



Sports organisations in times of change and uncertainty:

the role of organisational resilience

Dr Kirsten Fasey • Essays in sports governance : 3

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Foreword

This series of essays aims to provide a deeper dive into topics of interest and relevance to the Sports Governance Academy (SGA) community. Authored by experts in particular disciplines and by practitioners in sports governance and management, they will give the reader a closer look at current themes, best practices and initiatives in the sector.

By inviting authors to present their topics in essay form, we want to give them the scope and freedom to explore more deeply areas of governance affecting sports organisations, predominantly in the UK, but drawing on comparative international examples where appropriate. The approach taken will vary from essay to essay. Some will provide a case study to help the community get to grips with developments in the sports governance landscape. Others will present the results of original ongoing research. Others still will offer intriguing perspectives on governance debates, approaching familiar topics from a different angle.

We hope that you find plenty in the series to get you thinking and to help you and your organisations in your approach to governance and in facing the challenges ahead of us. Through the SGA website, you can access further essays in the series as they are released. There you will also find our knowledge base, a library of trusted, free resources to help you get to grips with governance and start to develop good practices. Visit <https://sportsgovernanceacademy.org.uk/>.

The impact of rapid change and uncertain circumstances has been brought home emphatically to most organisations over the past couple of years. We have been – and continue to go – through a time of considerable challenge and turbulence. Though highly visible and felt acutely, large external shocks of recent times are of course not the only disruptions that organisations face. Changes in the operating environment, funding landscape and personnel, in addition to the myriad pressures that confront them, sometimes with little or no warning, test the capabilities of organisations large and small, to deliver on their objectives and to progress against their strategy.

Kirsten's essay is a timely discussion of organisational resilience. Drawn from her academic work, practical application of research methods, structured interventions in sector bodies and experience of the workings of national organisations, Kirsten offers a definition of what resilience is and the characteristics of behaviours and processes that might demonstrate it. Perhaps uncomfortably for some, this places resilience at the organisational level in the context of the need to accept uncertainty and unpredictability and to demonstrate an ability to adapt, not simply return to the status quo ante crisis.

Of great value will be Kirsten's suggestions about how organisations of all sizes can design and implement a framework of interventions and exercises to enhance their collective resilience, and the practical steps to identify and improve behaviours and processes within organisations. Change is an inevitability. While it may not always be as drastic and traumatic as we have seen recently, it can nonetheless be challenging and discomfiting. This essay should encourage some organisational self-reflection and is an excellent discussion of dealing with change and uncertainty.

Craig Beeston
Sports Governance Academy
November 2022

Executive Summary

Sports organisations, like many other types of organisations, face an increasingly complex range of challenges, adversities, and changes which manifest themselves at a pace which can leave those dealing with them reeling. How individuals and teams working within sports organisations can equip themselves to deal with these rapidly shifting environments is a question that can be addressed by the study of organisational resilience. Organisational resilience seeks to understand and explain how and why organisations adapt and thrive in environments which are complex and uncertain.

This essay is divided into three parts. In Part One, some of the challenges facing those involved in governing sports organisations are outlined, and how organisational resilience may help. Part Two contains a summary of the findings from a recent doctoral research programme on organisational resilience in elite sport regarding the characteristics, processes, and strategies of organisational resilience, together with details of an intervention programme successfully implemented in one sports organisation. Finally, in Part Three, practical tips and suggestions are provided as to how those findings might be used by those working in or with sports organisations to help them navigate successfully through our increasingly turbulent and unpredictable ecosystem.

About the author

Dr Kirsten Fasey is Director of People and Culture at British Triathlon. Her Ph.D. from Nottingham Trent University focused on organisational resilience in elite sport. As the first programme of research in this new and exciting area, Kirsten spent over three years exploring the characteristics and underlying processes of organisational resilience in various elite sports organisations, and has facilitated a number of small-scale interventions purposively designed to develop resilience at the organisational level.

Previously, Kirsten was a commercial property lawyer for 20 years, and is also an endurance runner/triathlete, realising that everyone can be good at something: you just need to pick the right sport.

Introduction

Sports organisations, like many other types of organisations, face an increasingly complex range of challenges, adversities, and changes which manifest themselves at a pace which can leave those dealing with them reeling. The pace of change in sports organisations was recognised by UK Sport and Sport England in the introduction to the first iteration of the Code for Sports Governance in 2017:

The business of sport has changed rapidly in recent years. New opportunities and threats continue to present themselves. The type of decisions that now need to be taken are frequently complex, commercial, multidisciplinary, and high-profile in nature. Those entrusted with the responsibility to take these decisions therefore need to constitute and equip themselves in a manner that allows them to thrive in this shifting environment (p. 4).

Understanding how organisations can use individual, team, and organisational-level resources to overcome and adapt to changes in the sport environment is an essential requirement for achieving excellence through optimal organisational functioning. I've spent nearly four years speaking to individuals working within sports organisations, carrying out research, and studying academic literature, to try to gain a better understanding of the wide range of factors that can hinder or help sports organisations in dealing with change and uncertainty. In my current role as Director of People and Culture at British Triathlon, I'm trying to put some of that academic knowledge into practice. Over the course of this essay, I aim to:

- outline some of the challenges facing those involved in governing sports organisations and how organisational resilience may help;
- summarise the findings from the doctoral research programme on organisational resilience in elite sport; and
- provide practical tips and suggestions as to how those findings might be used by those working in or with all types of sports organisations to help them navigate successfully through a world of uncertainty and rapid change.

