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## Good Boards Are Strategic: What Does That Mean for Sport Governance?

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To learn more about the governance of sport organizations, this study explored what meaning board members of national sport organizations (NSOs) attach to the concept of “strategic capability”. In so doing, the inquiry also identified factors considered to constrain or enable board strategic function. This paper draws on a body of knowledge developed over 38 years on board strategic function, primarily from the commercial setting but also from the emerging body of work in the nonprofit and sport governance setting. Located within the interpretive research paradigm this study engaged a range of different qualitative methods including cognitive mapping and visual imagery. Working across two NSOs in New Zealand, four elements were generated that served as reference points in mapping out the meaning of a strategically able board. These were categorized as the need to have capable people, a frame of reference, facilitative board processes, and facilitative regional relationships.

“Boards are identified theoretically as the crucial lynchpin at the head of the organization .... In practice, they are also the point at which the buck stops” (Pye, 2004, p. 65). Pye also noted that as the highest decision-making level in an organization, boards, “in both theory and practice, have always been treated slightly differently than other areas and levels of group decision-making in organizations” (p. 65). In the sport management domain, governance is also considered to be one of the most influential elements for the success of a nonprofit sport organization (Balduck, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2010). Unlike commercial organizations, nonprofit sporting bodies in Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand are traditionally governed by a volunteer board which serves to direct limited resources via limited staffing capacity. As a consequence, the voluntary board, capable of attracting significant expertise, can be a nonprofit sport organization’s most critical asset (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009).

The question remains, however, as to whether current sport governance models are realizing the potential of those sitting around the board room table. The general consensus in any industry identifies both the performance role, or forward looking role of the board, and conformance, the monitoring and accountability function, to be key responsibilities of the board (Ruigrok, Peck, & Keller, 2006). Despite agreement on these dual functions, most prior research (emanating largely from the commercial domain) has concentrated on the conformance role of the board (Stiles, 2001). Stimulated in large part by the work

of Forbes and Milliken (1999), McNulty and Pettigrew (1996, 1999), and Pettigrew and McNulty (1995, 1998), some scholars, in turning their attention to the performance role and in particular the strategic function of the board, have begun to focus on board strategic processes (Kerr & Werther, 2008; Pugliese, Bezemer, Zattoni, Huse, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2009; Siciliano, 2008). Within this emerging body of literature, however, there is still a lack of consensus about the board’s strategic role and it remains an ambiguous concept (Pugliese & Wenstøp, 2007).

In the sport management setting, a small but growing number of studies have considered governance. In particular, scholars have concentrated on the areas of shared leadership (Auld & Godbey, 1998; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009; Hoye, 2004, 2006; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003a, 2004; Inglis, 1997a), board motivation (Inglis, 1994) and executive committee cohesion (Doherty & Carron, 2003), board roles (Inglis, 1997b; Shilbury, 2001; Yeh & Taylor, 2008; Yeh, Taylor, & Hoye, 2009), and board structure and performance (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003b; Kikulis, 2000; Papadimitriou, 1999; Shilbury, 2001; Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009). In this emerging field of inquiry, the term “sport governance” has come to mean the practice of governance applied to the sporting context (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). In essence, sport governance is “the responsibility for the functioning and overall direction of the organization and is a necessary and institutionalized component of all sport codes from club level to national bodies, government agencies, sport service organizations and professional teams around the world” (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009, p. 245). As such, many scholars in this field have taken their lead from more established research domains in seeking to determine the efficacy of applying major theoretical constructs to sport. Consequently, agency theory, stewardship

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theory, resource dependency theory, institutional theory and stakeholder theory, for example, have been employed to help explain the sport governance phenomenon. Curiously, few as yet have specifically addressed the strategic role of the board. Many of the findings from research specific to sport governance (Inglis, Alexander, & Weaver, 1999; Shilbury, 2001; Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009), however, have important implications for an investigation that places strategic function as its central theme.

