Are the basic structures and governance models of Canada’s sport organizations obsolete? Part One of this series introduced the idea of “adaptive governance”, or evolving change to the governance model as an organization matures, and called for a “Four Cs” approach to excellent sport organizations based on Culture of Excellence, Contracts, Creativity and Continuous Improvement. This article explores the basic function and structures of sport organizations, how they change as the organization matures, and how re-thinking staff and committee roles will best serve Long-term Athlete Development.

“Form follows function”. Originally coined by the architect Louis Sullivan, the phrase has since been used millions of times to express the simple idea that the design of anything, a building, a tool, or an organization, should reflect its intended use and be free of non-essential elements. By extension, governance- the system by which an organization is steered, including the methods of selecting leaders, managing decision-making, and operating the business of the organization- should fit function. But what is the true function of a sport organization?

Henry Mintzberg, professor of management studies at McGill University, believes that business organizations have four basic functions: Find, Keep, Transform, Distribute. Every business relies on one or a combination of several of these functions. For example, a mining exploration company finds minerals. A library or museum keeps a collection in a central place. An auto manufacturer transforms raw materials into a car; a university transforms students. A trucking or courier business distributes. And sport organizations- what do they do? If form really does follow function, an analysis of sport organization function will not only provide insight into how to manage the sport organization, but into its ideal structure and governance model. Mintzberg’s model may be useful for improving our understanding of sport organization function.

Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) is now the key organizing principle in Canadian sport, and the process of LTAD adoption has given sport organizations the chance to reflect on what their core business is. LTAD is a system which recognizes the developmental stages all athletes must pass through from early childhood (Active Start) to high performance (Train to Win), and to lifelong participation (Active for Life). The understanding that athlete development is a continuum which is supported by a series of different organizations, including family, school, sport club, municipal recreation department, provincial/territorial and national sport organizations, challenges these organizations to create a seamless athlete pathway that facilitates optimal athlete development. Coaching, facilities, competition, leaders and organizations together form the infrastructure which supports the LTAD pathway, but LTAD cannot be effective unless the organizations are able to work together harmoniously, which in LTAD terms is called “system integration.” To achieve integration, there must be mutual agreement on roles and responsibilities, which implies that organizations must know what they do, know what other organizations do, and cooperate to eliminate gaps and overlaps.

All sport organizations facilitate athlete development, but this is done in a number of different ways. Provincial/territorial sport organizations (PTSOs) and national sport organizations (NSOs) tend to do three main things:
• Select athletes to receive support;
• Support those athletes with a range of services such as coaching, sport science, funding, a program of competitions, etc;
• Set rules, create plans, and generally regulate the sport environment for their member organizations including other associations and clubs.

Local sport organizations such as sport clubs are somewhat different, although still focused on athlete development as their core business. Most sport clubs:

• Select athletes to receive support (although at the local level “selection” may just mean enrolling members who pay a fee for service);
• Support those athletes with a range of services including coaching, a program of competition, and, critically, a venue for training and competition.

The other main organizations in the sport system also have varied functions, but again, all support athlete development. Secondary schools, colleges and universities, for example, operate club-like programs which, like clubs, select athletes (for school teams) and provide support including coaching and competition programs. Elementary schools also provide general physical activity and sport instruction through gym classes. Municipal recreation departments maintain fields, rinks and pools which are rented to clubs and other stakeholders, and also provide physical activity and sport programs. Some private facility operators (e.g. ski hills, golf courses) and schools also provide access to sport facilities. In addition there is event organization, carried on by NSOs, PTSOs, clubs, schools, and private specialist businesses, which is the organizing of competitions ranging from house league games to the Olympics.

Using Mintzberg’s system, these functions are described as Find, Keep, Transform, or Distribute. In sport organizations, the prevalent functions are Find, which includes the initial identification and recruitment of athletes and volunteers and the ongoing selection (through setting standards, holding camps and selection competitions) of athletes for higher levels of support and attention, and Transform, which includes the training and development of athletes toward reaching their potential. Transform covers most of the functions of a sport organization: coaching of athletes, training of coaches and officials, running competitions (a space is transformed into a competition with equipment, officials, and athletes). The other functions are present to much smaller degrees, as for example when organizations Keep equipment for use by teams, or Distribute information or funding collected from another source. Organizations that provide facilities have a higher proportion of “Keep” in their business, in the form of facility construction and maintenance. Table 1 shows these key functions related to different types of sport organization.

