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The 2012 Olympic Leadership Agenda By Veronica Burke

The London 2012 Olympics offers us a focus for looking at leadership. Arguably, the pressing leadership challenge for the organisers (apart from delivering the Games themselves) is the creation of an Olympic legacy to support the promise. Crucially, the legacy must amount to more than a set of facilities or hardware and this is reflected in how it has been described in the legacy plan.

The legacy plan

The Olympics in Beijing had a mission to "transform the lives of ordinary people" and there are differing views about whether this objective has been realised. For London, the focus on young people in the original bid document was recognised as a key factor in its success and this dimension also features in the legacy plan which includes four main cornerstones:

- Increasing grassroots participation in sport
- Encouraging sport participation amongst the whole of the UK's population
- Promotion of community engagement in physical activity
- Development of the Olympic facilities as part of a wider regeneration programme

Delivery, not the promise.

The emphasis on physical activity is sensible but is it realistic? There is plenty of data to show that physical activity represents something of a "magic bullet" to enhance mental and physical health across all age groups and there is very strong evidence to support the idea that if we do nothing else, increasing physical activity is the ONE thing that will render health benefits. But the benefits come in the delivery, not the promise. If the games are to deliver long term, tackling the issue of inactivity would constitute a legitimate leadership agenda. That being said, there have been many initiatives to tackle the inactivity problem, many of which have not been successful. The issue is not a simple one and this agenda requires an understanding of the interrelationship between many wider (not well understood) factors including social attitudes, time spent at work and leisure, sport participation variance between societal groups, government involvement and provision of infrastructure for sport.

Delivering the legacy

There seems to be some debate amongst the major organisations involved as to who should deliver the legacy. The pressing leadership challenge is to provide something more enduring than a two week show and although the government has pledged to make the most of the Games for the whole of the UK, concerns have been raised that the Olympics will not deliver on its legacy vows – especially to young people.

In many ways, these challenges mirror those of organisations. Debates about what the strategy should be (what is the right thing to do?) and crucially, how to secure commitment amongst those who are involved in implementing the plan are two essential ingredients. For the Olympic organisers, the "Wimbledon effect" (where participation levels in tennis are temporarily elevated during the period of the Championships and then return to the same levels as they were prior), is a trap to be avoided. As one starting point, key stakeholders e.g. LOCOG and the Government could usefully focus on the *mechanisms* for achieving the legacy, alongside the processes that would be required to secure engagement for its delivery.

Nested thinking

One such mechanism is "nested thinking", where decisions taken at micro level are embedded (nested) within medium term agendas which themselves are nested within longer term aims. In this process, each stage feeds forward to critical thinking and a critically reflective feedback loop so that the whole process is dynamic and flexible. In tandem with the challenges of decision making in organisations, the nested thinking framework offers a way of mapping tactical and strategic plans within the longer term strategy.

Whether we are talking about the Olympic legacy or strategy making in business, having a sound planning process is only one part of the equation. Coming to an agreement about how the strategy will be implemented is a political process. Key stakeholders will need to face colleagues with strong agendas, negotiating and seeking commitment at every stage to make the essential connection between the essence of the plans and the engagement required to turn this foundation into a sustainable blueprint.

Time is running out

For London 2012, time is running out to deliver on the promise; the Games organisers have to figure out a way to make this happen. The ambitious objectives of the legacy must now be embedded as only one element of a wider developmental plan to achieve the long lasting effects that have hitherto not been achieved in sport participation before.

The 2012 Olympic leadership agenda

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