Part one

Sporting governance – the challenges

An understanding of the types of challenges faced by sports organisations is central to a context-specific understanding of organisational resilience. While all organisations face some degree of change and uncertainty, such as those caused by the current cost of living crisis, geopolitical events such as the war in Ukraine, and turmoil in the financial markets, sports organisations are particularly exposed across different levels of analysis. At the societal level, these include changing political policies, societal norms, and intense scrutiny from fans, stakeholders, and media. At the inter-organisational level, challenges include multiple, and sometimes contradictory, stakeholder agendas and needs. And internally, sports organisations, particularly professional ones, often face high levels of organisational change, such as management turnover, while national sports organisations are required to balance high-performance targets alongside investment in grassroots development. The organisation must then balance multiple, concurrent, and often conflicting, goals such as social good, commercial opportunities, engaging with members (and sometimes fans), and diverse sources of income including grant funding, sponsorship, membership fees, and event income.

In particular, for the many sports organisations reliant on unpredictable funding streams, reductions (and indeed unexpected increases) in grant funding can create an instability that triggers short-term, reactionary behaviours which may be at odds with long-term sustainability. A short-term focus is also apparent in professional sports organisations, where high levels of managerial change can result in a lack of organisational continuity and learning.

How individuals and teams working within sports organisations can equip themselves to deal with these rapidly shifting environments is a question that can be addressed by the study of organisational resilience. The term resilience is often employed whereby an individual, team, or organisation demonstrates a positive outcome despite experiencing adversity or change.

What is organisational psychology, and how might it help organisations deal with these challenges?

One question which often arises is how can you study the psychology of a whole organisation. How organisations function is a question of how a group of people are organised and how they communicate with one another. It is ultimately the behaviour of individuals and teams that determines what an organisation does and, over time, what resources it has. Organisational psychology addresses human behaviour in work settings, providing applied knowledge to enhance the effectiveness of individuals, groups, and organisations. This branch of psychology encompasses micro-level (e.g., employee resilience), meso-level (e.g., collective efficacy) and macro-level (e.g., strategy and structure) variables and processes, recognising that although organisational contexts are at a higher (macro-) level of analysis, they are anchored in the (micro-level) behaviours, attitudes, and feelings of individual employees. For example, in an organisational context, individual behaviours, attitudes, and feelings contribute towards the creation of the macro-level culture of the organisation, which subsequently impacts the behaviours and attitudes of employees and volunteers.

In summary, organisational psychology does not attempt to ignore or discount the individuals working within that organisation. Indeed, internal human factors are often targeted in organisational development strategies. However, when focusing on the organisational level,

this branch of psychology research differs from individual-level research by exploring how to enhance the functioning of the *organisation* rather than the individual, but it usually does so by targeting both team and individual-level factors, acknowledging the inherent complexities arising from the number of potential interactions between them.

The field of positive organisational sport psychology seeks to better understand the way in which successful dynamics are achieved and maintained in organisations through developing knowledge of the individual behaviour and social processes associated with such success. In pursuit of this goal, examining what has worked in the past may not always be a recipe for future success, despite its appeal. In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman explains the two systems that drive the way individuals think, making people: see the world as more tidy, simple, predictable, and coherent than it really is. The illusion that one has understood the past feeds the further illusion that one can predict and control the future. These illusions are comforting. They reduce the anxiety that we would experience if we allowed ourselves to fully acknowledge the uncertainties of existence.¹

To satisfy this need for predictability and coherence, recipe-style management books abound with stories of success and failure, but according to Phil Rosenzweig, in his book *The Halo Effect*² examining what drives business success and failure, such self-help texts consistently exaggerate the impact of leadership and management practice on positive outcomes. By focusing on how organisations can overcome, or effectively deal with, change and uncertainty in the present, rather than the ability of leadership to predict and avoid adversity based on what has worked in the past, organisational resilience is a valuable construct to help sports organisations navigate uncertainty and change.

Resilience at the organisational level **is not about the absence of adversity**. It is about exploring the everyday functioning that underpins success, despite the disruptions, difficulties, and uncertainties which are integral to organisational life. The topic of organisational resilience has been investigated in a wide variety of contexts, such as healthcare, entrepreneurial start-ups, and infrastructure providers. Within the sports sector, despite a growing body of literature on individual and team resilience, organisational resilience was yet to be investigated.

¹ Kahneman, D., *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, (New York, 2011), pp. 204-5.

² Rosenzweig, P., *The Halo Effect*, (London, 2014).

Part two

What were the findings from the doctoral research programme on organisational resilience in elite sport?

The purpose of the doctoral programme was to explore organisational resilience in elite sport. To do so, the research was split into four separate, interrelated studies. Study One aimed to construct a definition of organisational resilience and to identify resilient characteristics of elite sport organisations based on expert opinion. Building on this, Study Two sought to understand the underpinning psychosocial processes through which organisational resilience might function in elite sport. In Study Three, the research moved to working within a sports organisation in order to explore (from real-world experience) how one elite sport organisation successfully dealt with significant change. Finally, Study Four involved putting the findings from the first three studies to the test through the co-creation and implementation of an organisational-level programme of small-scale interventions chosen by those working within a sports organisation to purposefully develop its organisational resilience. Part Two of this essay comprises a summary of how each phase of the research was conducted and the key findings.

Study One – Defining and Characterising organisational resilience in elite sport³

The purpose of this Study One was to create a definition of organisational resilience and to identify resilient characteristics of elite sport organisations. The research was conducted using the Delphi method, which is a structured communication technique designed to transform expert opinion into group consensus through a series of survey rounds. Over a period of seven months, 62 expert panellists working in or with elite sport organisations, or having academic experience of resilience in various contexts, responded to four iterative online surveys. Following analysis of the data, organisational resilience was defined as:

‘the dynamic capability of an organisation to successfully deal with significant change. It emerges from multi-level (employee, team, and organisational) interacting characteristics and processes which enable an organisation to prepare for, adapt to, and learn from significant change’.⁴

Defining organisational resilience as a dynamic capability to successfully deal with significant change represents a shift in organisational resilience thinking away from simplistic engineering-based models in which external, singular events cause an organisation to temporarily deviate from a linear trajectory. Instead, organisational resilience is expressed in terms of a complex systems-based model⁵ in which resilience events, organisational systems, and their wider sociocultural context dynamically interact. The five resilient characteristics of elite sport organisations identified from the analysis are detailed in Table 1.