(Note: Table 1 shows the most significant roles of sport organizations. It can be argued that, for example, all organizations Keep financial records, but this is not the main, mission-driven role of a sport organization as it would be for a bank or financial institution.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Find</th>
<th>Keep</th>
<th>Transform</th>
<th>Distribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local sport clubs</td>
<td>Enroll members</td>
<td>Equipment management.</td>
<td>Athlete development Host training and competitions</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Find talented players (eg try-outs)</td>
<td>Sometimes manage facilities.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Find facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Provincial &amp; National Sport</td>
<td>Select athletes for teams or funding</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Athlete development (eg National Team) May host competitions.</td>
<td>Role in funding support to athletes. Allocate rights to host competitions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Recreation Dep’ts</td>
<td>Enroll registrants to rec programs</td>
<td>Facility management</td>
<td>Facility building Participant development</td>
<td>Allocate facilities to user groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Sport</td>
<td>Enroll participants (eg intramurals) Select talented players (eg try-outs)</td>
<td>Facility &amp; equipment management</td>
<td>Participant and athlete development</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Boards</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Facility management</td>
<td>Facility building</td>
<td>Allocate facilities to non-school user groups (eg clubs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-sport Organizations e.g.</td>
<td>Usually minimal</td>
<td>Usually minimal</td>
<td>Varies: coach development, organization development</td>
<td>Often act as funding agencies</td>
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<td>Coaching Association of Canada</td>
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Table 1: Key Functions of Various Sport and Recreation Organizations. Most-significant functions are highlighted, insignificant functions shaded.

This system of defining business functions encourages a re-thinking of the way we view organizations. Typically we view them using an organization-chart approach, breaking them into divisions, departments, or committees. In this view, Finance or Marketing and Communications may appear as important as National Team or Athlete Development functions. In reality, of course, administrative functions, while essential, simply provide assistance to the key functions of Finding and Transforming athletes, or in other words, Long-term Athlete Development. Figure 1 shows the same organization viewed in a traditional organization chart and as an “organigram” which shows functionality.

Mintzberg’s model goes on to describe four ways, or “forms” in which any of the four basic functions can be organized. These are Chain, Hub, Web and Set. Chain is the easiest to understand, because we are used to the assembly-line model in which pieces are added one at a time until a finished product is created- a progressive chain of events. For example, when automobiles are built on an assembly line, you have to weld the body shell together before you can install the seats. A specific sequence of assembly is required. Car-building is a Transform function in a Chain form. A Hub is different: items or people or information have to go to a central point or hub to be processed, sometimes by only one individual in the hub, sometimes by several. “A hospital is a hub for disease cure” says Mintzberg. It’s still a Transformation-diseased to healthy- but it doesn’t require everyone in the hospital to perform one action on the patient and then pass him or her on for the next step, as in a chain. Then there is the Web, in which people interact and exchange freely in different directions at once, as in the World Wide Web. Finally there is the Set, in which separate departments or boxes are used to keep sets of
things organized - think of departments which maintain records, such as data processing or accounting.

Figure 1: The same Sport Organization Depicted as a typical Org Chart, and as an “Organigram”
In sport organizations, the “Transform athletes” function usually occurs in a hub. A club is a hub- a central sport venue with equipment and a coach, where athletes go, train or compete, and leave. Likewise, a Provincial or National Team is a hub, where the athletes gather, train and/or compete, and disperse. The “Find athletes” function, too, is hub-based because athletes are identified at camps, during training or in competition. “Find athletes” usually piggy-backs on the “Transform athletes hub” in sport. PTSOs and NSOs are also hubs: central locations where knowledge and resources can be found and are shared with select individuals and organizations. Events have a different form: they are chains. It’s true that everyone congregates at an event, like a hub, but when you think of event organization it is a step by step process of finding a venue, taking registrations, seeding the competition schedule, setting up the venue with equipment and officials, starting and finishing the competition, then tearing the venue down again. An event is relatively brief and has a defined beginning and end, while transforming athletes is cyclical and continues over a long time period.

