

## Context receptivity: Innovation in an amateur sport organization

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### **Abstract:**

The Amateur Boxing Association (ABA) is a Canadian provincial sport organization. Recently, the ABA has attempted many innovations in response to strong pressure for change. The success of these attempts has been mixed. This study uses Pettigrew, Ferlie and McKee's (1992) metaphor of context receptivity to explain this outcome variability. Context receptivity is a process-oriented perspective on organizational change behavior. This research is a qualitative, ethnographic case study focussing on two particular ABA innovations. One innovation failed; the other succeeded. These results are consistent with the expectations of context receptivity, which is a useful framework for understanding change outcomes in sport organizations.

**Keywords:** boxing | amateur sport | sports management | context receptivity

### **Article:**

In Canada, the Canadian Amateur Boxing Association (CABA) supervises the Olympic sport of amateur boxing. In each province, CABA is represented by a provincial sport organization (PSO) that is responsible for all boxing within that province (e.g. Boxing Ontario, Boxing Alberta, etc.). Each PSO handles the local aspects of amateur boxing. Although the PSOs depend upon the sanction and approval of CABA, they are generally autonomous in their operations. CABA handles National Team and international boxing matters while leaving the PSOs to routine operations (such as local competition, registration, training, etc.). The organization discussed herein, the Amateur Boxing Association (ABA), is one of these boxing PSOs.<sup>1</sup>

Like most amateur sport bodies in Canada, the ABA is a non-profit organization comprised of an Executive Committee, a Board of Directors, coaches, athletes, officials, and other interested parties.<sup>2</sup> The Executive Committee and the Board of Directors serve as the leadership for the ABA, making decisions regarding policy and procedure.

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<sup>1</sup> Amateur Boxing Association is a pseudonym. As per the terms of informed consent, all references (including bibliographic) will be made to the Amateur Boxing Association.

<sup>2</sup> The following information is drawn from the ABA *Annual Report* (Amateur Boxing Association, 1998), *ABA Constitution & By-Laws* (Amateur Boxing Association, 1997a), *ABA Policy Manual* (Amateur Boxing Association, 1997b), and *Minutes of Executive Meetings* (Amateur Boxing Association, 1996-98), as well as personal communication with various members of the organization.

While some major decisions are deferred to ABA-wide secret ballot at the Annual General Meeting, this is rare. In practice, ABA decisions are made at the monthly Executive meetings. These consist of open votes on motions made by those in attendance. Meetings are attended by some or all of the President, Past President, Treasurer, Secretary, five Vice Presidents, the Chief Official, the Athletes' Representative, the Head of the Coaches' Committee, eight Regional Zone Representatives, and two administrative assistants.<sup>3</sup> All ABA members donate their time on a volunteer basis. Unlike larger sport organizations, the ABA has no paid employees.

The ABA has four sources of income. The smallest and least reliable is that generated by ticket sales from boxing tournaments. Registration fees, paid by coaches, clubs, and athletes, are the largest source. The second largest is an annual operating grant provided by the provincial government's sport funding program. The ABA also receives income through sanctioned gaming activities. Together, these form the ABA'S annual budget of approximately \$80,000. During the observation period, the ABA's attempts to attract private sector funding were unsuccessful.

Most of the 1,000 ABA-registered members are athletes. Two-fifths are registered as competitive boxers. The other athletes are non-competitive, recreational boxers. The ABA has a slightly higher than average number of female athletes (18%) compared to the national level of 15% (Amateur Boxing Association, 1998).

Although some ABA coaches and officials have the necessary experience and training to participate in national and international boxing events, they are few. The ABA has few formal development policies for coaches or officials. While the ABA does participate in the National Coaching Certification Program, training clinics for coaches and officials are sporadic and inconsistent.

The only system for athlete development in the province is actual competition. The ABA has no recruitment or talent identification procedures and rarely conducts training camps. Prior to the changes discussed below, the Provincial Team was simply composed of the winning boxers in each weight class at the previous Provincial Championships. While the ABA pays travel expenses to national competitions, the Provincial Team does not train as a whole, and no support services (e.g., sport science, nutrition, etc.) are provided. The ABA offers no financial assistance to athletes beyond that provided by the government's Athlete Assistance Program.

