

The Sport Matters Group: “Un-organizing” the Future of Canada’s Not-for-Profit Sector

Paul Jurbala, July 2010 - Final

If you go looking for the corporate headquarters of Sport Matters Group, you’ll search in vain. There’s no office and no name-plate, yet almost anyone working in one of the fifty-plus National Sport Organizations based in Ottawa could steer you to the two desks deep within the Sport Information Resource Centre on Elgin Street. Likewise, if you ask for the CEO, you may receive a blank look: the title is “Senior Leader” and the chances are that Ian Bird, the man who wears that title, will not be at his desk. He’s usually convening a meeting of sport leaders or making a case for sport on Parliament Hill. In short you’ll be standing in someone else’s office, looking at an empty desk. It’s unlikely you’ll be wondering if Sport Matters Group is a model for Canada’s Not-For-Profit (NFP) sector or a glimpse into its future.

Others are pondering that very question. “There’s a steady stream of requests for me to go to annual meetings and Board meetings to explain how the Sport Matters Group works” says Bird, a former field hockey Olympian who took over as Senior Leader in 2005. Sport leaders, especially the engaged “contributors” who collectively make up SMG, have no doubt that it works very well indeed. As SMG celebrates its 10th anniversary, the word has spread to the greater NFP sector and the number of invitations is growing. Perhaps it’s the air of mystery: SMG has variously been described as an experiment, a meritocracy, a constellation model, a collective, a community of purpose, and an “un-organization”. Relevance and effectiveness don’t seem to be hampered by lack of formal structure- to the contrary they seem to flow from it. SMG embodies all the characteristics beloved of business magazine writers: networked, nimble, low overhead, open-source.

So what is the Sport Matters Group, anyway?

SMG began in 2000 as a round of informal discussions between sport leaders, virtually brown bag luncheons and Friday afternoon meetings over pizza and beer. The popularity of the sessions and the ability to attract an expanding circle of participants stemmed from the realities of the time: the absence of a similar forum, the sense of disunity in the sector, and the release of the 1999 “Mills Report” and subsequent hosting of a series of sport conferences by Secretary of State Denis Coderre bringing the promise of input into government sport policy. Under the emerging leadership of Victor Lachance, then CEO of the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES), discussions ranged across topics including structure of the sport system, how to enhance vertical and horizontal cooperation between organizations, and inevitably, participation in government policy-making and advocacy for increased funding for sport. The term “Sport Matters” was originally coined by Scott Logan, then CEO of Sport Nova Scotia and a prominent early member of the group, for an advocacy campaign in his province.

By 2001 SMG had settled by consensus on its current structure: a “Senior Leader” instead of a CEO or Executive Director, and collaborative support from its community in lieu of formal structure and membership fees. Grant funding was found from a few sources, and managed on behalf of SMG by one of its incorporated contributor organizations. While the focus of SMG slowly narrowed on providing sport and recreation input to government policy-making, that is,

advocacy/lobbying, SMG continued to use its resources to pursue a broad range of research and partnership-building initiatives, led by individuals recruited on the basis of their expertise and ability who were termed “early leaders” in their areas. A primary role in the early years of SMG was a behind-the-scenes shaping of the 2002 Canadian Sport Policy, but other early tasks included strengthening linkages between the sport and recreation communities and building linkages with other non-sport voluntary sector organizations.

Today, SMG continues as an unincorporated “un-organization” with a staff of two (the Senior Leader and a Community Engagement Manager) in rental space donated by a contributor. Business affairs (finances, contracts) are managed on behalf of SMG by another organization, while yet another provides web site support and hosting. Over 40 contributors generate about \$150,000 annually in donations to keep SMG going, and grants are occasionally and selectively obtained for sector development work.¹ There are also major contributions of time by senior sport leaders and numerous in kind contributions, such as hotel room nights, travel credits, hosting opportunities, supplies, technology and so on. “If we need it, someone normally has it in surplus or makes it available” says Bird. SMG continues to host regular members meetings, both live and web-enabled, to support its advocacy work as well as a diverse range of initiatives which seed new ideas into the Canadian sport community. Some of the prominent successes (beyond the Canadian Sport Policy) include input into the Physical Activity and Sport Act, advantageous changes to Federal policy regarding tax status, and a series of sport-positive Federal budgets. In fact, Federal sport funding has increased from \$70M to over \$200M annually in the SMG decade, and sport and recreation facilities have finally been recognized as a priority in infrastructure funding programs. SMG has also been instrumental in the Working Together Initiative, where 9 federal departments collaborate in recognition of the diverse impacts and benefits of sport. As Bird points out, however, “Let’s not overplay the results. Some of the (successes) are internal: creating a place for open debate, a chance to connect with each other, and building a sense of purpose and autonomy.”