To learn more about the governance of sport organizations, this study explored what meaning board members of national sport organizations (NSOs) attach to the concept of "strategic capability". In so doing the inquiry also identified factors considered to constrain or enable board strategic function. The present study is part of a larger study that sought to determine how boards of NSOs could develop their strategic capability using a four-phase action research process. This paper specifically focuses on the first two phases in an in-depth consideration of the meaning of board strategic function, as expressed by volunteer board members of two NSOs. In this context, the board's strategic role is considered to be a subset of the overall governing function.

The nature and form of NSOs has been well established in sport organization theory (Babiak, 2007; Kukulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1995; O'Brien & Slack, 2003) with their role as lead sport organizations reconfirmed by a series of government reports and initiatives in New Zealand, Australia and the UK (Ministerial Taskforce, 2001; Crawford Report, 2009; Department of Culture, Media and Sport/Strategy Unit, 2002). In light of the central position NSOs hold within a sports system, New Zealand-based NSOs were chosen as the population for this study. Known in the UK as National Governing Bodies (NGBs), Taylor and O'Sullivan (2009, p. 683) noted, "Given the significant role NGBs play in the sporting landscape it is not surprising that the way they are governed has become such a topical issue". NSOs in New Zealand have evolved, like their Australian, Canadian and UK counterparts, from small and independent member-based associations with volunteer executives to organizations with paid staff and administrative offices. A primary, yet under-researched role of the governing group within an NSO, now known as the board of directors, is the strategic function (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Situated within the interpretive research paradigm, and using qualitative research methods, this study sought an in-depth and "insiders" interpretation from two NSOs to "unpack" the meaning of a strategically able board.

## Reviewing Board Strategic Function

Within the governance literature, various terms have been used to describe board strategic function including strategic focus (Huse, 2005), strategic decision-making (Forbes & Milliken, 1999), strategic involvement/contribution (Edwards & Cornforth, 2003; Pugliese et al., 2009), strategic role (Roberts, McNulty, & Stiles, 2005), strategy development (Pettigrew & McNulty, 1998),

strategic processes (Stiles, 2001), strategic orientation (Ingle & van der Walt, 2005), and strategic capability (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009). These labels are often used interchangeably, and it is within this "family" of concepts (in reference to the role of a governing board), that this study is situated. In particular, the terms "strategic function" and "strategic capability" have primarily been adopted, the latter indicating potential capacity, considered to be a useful perspective for exploring this concept (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009). As explained above, a further mediating influence is the context within which the study took place, that is, the governance of national sport organizations. This section, therefore, provides an overview of the key elements regarding what is known within this body of knowledge, and how these elements relate to the context in question. In so doing, it traverses three distinct but related settings, that is, governance within commercial, nonprofit, and sport organizations. The distinctions between these settings are previously well-documented (see Balduck, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2010; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009; Shilbury, 2001; Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009), with the specific research context in question outlined above.

## Research Periods on Board Strategic Function

Arguably, the greatest insights to date in relation to board strategic function come from the commercial setting. Pugliese et al. (2009) found that the first scholarly articles were published in 1972 (Clendenin, 1972; Heller & Milton, 1972), beginning four decades of scholarly debate in relation to what they term "board strategic involvement". In examining the literature between 1972 and 2007, Pugliese et al. (2009) noted three distinct research phases. The first, labeled "The Emerging Debate About Boards' Strategic Involvement" (p. 299), spanned the timeframe between 1972 and 1989. According to Pugliese et al. this period was characterized by discussion "on the desirability of active board involvement, also in the realm of strategy" (p. 299) and was set against a backdrop of perceived board passivity in the affairs of the corporation (Stiles & Taylor, 2001). A small number of articles were produced during this era leading Zahra and Pearce (1989) to conclude that overall, "empirical research on the boards' strategic role is in its infancy stage" (p. 304).