³ Fasey, K. J., Sarkar, M., Wagstaff, C. R., & Johnston, J. (2021). Defining and characterizing organizational resilience in elite sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 52, 101834.

⁴ Fasey et al., 2021, p. 5

⁵ A complex system is one which emerges organically as a result of the behaviours of the components within it, rather than because of a predetermined plan.

Table 1 - The five resilient characteristics of elite sport organisations

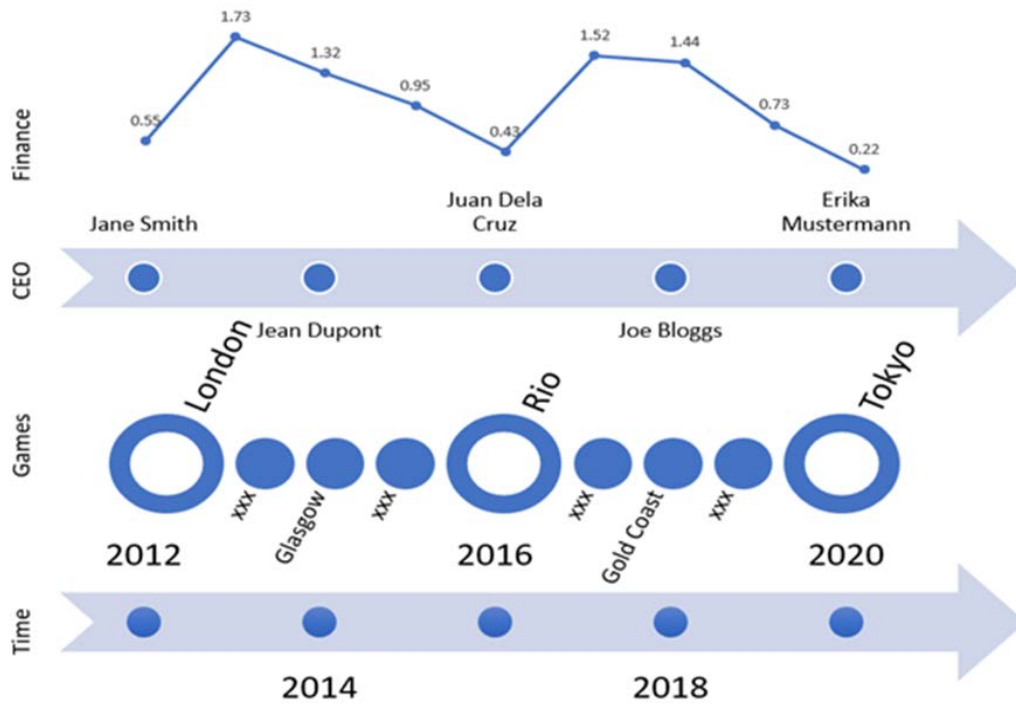
Structural clarity	Having a clear and effective structure, particularly regarding communication channels, roles and responsibilities between individuals and teams, and decision making.
Flexible improvement	The capability to learn and adapt alongside a culture in which innovation and learning are valued.
Shared understanding	Having a shared understanding of the organisation's vision and values, the rules governing behaviour, and the collective ability to achieve goals.
Reciprocal commitment	A two-way partnership between employees and employer in which employees feel supported, valued, and safe.
Operational awareness	The capability to identify and assess the range of options available through understanding the operating environment, available resources, and alternative viewpoints

Study Two – Understanding organisational resilience in elite sport – an exploration of psychosocial processes⁶

Having identified some key characteristics of elite sport organisations that successfully deal with significant change in Study One, further research was needed to understand how they function. The purpose of Study Two was to explore the psychosocial processes underpinning organisational resilience in elite sport. Using interviews supplemented by timelines compiled from documentary analysis of public online sources (as illustrated in Figure 1), data was gathered during 43 interviews with 22 participants from 10 elite sport organisations across an eight month period.

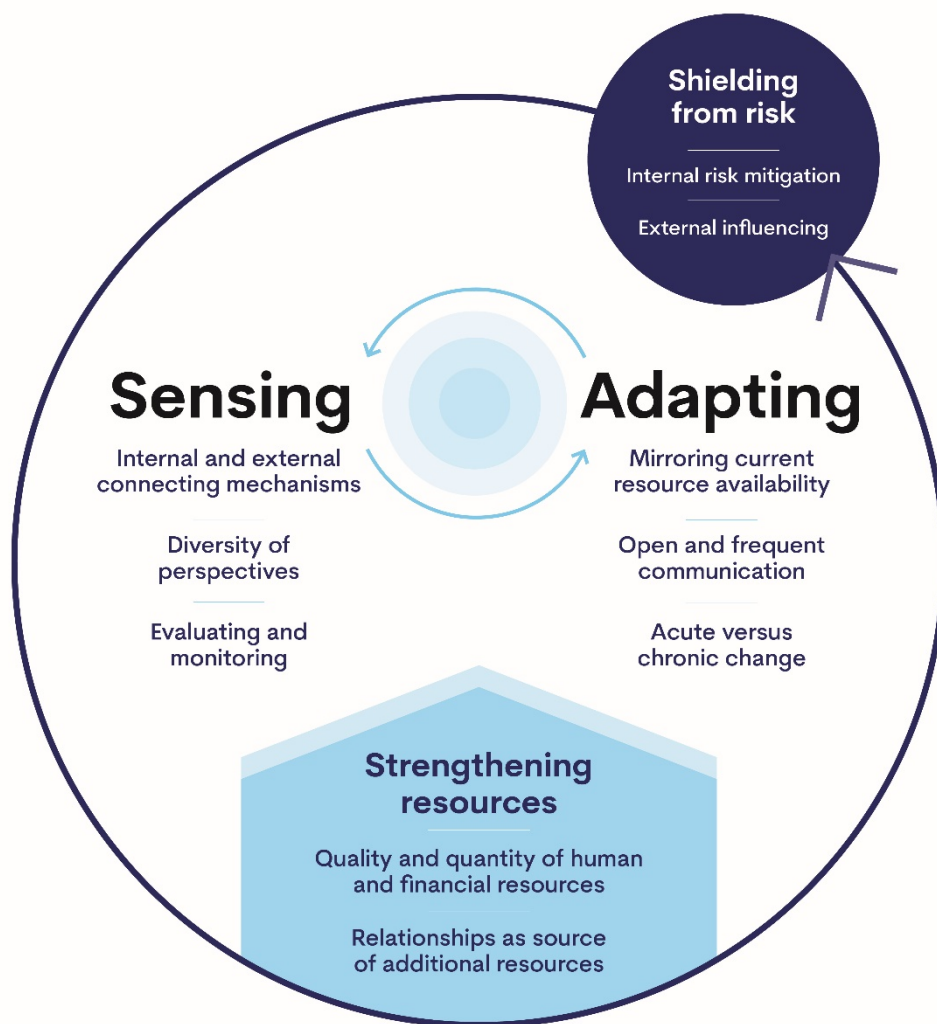
⁶ Fasey, K. J., Sarkar, M., Wagstaff, C. R., & Johnston, J. (2022). Understanding organizational resilience in elite sport: An exploration of psychosocial processes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 62, 102236.