To leaders of Canadian NFPs this may seem idyllic, not to say utopian. Sport organizations spontaneously agreed to work together? They donate their own money to support an organization that doesn’t exist on paper? Their senior staff and volunteers give up their time to contribute ideas and expertise? Where’s the turf-protecting, the rivalry, the in-fighting? To be sure, a series of previous attempts to create an organization representing sport interests met that fate: three different iterations of the “Sport Federation of Canada” formed and collapsed in the 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s. Why, then, does SMG endure and succeed where a “real” organization failed? Is there something different about the times, about SMG, or both? Is it just a case of charismatic leadership, given that both Bird and his predecessor, Victor Lachance, are highly respected in the sport community? Most importantly from a NFP point of view, is there something here we can borrow, steal or adapt?

What are the transferable success factors behind the decade-long SMG experiment? An asset-based approach would enumerate the unique features of SMG as the basis for the value it adds. For example, shoestring NFPs typically lack advocacy and government-relations capacity, so it makes sense to cooperate on forming an industry association; in sport, that function is managed by SMG on a “pay what you can” basis. As it transmits sport’s perspective outward, SMG also brings government and external news and views back to the sport community, making it a key strategic communication channel. Government, as a key NFP funding partner, prefers to dialogue

on policy matters with a single entity rather than dozens of discordant voices; SMG fulfills this role for sport. The ability to provide cost-effective leadership, issue analysis, and advocacy in the public policy space is itself sufficient to ensure the viability of SMG, but SMG does far more. There is a standing commitment to innovation: the use of web conferencing and social media to expand reach and access, for example. “Outside the box” thinking is prized and recognized. SMG-like initiatives at the provincial and municipal level are nurtured. Cross-sector partnerships, for example SMG participation on sport’s behalf in voluntary sector roundtables and initiatives, give sport a place in the broader NFP/voluntary community. This is essential since sport and recreation is the largest single component of Canada’s voluntary sector, yet until recently, rarely participated in such discussions. Finally, there is the “leadership space” in which SMG acts as convener, creating opportunities for knowledge transfer, peer-to-peer interaction, and network-building, while it simultaneously reinforces shared values and supports and celebrates individual contributions. SMG owns neither property nor its successes; victories small and large belong to the community as a whole, and the values of shared leadership, engagement, collaboration, and open-source meritocratic contribution are constantly reinforced.

All this is merely description. No doubt a progressive open-minded group of leaders in any sector could collaborate in this way; after all, industry associations, communities of practice and roundtables abound in both the public and private sectors, and companies sometimes create “skunk works” to take on projects better handled at arms’ length. There are bigger questions: first, does SMG work better *because* it is unstructured? Second, are self-organizing, low-structure “virtual” groups like SMG the killer-app in a world grown accustomed to virtual social networks?

To the first question, there is a long list of advantages enjoyed by the “un-organization” which enhance trust and facilitate agility and innovation. There is no turf, no assets to protect other than reputation. SMG can’t lose a million dollars on a poor decision simply because it doesn’t have a million dollars. There are no stultifying corporate hierarchies or policies; no need to worry what the boss, or external funding partner, will think when an idea is put forward. There are few layers of decision-making. Moreover, SMG relies completely on donations from its community and grants; it is not beholden to government, nor bound by government policies. SMG is clearly in business for its community, not for itself. Within the community this has a powerful liberating effect which attracts contribution since good ideas are both valued and acted upon. At the same time these assets are only valuable because they serve the needs of structured sport organizations; without them SMG could and would not exist. SMG needs a telephone, a desk, an internet address, and a bank account, and it cannot apply independently for or receive grants and financial contributions. All this must be provided by “real” organizations on SMG’s behalf. While SMG can do its work more effectively because it is unstructured, there is no reason to expect that “un-organizations” will replace “real” incorporated organizations. Rather, progressive NFPs will likely collaborate more frequently in future to create SMG-like un-organizations that meet strategic needs.

