

Canadian Culture of Excellence in High-Performance Sport Position Statement

Introduction

Canadian high-performance sport, represented by the National Sport Organizations (NSO) and personalized by its leaders, coaches, athletes, and support staff, will benefit from understanding and developing cultures of excellence in which people can thrive and optimize their performance. This work is not only essential to achieving podium performances, but also to emphasize personal well-being as a crucial co-variable in the process of individual, team, and organizational accomplishments. To this end, it is imperative to prevent undesirable environments that potentially come with high costs and are associated with unethical practices (e.g., doping, corruption, maltreatment) and legacy shortfalls.

Defining Culture of Excellence

One of the most challenging aspects of creating a consensus statement on a culture of excellence in Canadian sports is creating clear definitions of what is meant by culture in the context of high-performance sport. Culture can be defined as “a dynamic process characterized by the shared values, beliefs, expectations and practices across the members and generations of a defined group”. Moreover, “high-performing cultures prevail when the shared perception and action of elite team environment members (1) support sustained optimal performance, (2) persists across time in the face of variable results (i.e., wins, losses, ties), and, most importantly, and (3) leads to consistent high performance” (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, p. 340).

The following excerpt from Wagstaff and Larner (2015) also emphasizes the notion of sustained performance and the importance of effective relationships among various stakeholders to help us better understand a culture of excellence in the context of high-performance sport:

“Sustained success in high-performance domains is not solely predicated on the embodied competence of individual performers, but how effectively these individuals build and maintain working relationships with a network of stakeholders (e.g., coaches, managers) and organizations (e.g., sports institutions, organizations) in addition to those who provide informational (e.g., scientific, medical, and technological expertise), financial (e.g., sponsors), and social supports (e.g., friends, family) to optimize day-to-day productivity in preparation for and performance at major competitions” (p. 93).

Wagstaff and Larner (2015) also provide an argument that a culture of excellence encompasses both people- and performance perspectives for sport organizations to attend to:

“There is also a need to view sport organizations as workplaces that must ensure the well-being of their employees, rather than merely systematized collectives aimed at promoting success” (p. 94).

Finally, Wagstaff and Larner (2015) offer insight into the implementation strategies of a culture of excellence at an individual, team, and organizational level:

“The implementation of an intervention aimed at creating a high-performance environment within a sport organization would require concerted efforts across the individual, team, organizational levels of analysis through the optimization of leadership, performance enablers, people, and the organizational climate” (p. 112).

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Culture of Excellence: Characteristics

A National Culture of Excellence Think Tank in February 2019 identified several characteristics that may be required for a culture of excellence to exist in a high-performance sport organization:

Figure 1 – Culture of Excellence Characteristics



Building the Framework

A Culture of Excellence Think-Tank outcome was a consensus to develop a national framework for understanding and facilitating cultures of excellence in high-performance sports in Canada. The development of a framework accomplishes three goals:

1. Identifies the structures, roles, responsibilities, and markers of (1) cultural **leadership** (e.g., direct and indirect leaders, and organizational support), (2) cultural **stakeholders** (e.g., organizational subgroups, performance teams and training groups, and individual athletes, coaches, and IST), and (3) cultural **outcomes** (e.g., organization, teams/groups, and individuals).
2. Prioritizes the importance of clarifying and finding mutual or reciprocal **responsibility** for the desired organizational **vision, core values** with subsequent **behaviours, group norms**, and agreements, and reinforcing/corrective **processes** facilitating **accountability** for the development, progression, and maintenance of excellent cultures within a sport.

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- Provides a means to **audit/assess** (based on **descriptors or ‘culture anchors’**) individuals, teams, sub-groups, and the whole organization on their position on the matrix, leading to purposeful activities for **change in/of culture** towards excellence.

A Culture of Excellence Framework and Matrix were developed by Paquette (2020) following (1) the completion of a systematic review of literature in the domain of high-performance sport and (2) conducting and analyzing 42 in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders from the Canadian sport system (i.e., technical leaders, coaches, IST, and athletes). The two resources serve to underpin a collective understanding of what is meant by a culture of excellence in high-performance sport and the cultural markers that define its existence.