Figure 1 - Illustrative anonymised timeline



Participant roles included chief executive officers, directors, board members, middle managers, support staff, head coach, and senior athletes. The data analysis yielded two core processes of sensing and adapting, and two supporting processes of strengthening resources and shielding from risk, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Two Core Processes and Two Supporting Processes of Organisational Resilience



Sensing refers to the need, and the mechanisms used, to gain an awareness of what is happening within and external to an organisation. **Adapting** is the process of continuously and sustainably adjusting the activities of the organisation to mirror current resource availability through open, honest, and transparent communication. **Strengthening** enhances the quality and quantity of human, relational, and financial resources available to an organisation. Finally, **Shielding** refers to protecting the organisation through internal and external shielding processes, allowing an organisation to strengthen resources and build its future resilience capability.

The four key processes represent a departure from the historical perspective of organisational resilience as either planning *or* adapting. Where resilience events are regarded as unknown but potentially knowable, the focus has been on precursory planning processes in order to mitigate risk. In contrast, if the future is regarded as uncertain, and unknowable, the planning stage is rendered futile, leading to a focus on gathering and evaluating information in real-time, accepting that decisions will be made with incomplete information and subject to change.

Our research suggests that the latter approach is the core of organisational resilience, particularly in times of rapid change and high uncertainty, but that basic governance processes must not be ignored. Some risks will be more predictable than others, and organisations need to proactively shield themselves from these so far as practicable in order to preserve their ability to sense and adapt to current circumstances, otherwise all the internal resources can be absorbed by the need to continuously fight fires.

Study Three – How an elite sport organisation successfully dealt with significant change: an ethnographic approach to understanding organisational resilience

In Study Two, a need was recognised for contextually embedded research reflecting how the characteristics and processes of organisational resilience, identified in Studies One and Two, manifest themselves within a particular organisation. The purpose of Study Three was, therefore, to explore first-hand how an elite sport organisation had successfully dealt with significant change. Through being immersed in the everyday life of an elite sport organisation, supplemented with interviews and documentary analysis, data was gathered over a seven-month period. The participant body was a medium-sized UK national organisation for Olympic and Paralympic sport which had experienced a significant deterioration in its financial position during the preceding year. The results were categorised into four main themes:

- Collectively owning decisions and their consequences
- Awareness and exposure of vulnerabilities to strengthen relationships
- Recognition of future uncertainty rather than retrospective solace
- The desire to empower with a need for support and reassurance.

These four themes are expanded upon in Table 2.

Table 2 - Strategies Employed to Develop Organisational Resilience with Illustrative Examples of Behavioural Indicators

Strategy	Description of strategy	Behavioural indicators at the individual, team, or organisational level
Collectively own decisions and their consequences	A willingness to approach, evaluate, and deal with difficult facts or situations collectively, not only in the present but also with a view to their potential future consequences.	Team: During discussions regarding a large, complex IT investment, the senior leadership team went beyond probing the individual responsible, providing support – ‘this type of project often goes wrong, what can we do to help stop that?’ and constructive evaluation – ‘If you could only achieve one thing, what would that be?’
Awareness and exposure of vulnerabilities to strengthen relationships	Strengthening relationships through developing an awareness of, and exposing, individual, team, and organisational vulnerabilities.	Individual/team: Beginning Senior Leadership Team meetings with a ‘how are you feeling?’ exercise, with each individual, encouraged to express their current emotional state, whether arising from personal or work circumstances.
Recognition of future uncertainty rather than retrospective solace	A position of awareness and agility to deal with future uncertainty, in contrast to solely deriving confidence from successfully dealing with significant change in the past.	Organisation: Changes to the membership structure had been discussed for several years at board level, it was finally accepted they would never attain the certainty they sought, and a decision was made to proceed – ‘at some point you’ve got to just hold your nose and jump’
Desire to empower with the need for support and reassurance	Empowering individuals to take decisions and act autonomously, but also need support (from leadership) and reassurance (for leadership)	Organisation: The Junior Leadership Team was modified with the intention of it becoming a self-organising, autonomous group: ‘Set the direction, get the right people in there, develop them, and sit back and watch it happen’, but in a later reflection: ‘we probably haven’t given them enough skill development in that area, and I think the thing I’ve got to be aware of is, to me, it’s really simple and really obvious...and so I’ve got to always remind myself to see it through their eyes and not through mine, or those of the Senior Leadership Team’.