The second period, labeled "The Heyday of 'Input-Output' Approaches" (Pugliese et al., 2009, p. 300) encompassed the timeframe 1990–2000. This decade represented a concentration of research on the relationship between board characteristics and board structure. Heavily influenced by agency theory, this era also drew primarily on the US context and a quantitative, outsiders' view of board strategic function (Dalton, Daily, Ellstrand, & Johnson, 1998). Although a final outcome of this research strand was board strategic performance, much of the work during this era appeared to concentrate on matters of conformance, such as board CEO-duality,

outsider ratio, director's equity stakes, and tenure (Pugliese et al., 2009). The final period between 2001 and 2007 entitled, "Towards More Pluralism in the Board-Strategy Debate" (Pugliese et al., 2009, p. 300), is underlined by the emergence of a behavioral and cognitive approach to board strategic function. As indicated by the label, this line of inquiry employed a broader theoretical approach, moved beyond agency theory in particular, and engaged qualitative techniques that emphasized the importance of context and process (Pye & Pettigrew, 2005). It is in the latter tradition of inquiry into board strategic function that the current study is situated, and seeks to respond to the practical and theoretical need to clarify the notion of a "strategic board" within the sport organization setting.

### Board Strategic Process Research

A key idea to emerge from a focus on board strategic processes has been an understanding that the board's role is beyond compliance and monitoring and, as such, not limited to ratification of strategy (Fiegener, 2005). Rather, the strategic role necessitates involvement in all phases of the strategic decision-making process. This has not always been the accepted line of reasoning in the literature. Stiles (2001) noted that the "... concept of involvement in strategy has proved difficult to define" (p. 629). He argued that a common view is based on the distinction between formulation and evaluation and that the board's involvement in formulation ranges from "... working with management to develop strategic direction, to merely ratifying management's proposals" (2001, p. 269). With regard to evaluation, the accepted work style of the board has ranged from probing management's evaluation of resource allocations, to simply accepting the evaluation that top management provides (Schmidt & Brauer, 2006; Stiles, 2001).

Pugliese and Wenstøp (2007) reinforced the "fuzziness" associated with the notion of board strategic involvement. They asserted that, "Board strategic involvement, albeit challenged by many scholars, is widely recognised as one of the major tasks of the board .... However, we still lack consensus about the boundary of board strategic involvement" (p. 385). In their study on small firms, they adopted a definition that "board strategic involvement, in general, refers to shaping mission, vision and values, identifying important strategic activities and scanning the environment for trends and opportunities" (p. 386). Although wide-ranging, this definition curiously does not include evaluation of strategic activities nor does it provide guidance as to the extent the board becomes involved in shaping the aspects noted. This very critique demonstrates the difficulty in "nailing down" the concept of strategic function. Yet, we know that without articulated clarity we cannot hope to advance this function (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2002). So, the search for an understanding of this concept, appropriate to the context in question, continues.

In their study of a UK hospital trust, Mueller, Sillince, Harvey, and Howorth (2003) noted that boards

face conflicting requirements in fulfilling the monitoring role (considered to need a level of "independence"), and the strategy role (considered to require board involvement and collaboration with the CEO). Other scholars (e.g., Hambrick, Werder, & Zajac, 2008; Kerr & Werther, 2008; Mankins, 2007) have noted, there is a complex interplay between the board and senior management in relation to strategy formation and execution. This interplay is further complicated by the growing raft of regulatory reforms that enforce a compliance culture on the board as the group ultimately accountable for the organization. The balance between accountability (compliance), control, and strategic direction contains a tension which is particularly evident within the nonprofit and sport settings as the sector professionalizes (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009).