The process applied to the athlete to effect the transformation is knowledge transfer. Coaches gather knowledge from many sources and convey it to athletes to modify athlete training, competition and recovery. Athletes gather knowledge from many sources, including coaches and other athletes, and use it to improve performance. Acquiring sport skills depends on knowledge transfer: seeing it, trying it, perfecting it. So does acquiring advanced tactical knowledge, or the latest sport science about recovery, or knowing what competitors are doing. Transforming the athlete to improve sport performance is largely about improving knowledge transfer to the athlete.

To summarize:

- The core business of NSOs, PTSOs and sport clubs is transforming athletes;
- The transformation usually occurs in a hub form, with athletes going to a place (real or virtual) to access coaching, use facilities and equipment, and so on;
- Sometimes, as in event organization, the transformation uses a chain form;
- The “raw material” of the process is athletes, just as raw materials in car-building are steel, glass and rubber;
- The process applied to the athlete to effect the transformation is knowledge transfer.

This simple (and admittedly somewhat simplistic) analysis of function dictates the structure of a sport organization, and therefore, its management and governance. What is the best way to manage an organization that uses knowledge to transform athletes? Is there a difference between managing a hub and a chain? What is the implication for Board and committee structure?

Management Follows Function

How does knowing that sport organizations transform athletes using a hub-type model say anything about how the organization should be managed?

Each form has different management requirements. Again, consider the assembly-line or chain form. The key requirement of an assembly-line is efficiency. The work should proceed as fast as possible with a minimum of mistakes, which result in waste or delay. Every part should be on hand just when it’s needed, but not too long before it’s needed, because that means setting up a space for inventory. Any break in the chain- a missing part, a missing worker, a worker who does
not know their job—stops the entire process. A hub is different: unlike an assembly-line chain, you can’t be sure who will appear at the hub or when, so there has to be enough resource available for different contingencies. Gate-keeping is important, or letting just the right things and people into and out of the hub, and so is coordinating and matching, so resources are allocated effectively. Managing a chain is about getting the sequence of operations correct, then striving for maximum throughput. Managing a hub is about collecting resources, gate-keeping and matching so the right people get the right resource in the right amount. In the sport context that means having the right knowledge available (state-of-the-art knowledge on how to develop through training and competition) and matching it to the right athletes (based on their stage of development and abilities) in the right way (which is the art of coaching: how to present knowledge and experience appropriately so the athlete can use it effectively).

A hub is a natural form for a sport club, since athletes need to come to the sport venue to participate, and the venue is a logical meeting place for athlete and coach. System-wide, however, it raises challenges. Hubs are insular; you need to get permission to come in and use the resources. Hubs don’t connect well with each other. For example, in sport, clubs often want to hold on to an athlete long after he or she would have benefited from moving on to a new team or a new coach. But LTAD views athlete development as a chain, with athletes receiving just the right level of training and just the right kind of competition to enhance development in a stage-by-stage sequence. It can be thought of as a chain made of a series of hubs: athletes should move smoothly from one stage to another, one club to another, one coach to another. What we lack is a “master coach” to guide the athlete’s career from entry into the sport and take them club-to-club, coach-to-coach, ensuring a seamless progression. Currently, many athletes must escape from hubs, then migrate (or be selected) to join other hubs. To link disconnected hubs into an effective chain of hubs, we need more effective coordination between organizations, better “system integration”, to align our systems and smooth the athlete pathway. Figure 2 compares our current system of disconnected hubs with an aligned, integrated future system.

To move our system to that next level, sport managers (who may be paid or volunteer) need to do more than the traditional hub management functions of gate-keeping and internal coordination of knowledge to transform athletes. They also need to constantly find and bring the best knowledge into the hub, and they need to find ways to connect their hub to other hubs to form athlete development chains. The implication is that sport organizations need some new kinds of workers. One needs to be adept at finding and easing the entry of athletes into the hub, but more important, at later passing them on to the right upstream organizations to further their development. Another worker needs to be expert at knowledge transfer, at finding the knowledge needed by the organization and especially by the “transformation team” of coaches, and delivering it as needed, whether as educational courses and workshops or as printed material and web links. And, just as they need new kinds of expertise, sport organizations also need to conceive of themselves differently, manage themselves differently, and govern themselves differently.