The results can be interpreted as pointing to the value of identifying and then exposing organisational vulnerabilities in order to strengthen relationships, in contrast to the existing organisational resilience literature, which suggests a need to manage organisational vulnerabilities through risk mitigation. There are inherent risks in this alternative strategy,

particularly that the vulnerability is viewed as symptomatic of organisational weakness from which key stakeholders turn away rather than towards. To facilitate collaborative problem-solving and access to third-party resources, it seems attention should first be paid to strengthening inter-organisational relationships, emphasising mutual values and goals, which in turn motivate the interpretation of vulnerabilities as shared rather than individual concerns.

Significantly, it is suggested that organisations would benefit from a shift in thinking away from controlling the future, instead being aware of the future but cultivating recognition of current uncertainty and vulnerability, and the need for collaborative relationships as a potential source of diverse resources which can be drawn upon as changes become manifest over time.

Study Four – Co-creating, implementing and evaluating interventions to develop organisational resilience in an elite sport organisation

The results of Studies One, Two, and Three identified the resilient characteristics, processes, and strategies which contribute towards an elite sport organisation's success in dealing with financial decline. How to create the conditions necessary for the emergence and development of these factors, however, is less clear. The purpose of Study Four was to explore the co-creation, implementation, and effectiveness of a series of three small-scale interventions chosen by an elite sport organisation to purposefully develop its organisational resilience. The study was based on participatory action research in which researchers and participants work together to understand issues and bring about change. This approach was supplemented by process evaluation, which considers the perspectives and actions of those implementing interventions and their potential influence on outcomes. In contrast to traditional action research, in which the researchers act as outside agents of change, participatory approaches are those in which the researcher works alongside practitioners already embedded in the organisation or community, working together to design and deliver the research.

The three interventions, which were led by six practitioners working within the performance and HR functions of the organisation in question ('NGB-1'), took place over a four-month period and involved 22 participants working in NGB-1 in senior and junior management roles. Data regarding intervention outcomes and intervention processes were collected using quantitative and qualitative methods. The phases of research, and the activities of participants in each phase, are detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - Action Research Processes and Data Collection for Organisational Resilience Interventions

Time period	Action research processes	Activities	Qualitative data	Quantitative data
Ethnographic research (April – Nov 2019)	Understanding existing capabilities, establishing relationships	Prolonged immersive research (see Study Three)		
	Mobilisation	Discussing the scope of interventions and timescale		
Pre-intervention (March 2020)	Reflecting	Workshop - presenting framework of potential intervention topics		
	Co-analysis of issues	Workshop - rating topics on priority, feasibility, and impact		
	Co-design of interventions	Agreeing intervention topics, practitioners, and participants		
T1 (April 2020)	Co-creation of action plan	Creating, discussing, and refining action plans for each intervention topic	Focus group (practitioners only)	OR survey; PE survey (practitioners only)
	Implementation of action plan	As detailed in each action plan		
T2 (July 2020)	Evaluation of action plans	Reflexive discussions to monitor and enhance intervention adherence/adaptation	Three focus groups (practitioners only, one per intervention topic)	OR survey; PE survey
	Implementation of action plan	As detailed in each action plan		
T3 (Oct 2020)	Evaluation of interventions	Debrief sessions, feedback regarding how to sustain intervention outcomes	Two focus groups (practitioners; participants)	OR survey; PE survey

Note. OR survey = organisational resilience survey; PE survey = process evaluation survey.

Each intervention had a different task focus, but all shared design elements that contribute towards the development of organisational resilience characteristics and processes identified in Studies One and Two, specifically strengthening resources, increasing shared understanding, flexible improvement, and reciprocal commitment.

Group 1 ('Aligning Values and Behaviours') sessions considered the values of NGB-1, and the types of behaviours which might exemplify them. A behavioural charter was drawn up, and buddy pairs were formed to further explore those values and behaviours. Within Group 2 ('Owning Development'), the initial focus was on exploring participants' experiences of development, with pairs then assigned to explore and trial different types of learning and development with their wider team (e.g., podcasts, webinars) before reporting back to the group. In Group 3 ('Self-Awareness'), an initial storytelling exercise was used to build trust and psychological safety within the group. Participants were tasked with seeking feedback outside of group sessions from others within NGB-1, both people with whom they work well and people they struggle with, to raise awareness of how their behaviours are perceived by others. Participants then reported back, with the group providing reflections on what aspects of the feedback were perceived as important or unexpected and why.

Following a process evaluation approach, data were collected at each phase of the research (see Figure 3) regarding intervention processes and outcomes. Qualitative data (focus groups) was supported by quantitative data (an Organisational Resilience Survey and a Process Evaluation Survey) collected at each time point shortly after focus group discussions.

From the focus group data, outcomes of the interventions (intervention effectiveness) were categorised into three themes: meaningful cross-departmental connections, peer-to-peer innovative learning, and collective behavioural awareness. From the survey data, the principal outcome of the interventions was found to be an increase in organisational resilience in NGB-1. Each of these outcomes is discussed below, before considering the factors which may have affected the implementation of the interventions.

Meaningful cross-departmental connections

'I'm not doing it justice by saying how privileged and impactful it was.'

Through some of the exercises, there was an increased understanding of the similarities in the challenges faced across different departments. Meaningful connections also helped to establish a support network in which challenges could be shared and collectively evaluated:

'This group has given me that safe place to go through some of those challenging situations that I've been dealing with in day-to-day life and feel that I can talk about them and get some support.'

Peer-to-peer innovative learning

Across all the intervention groups, participants experimented with new ways of developing themselves and often extended this to helping to develop those around them. Practitioners also felt they had actively developed their skills through designing and implementing the interventions and through learning from their co-practitioners:

'During this four-month process, I've developed more from working through the intervention with [Dave]. I've developed differently and more impactfully, and I think more sustainably, than I would from the personal development activities my line manager is expecting me to do.'

