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Professional Philosophy: Inside the Delivery of Sport Psychology Service at Team Denmark

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The field of applied psychology has developed rapidly in Europe in the past four decades. In Denmark, the sports psychology profession has been characterized by a diversity of approaches with little overarching consensus on the professional philosophy and interventions strategies among consultants in the field. In 2008, Team Denmark established a sport psychology team with the aim to enhance the quality and consistency of applied sport psychology services. The team began their work by creating a professional philosophy. This paper describes the rationale, content, and implications of this philosophy, including: (a) basic beliefs and values; (b) theories of intervention and behaviour change; (c) objectives of the sport psychology intervention, (d) the content and focus of the interventions, and (e) sport psychological services and methods. High quality service requires coherence across all five levels of the philosophy. Implications of introducing the professional philosophy include a more unified service delivery across Denmark and the fact that sport psychology services are demanded more than ever in Danish elite sport.

Keywords: Applied sport psychology; professional practice, researcher-practitioner

Introduction

The field of applied sport psychology has developed rapidly in the last four decades, and many European countries have established applied sport psychology programs within elite sport organizations, universities and private clinics (Wylleman, Harwood, Elbe, & de Caluwé, 2009). The sports psychology profession in Denmark has been characterized by a diversity of approaches and has

acted as a tool-based discipline. There has been little overarching consensus on the professional philosophy and interventions strategies among consultants in the field, and the quality of service delivered has varied to a large degree in focus, duration and quality. At the same time, no Danish university offers a degree as an applied sport psychologist. These facts have contributed to giving sport psychology a tarnished reputation among coaches and sports federations in Denmark.

In 2008, Team Denmark (Denmark's organization for elite sport) decided to strengthen the sport psychology service delivery in Danish elite sport by employing a permanent staff of sport psychologists (including the two authors of this paper) and formulating an overarching professional philosophy. This paper presents the philosophy, describes the rationale behind it, and discusses its implications.

Although most literature on sport psychology is addressed to scholars, coaches or athletes, a number of recent publications - particularly books and chapters - have been published on the "how" of doing sport psychology and specifically addressed to the sport psychology consultant (e.g., Andersen, 2000; Andersen, 2005; Bond, 2002; Falby, 2004; Hill, 2001; Murphy, 1995; Nesti, 2004). As the profession continues to grow, a number of challenges to the field crystallize. In a recent review of European applied sport psychology, Wylleman et al. (2009) describe some challenges to developing applied sport psychology that include: a) clearly and uniformly defining itself, its role, and its practitioners within an elite sport context, b) gaining insight into the quality management of the educational pathways that train future sport psychology practitioners, c) and the need to optimize the vocational development, to ensure the quality of applied sport psychology service delivery and the competencies of practitioners.

Another specific challenge to the field is developing coherent professional philosophies. It is suggested that optimal sport psychological interventions require a coherent service delivery model that integrates the entire efforts of the consultant's work (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). They state that: "Professional philosophy significantly shapes the consultant's approach to the essential elements of the consulting process such as gaining entry, assessment, conceptualization of the issue and the intervention, implementation, evaluation, and bringing closure to the consulting relationship" (p. 446). As such, the professional philosophy of a consultant is a driving force behind his or her consulting process, and therefore sport psychologists need to clarify their professional philosophy (Corlett, 1996). Poczwadowski, Sherman, and Henschen (1998) further outline 11 factors that a sport psychologist should consider when designing interventions, including professional boundaries and philosophy; range, types and organization of service; and program implementation. Focusing

on these issues has successfully contributed to the quality of service delivery in different applied settings (e.g., Van Raalte, 2003).

Poczwardowski et al. (2004) go on to propose a hierarchical typology of the major components of a professional philosophy. They suggest that such a philosophy should include the following components: (a) personal core beliefs and values, (b) theoretical paradigm concerning behaviour change, (c) models of practice and the consultant's role, (d) intervention goals, and (e) intervention techniques and methods. All of these are elements that need to be explicitly and coherently integrated into an effective approach.