On example of this different thinking is structural. Hubs are good structures for many of the basic functions of athlete development, but not for knowledge acquisition and sharing. A better structure for that function is the Web. Webs, or networks, encourage random access to knowledge from any other point on the web. Webs are about peer sharing. There is no sequence
or hierarchy; if you need something, and you know where to get it, you do so. Good coaches, for example, get information from other coaches, from experts within and outside sport, from their PTSO or NSO, from the internet, from athletes, from books and videos, from educational courses or workshops, and so on. So, just as an athlete can benefit from an Integrated Support Team (IST) which includes a coach, doctor, physiotherapist, psychologist, physiologist, nutritionist, and others, so a coach benefits from the services of a support network where he/she can access knowledge. For a sport organization to do excellent work, it needs to be part of a number of different knowledge networks, or a web of knowledge networks. In the same way, the managers of the organization need to be part of a network of other related sport organizations so they can recruit new athletes, and pass on “completed” athletes for further development, say to the Provincial or National Team.

Introducing more effective ways of thinking and managing means replacing obsolete governance structures. An illustration of this can be found in the current trend in larger PTSOs and many NSOs toward hiring a Chief Technical Officer (CTO). The CTO’s job is to coordinate the entire athlete development project, from development programs and teams through to high performance. At one time, organizations tended to have volunteer-based Development
Committees and High Performance Committees making decisions in cooperation with staff with titles like “Development Coordinator” and “High Performance Director”, who then carried out the decisions. However, a CTO is hired to have control over the process so the Coordinator and Director report to the CTO and take direction from him or her. Unless the governance structure is changed, there is a likelihood of conflict with the existing Committees, which the CTO has rendered at least partly redundant. An evolution to a different structure is needed. The answer may be to revise the committee structure into more of a support network for the CTO, providing expertise from both within and outside the sport organization which the CTO can call upon as needed. This is an example of “adaptive governance”, which will be discussed below. It’s really just a case of form following function.

*Governance Follows Function*

In the previous article (Long-term Organization Development, Part 1) I suggested that organization governance needs to change as organizations change. In the “long-term organization development” model, organizations grow and develop much as athletes do, from an initial formative stage, through to developing, maturing and finally performing stages. Each stage of development implies an increase in complexity and therefore different management and governance needs. Consequently, organizations need to assess their stage of development and review and modify their by-laws, policies, job descriptions, and Board and Committee compositions accordingly. This is one example of what I termed “adaptive governance”.

Added to this, now, is the idea that governance also needs to be appropriate to function and form. A hub not only needs to be managed differently to a chain or web, it needs to be governed differently. What are the different governance characteristics? How do they mesh with the idea of evolving, or adaptive governance?

Governance is the *system* by which an organization is steered, including the methods of selecting leaders, setting plans and standards, and managing decision-making. The responsibility for governance resides primarily with the Board of Directors. The two key roles of a nonprofit Board can be described as *stewardship*, including the protection of the organization by putting in place controls and procedures, using due diligence in decision-making, oversight of staff actions, and responsible use of resources, and *leadership*, which includes the strategic planning function, hiring/staffing (paid or volunteer), and setting standards including ethical standards and codes of conduct. These two roles, stewardship and leadership, must exist in balance; stewardship without leadership results in a conservative, risk-adverse organization which cannot remain competitive while leadership without stewardship results in over-emphasis on growth with inadequate attention to member needs, financial controls and risk management- a recipe for disaster.

The need for balanced stewardship and leadership never changes, but the structures and policies that are used to achieve them must be appropriate to the organization. The stage of the organization’s development is one key factor. Younger or smaller organizations, like many sport clubs, have few workers and a flatter decision-making structure. Larger, older organizations tend to be more complex, with layers of management and stakeholder and partner relationships. When organizations initially form they have a “do-everything” or Operating Board which makes decisions and runs the organization hands-on. As they grow they develop a committee structure.
in which the committees take over hands-on operation of the functions or “departments” while the Board, usually composed of the committee Chairs plus an Executive branch, focuses on managing coordination of functions and the stewardship/leadership functions. The Board is now a Management Board. Many sport organizations do not advance beyond this basic governance model - even when they should.