### **Pressure for Change**

In recent years, Canadian amateur sport has experienced strong pressures for change, from a variety of sources and in a number of different areas (Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Slack, 1997; Slack & Hinings, 1992, 1994). This is certainly true of the ABA. Their level of government funding has been steadily reduced, increasing the need to find alternative sources of revenue. At the same time, government and insurance requirements have become increasingly stringent in terms of required policies, regulations, and paperwork. For

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<sup>3</sup> In practice, no distinction is made between the Directors, Executive Committee members, or the administrative assistants. All may motion, second, and vote at the meetings. For brevity, those involved in decision-making will be referred to collectively as the Executive. All subsequent references should be understood to refer to this group as a whole.

example, in response to government requirements and the increasingly litigious nature of Canadian society, the ABA has recently implemented harassment and risk management policies (Amateur Boxing Association, 1997a, 1997b).

In addition to the pressures felt by most Canadian sports, the ABA also faces a number of unique circumstances. Among these is the recent growth in the popularity of boxing. Participation rates and media attention have reached record levels, catapulting boxing into the public eye (Amateur Boxing Association, 1998). At the same time, the ABA's competitive success at national and international competitions has decreased. Historically, the ABA won proportionate athletic representation on the Canadian National Team. However, during the period of observation, very few athletes succeeded in reaching this level. At the time, the ABA had no athletes on the Senior National Team.

Another important factor for the ABA is the rising level of female and recreational participation. Traditionally, boxing was dominated by male competitors. However, it has become common for women to train and compete in boxing. Furthermore, many people have begun to train in boxing without any intention of competing. This change represents a significant demographic shift within the ABA. These members bring different experiences, priorities, and demands to the sport of boxing.

Due to these many changes and pressures, the ABA has considered a variety of innovative responses. However, the response to these innovations, and their success, has been mixed. The purpose of this research is to examine the ABA's responses, using Pettigrew, Ferlie, and McKee's (1992) concept of *context receptivity*.

## **Theoretical Background**

Change and innovation are important topics in organizational theory. Furthermore, as the pace of development in all sectors is constantly increasing, there is no reason to believe that environmental demands on organizational adaptability will decrease (Bamyeh, 1998; Giddens, 1990). Peters goes so far as to claim that modern organizations have only two choices: they can "get innovative or get dead" (1990, p. 9). Lawler (1985) suggests that change may be the single most important issue in organizational analysis, as nothing is truly static. Clearly, change is an important topic for researchers and practitioners alike.

Not surprisingly, change and innovation have been widely discussed and researched (Rogers, 1983; Slack, 1997; Wolfe, 1994). However, many analyses of change have a narrow focus, considering issues in isolation and assuming other factors are unimportant or remain constant. For example, it may be proposed that certain key events are fundamental to an organization's development and subsequent transition through various stages of growth (Kimberly & Miles, 1980). This typically leads to a straightforward cause and effect explanation, wherein change proceeds through clearly identifiable stages (Gersick, 1991; Greiner, 1972).

Many of these studies offer powerful insights. However, they tend to have a limited applicability; relevant factors in one setting may be unimportant in another. Consequently, there is

considerable disagreement and lack of corroboration within the change and innovation literature (Mohr, 1982; Rogers, 1983; Wolfe, 1994).

One possible explanation for the lack of cumulative knowledge is the absence of process in many studies of change and innovation. Numerous authors have mentioned this problem (Mohr, 1982; Pettigrew, 1987; Pettigrew, et al., 1992; Rogers, 1983; Slack, 1997). Contextual perspectives offer a particularly strong critique of the lack of process (Lawler, 1985; Pettigrew, 1987; Pettigrew, et al., 1992). It has been claimed that "much research in organizational change is ahistorical, acontextual and aprocessual in character" (Pettigrew, 1987, p. 655).

Most often, these studies describe a change that has occurred, along with a selection of the environmental conditions surrounding it. It is quite clear what happened, but how it happened is rarely addressed in detail. "Studies of organizational change are, therefore, often preoccupied with the intricacies of *changes* rather than the holistic and dynamic analysis of *changing*" (Pettigrew, et al., 1992, p. 6).