Work in the nonprofit arena has advanced support for the widely-held assumption that a focus on board strategic development will enhance organization effectiveness (Brown, 2005). In one of the few studies focusing on the board's strategic role, Edwards and Cornforth (2003) identified difficulties in explaining board strategic contribution in the nonprofit setting. First there is the blurring of boundaries between operational detail and strategic focus. They considered, that the board's "... understanding of strategic issues may come from exposure to operational detail ..." (p. 78). At the heart of this argument is the idea that operational detail may be a necessary element of strategic decision-making. Pugliese and Wenstøp's (2007) findings supported this assertion. In a survey of 497 Norwegian small firms, noted above, Pugliese and Wenstøp (2007) found that board working style and board quality aspects appeared to contribute more to board strategic involvement than board composition features. More specifically, they found that the most important aspects affecting board strategic involvement were board quality attributes. That is, "in small firms, the board could actively perform strategic tasks when it has acquired in-depth knowledge of the firm, a broad diversity in skills, and the motivation to do a good job" (p. 401).

The second concern noted by Edwards and Cornforth (2003) was the distinction between "policy" and "strategy". Here the authors stressed that strategy relates to how organizations position themselves competitively, while policy is "... about giving substance to collective values" (p. 78). Thus in a sport organization, concerns about gender equity would be matters of policy where as a merger with another sport to establish a better competitive position would be a matter of strategy. They considered that the boundary has become blurred in practice within the public and nonprofit setting and that "... the discourse of strategy has become predominant" (p. 79). Overall, the authors considered that strategic contribution is a contested term: "how boards interpret it depends on perceptions about the very purpose of quasi-autonomous public and non-profit organisations" (p. 79). Similarly, Brown and Guo (2010) in a study of 121 community foundation executives in the US, found that strategy and planning rated as the second most important role of the

board (behind fund development). They also concluded that "... research that explores the board's involvement in strategy must recognize that strategy is a highly complex concept that may or most likely not mean the same thing to all of the executives" (p. 10).

In an earlier study, Inglis, Alexander, and Weaver (1999) also focused on the roles and responsibilities of community nonprofit boards and established empirical support for involvement by board members in strategic activities. They defined "Strategic Activities" as roles that relate to planning, setting the vision and mission, policy development, evaluating the CEO, and a strong external focus. "Strategic activities are future focussed with an eye to the external community. They represent the broad community context for the organisation" (p. 163). The study helps define the notion of board strategic activity and affirms the importance of a strategic orientation for nonprofit boards. In a follow up study, the work of Inglis and Weaver (2000) on prioritizing strategic activities on the board agenda provided an insight into how particular actions can influence the level of strategic contribution by the board.

Bradshaw, Murray, and Wolpin (1992) provided important foundational work in exploring the relationship among board structure, process and effectiveness within non profit organizations. Four-hundred nonprofit Canadian voluntary organizations were surveyed using objective indicators of organizational performance defined as structural policy characteristics (board size, committees, position descriptions and policy manuals) and process characteristics (nature and extent of strategic planning, meetings, decision-making and conflict). Their findings supported other nonprofit research in terms of the limited role played by the board, that is, that they act "...mostly as trustees rather than entrepreneurs, and are largely risk averse" (p. 246). In addition, Bradshaw et al. (1992) identified the social constructivist perspective as an avenue that should be explored in the study of nonprofit boards.

Moreover, Hoye and Inglis (2003) presented an overview of nonprofit governance models and considered how these models could be adapted to the context of leisure organizations. In doing so, they noted the association between governance models, organization effectiveness and strategic expectations. More studies of this kind that incorporate the nuances of the nonprofit context are needed to increase the empirical knowledge-base around the board's strategic role.

### **Toward Greater Board Strategic Involvement**

Despite gaps in our knowledge in relation to board strategic function across any setting, there is growing interest in the board of directors' contribution to strategy and this echoes a movement toward more strategic involvement by the board (Pugliese et al., 2009). Ferkins, Shilbury, and McDonald (2009) in their study of board strategic processes found that boards of sport organizations can

develop their strategic capability by becoming more involved in strategy development. This evolution in research mirrors a general shift in strategic management from a focus on the "content" of strategy, to understanding strategy processes and context (Pettigrew, Thomas, & Whittington, 2002; Pugliese et al., 2009). As concluded by Pugliese et al. (2009), "Board strategic involvement is a latent construct and no single way to define or interpret it emerges from the literature" (p. 295). They also concluded that the "more recent line of research posits boards as decision-making groups whose internal processes and external context should be better understood" (p. 301).