Team Denmark's 2008 initiative to establish a team of four sport psychology consultants was groundbreaking for Denmark's elite sporting organisation, and the sport psychology profession in Denmark. All sport psychology service had earlier been delivered by a large number of private consultants working independently with no coordination and no means to make sure the knowledge and experiences of these consultants could be of benefit for all of Danish elite sport. The first task of this team was to develop a systematic and coherent professional philosophy. The objectives behind creating this model included: (a) to make the professionalism of the sport psychology team visible in Danish elite sport; and (b) to create an overall framework for the sport psychology work in Team Denmark. This work will allow coaches, athletes and federations to experience uniformity in the consultants' work. It also allowed Team Denmark to provide clear and visible expectations towards a network of external sport psychology consultants who work with sub-elite athletes and in less prioritized sports. These consultants are today asked to comply with the directions described in the service delivery model, which ensures that athletes who switch consultants as they progress to more elite levels in their sport experience a similarity in the approaches encountered at different levels.

The Team Denmark Sport Psychology Professional Philosophy

This paper presents the professional philosophy of the Team Denmark sport psychology team. It is presented in the form of a hierarchically structured model, which is inspired by - but does not strictly follow - the recommendations of the Poczwardowski et al (2004) paper. The professional philosophy is structured in 5 levels: (a) Basic beliefs and values; (b) Theories of intervention and behaviour change; (c) Objectives of the sport psychology intervention; (d) The content and focus of the intervention structured in 'the Team Denmark sport psychology model'; and (e) Sport psychological services and methods.

The idea of the model is that a good intervention requires consistency between all these five levels. A tool-oriented sports psychologist will go directly to level four and describe a number of practical skills and tools to teach them. The Team Denmark Sport Psychology team's position is that the content and tools only make sense in the context of a fundamental professional philosophy.

Level 1 - Basic Beliefs and Values. The foundation for action is the psychologist's innermost and fundamental beliefs and values about the world, about the athletes, coaches and their performance, and about the nature of elite sport. This level contains assumptions we are not always aware of and do not talk about in the daily work, but which govern our approach to the field. These basic beliefs and values are often considered to be individual or even private, and it is recommended that reflection on basic beliefs and values are integrated as an important part of the self-reflection and supervision of the sport psychology consultant (Andersen, 2000; Poczwadowski et al., 2004; Poczwadowski & Lauer, 2006). As members of a team of consultants, we consider these beliefs and values to necessarily be shared among the team members. Through lengthy discussion we have, as a team, defined 10 fundamental beliefs that pervade our work:

(1) Elite athletes and coaches operate from interplay of thoughts, feelings, physiology and actions. The interplay of these elements is crucial for the athletes' and coaches' performance and wellbeing; (2) Elite athletes and coaches have a personality and identity (values, motives, self-esteem, and typical behaviours) that shape their lives and actions. However, people act differently in different situations, because they are also affected by the surroundings and adapt to different situations; (3) Elite athletes are embedded in an environment. One can not understand an athlete without understanding his or her relationships with people within this environment; (4) Elite athlete are motivated and learn better when they are allowed to think and take responsibility for their own development; (5) Elite athletes are elite athletes 24 hours a day. This requires dedication and commitment. However, the development and performance of elite athletes is best in the long run, when their identity has broader meaning than the sport and when their self-esteem is not only dependent on sporting performance; (6) A sports career is a progression through a series of natural phases that possess unique challenges. The transition between and progression through these phases are a key challenge for the athlete and hold the potential for crisis or growth; (7) Adversity is a part of sport. Athletes must learn to view adversity as a natural part of sport and therefore develop strategies to manage and cope with it; (8) The way to top results is through a focus on performance processes rather than only on the results; (9) The mental component plays a major role in both training and competition. Quality performances require quality training. A sports psychologist's core mission is to build quality into the

daily training as well as in competition; (10) Mental skills should be developed in the sport environment. Therefore, the development of mental skills should be integrated into the daily training where the coach plays an important role. These basic beliefs and values are at the core of the professional philosophy, and the way in which they influence our interventions are subject to ongoing discussion and reflection in the team.

