intentionally into their management practices.

Strategic Communications

At no time in our history have we had access to data and information such as we have today – yet, ironically, we may be communicating less effectively than we ever have before. To

communicate better, we need to distinguish among data, information, knowledge and wisdom. The Internet has allowed us to exchange huge volumes of data quickly, and has also made it easier for us to share information – where information is data that has undergone some analysis and packaging. Knowledge, on the other hand, is data that has gone through a series of deliberate filters to make the data more relevant to the intended target. “Knowledge management” means that we are consciously altering the communication and the medium to better target our audience: for example, using face-to-face dialogue and telephone communication where appropriate, but also embracing social networking platforms and text-messaging to engage a younger audience. We would suggest that shared wisdom is what results when data, information, and knowledge are managed and shared in ways that enable true dialogue. This can only happen as part of a deliberate communications strategy – which we would suggest is a hallmark of a world-leading high performance system.

Networks of collaboration

It has been widely noted that the Canadian sport system is characterized by much duplication of effort and squandering of time and resources, precisely because organizations do not collaborate. Thriving sectors, on the other hand, have the ability to come together to seek out what they share in common and also how they are distinct and thus how they may complement one another. A world-leading sport system would facilitate the opportunity to come together to share, collaborate, innovate and plan on issues of common interest, but would do so in a way that respects autonomy while also creating a unity in purpose. Sport is not a homogenous group and a world-leading sport system would make it possible for connections and alliances to occur, but would not expect organizations to centralize, follow rigid policy prescriptions or use cookie-cutter funding frameworks such as SFAF. To thrive as a sector, sport leaders must embrace alliances and partnerships through a philosophy of innovative collaboration.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Becoming a world-leading sport nation is within our reach. Canada is leading the way on many fronts as evidenced by the establishment of the *Canadian Sport Policy*, *Canadian Sport For Life*, *Own the Podium* programs, and the True Sport Movement. As Alvesson and Deetz (2000) point out:

“The increased size of organizations, rapid implementation of communication and information technologies, globalization, the changing nature of our work, reduction of the working class, professionalization of the workforce, stagnant economies, wide-spread ecological problems and turbulent markets are all part of the contemporary context demanding a research response.”
Doing Critical Management Research. London: Sage. p.10

Integrating the aforementioned principles at all levels reflects the ongoing commitment by sport leaders to create the kind of culture where innovation and trust, rather than rigid control, characterizes the relationships between sport organizations and their partners and funders. The degree to which decision-makers embrace key principles as a way to organize, come together and deliver sport in this country, is critical to our success and sustainability as a world leading high performance sport nation.

Sincerely,

THE CENTRE FOR SPORT AND LAW

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