To fully understand the matter of changing, Pettigrew (1987) argues that research must address three elements of change: content, context, and process. Content refers to the details of the actual change. Context, which has internal and external components, is the environment surrounding the change, and includes issues such as environment, culture, structure, and politics. Process refers to the "actions, reactions and interactions from the varied interested parties" (Pettigrew, 1987, p. 657).

Most studies of change address content, and there are many excellent perspectives for understanding various aspects of context. However, little work has been done with process. As far as true contextual analysis is concerned, combining all three elements, "no studies within sport management have used this approach (Slack, 1997, p. 217). This is unfortunate. As LeLaurin (1999) notes, failing to consider process leads to gaps in understanding. An observer may know what the outcome was, but not understand how it was achieved. This obviously limits the ability to learn and replicate.

A key to bringing process into the study of change and innovation lies in examining the simultaneous interaction of multiple contextual factors (Caza, 1999; Lawler, 1985; Weick, 1979). Too often, a change and its environment are depicted in simple terms. The focus is too narrow and/or poorly defined (Rogers, 1983; Wolfe, 1994). As Gersick (1991) notes, it is possible that two conflicting models of change could be true in the same organization at different times because of changed circumstances. For a richer understanding of change, it will be necessary to move away from an episodic, single-cause analysis to allow the complex interplay of process to reveal itself. Weick (1979) claims that patterns of interdependence are ultimately more important than particular details.

To clarify such processes, Pettigrew, et al. propose using "the metaphor of 'receptive' and 'non-receptive' contexts" (1992, p.98). "We mean by the term receptive context that there are features of context (and also management action) that seem to be favorably associated with forward movement. On the other hand, in non-receptive contexts, there is a configuration of features that may be associated with blocks on change" (Pettigrew, et al., 1992, p. 268).

Receptivity, as a continuum, reflects how amenable a given setting is to any particular innovation. Every context has a characteristic level of receptivity, which in turn is influenced by the unique details of any particular innovation. Pettigrew, et al. (1992) propose an eight-factor framework for describing context receptivity. These eight factors represent "a linked set of conditions which provide high energy around change," facilitating the process of organizational change and innovation (Pettigrew, et al., 1992, p. 275). Briefly, the eight factors are:

1. *Quality and coherence of policy.* This includes matters such as clear conceptual framing of the issue, strategic considerations, coherence with other policies, feasibility, etc.
2. *Availability of key people leading change.* It is important to note that this reference to leadership is not to change champions or "heroic and individualistic 'macho managers,' but rather leadership exercised in a much more subtle and pluralist fashion" (Pettigrew, et al., 1992, p. 278).
3. *Long-term environmental pressure.* Although organizations have demonstrated the ability to resist external demands, environmental pressure is still an important potential factor in prompting and stimulating significant change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Gersick, 1991).
4. *Supportive organizational culture* refers to official ideology, patterns of behavior, and deep-seated assumptions. The important influence of history and tradition are reflected in this factor.
5. *Effective managerial-clinical relations.* This refers to the patterns of interaction between executive and front-line personnel. These relations, good or bad, are most influential during implementation stages.
6. *Co-operative inter-organizational networks.* Pettigrew, et al. note that such networks are potentially important sources "for training and education, for commitment and energy-raising" (1992, p. 284).
7. *Simplicity and clarity of goals and priorities.* Focus is important to maintain change momentum and resist short-term pressures and distractions during the implementation process. Simplicity and clarity are important for such focus.
8. *Fit between the district's change agenda and its locale.* In general terms, this refers to the effects of the external context surrounding change. "While many of these factors may appear beyond management control, awareness of their influence could, nevertheless, be important in anticipation of potential obstacles to change" (Pettigrew, et al., 1992, p. 286).

## Research Method

The purpose of this project was to test the potential usefulness of the context receptivity framework in an amateur sport setting. Using a case study analysis, the framework was considered in relation to innovation outcomes in the ABA.

This case study is based on the author's involvement with the sport of amateur boxing.<sup>4</sup> The data used for this analysis were collected from a variety of sources over a three-year period. This included observations of Executive Committee meetings (approximately 10 to 12 per year) and boxing events (6 to 8 per year), Executive meeting minutes and other ABA memos, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> The author was in no way an idle observer. Holding a variety of positions within the Executive during the observation period, he played a direct and active role in the process surrounding the innovations under discussion.

personal conversations with members of the ABA. Because of the author's participatory involvement, unrestricted access to both records and members was available.