Level 2 – Theories of Interventions and Behaviour Change. This level describes the theories of intervention, on which the practical work is based. Today, psychology is characterised by a variety of theoretical paradigms which contains both a descriptive level (what is the nature of people and their problems?) and an applied level (how can and should a psychologist create development and change in humans to help them overcome their problems and perform at their best?). Such paradigms or ‘schools of thought’ include cognitive and behavioural psychology; humanistic and positive psychology; psychoanalysis and neo-psychoanalytical approaches; neuro linguistic programming; ecological and systemic psychology, and more (see e.g., Hill, 2001 for review) . These ‘schools of thought’ are to a different degree supported by research and often compete and conflict. We believe, however, that at the applied level some of the theories can complement each other in a fruitful manner. At the same time it is important for a professional organization such as Team Denmark that their sport psychologist work from evidence-based intervention methods. Therefore we work from an eclectic perspective and draw inspiration from three approaches that are cognitive behavioural psychology, systemic psychology and humanistic/existential psychology, selected because their effectiveness in treatment is documented by a great body of research. An eclectic approach is not the same as working outside the theory, but a creative synthesis of the theories. Below is a brief description of the theories and specifically which parts of the theories we will draw inspiration from.

Cognitive Behavioural Psychology

Cognitive behavioural therapy (Beck, 1993; Beck, 2008; Knapp & Beck, 2008) describes the link between thoughts, feelings, physiology and behaviour. Athletes’ thought patterns are at the heart of their performance. Athletes experience automatic thoughts that are subject to classic cognitive distortions such as negative, dichotomised (black and white), personalized and over-generalized thinking. By identifying, modifying and controlling thoughts, athletes can optimize their athletic performance (Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001; Johnson, Hrycaiko, Johnson, & Halas, 2004). Another central belief in the cognitive behavioural therapy is that we do not respond to reality, rather to our interpretation of reality. An athlete will not necessarily be nervous when

he is in fact out matched and in danger of losing, but only when he perceives this is occurring. A key part of the psychologists' task will be to help athletes to understand how they interpret events and what impact this may have on their effort and achievement. The cognitive behaviour therapy emphasises that people often maintain 'dysfunctional' behaviours in order to achieve a 'secondary' gain (e.g., if I become ill in a competition it may reduce the pressure to perform). An aim is to work with athletes to develop functional thoughts and behaviours with positive impacts on both sporting performance and personal development.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy offers a number of intervention tools that are effective in sport psychology, including psycho-education (e.g., teaching key psychological concepts such as stress and self-esteem); behavioural experiments; and deconstructing dysfunctional thought patterns to build more functional ones. Last but not least, the cognitive behavioural therapy emphasizes the importance of training in learning psychological skills. This idea fits well with elite sport where 'quick fix' solutions are rare and improvement requires consistent effort.

Ecological Psychology and Systems Theory

System's theory is not one specific theory but rather a scientific tradition that embraces a diverse set of theories. Common to these theories is the idea that most phenomena must be considered in systems; that is organised wholes which are so complex that they cannot be disassembled into parts without losing their central quality, which is their wholeness (Bateson, 1973; Lewin, 1939; Luhmann, 1995). Ecological psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) emphasizes that humans are embedded in their environment, stresses that development must be understood as a mutual accommodation between the individual and his or her context and depicts the environment as consisting of a series of nested layers that go from the micro- to the macro-environment.

Recent research on successful athletic talent development environments (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a; 2010b) has demonstrated the potential applied significance of a holistic ecological approach that shifts focus from the individual athletes to the environment in which they develop. Applied sport psychologists who adopt this perspective recognize that some sporting environments are more successful than others in helping their athletes develop and perform. We therefore advocate the need to work holistically and address the whole environment, both in sporting and non-sporting areas, in order to create optimal conditions for the athletes' performance. This is particularly relevant in the case of environments that are less successful in developing athletes, where the applied sport psychologists may help the environments to reappraise their methods and become more successful.