Today, a combination of tradition, resistance to change, and external regulations force many organizations to retain the Management Board-plus-Operating Committees model which they may have been outgrown long ago. A typical governance model for a sport organization is a Board of Directors which includes the following members:

- An Executive, consisting of a President, one or more Vice-Presidents, a Secretary and a Treasurer (which may be merged into a Secretary-Treasurer);
- Committee Chairs for committees such as Development (or Youth), High Performance, Coaching, Officials, Competitions, etc;
- Alternately, or even additionally, committee Chairs for sub-divisions (disciplines) such as rhythmic vs. artistic gymnastics, or road vs. track cycling;
- Representatives who may include Regional Representatives, Athlete Representatives, etc.

The Executive members, or Officers, are generally required by law (e.g. Corporations or Societies Act), but the make-up of committees and/or other representatives are at the discretion of the organization, or else are “suggested” by the policies of external funding agencies. For example, Sport Canada or provincial/territorial government policies that require a minimum regional representation (e.g. “active in at least eight provinces”) may lead an organization to infer it needs regional representatives on its Board to prove activity or to maintain activity in certain areas in order to protect funding. Whatever the reason for creating the structure, both regional representatives and expert-group committees can be at odds with the primary function of a sport organization.

The fault with regional representation is that it has little sympathy for the management needs of the hub. The hub is concerned with effectively allocating resources to effect a transformation: deciding which athletes to select to be on a team, or deciding how much competition, facility use and coaching different athletes can access so they can develop to higher-level athletes. Regions, on the other hand, are concerned with ensuring they get their slice of the resource pie. Regional reps become advocates for athletes from their own regions. This creates an obvious source of conflict with the managers of the organization. The same is true of sub-discipline committees, which effectively act like regional committees, interested in protecting their own discipline’s resources and advancing their own discipline’s athletes. Committees, like regions, become concerned with protecting their share of budget. All of these structures become hubs within hubs, silos within silos. None of them are appropriate to the task of transforming athletes.

“Expert-based” committees (e.g. Coaching Development) or regional representative committees do, however, compliment a Web structure. They can be an effective sounding-board, or a means of liaison between the organization and its members. They can be a good means of information-sharing. This is not, however, a regulatory or governing role; it is an advisory or supporting role.
Placed in the typical role of watchdog or manager, such committees can paralyze an organization, but when an organization evolves to the Perform stage, advisory support from such groups can be valuable. As an organization matures, it may be necessary to disband such structures then to later replace them with groups of similar composition but very different job descriptions that shift from governing/managing to advising.

The Board of Directors faces a similar transition. In Part One of this series, I described how Boards go from Operating Boards in the forming and developing stages of the organization, to become Management Boards in the maturing stage, and finally to Policy and even Patron Boards in the performing stage. That role transition does not change, and neither does the responsibility for balanced stewardship and leadership. What is affected by a new understanding of the function of sport organizations is the composition of the Board and its Committees. In the forming and developing stages, which are the stages where most local sport clubs exist, the hands-on, no-employees Operating Board needs representation from the Find, Transform and Distribute functions as well as from the business function of the organization, typically represented by the Secretary and Treasurer. In smaller organizations, one individual may be responsible for both talent identification (Find) and placing “developed” athletes in next-level upstream organizations (Distribute); coaches are of course the leaders of Transform, joined by the individual responsible for knowledge acquisition and transfer (who may well also take a coaching role in a small organization). Later, in the maturing stage, the Board moves to a Management Board role and volunteer committees become responsible for coordinating these same functions in the growing organization: Find, Transform, and Distribute Committees along with business management, which is often the Executive Committee. In the performing stage, and/or in the largest organizations, a Policy/Patron Board oversees professional managers leading Find, Transform, Distribute and business functions, each of which may be supported by its own advisory team or committee, as well as by an extensive network of partners forming a support web.