The data collection techniques used were ethnographic, based on participant observation. As a method, participant observation has the advantage of offering "a great deal of depth in research since it allows the researcher to get very close to the phenomena of interest" (Gill & Johnson, 1991, p. 92). In this case, the author was an active member of the ABA, and thus in routine contact with many members of the organization, privy to and participating in various sport-related interactions. Formal data collection included analysis of all ABA documents during the observation period and informal interviews with members of the ABA. As well, a research journal was maintained as a means of capturing reflections and expanding on the documentary sources. While the ABA was informed of and consented to this research, the study was effectively based on covert observation due to the author's "complete participant" status (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 94). Such a means of observation is generally considered to increase the ecological validity of ethnographic data by reducing subject reactivity (Gill & Johnson, 1991 ; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

During the period of observation, ABA members considered many innovations. For example, policies regarding harassment were developed, attempts were made to generate private sector income, and a proposal to create a paid position within the ABA was discussed (Amateur Boxing Association, 1996-1998). However, most of these innovations addressed incremental or minor issues. As such, they were relatively isolated matters involving only a few members of the association.

However, during the observation period, the Executive addressed two significant innovations. These two were widely debated and, if adopted, had the potential to change important aspects of operations within the ABA. In addition to the importance of these two innovations, they also offered the advantage of being contemporaneous. Therefore, many potentially mitigating factors, such as budgets, membership demographics, and Executive membership were similar for both innovations, facilitating comparison. Consequently, these two innovations were selected for this analysis.

#### Innovation One: Computer Scoring

The first innovation considered is the proposal that the ABA adopt the computerized scoring system currently used in international boxing competition. Prior to the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, all amateur boxing bouts were scored manually. The traditional scoring guidelines called for five judges at ringside, each maintaining a running total of points scored by the boxers. In order to decrease subjectivity in scoring, and to differentiate the sport from professional boxing, the International Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) replaced the manual system with a computerized one following the 1988 Games.

Using the computer system, there are still five judges. Each judge has two computer pads, one for each boxer. Rather than tracking points, the judges simply press the appropriate pad when they see a scoring blow. If at least three of the pads are pressed within one second of each other, the computer scores a point for that boxer. The intent is to require majority agreement between

the judges before a scoring blow is recognized. The boxer with the highest score at the end of the bout is the winner.

Since its adoption in 1988, computer scoring has become standard practice at all IABA tournaments. CABA followed suit in 1991 and now uses computer scoring at all Canadian National Championships. More than half of Canada's provincial boxing associations have likewise implemented computer scoring.

It should be noted that computer scoring remains a controversial issue within boxing. For one, it significantly changes the practice of the sport. A detailed analysis of this change is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in simple terms, it has made amateur boxing a more defensive sport. Tactics and methods that were rewarded by manual scoring are less useful for computer scoring, and vice versa. This change in the dynamic of competition requires a corresponding change in training methods and coaching techniques.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, although it was introduced to decrease subjectivity, opponents of computer scoring question the actual effect on objectivity as well as the overall accuracy of the system.

The ABA was one of the provincial organizations not using the computer scoring system. However, immediately prior to the observation period, it was proposed that the ABA purchase and use a computer scoring system in its competitions. The argument was made that if the computer was changing boxing, then the ABA would need to change as well in order to have its boxers remain competitive.

#### Innovation Two: Provincial Athlete Ranking

Prior to the introduction of a provincial ranking system, the Annual Provincial Championships determined the members of the Provincial Team. All eligible athletes in a given weight class would box against each other in the championships. A tournament winner would be determined based on a random draw, single elimination format. That winner was then the ABA's representative at all out-of-province tournaments for the next year.

The proposed new system was based upon fluid Provincial titles. No longer would a boxer automatically be the champion for an entire year; if he or she lost a bout to a challenger, that challenger moved onto the Provincial Team. During the season, all boxers accumulate points based on their competitive activity (e.g., 4 points for a winning bout, 1 for losing). The person with the highest point total at any given time would be considered the top contender in the province and have the right to challenge the existing Provincial Team member.