Such a strategy makes good sense. The un-organization structure is extremely flexible. According to Bird, one of the greatest strengths of SMG has been its ability to act as a conduit for latent capacity already within the sport community. SMG is “scaleable”- it can grow or shrink its activity level depending on funding, opportunity and need, without the inherent delays

due to planning, decision-making, hiring and training a traditional organization would face, and without the pain of lay-offs at the end. One year the SMG budget might be \$250,000, and double that a year later. “If a social investor wanted to put \$100,000 to good use tomorrow because they wanted sport to engage in what they were doing, anywhere else you would have to ramp up. But in SMG we have that capacity already in the community. You can identify who within the sector has the skills and the ability and you can bring them onboard and you can move really quickly. I think of it as mobilizing the ready capacity in our sector.” Not that the un-organization approach doesn’t take getting used to on the part of funders: the SMG approach of “I’m going to put the opportunity out there and see what happens” isn’t necessarily what foundations, for example, want to hear. Nonetheless, results speak for themselves, and SMG’s decade-long track record is lengthier than that of many conventional NFPs.

The evolution of SMG has not been without snags- Bird points to lows as well as highs in the ongoing SMG experiment. Tellingly, the lows, and the learning, occurred when SMG strayed too close to the functions of a traditional organization. “When we’ve tried to operationalize things, we’ve failed” he says. “Around 2006, I thought we could make public opinion research into sport a profitable activity that produced an ongoing stream of valuable information. We tried this with a research company and a set of investors, and we couldn’t do it. We couldn’t deliver on time, and the information was proprietary so we couldn’t share it with our own sector. The opportunity cost was huge- I was spending too much time trying to make this venture work at the expense of other priorities. It’s just not something a skeleton staff can do. Now we focus on the hand-off right up front; if we see an opportunity we look at it as incubation, not something we will take in-house. It’s best if we focus on the “what” and let the sector look after the “how”.

What are the parallels? Examination of communities of practice, now widely adopted as best-practice examples of intra-organizational cooperation and innovation, may add to our understanding of groups like SMG. The term “community of practice” was coined by Wenger and others about twenty years ago to describe “groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do, and who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better.”ⁱⁱ A key insight has been that communities of practice are really about building social capital- that much knowledge is tacit, or unwritten, so it is energizing and productive for experts to meet face-to-face (or virtually) to share this knowledge and build upon it. In other words, keeping people in silos, including within their own independent organizations, constrains knowledge transfer while letting experts with “a passion for something they know how to do” get together to talk stimulates knowledge transfer and growth. Yet while SMG has many characteristics of a community of practice, it is perhaps something different: a “community of purpose” (COP).ⁱⁱⁱ Where the community in a community of practice is defined by expertise or interest- for example, expertise in designing computer keyboards- a community of purpose is defined by intent. A community of purpose wants to see something specific happen, and meets to determine how best to do it. A community of practice is knowledge-oriented- “how do we solve this problem, how do we improve this thing”- while a community of purpose is change-oriented: “how do we create the difference we want to see?”

Ian Bird affirms that social capital fostered through relationship-building is just as critical as having a “mission of the moment” in creating agility and responsiveness and sustaining momentum for change. “We can put an idea or an opportunity to the group, and before you know

it a sport leader hops on an airplane to attend a meeting on sport's behalf." At the same time, there is a tricky balancing act at work and experience and leadership is needed to pull it off. The dive-in-and-volunteer approach can be a mixed blessing: how do you know that the person who wants to jet off to a meeting to represent SMG, or the keener who happens to hail from a supportive organization, is the right person? "I guess that's part of the leadership aspect," says Bird. And leadership in a COP is quite different than the much-celebrated corporate model. The Jack Welch, damn-the-torpedoes corporate-style leader would founder at SMG, where the requirement is not for a high-powered high-profile CEO but instead for careful listening, ability to match people to tasks, and cultivation and seed-funding of "early leaders" with an affinity for nascent projects and the desire to get them off the ground. The culture encourages creative one-off contributions. Yet while Victor Lachance says "the best contribution is the one you want to make", channeling participation demands good judgment from the Senior Leader as well as a high degree of trust within the group, something that can only be built through dialogue and commitment to a shared set of values- the polar opposite of the "command and control" style of management. Sometimes you have to let it flow.