_Transformation Follows Function_

Hubs are difficult structures to connect: that’s one reason the Canadian sport system is fragmented. Building hubs within hubs and calling them committees only makes the job harder. Too many organizations spend a significant amount of energy trying to make their own committees and regions work. This is not to say that committees are not needed, or that regions should not be consulted. What is needed is a different way to govern sport organizations: a way that makes the best use of volunteer and staff time, a way which is based on a clear understanding of the purpose of the organization.

How to transform the sport organization governance model to reflect both stage of organizational development, and function? How to achieve effective sport organizations, ones which are structured to excel at their key functions?

The first step is to understand that many of the governance structure and policies retained by organizations are relics. These fall into three main categories: Event Relics, which were either put in place at the founding of the organizations, or which were a response to a specific crisis, such as a lawsuit or near-bankruptcy; Extrinsic Relics, which are structures and policies required
by an external agency, such as a funding agency; and Development Relics, which are structures and policies which were appropriate at an earlier stage of development, but which are now outmoded. A critical review of the organization’s current needs versus its structures and policies can help determine which committees and policies are relics and which are still appropriate. It is important to overcome arguments such as “we’ve always done it this way” or “if we change our committee structure, the regions will scream”. It’s a simple fact that organizations, like athletes, grow and mature. Long-term organization development means sweeping away relics and creating new structures as needed to serve the organization and its members.

The second step is to analyze the organization’s business, that is, its true function, as well as its stage of development. Which predominates: hub, chain, web? Is the organization at a formative, developing, maturing or performing stage?

The third step is to match current and future needs to specific changes in governance and management structures and supporting policies. Which are the most important changes? How should stakeholders be brought onside? Is a phased approach to transformation needed? Over what time frame? In other words, an implementation strategy for the transformation is created.

A fourth is to recognize the importance of finding the right people for the job. Currently, we expect the coach to be the jack of all trades: finding promising athletes, transforming them through training and competition programs, distributing them to the next level in their careers, and seeking and sharing knowledge from many sources to make the project work. Outside sport, businesses are more specialized: there is a person or department charged with building the product, one charged with research or information management, and one charged with distribution, all working as a team. We wouldn’t expect these to be the same people, or even the same kind of people; we would recognize that a good information-collector might have a different background, education, and personality than a good builder or craftsperson. Why should sport be any different? Why should sport organizations not create the Knowledge Manager, whose job it is to know the latest sport intelligence and manage athlete tracking data, as a part of the coaching support team? Why not create the Athlete Placement Manager, whose job it is to place athletes in the best upstream club, PSO, NSO or college sport program when the original organization has given all it can? Similarly, the role of a volunteer committee member tasked with advising staff or liaison with members may well require a different skill-set than one tasked with overseeing and controlling programs. Figure 3 shows a “new model” sport organization: a web-supported hub containing workers leading the Find, Transform and Distribute functions.

Five Signs a Committee is a Relic:

1. The committee has become “an empire unto itself”; it seems to operate by its own rules and contributes little to the organization as a whole.
2. The committee is a leading source of disharmony or challenge to the organization.
3. The committee is positioned as a “watchdog” protecting against recurrence of some historic abuse.
4. The committee refuses to consider change or transformation.
5. The committee relies on an external mandate e.g. “The funding agency says we have to have this committee.”
Conceiving of sport organizations, from clubs to NSOs, as athlete transformation hubs supported by webs of knowledge management and connected end-to-end in a seamless athlete development pathway suggests different priorities, different structures, different jobs and different governance. Today, too many sport organizations are using a hammer when they need a wrench, and excusing the inefficiency on the basis that the by-laws are inviolable or that the committees refuse to change. We can never have a high-performance sport system with low-performance organizations. We must change our organization structures, policies and roles to match key organization functions.

Change is always challenging. The idea of ongoing evolution and transformation of sport organization governance is new, and it depends on a mindful, analytical approach to governance which has been missing in Canadian sport. When sport leaders come to understand that organizations, like athletes, develop over time and, like athletes, require specific support and interventions at specific times, we will be well on our way to effective organizations. That, as much as anything, will help us achieve the sport system we all aspire to.
References