While both innovations were proposed at approximately the same time, they experienced very different responses. Athlete ranking was successfully implemented, while the introduction of computer scoring ultimately failed. Despite similarities in setting and timing between these two innovations, they had very different outcomes.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on information provided by the coach of the Canadian National Team (Canadian Amateur Boxing Association, 1997)

This study of the ABA was idiographic in nature, seeking an explanation for the observed innovation outcomes. Pettigrew, et al.'s (1992) conception of context receptivity was utilized in order to assess its potential applicability to amateur sport settings.

## Discussion and Analysis

Each of the two innovations is discussed below in terms of the interaction and effect of the context receptivity factors. Table 1 summarizes the discussion.

### Computer Scoring

Despite its ultimate failure, the initial proposal received Executive support. A motion was passed, and several thousand dollars were included as a projected expense in the following year's budget.<sup>6</sup> Part of this initial success stemmed from external pressure. The fact that the system was the international standard, and used by CABA at all national competitions, provided significant support for the ABA's adoption. This external use was also an important source of validation in the ABA, as there was a tendency among Executive members to be suspicious of one another's motives. Proposals were typically viewed with the assumption that the instigator had a hidden agenda, some selfish motive, in raising the issue. In this instance, those in favor of computer scoring could point to the external context, clearly demonstrating why it was an important issue.

**Table 1.** Summary of Factors' Influence on the Two Innovations

Receptivity Factors <sup>7</sup> (Pettigrew, et al., 1992)	Computer scoring	Athlete ranking
Quality and coherence of policy	? + Initial vagueness; proactive integration. – Too vague, beyond threshold	+ Kept simple; clear directions & goals; fit with other functions.
Key people leading change	– Change champion attitudes.	+ Buy-in, ownership by Executive.
Long term environmental pressure	+ National, international standard.	? (Minor importance.)
Supportive organizational culture	– Coaches versus officials.	+ Support of coaches.
Inter-organizational links	+ Arrangements for discount and training.	? (Minor importance.)
Simplicity and clarity of goals and priorities	– All-at-one approach.	+ Step-by-step; control of information.
Fit between the district's change agenda and its locale	+ Professionalization in Canadian sport.	? (Minor importance.)
Innovation outcome	Failure (not adopted)	Success (adopted)

*Note.* ? = minor or mixed impact on receptivity; – = negative impact; + = positive impact

Related to this was the overall professionalization occurring in Canadian amateur sport (Kikulis, et al., 1992; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Slack & Hinings, 1992, 1994). This provided

<sup>6</sup> In order to use computer scoring, it is necessary to purchase specialized scoring software as well as the pads that the judges use to score blows. There are several manufacturers, and their prices vary. However, purchasing the system represents an expense of approximately three to four thousand dollars (Canadian).

<sup>7</sup> This research was restricted to the Executive level. In this context, adoption and implementation refer to Executive policy and behavior, not the actual use that individual clubs made of the innovations. Local implementation was beyond the scope of this analysis. As such, the "effective managerial-clinical relations" factor is not relevant to the present discussion, and has been omitted from this table.



additional legitimacy for the move to computer scoring. It was the belief of the majority of ABA Executive members that computer scoring would be consistent with this trend. It involved modern technology, provided faster results, and was perceived as being more modern than manual scoring. Thus, both the specific context of amateur boxing and the more general environment of Canadian sport was seen as supporting the introduction of computer scoring.

Additionally, the initial proposal was quite vague, increasing the level of support. The resolution that was carried regarding computer scoring was simply to put the system in place. Nothing specific about its implementation or use was described. This vagueness allowed for widespread support, as everyone involved was free to believe the computer system would be used the way they preferred. Likewise, in the absence of a specific plan, it was impossible for objectors to disagree over details. Since the fundamental argument in favor of computer scoring was straightforward, the absence of details made it difficult to argue.

The following statement, issued by the Vice President of Planning and Administration, is an example of the non-specific enthusiasm that was generated.

At National competition, our boxers are at a distinct disadvantage on the scoring in each bout if they have not been trained or coached in this computer scoring system. Under Risk Management there is inequity in the training and administrative policy which the [ABA] is responsible to provide in competitive situations. Further our coaches, trainers and officials are also at a disadvantage if they are untrained for the same reasons. I therefore strongly recommend approval and purchase of the computer scoring system and equipment for our athletes, coaches, trainers, and officials. (Amateur Boxing Association, 1998, p. 15)

This response to vagueness supports Pettigrew, et al.'s finding that "a broad vision seemed more likely to generate movement than a blueprint" (1992, p. 277). A vague beginning facilitated the immediate acceptance of the idea of computer scoring.