Through the participatory intervention design and its use of in-house practitioners, each of the intervention groups was actively demonstrating to participants that NGB-1 employees could learn from each other. Proactive learning behaviours support organisational adaptability, a central process of organisational resilience.

Collective behavioural awareness

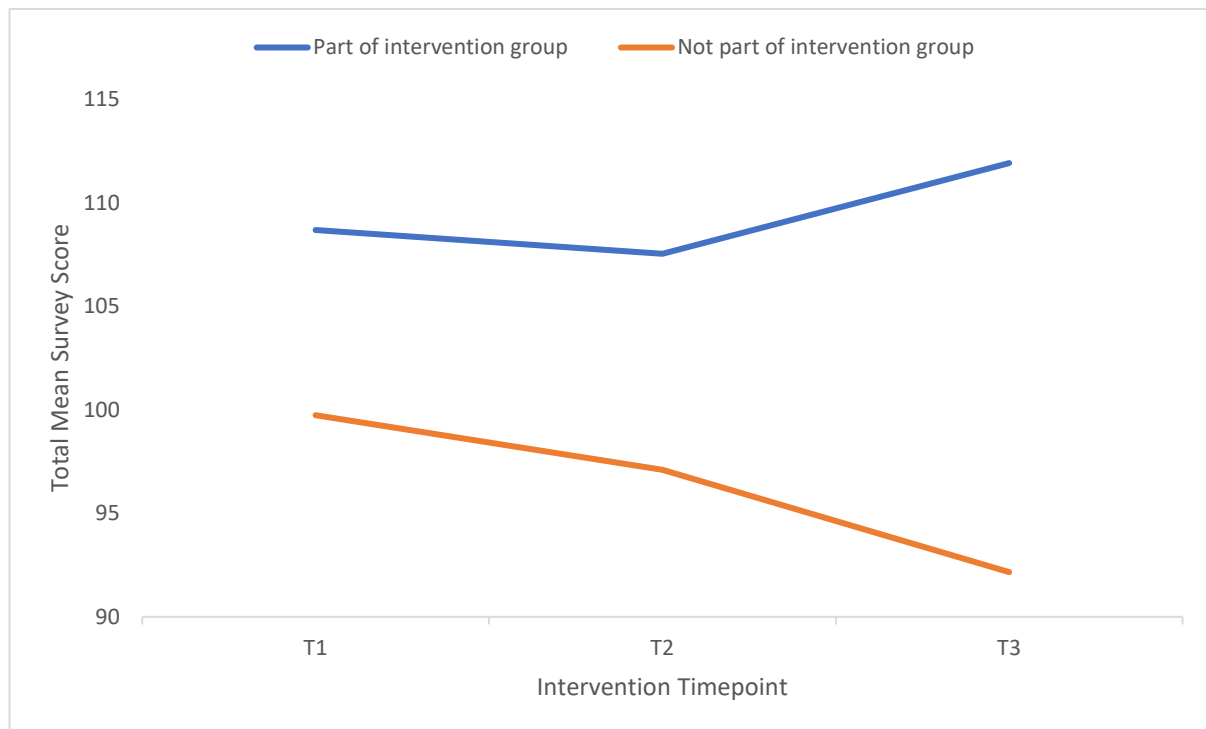
There was a heightened awareness of self and others' behaviours, cultivated through sustaining emphasis and revisiting issues over a number of sessions, and encouraging reflection outside of the sessions. Creating an environment in which employees get used to observing, being observed and reflecting on their own behaviours and work practices has the potential to enhance not only behavioural awareness but also awareness of the organisation's operating environment, a key organisational resilience capability. Participants in the research referred to striving for consistency in awareness rather than consistency in behaviours, displaying an empathetic appreciation of diversity between individuals:

'One of my biggest realisations is that everybody is different, and there's nothing you can do about it. We've come up with this list of ideal behaviours, but you're never going to get 25 people in a leadership group displaying 100% of these behaviours 100% of the time. We can try and work towards that, but you've got to accept that if you're in a meeting with someone...they might just see things completely differently. So even though we're all trying to strive towards this ideal leader, there's a lot of acceptance that we're all extremely different.'

Increased organisational resilience

From a quantitative perspective, namely an organisational resilience survey conducted at T1, T2, and T3 (see Figure 3), the key outcome of the interventions was a significant increase in organisational resilience between the mid- and end-point survey evaluation, as shown in Figure 4. The increase in perceived organisational resilience amongst intervention participants was against a backdrop of decreasing perceptions of organisational resilience for non-intervention survey respondents. This suggests there were contextual factors experienced during this period leading to a generalised decline in resilience which the interventions helped to offset, the most prominent of which was the global Covid-19 pandemic and its consequential impact on working patterns (uncertain) and working style (online only). Interestingly, while the initial focus group with practitioners explored concerns around this method of delivery, by the end of the intervention period, only one practitioner expressed a negative perception of online intervention delivery, whilst none of the participants raised it as a concern. Indeed, potential benefits of working online identified by practitioners in the current study included an ability to detach from emotionally challenging subjects if required and the ability to schedule meetings with geographically dispersed employees.

Figure 4 - Organisational Resilience Survey Results across Time by Intervention Participation



Process factors

Too often, research findings are discussed in terms of results only, ignoring the wide range of factors that may have affected how the research was conducted and the results. Here, the qualitative data was analysed not only to identify key outcomes from the interventions, but also key factors which were likely to have impacted how the interventions were implemented. This information is vital for any practitioner seeking to understand not only *what* results they may be able to achieve within an organisation but also, crucially *how* they may be obtained. The process factors identified in this study were categorised according to intervention context (the Covid-19 pandemic, as referred to above), intervention content (comprising self-organising groups with collective ownership and accountability, and expertise within the performance department), and mental model factors (with two sub-themes of psychological safety, and enjoyment).