Humanistic and Existential Psychology

Humanistic Psychology (e.g., Nesti, 2004; Orlick, 1990) sees people as self actualised, that is motivated towards goals and able to assume responsibility for their own development. In practice this means that the sports psychology consultant should believe that the athletes are competent and motivated to work on their own problems. Therefore, self-directed tasks (“home assignments”) and a focus on the athletes’ own resources are important consultation methods.

The humanistic psychology also draws attention to larger questions of identity, choice, responsibility and meaning, and to career long personal development. In a sport psychological context it can be said that concrete mental skills are important, but it is equally important to go „back“ and examine how the athlete understands himself and whether he or she is experiencing a meaningful career as an elite athlete. Humanistic psychology also strongly focuses on the relationship between psychologist and client. A central belief is that a relationship characterized by trust, confidence and recognition creates fertile ground for learning and development.

Level 3 - Objectives of the Sport Psychology Intervention. The sport psychology team is a part of Team Denmark and its overall objectives. These overall objectives include achieving results on the international level and doing so in a socially responsible manner. More specifically, the sport psychological team has the following objectives: (a) To ensure that Danish elite athletes obtain the right mental skills to perform optimally at the highest international level and to ensure that the Danish elite athletes have the mental edge in competitive situations; (b) To further enhance the quality of the daily training; (c) To ensure that the individual elite athletes experience meaning and value in life as elite athletes; and (d) To create a common language for the psychological aspects of sports training and competition among professionals, coaches and athletes across sports.

Level 4 - Content and Focus of the Intervention - Team Denmark’s Sport Psychology Model. To provide an overview of the content and focus of our interventions, i.e., the levels, layers and themes we’re working with, we developed the Team Denmark Sport Psychology Model (see figure 1). The model is structured with a triangle in the middle representing the athlete. This triangle has three levels: ‘Personality and identity’, ‘Life as an elite athlete & life skills’, and ‘Mental skills in training and competition’. Surrounding the athlete is a circle representing the sport and non-sport environments into which the athlete is embedded. Knowing well that each component of the model could be subject to a separate paper, below we will provide a short summary of the model.