Upon approval of the motion, the Chief Official took steps to bolster this initial receptivity. In terms of supportive inter-organizational links, he arranged an agreement with one of the potential computer system manufacturers. The ABA would be able to purchase the necessary equipment and be trained in its use at a reduced cost. Likewise, the Chief Official attempted to facilitate the integration of the system into the ongoing boxing organization. The National Team coach was brought to the province to conduct a seminar discussing the benefits of the new system and to assist coaches in making the transition in training styles.

However, despite these efforts, the ABA did not purchase a computer scoring system. As time passed, it became clear that the computer proposal was excessively vague. Pettigrew, et al. (1992) observe that while a broad vision is very effective for gaining support, at some point the administrative complications of an unduly vague proposal outweigh the additional support gained. This was also the experience of the ABA.

The initial argument for the computer scoring system was simply that it is used at the national level, so the ABA should also use it. Everyone could easily agree with this. However, this

proposal was too vague; it provided no guidelines for implementation. This led to disagreements almost immediately after the motion was passed. For example, it was never specified who was responsible for pursuing the matter. Ultimately, the Chief Official became the champion of computer scoring, but in the beginning, both he and the President pursued the matter independently of each other. This duplication of effort led to wasted resources and began reducing the ABA's receptivity concerning computer scoring.

Even after the cost and delivery information was determined, the situation continued to worsen as members of the Executive argued over the details of implementation. Lack of clarity and simplicity led to bitter disagreements about a host of issues. Pettigrew, et al. (1992) note that simplicity depends on a parceling of demands; best results are achieved when the larger task is broken into actionable pieces. This is also consistent with other findings in the field of organizational change (Kotter, 1995; Strebler, 1996).

The ABA failed to take this approach with computer scoring. In fact, a special meeting was scheduled where all the issues were to be resolved. This led to arguments on many topics, such as when and where to introduce computer scoring, which competitions to use it in, and who was responsible for training the officials, coaches, and athletes. The discussion rarely focussed on one issue. Instead, it shifted from one detail to another depending on who was speaking. Very little was resolved at the meeting.

Leadership style was another key factor in the failure of the computer scoring proposal. The President and Chief Official initiated the motion for computer scoring and were its primary supporters. Unfortunately, the presidency changed a year later. Although the initiating President was still theoretically involved, in his role as Past President, his power and time investment in the ABA were significantly reduced. Therefore, the Chief Official became the sole champion for the computer scoring system.

This inconsistency in leadership hurt the momentum of the innovation. However, what was probably more damaging was the change champion attitude adopted by both the President and the Chief Official. They approached the issue from the perspective of doing what they believed was best for the ABA, regardless of how others felt about it. As noted above, the context receptivity framework predicts greater success from leadership, rather than leaders. This is consistent with recent critiques of the concept of transformational and charismatic leadership (Offermann & Hellmann, 1997; Shamir & Howell, 1999; Yukl, 1999), as well as research in organizational change and innovation (Clayton, 1997; Kotter, 1995; Schaffer & Thomson, 1992).

Pettigrew, et al. (1992) note the importance of leadership in the success of change. The decision to go ahead is rarely enough. In any task, there are many small steps and miniature crises encountered during implementation. Leadership refers to the willingness of the many necessary individuals, whoever they are in a given situation, to take it upon themselves to act and further the project. In the case of the ABA, this attitude was not engendered. Because of the change champion approach used by the proponents of computer scoring, they received little support. A few Executive members actually opposed the implementation and worked against it, but none were willing to help. They simply watched as computer scoring floundered in a multitude of small details. For example, the Coaches' Representative did not help to organize training

schedules or sessions for coaches, despite his greater rapport and regular communication with all the coaches. Consequently, the Chief Official, in trying to arrange everything, did not benefit from the experience or influence of the Coaches' Representative.