Focusing on just one of these areas, it was noted that adherence to the intervention was enhanced through the creation of self-organising groups. The intervention groups all began with an outline plan but with the flexibility to proceed with content and at a pace agreed upon with participants. Not being overly prescriptive allowed space for organic ways for the groups to self-organise. In particular, participants formed their own preferred communication methods, which contributed towards the intention to maintain the relationships formed beyond the intervention period and reduced the reliance on the practitioners to directly facilitate relationships, helping to sustain intervention effects over the longer term. Self-organising groups also engendered ownership of initiatives linked to collective accountability:

'now we've discussed these behaviours, and we've created this document, if I don't do what we've written on that sheet, I'm going to be held accountable by this group for the fact that I haven't done that.'

Overall, through taking a participatory approach, consulting with and working alongside employees in the co-creation of the interventions, the content of those interventions was able to target issues and objectives consistent with organisational priorities. In particular, using practitioners already embedded in the performance department to co-create and subsequently deliver the interventions helped to ensure they were feasible, broadly accepted, and maximised specificity and trust, as well as generating high levels of momentum during implementation. Interventions driven wholly externally or perceived as coming from 'head office' can leave participants uninvolved and jeopardise future progress once the facilitator or external consultant's involvement is over. Sustainability was enhanced in this study by empowering stakeholders to develop internal intervention expertise through drawing up and experimenting with solutions to areas of weakness in organisational resilience. Furthermore, allowing participants to be involved in co-creating and designing solutions to problems during interventions can enhance their perceived control and autonomy, making the process itself a positive intervention.

The research underlines the potential for organisational-level interventions to influence the psychosocial environment and develop organisational resilience, even during a period of significant uncertainty and change.

Part three

Practical applications of these findings regarding organisational resilience in sport

The degree of collaboration throughout the doctoral research programme outlined in Part Two of this essay with those working within sports organisations, especially the participatory action research and process evaluation which were undertaken as part of Study Four, enhances the potential for knowledge transfer from the academic to the applied domain by helping to identify how organisational-level resilience interventions may work, as well as why. These learnings have informed the remainder of Part Three of this essay to help translate the research in this area into practical, implementable guidance for those working in and with sports organisations to help them navigate through the rapidly shifting environment we are currently operating in.

Practical implications

The identification of key characteristics, processes, and strategies of resilient organisations provides a framework for practitioners to design interventions targeted at enhancing organisational resilience. The phases which follow address how to determine which interventions may be desirable and/or feasible in a particular organisation, and identify issues which may be encountered. There are suggestions as to how to incorporate some of the principles of organisational resilience at each stage to help governance professionals, leadership teams and other practitioners develop the ability of an organisation to successfully deal with significant change. The phases are based on a set of guiding principles proposed by Cruickshank and colleagues, published in 2014-15⁷, from their work exploring the management of change in the performance departments of professional and Olympic sports organisations. These guiding principles suggest that practitioners should address the initial evaluation, planning, and impact phases of instigating change alongside managing stakeholder perceptions and expectations.

It is worth mentioning at this stage that the following framework is purposefully idealistic and that it is acknowledged and understood that some of these key factors will be more readily amenable to intervention than others, particularly over a limited period of time when changes to the organisational structure or creating and embedding new suites of policies and procedures may not be practicable. In the absence of a tailored intervention programme, it may be beneficial to focus instead on those interventions which target several organisational resilience characteristics and processes at once. See Table 3 below for some ideas.

Initial Evaluation Phase

1. Meet with gatekeepers from the relevant sports organisation to understand their expectations and motivations in instigating the change process, including an understanding of where the decision-making power lies. This is particularly relevant if you are working with an unfamiliar organisation but also applies to internal change management processes.

⁷ Cruickshank, A., Collins, D., & Minten, S. (2014). Driving and sustaining culture change in Olympic sport performance teams: A first exploration and grounded theory. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 36(1), 107-120.

Cruickshank, A., Collins, D., & Minten, S. (2015). Driving and sustaining culture change in professional sport performance teams: A grounded theory. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 20, 40-50.

2. The extent of involvement or influence from external stakeholders should be ascertained as this may act as a motivation or limitation on enacting change. For example, are there any external government-funded agencies pushing for this work to be carried out?
3. Initial needs assessment/information gathering about the department or organisation in which the change is to be introduced through:
 - 3.1. profiling current resilience capabilities through the use of an evaluative tool such as the organisational resilience survey developed in Study Four (please contact the author if you would like more information) and/or
 - 3.2. interviews and focus groups with individual employees.

This will help to evaluate current resilience strengths and weaknesses within the organisation.

Planning Phase

4. Where possible, professionals should seek a wider understanding of the current organisational culture to consider, or at least be aware of, the potential for resistance to change and conflict between departments. Introducing leadership to the principles of complex systems at this stage will help to explain why attempts to control and manipulate the organisational culture are unlikely to be successful. The principles can also be used to encourage leadership to focus on stimulating the capacity of the organisation to self-organise and adapt through facilitating connections between teams and individuals. In practical terms, this means the design and planning of interventions should prioritise developing inter-departmental working groups which accept ownership and accountability of the interventions and seek to inculcate the principles of peer-to-peer learning.
5. Setting and aligning multi-stakeholder perceptions and expectations is also part of the planning phase, discussing expectations with key stakeholders regarding the time and resources available for the intervention work and likely outcomes.
6. Identify and gain support from individuals and groups who could foster acceptance of change. Insufficient employee participation and lack of support from leadership are commonly reported obstacles to intervention success. In Study Four, support was achieved through engaging the end-users of the intervention in their design and delivery, namely sharing ownership of intervention selection with the junior and senior management teams and subsequently recruiting employees from the performance and HR departments to co-create and deliver the interventions.