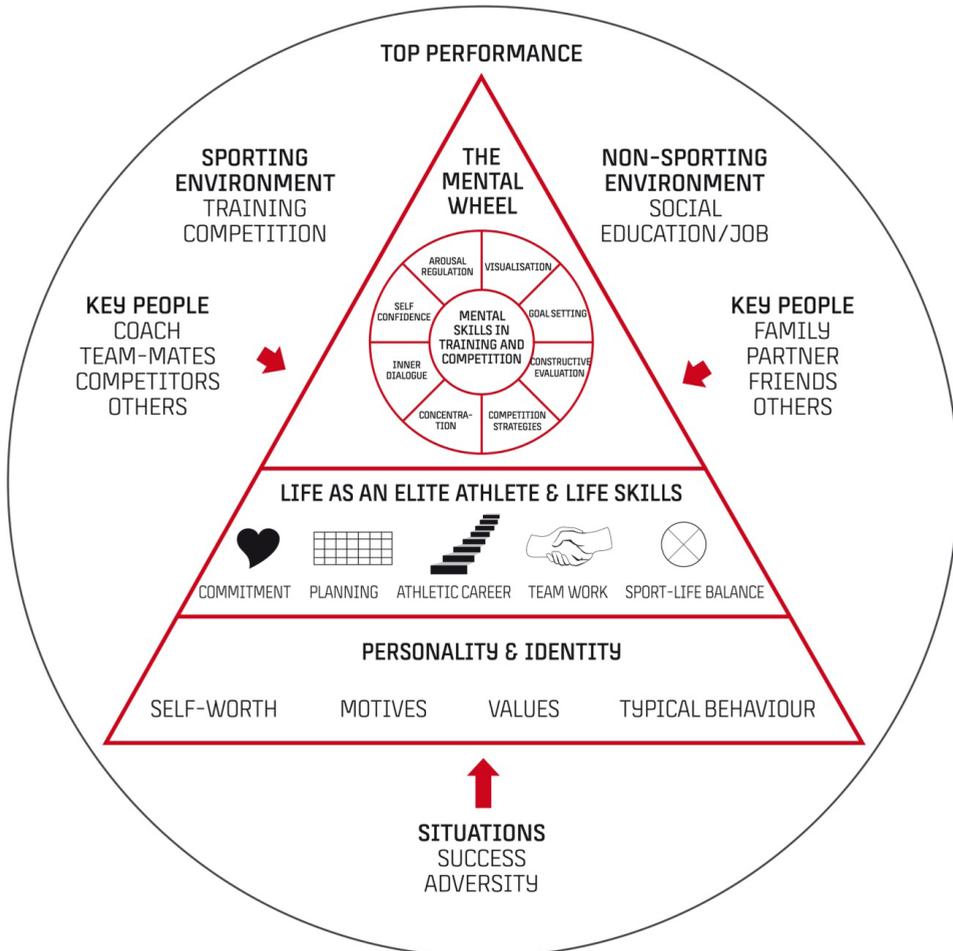


Figure 1. The Team Denmark Sport Psychology Model

Personality and Identity

This foundation layer contains: (a) Self-worth, building a solid base of self-worth in the athletes that is independent of his or her performance; (b) Motives, including awareness of motivating factors in his or her life and helping athletes to manage conflicting motives; (c) Values, helping athletes become aware of their own values so they can go through their career in a manner consistent with these values; and (d) Typical behaviour, helping athletes become aware of their „sports personality“ and identify behaviour strengths as well as areas for development.

Life as an elite athlete & life skills

The middle layer refers to tackling life as elite athlete and mastering the life-skills that are needed to be an elite athlete. Recent research has emphasized that sport psychology interventions should include life skills and have a broader focus than simply mental skills (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Jones & Lavallee, 2009). Particularly for young athletes, being able to tackle the everyday challenges of life as an elite athlete is an important skill. This layer therefore emphasizes life skills. Commitment refers to an athlete's attitude, motivation and volition in training and competition, and the degree to which he or she prioritises elite sport. Planning refers to time management skills, in particular how an athlete structures his or her everyday life (training, eating, rest, study, work and socialising with family and friends) to maximise gains from training. It also involves prioritising quality recovery. Career Transitions regard helping the athletes build resources to cope with the challenges they meet during their careers as well as helping them prepare for and handle the transitions that are part of an athletic. Team Work includes the psychology of groups such as team dynamics, cohesion and communication. It also relates to an athlete's social skills in regards to communicating and working with key people in the environment, such as coaches, team mates, support staff and other partners. Sport-life balance reflects the athletes' ability to balance the demands, rewards, and ambitions from their sport, social and family life, education and career – while always being aware they are elite athletes.

The Mental Wheel – Mental Skills in Training and Competition

In the upper layer is the Mental Wheel. The mental wheel contains eight key mental skills that are important to an elite athlete in order to perform optimally. Training of the eight mental skills is an important element in the daily training environment. A number of models, prioritized lists and other attempts to structure mental skills have been proposed over the years (Highman, Harwood, & Hall, 2007; Lesyk, 1998; Orlick, 1990; Thomas, Murphy, & Hardy, 1999). Based on reviews of literature and research, as well as experience in the applied field, we chose the following mental skills to be included in our sport psychology model: goal setting, constructive evaluation, concentration, inner dialogue, self-confidence, arousal regulation, visualisation, and competition strategies. In order to create coherence in the service delivery model, Team Denmark has created and validated a questionnaire designed to measure an athlete's effective use of these eight skills in training and competition.