While he did an excellent job of pursuing external partnerships, the Chief Official did little to build internal support. Even before the issue of the computer system, his personality was considered by many members of the ABA to be somewhat stuffy and overly proper. The combination of this perception with his role as the sport's rule enforcer made him unpopular with many coaches and athletes. Unfortunately, he did nothing to counteract this lack of popularity. He was of the opinion that the need for computer scoring was obvious, and chose to let the facts speak for themselves. No effort was made to generate internal coalitions or support.

This lack of popularity and support was simultaneously caused and aggravated by a general trend in the demographics of the Executive. Five years prior to the observation period, three-quarters of the Executive Committee and Board of Directors were composed of officials or retired officials. Since that time, each election has led to more coaches becoming involved. This trend was summarized by the ABA President's observation that "though it used to be official-dominated, now the Executive is run by coaches" (Amateur Boxing Association President, personal communication, 1998).

This trend has led to culture changes and a degree of antagonism between coaches and officials. There is an attitude in the ABA that it is "the coaches against the officials" (Amateur Boxing Association President, 1998). This antagonism exacerbated the disagreements over computer scoring. Combined with the excessive vagueness of the proposal, it led to computer scoring discussions being split over minor details. The resulting frustration and wasted time fuelled perceptions that the new scoring system was a poor use of resources.

In summary, computer scoring was initially perceived in a positive light, as its vague proposal allowed wide acceptance. This response was bolstered by the presence of environmental pressure, the system's congruity with the context of sport in Canada and internationally, and the chief official's efforts to create supportive inter-organizational links. However, when acted upon, the proposal proved to lack coherence. It also lacked the benefit of consistent, effective leadership. Worse still, in a culture that was beginning to doubt the value of computer scoring, no effort was made toward team building or improved relations. The initially strong receptivity did not generate the continuing support needed to move computer scoring beyond the proposal stage.

### **Athlete Ranking**

When first presented, the ranking system appeared to be merely an administrative change. It was described as a new way of recording each athlete's competitive performance. The initial proposal, made by the Vice President of Operations and Competitions, was a self-contained program. Unlike the computer-scoring proposal, which sought support through vagueness, the ranking system came with specific details as to how it would work and what it would do. The proposal was coherent and clear, with directions and guidelines.

There was also consideration of how it would mesh with parallel functions in the ABA. In fact, the proposal capitalized on these considerations as a means of building support. In the proposal were details regarding how the ranking system might be used to benefit the ABA's monthly newsletter, to simplify record keeping for the Provincial Championships, and to assist the ABA's efforts to attract corporate sponsorship. Outlining how the ranking system could simplify many existing duties (e.g., finding material to fill the newsletter, providing athlete performance data to potential sponsors, etc.) earned the support of numerous members of the Executive.

In general, the Vice President of Operations and Competitions was popular within the ABA. He was always at tournaments, shaking hands and greeting those he knew. Additionally, unlike the Chief Official, his position served to increase his popularity. Rather than having to chastise rule-breakers, his duties included helping clubs to organize competitions and helping athletes find bouts. Moreover, as mentioned above, the change in the ABA culture, from a predominance of officials to an emphasis on coaches, worked in his favor. As he was a successful coach himself, many of the ABA members considered him to be representing their interests.

As a leader, he recognized the need to build relationships within the ABA, and did so frequently. He made the most of his popularity, using it to build support for the ranking system. He discussed the ranking idea individually with everyone who would be affected. When doing so, he asked for input and reactions so that when it was finally presented as a motion, the system was not a surprise. Everyone there was familiar with the idea, and many felt a sense of involvement because they had been consulted prior to its formal presentation. Consequently, the ranking system was popularly acclaimed and almost immediately implemented. This approach also minimized Executive members' suspicions about the VP's personal agenda in making the proposal.

Most importantly, it allowed the ranking system to benefit from leadership, not just a leader. The VP's approach was based on effective "backstage activity," rather than macho management (Buchanan & Boddy, 1992). Individuals, because they felt a sense of ownership in the ranking system, were prepared to help it succeed. For example, when the first round of ranking results were too late for the newsletter deadline, the editor filled the space with a brief article describing the advantages of the ranking system.

Perhaps the most important factor, however, was how the actual implementation process was managed. Exactly as found by Pettigrew, et al. (1992), the receptiveness of the ABA was enhanced by the VP's efforts to keep the project simple. The initial proposal was actually a significant understatement of the final effect of the ranking system. It was presented as a relatively minor change, and as each new issue came up, the VP was careful to point out how small a matter it was. The entire impact of the ranking system was never presented as a whole; every issue was treated as an isolated matter that could be dealt with easily.