Despite sport traversing the commercial and nonprofit domain, sport boards have in large part adopted corporate governance practice (Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009). The current debate in relation to board process research, drawn largely from the commercial setting, is therefore instructive for the emerging field of sport governance inquiry. Furthermore, a study of sport organizations that seeks to explore what meaning board members of NSOs attach to the concept of strategic capability is an important step toward unlocking the potential of those around the boardroom table charged with the current and future viability of these important social institutions. There is also room for such an investigation to contribute to our theoretical "resource box" on governance research.

## **Method**

This study is located within the interpretive research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Using a tradition of inquiry that seeks to construct knowledge from the interpretations of both the research participants and researchers, the goal of the study was to build meaning around the notion of board strategic function. Interpretivism, a general term used to capture a collection of related perspectives (Edwards & Skinner, 2009), stresses the constructed and evolving nature of social reality, rejecting the positivist notion that knowledge is objective and tangible. Instead, a primary intent of the interpretive paradigm, associated with qualitative research methods, is to "... understand social reality through the eyes of those being studied" (Devine & Heath, 1999, p. 202), and to use that understanding to cogenerate knowledge between the researchers and research participants (Heron & Reason, 2001).

Although the research process was emergent in nature, the researchers worked from a platform of prior knowledge in relation to board strategic function, as explained in the previous sections. These theoretical constructs were used in the research design in general, and in data generation and analysis, in particular. Theoretical perspectives were then integrated into the outcomes by the researchers. Cognitive mapping and visual imagery, techniques known to help explicate "fuzzy" concepts, facilitate group communication, and "help aggregate opinions within a group" (Huff & Jenkins, 2002, p. 14), were the primary tools used throughout this process. More

specifically, three types of qualitative data generation methods were employed for the study. They were: participant observation, interviews (16), and focus groups (4).

### Choice of Research Sites and Participants

The population for the study was the NSO board group (including CEO) in New Zealand. NSO research sites were deliberately selected by the research team based on: willingness and ability to engage in the proposed research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), logistical considerations (e.g., proximity and access; Tolich & Davidson, 1999), high experience levels of the phenomena under study (Pettigrew, 1990), and evidence of some diversity between NSOs selected as well as typical characteristics that could enable broader application of the outcomes to those beyond the NSOs involved (Stake, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, two NSOs were chosen to allow for cross-case comparison (Stake, 2000), while the consideration of any more than two was deemed too many in terms of volume of data.

University ethics approval was gained for the study, and the NSOs selected from the outset agreed to take part in the study. The chairpersons and CEOs on behalf of their respective NSO also agreed for their organization to be named in publications, however, individuals involved in the research remained anonymous. All research participants were also provided with draft copies of publication documents where the organizations were named with both chairpersons accepting these documents in writing. Squash New Zealand and New Zealand Football (soccer) were the two NSOs participating in this study. Each NSO board group consisted of the CEO and between five and seven board members including the chairperson. The fieldwork component of the study spanned seven months between July 2005 and January 2006, with the lead researcher attending almost all monthly board meetings during the period of the fieldwork phase.

### Data Generation and Analysis

In addition to the data generation techniques noted above, reflective journaling, memorandums, theming, writing, and member checking were also employed as part of the data analysis process (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). During the focus group sessions, the lead researcher acted as facilitator, drawing out data and testing and reflecting on conclusions with the research participants, using cognitive mapping and visual imagery techniques (Huff & Jenkins, 2002), captured on electronic white boards. At other times, the lead researcher played an observatory role during board meetings, particularly toward the end of the fieldwork phase. All focus groups, board meetings and interview situations were video or audio recorded, and mind maps drawn on the electronic white board were printed and videoed.