External Influences

Outside the triangle are various external factors which affect the athlete. Sport psychology interventions need to include an understanding of the athlete's overall environment and his or her relationships with people in this environment. This includes both the sporting environment (e.g., coach, teammates, competitors) and the non-sporting environment (e.g., parents, friends, partner) (Côté, 1999; Henriksen et al., 2010a; Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, & Wylleman, 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In addition, the model also includes the specific situation, in which the athletes currently find themselves, such as adversity, injury, success etc.

The model also suggests that the sport psychologist should help coaches build a training and competition environment that supports the development and performance of the athletes. This includes creating communities of practice where knowledge is shared among the members (Stelter, 2005), reducing organizational stress (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006) and finding the right balance between task- and ego-oriented climates (Bortoli, Bertollo, & Robazza, 2009).

Level 5 - Sports Psychological Services and Methods. Team Denmark's sports psychological services include courses, individual consultations, group consultations and the teaching of sport psychological skills in the daily training. From the perspective of a professional philosophy, it is decisive that all the levels of the philosophy are consistent. This means that the specific services offered should reflect the basic assumptions, interventions theories, objectives and key areas of content described in the previous sections.

Examples of such consistency in regards to the services delivered are manifold and we will present a few. The importance of the environment is reflected both in basic assumptions, in the inclusion of system's theory as an intervention strategy and in including sport and non-sporting environments in the sport psychology model. In the daily service delivery, this is displayed in the fact that we arrange courses not only for athletes but also for coaches and parents, as well as in the fact that we advise the sporting organizations on how they can create optimal performance environments. Another example regards the team's assumption that mental skills training must be integrated in athletes' daily sport specific training. This is reflected in the way the consultants often attend training, arrange specific exercises in cooperation with the coaches, and work to teach coaches how to reinforce mental skills in training.

Discussion

The field of applied sport psychology has developed rapidly in the last four decades (Wylleman et al., 2009), and in Denmark this rapid develop has been characterized by a diversity of approaches with little overarching consensus on the professional philosophy and interventions strategies among consultants in the field. Team Denmark's sport psychology team established a professional philosophy with aim to address this challenge. Based on the idea that the professional philosophy of a consultant is a driving force behind and significantly shapes his or her consulting process, Team Denmark's team of sport psychologists has developed such a philosophy. The philosophy contains five hierarchical levels that move from the fundamental and theoretical to the concrete and practical. These levels are (a) basic beliefs and values, (b) theories of intervention and behaviour change, (c) objectives of the intervention, (d) focus and content of the intervention, and (e) services and methods. In order to deliver an optimal service to athletes and coaches these levels must be in concordance.

An example of how this professional philosophy coherently links all five levels starts with the basic belief (Level 1) that one cannot understand an athlete without understanding the environment and his or her relationships with people within this environment. The base belief is closely linked with systemic theory (Level 2), in particular that one must consider the complexity of the athlete and work holistically to address the whole environment and the key persons around the athletes (e.g., team mates, coaches, parents, friends, etc). Accordingly, a central goal of the psychology team (Level 3) is to promote and enhance the quality of the daily training' though optimising the training environment and key relationships. These ideas are represented by the outer ring of the Team Denmark Sport Psychology Model (Level 4), which places the athlete in his or her sport and non-sport context. Finally, these four levels are practically delivered to athletes (Level 5) through a basic course in sports psychology that teaches the necessary skills, but also works with coaches, team mates, parents and other partners in regards to helping the athlete achieving their career goal.

Initial reactions from athletes, coaches, sport federations, and the sport psychology consultants themselves, have been positive. First working from a coherent framework has enabled Team Denmark to deliver a consistent service across sports, but also within sports. As young athletes progress towards the elite level they are met with the same approach, thereby creating continuity and more effective service delivery. This same level of consistency is received by coaches across and within federations. Second, working from a coherent professional philosophy has helped create a common psychological language in Danish elite sport.