Therefore, the system appeared to be a simple matter for the ABA. However, once it was fully integrated with the Provincial Championships, it significantly altered the process of Provincial Team selection. When initially proposed, the ranking system was to have no effect on the selection process of the Provincial Championships. Explicitly tampering with traditions would have caused cultural resistance, so this was not done. However, over the course of the first

season of use, the system became the standard method for evaluating the performance of boxers. Consequently, it began to determine competitive matches. The Provincial Champion would box against the top contender, and the coach of a lower ranked athlete would focus on moving up in the ratings before challenging highly ranked boxers.

Thus, a year after its introduction, the system had a fundamental effect on how the Provincial Championships were conducted. The Championships were no longer a single-event tournament that all boxers entered. It became a series of competitions, with seeded positions and elimination based on each athlete's ranking. In addition, a victory in the Championships no longer guaranteed a year of Provincial Team membership. Athletes were now required to defend their right to remain on the team.

Because of the new ranking system, both the Provincial Championships and the membership of the Provincial Team were every different. However, by the time its full impact was widely recognized, the ranking system was familiar to everyone. Because of the incremental way they were introduced, the necessary changes to the Provincial Championship format were viewed as small matters.

The ranking system was a highly successful innovation, in large part due to the careful management of its implementation from start to finish. The plan followed by the vice president in charge addressed almost all of the factors cited by Pettigrew, et al. (1992). The VP even tried to make use of elements in the external context. Obviously, there was little environmental demand for a boxing ranking system. However, the ranking system provided printable information for the newspapers and a means of demonstrating an athlete's success to potential corporate sponsors. Therefore, the system was successfully linked to the ABA's desire to attract corporate sponsorship and greater media coverage. Both of these needs stemmed from strong external pressures that the ABA was experiencing. By tying itself to these things, the ranking system was able to take that pressure onto itself, facilitating implementation.

## **Summary**

No finite explanation of a social phenomenon can ever be truly complete, particularly one as complex as change. "Change . . . because of its non-linear nature is almost impossible to deal with systematically" (Bates, 1994, p. 3). However, Pettigrew, et al.'s (1992) concept of context receptivity appears to be a promising place from which to start. When applied to the ABA, the metaphor was effective in explaining observed outcomes. Unfortunately, it is not as simple a matter as saying the change succeeded because there were more pluses than minuses; some factors will be more important than others will. However, in both cases, the outcomes were consistent with the general trend expected by the receptivity concept. This usefulness has a number of implications.

From a theoretical perspective, this application of context receptivity to amateur sport is offered as a step toward integration in the literature. It has been hypothesized that the tendency to limit investigations to one type of organization is hindering cumulative learning in the innovation literature (Wolfe, 1994). Pettigrew, et al.'s (1992) research was done in the British health care system. Canadian amateur sport is a very different context and type of organization. However,

the metaphor transferred effectively. This indicates that research need not be limited to a particular industry or type of organization, and that there are lessons to be learned by integrating the literature.

Perhaps most important, as mentioned throughout, this research has found the expectations of the context receptivity to be consistent with much other work in the field. The position taken herein is that single variable explanations are of highly limited usefulness; richer answers lie in broad, contextual understandings of outcomes. Hopefully, by drawing them together, work such as Shamir & Howell's (1999) can be used to expand on the leadership factor within context receptivity.

For the practicing sport manager, context receptivity offers important lessons for creating change. Admittedly, a process oriented explanation moves away from simple cause and effect relationships. "It is quite possible, however, that the best way to improve practice is not by producing facts but by producing frames, or ways of organizing and thinking about the world" (Lawler, 1985, p. 10). Context receptivity appears to be a useful framework in this regard. By being conscious of the multitude of factors that will shape the organization's response to a change, the manager is sensitized to potential blocks. Such foreknowledge allows proactive movement to support the change.

Context receptivity seems a very useful metaphor, but it is not the entire explanation. Other findings can and should be used to further expand the understanding of change. It is hoped that this research will facilitate a more detailed integration of the diverse research and practical experience.

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