Not surprisingly, the recent rise of the un-organization has attracted attention from a number of writers and academics. Tonya Surman has outlined a "constellation model" of collaboration as a governance model for multi-organization partnership^{iv}. Essentially, a common need or goal (a "magnetic attractor" in Surman's terms) mobilizes a number of organizations to set up a group with a shared vision under a flexible partnership agreement. Surman lists a number of key conditions for constellation success, all of which SMG shares. A constellation is "permeable", meaning organizations can participate freely, taking and giving according to need, interest and capacity, and entering and leaving as it suits them. Secretariat leadership is vested in "a highly skilled and discriminating person who embodies collaborative leadership", in other words, a "Senior Leader." Constellations endure as long as they are relevant; when the collective goal is achieved Surman argues for creative destruction in favour of new constellations. In brief, constellations are like SWAT teams formed as a flexible, temporary means of achieving a mutual goal. But while Surman sees collaboratively formed and consensually disbanded constellations, a different analogy also fits: the social network. Here is anarchic but creative open-source contribution, unregulated yet all the richer for it. The potential for these even looser collaborations is revolutionary; in the words of social media theorist Clay Shirkey, "loosely coordinated groups are going to be given increasingly high leverage, and the more those groups forego traditional institutional imperatives like deciding in advance what's going to happen...the more leverage they will get"^v So far, SMG is a little less structured than a constellation, but more structured than, say, Flickr or Craigslist.

While each writer has a different name for the phenomenon, all are united on one point: trust is the sine qua non for an effective, enduring collaboration. Lacking the institutional solidity found in structure, property, and policy, SMG has no foundation for trust but its own reputation for effective action. This must be continuously built and maintained both within and outside the sport community, and has elements of altruism (being in business for others, rather than to profit for oneself), of reliability (walking the talk, meeting objectives) and of familiarity and popularity (because we trust people we know and like, and are more likely to mistrust people we don't know or dislike). The success of a COP depends on all these elements of trust, which is parallel to the social capital built within the community. Without hierarchy, the organization depends on

consensus and adherence to values for its cohesion. The leader has a critical role in growing trust by guiding, connecting, and presenting new ideas while simultaneously avoiding rigid positions and excessive conflict.

There is one other key element in trust-building: the degree to which the COP can be trusted to have good ideas, its intellectual capital. Ideas are freely exchanged and constantly tested, and the best, or at least the most topical and relevant rise to the top. This creates another distinction from the typical organization, which envisions itself as a distinct entity and works to protect its own interests. Intellectual capital is seen as proprietary. External partnerships must be protected, lest a competitor steal them. Corporate policies and leadership hierarchies impose internal barriers. All these factors are inimical to trust. Compared to an open-source COP, a corporation may have superior leadership and capacity, but will almost inevitably be lower on the diversity/democracy and trust scales. Diversity of ideas, broad-based trust and lack of protectionism permit the COP to deploy its ideas quicker, and create change sooner, than traditional organizations. Moreover, the change catalyzed by COPs works both ways. Un-organizations can powerfully influence organizations within their own reference community. Pursuit of the greater purpose is inspirational. In the words of long-time contributor and Cycling CEO Greg Mathieu, “One of the things SMG has provided is a place where others can find us.” As diversity and democracy build social and intellectual capital and as trust in the greater good is generated, organizations conceive of themselves differently and develop that sense of “us”. What was impossible becomes do-able.

No matter what it is called- constellation, un-organization or COP- the power of self-organizing collaborative teams is there to be harnessed by Canada’s NFP sector. By emulating the SMG example relationships can be leveraged and progress made toward goals too difficult for any single organization to tackle. The rules are relatively simple: agree on a purpose, find one or more patrons within the group willing to provide secretariat support and services, beg, borrow or steal resources to engage a Senior Leader. Keep it flexible: “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need”. Don’t incorporate. Share leadership (and credit for successes) around the circle. Strong relationships, or social capital, and creative ideas, or intellectual capital, are the currency. Reputation is trust, and trust is everything.

What will the next decade hold for SMG? Over the past year the work of self-renewal has been added to an already-full plate, prompted in part by Ian Bird’s decision to move on to new challenges late in 2010. “What began as a conversation about transition for SMG became one of succession, but now that’s been replaced with a conversation about renewal” says Bird. “It’s the right time for a renewed vision and sense of purpose.” This tradition of self-examination and a determination to keep the sport community engaged in periodic crystal-ball gazing have kept SMG pointed the right way so far, but a new Senior Leader will clearly have big shoes to fill. The coming year will be pivotal, but SMG has a war chest of social and intellectual capital, and the community desire to work within the collaborative SMG framework remains strong. Most important, the need for an un-organization to address policy issues, act as a convener for community discussion, and promote shared leadership for sport is as strong as ever. So long as the need is there, SMG will endure.

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- ⁱ Retrieved from Sport Matters Group web site: [www.sportmatters.ca/Images/2 Support Documents/2007/About us/Making it happen together.pdf](http://www.sportmatters.ca/Images/2%20Support%20Documents/2007/About%20us/Making%20it%20happen%20together.pdf)
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