Figure 2 – Culture of Excellence Framework in High-Performance Sport

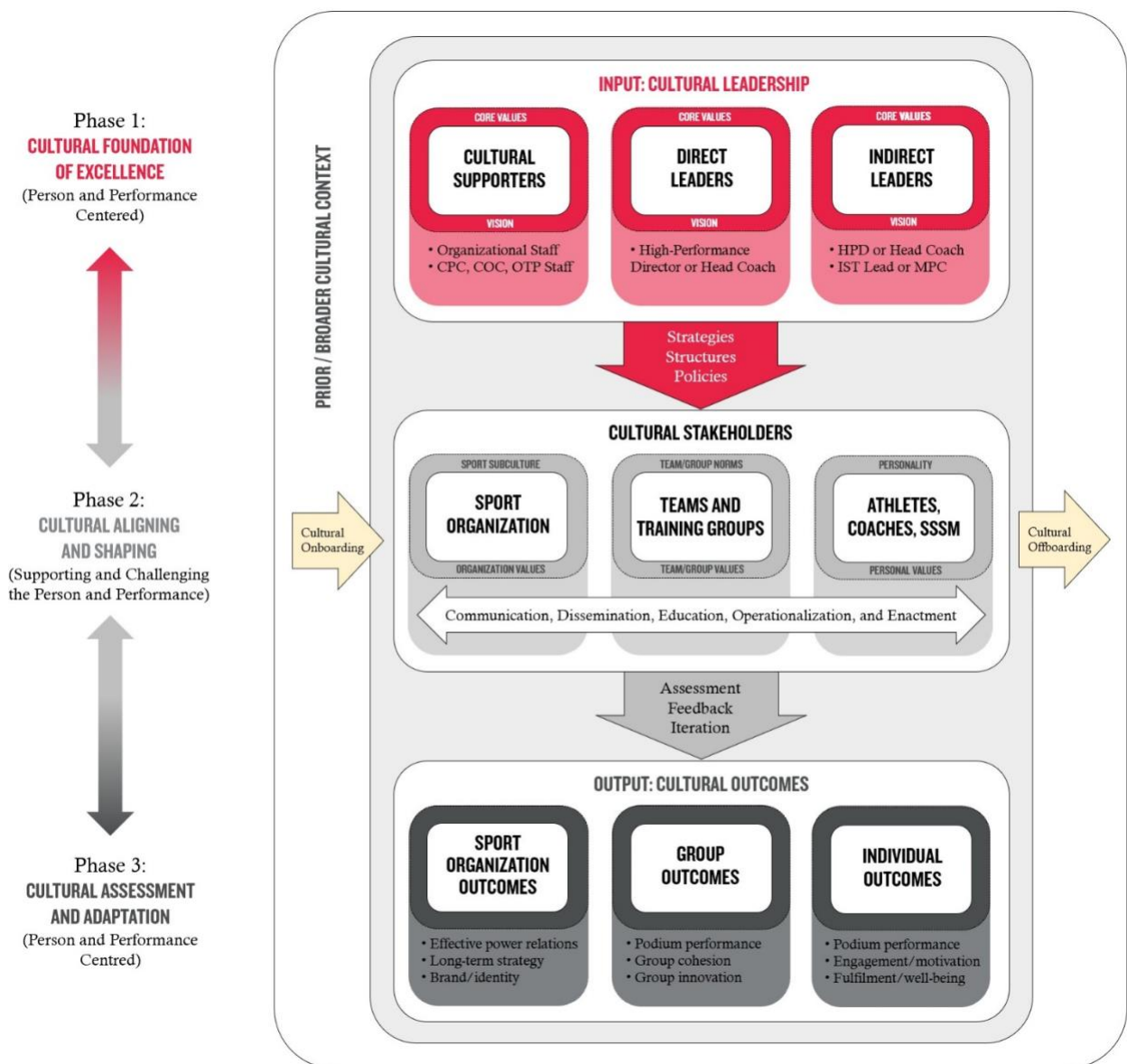


Figure 3 – Culture of Excellence Matrix



Person Dimensions	Performance Dimensions
Mental health and well-being	Leadership and vision
Physical health and well-being	Coaching
Psychological safety	Daily training environment
Physical safety and Safe Sport	Sport science and sport medicine
Self-determination	Pathways and profiles
	Athletes and international results

Position Statement

This Position Statement acknowledges the impact of a sport culture in achieving podium success. A culture of excellence demands high personal accountability and a strong focus on performance across the organization. The sport system-wide goal should be to promote and inspire NSOs to proactively pursue their culture of excellence through innovative awareness, assessment, consultation, and education. This Position Statement supports the adoption of Paquette’s (2020) culture of excellence framework for high-performance sport in Canada. This framework, and accompanying matrix for auditing and gap-closing purposes, recognize the significance of both person- and performance-centered approaches in developing Canadian cultures of excellence. It also serves to guide NSOs in developing and implementing the desired culture of excellence in their sport/teams. For people involved to be and

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stay well, it is necessary – at a minimum – to ‘rise above the midline’. Continuous improvement and growth mindset to ‘move to the right’ is required for sustained performance and enhancement.

This Position Statement also advocates for mental performance consultants (and others) training to become ‘culture consultants/coaches’ to support NSOs with expertise to develop an intentional, quadrennial focus on NSO-led culture of excellence. Leadership training in culture development for NSO technical leaders through proactive professional development opportunities will be critical.

This Position Statement acknowledges the importance of creating high-performing team modules with a Games’ focus that is available as supportive resources specifically for NSOs that do not have technical leadership capacity. It is crucial to build and catalog a repository of knowledge and practices for culture training and development in Canada.

References

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