Impact Phase

7. Specific interventions should be tailored around the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation as identified in the Evaluation Phase. Some suggested interventions, and the organisational resilience factors they target, are set out in Table 3.

Table 3 – organisational resilience interventions

Intervention	What it involves	Organisational resilience factor(s) targeted
Communications audit	Assessing how management and employees perceive the information flow in an organisation, their ideal structure, and how these compare with reality. Data can be collected in various ways depending on the size, culture, and complexity of an organisation. Techniques include interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, observations, and network analysis. The aim is to understand and refine the structure, efficacy, and efficiency of communication both within and external to the organisation.	Structural Clarity; Operational Awareness; Sensing; Adapting; Shielding
Stakeholder engagement planning	Identifying key internal and external stakeholders and rating their power and influence in relation to an individual's role or a team's project to determine which relationships to focus on. Relationship networks developed in this way can help organisations to sense potential significant changes, as well as being a source of additional organisational resources in times of adversity.	Reciprocal Commitment; Strengthening Resources; Sensing
Scenario planning	Involving a technically diverse group of employees to sense risk from a variety of perspectives, and to evaluate the organisational resources available to deal with them. Instead of being seen as a constraint, restricted resources can encourage innovative solutions and flexibility of approach. The focus from the perspective of strengthening organisational resilience is on the processes involved, such as enhancing shared understanding among those involved of the team's skills and capabilities, rather than the specific solution-focused outputs.	Flexible Improvement; Shared Understanding; Operational Awareness; Sensing; Shielding
Simulation exercises	In contrast to scenario planning, simulation exercises focus on the mobilisation of resources in response to a predetermined scenario. Adaptability can be improved through the development of collective behavioural awareness and a shared understanding of the team's collective ability to achieve its goals.	Adapting; Shared Understanding

Intervention	What it involves	Organisational resilience factor(s) targeted
Personal-Disclosure Mutual-Sharing	Communication exercises such as Personal-Disclosure Mutual-Sharing, ⁸ which encourage individuals to publicly disclose personal stories and information, have the potential to facilitate team cohesion. Further, such exercises can enhance the confidence of individuals to expose vulnerabilities within individual and organisational level relationships outside of that team environment. Skilled practitioners who are sensitive to the welfare of the individuals involved should be used to lead these types of sessions.	Awareness and exposure of vulnerabilities to strengthen relationships
Pre-mortem ⁹	Knowledgeable individuals are gathered together prior to a formal, committed decision and asked to imagine the project a year from now, when it has gone terribly wrong, and to write down a brief history of the failure. The responses elicited simultaneously focus on long-term outcomes and heightened awareness of current uncertainty and vulnerabilities.	Recognition of future uncertainty rather than retrospective solace

8. Finally, during the impact phase, consideration should be given to the potential requirement for demonstrable quick wins within the organisation. Whether and how such performance or resilience gains will be assessed should, therefore, be ascertained at the outset, particularly any requirement from stakeholders for quantifiable measures of success.

As this phased approach illustrates, careful consideration of ‘the how’ as well as ‘the what’ of intervention delivery is required to ensure the appropriate level of trust and engagement within the organisation, as the best intervention content is of little use if participants are not motivated to engage with it.

⁸ See Holt, N. L., & Dunn, J. G. (2006). Guidelines for delivering personal-disclosure mutual-sharing team building interventions. *The Sport Psychologist*, 20(3), 348-367.

⁹ See Klein, G. (2007). Performing a project premortem. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(9), 18-19.

Conclusion

The concept of organisational resilience has started to move away from crisis research, in which resilience events are regarded as unexpected and externally generated, or safety and reliability research, in which events can be anticipated and mitigated. In both cases, there is an overly simplistic perspective of organisational resilience as baseline functioning impacted by a single event before returning to baseline functioning. Instead, the more recent research moves towards a systems-based model in which an organisation interacts dynamically with its wider social and political environment. Complex systems theory is a useful framework to understand resilience as emerging from a self-organising system (such as a sports organisation) which has the capacity to adapt and operate under constant change. Through the perspective of constant iterative sensing and adapting, as proposed in Study Two above, change is seen as normal and necessary, representing a shift in thinking away from control or stability. Study Three further developed the systems perspective, highlighting the need to be mindful of the future but cultivating an awareness of current uncertainty and vulnerabilities. This involves developing flexibility and responsiveness to pick up irregularities or abnormalities as they start to emerge rather than interpreting the absence of adversity as evidence of an organisation's competence.

By focusing on the core resilience characteristics, processes, and strategies outlined above, sports organisations will be better placed to adapt to changes and opportunities as they currently exist, viewing those changes as normal and indeed necessary, rather than attempting to predict the future, or pursue a pre-determined agenda, in the face of an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable financial, political, and social environment.

About the SGA

The Sports Governance Academy is the governance support hub for the sports and physical activity sector. A partnership between The Chartered Governance Institute UK & Ireland and Sport England, we champion good governance because we are passionate about the role it plays in enabling the success of individual organisations and the sector as a whole.

Our goal is to improve the standard of governance in sport and physical activity organisations by supporting, developing and connecting the people in the sector who work with, and have an interest in governance. Our services are designed to meet the diverse needs of an audience that includes governance professionals, those with governance responsibilities as part of their role, chief executives, board members and everyone who has an interest in improving the way their organisation operates.

We provide:

Resources

A trusted set of free resources that support all areas of governance activity. Our guidance, templates, checklists, webinars and blogs are designed to help you get to grips with governance and drive success in your organisation.

Learning

Our practical training will build your governance skills and confidence. We currently offer sports governance courses at introductory and intermediate levels, as well as training for chairs.

Community

Our community is an active network of people who are facing similar governance challenges in the sports sector. Being part of it provides you with the support and experience of others and creates new opportunities for collaboration.

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