Third, our broad and coherent philosophy has engaged sport psychology as an integrated part of the Danish elite sport environment and sport psychology consultants as a natural member of an expert team. Long-term working relationships with specific sports federations have allowed the sport psychology consultants to follow athletes and coaches across contexts, and to work with all levels within Danish elite sport, and given the consultants a chance to develop sport specific programs. Sports federations have expressed satisfaction with and confidence in the concept, and athletes and coaches more often approach Team Denmark to receive service now than they used to. This work has gone a long way to address the tarnished reputation of sport psychology where earlier service delivery varied in focus, duration and quality.

Recently, a number of challenges facing applied sport psychology in Europe have been listed (Wylleman et al., 2009). The first of these challenges is for the profession to clearly and uniformly define itself, its role, and its practitioners within an elite sport context. Team Denmark's professional model sought to address this challenge through making the professionalism of the sport psychology team visible in Danish elite sport, and to create an overall framework for the sport psychology work in Team Denmark. This has allowed the psychology team to clearly define both the theoretical philosophy, but also the practical work with coaches, athletes and sport federations. Our 'customers' experience clarity in the sport psychology team's role, as well as uniformity in the consultants' work.

However, formulating a professional philosophy does not address all the challenges listed by Wylleman et al. (2009). A challenge still remaining includes the quality management of the educational pathways that train future sport psychology practitioners in Denmark (Wylleman et al., 2009). A key aspect of the challenge is developing closer collaboration with universities in Denmark. For this purpose, collaboration could include integrating Team Denmark's professional philosophy in the University courses on sport psychology and also using Team Denmark sport psychologist as supervisors for students taking applied courses in the field of sport psychology. Working more closely with universities also involves coming together to describe meaningful research projects that can bring the applied field forward. Lastly, such collaboration could include finding ways to make sure the experiences of the consultants are scientifically collected for the purpose of publication and knowledge sharing. We are confident that actually having two members of the team holding split positions in both universities and in Team Denmark will bring forward this process.

A third challenge is the need for on-going vocational development, also addressed by Wylleman et al. (2009), to ensure the quality of applied sport

psychology service delivery and the competencies of practitioners. As a team, we need to engage in ongoing discussions and reflections about how we manage to create concordance between all levels of the professional philosophy in their daily work. To optimize the quality of our service delivery and minimize the risk of stress among the consultants, the sport psychology team engages in professional development through internal peer supervision and also professional supervision on a monthly basis from a licensed clinical psychologist and supervisor who works within a cognitive behavioral tradition. Working from a coherent professional philosophy gives direction to this vocational development. Although the sport psychology team has already begun to engage in professional development, this process needs to be an on-going process that continually evolves and challenges the psychology consultants. As for Danish sport psychologists who are not part of this team, the challenge is yet to be addressed.

As the psychology team moves forward a final and key challenge is the quality assurance of the model and evaluating the success of the philosophy in achieving the objectives of the psychology intervention (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004; Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002). Any evaluation must be conducted firstly on the effectiveness of the intervention on the individual level (developing the right mental skills in individual athletes and coaches, as well as developing meaning and value in their lives), and secondly on a broader level in relation to developing a common sport psychology language among professionals, coaches and athletes. The specific challenge is to develop a clear and meaningful evaluation process that considers not only individual and cultural development, but also the specific evaluation of the skills, competencies, and effectiveness of the sport psychology consultants.

Conclusion

Before the Team Denmark team of sport psychologist was established, Danish sport psychology was fragmented and suffered from a tarnished reputation due to too many ineffective interventions. We have yet to see the full effect of this new initiative, including the establishment of a core team and a network of sport psychology consultants, and the development and integration of a professional philosophy. To date, the initiative has been successful. Sports federations have expressed satisfaction with and confidence in the concept. Sport psychologists have also expressed that the discussions and reflections have strengthened the quality of their work. Athletes and coaches more often and more willingly approach Team Denmark to receive service, convinced it will help them achieve their goals. This paper thus supports the idea, that formulating a cohesive professional philosophy within a working team can bring applied sport psychology forward.

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