While three of the four focus group sessions took place within scheduled monthly board meetings, they

were identified clearly to the research participants as part of the data generation process for the research project. As such, they were represented on the formal board meeting agenda as the “Board Strategic Capability Research Project”. No details pertaining to the focus group data were reported in the board minutes, only the fact that they took place. The full board meetings were half day events for both NSOs and the focus group sessions lasted between 60–90 min each.

The fourth focus group was a separately organized session and was also clearly identified to the research participants as a data generation event. As noted earlier, sixteen individual semistructured interviews were also conducted and were scheduled in the intervening time between board meetings. Wherever possible these interviews took place face to face (10). However, due to geographical distance, six interviews were conducted via telephone. The individual interviews lasted between 15 (telephone) and 60 (face to face) minutes.

For the purposes of this paper, quotations used from the research participants’ data have been coded as “1” (for Squash New Zealand), and “2” (for New Zealand Football), followed by the letters ranging between “a-i”. This allows for both individual anonymity, and for data to be cross-referenced back to individual participants by the researchers, demonstrating diligence in the data generation and analysis process. While there was an overall consistency in intent and approach among the two NSOs, there were variations in the number and nature of board and CEO interactions due to availability and meeting scheduling. There were two distinct aspects to the data generation process. The first was the “teasing out” of board and CEO understanding of strategic function via interviews and focus groups. The second was an exploration of those factors the board and CEO felt constrained or enabled their own ideal of what constitutes a strategically capable board (using a second round of interviews and focus groups). The latter enabled a more contextualized understanding of board strategic capability. This was evidenced in the mapping out of meaning attached to board strategic function presented later in this paper.

### Limitations

As a cautionary note, it is important to understand what this style of research can offer and what it cannot. First, an appreciation of the context within which the research took place is important. Context influences interpretation (Pettigrew, 1997; Pye, 2004). The findings and discussion section, therefore, seeks to establish context within the confines of article length. Regrettably, not all contextual factors that may bear influence can be captured nor described. Second, there is no attempt to establish a definitive definition of board strategic function, merely an endeavor to derive and meld the dual interpretations of the research participants and researchers to add meaning to the concept. The findings and discussion section also endeavors to provide enough first-hand perceptions from the research participants for the reader to add their

own interpretations alongside those of the researchers. This study is, therefore, limited to the context and interpretations offered, and it is left to the reader (with some signposts and “maps”) to draw their own conclusions from that, and to make connections across other contexts.

## Findings and Discussion

The two organizations who participated for the purposes of this study were considered to be small- to medium-sized NSOs (Sport and Recreation New Zealand, 2010). Both had between eight and 15 staff working for the national office, with a business turnover of between \$1 and \$4.4 million per annum. As the larger of the two, New Zealand Football had 105,000 registered players, seven regional entities, and 325 clubs under its jurisdiction. Squash New Zealand had 28,000 registered players, 11 regional entities and 231 clubs. While New Zealand is a small country with a population of approximately 4 million, its sporting success on the world stage is well recognized (Trenberth, Leberman, & Collins, 2006). It has produced world champions in many sports, with squash being no exception. Despite hefty international competition, New Zealand has also qualified for the football world cup twice including narrowly missing out on pool advancement at the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. The characteristics of the two NSOs involved in the study, in relation to size and scope, are typical of numerous other sports found in New Zealand such as, athletics, swimming, tennis, bowls, basketball, and cycling.

The legal composition of the two boards called for a structure that sought to achieve a “skills-based” board as distinct from a “representative” board. As part of the journey, many NSOs have traveled toward professionalization in countries such as Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, and national governing boards are rarely made up of representatives of the state/provincial associations. Instead, board size has generally been reduced to between seven and 10 members (Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009), and the selection process increasingly involves both elected and appointed positions. Again, as part of a transition process toward a more professionalized approach, a co-option clause has been added to a number of NSO constitutions in New Zealand to allow for appointed members to be added (Sport and Recreation New Zealand, 2006). Board composition of this nature is considered to be a “hybrid” which allows for the democratic ideals of an election process to remain, supplemented by individuals chosen for their professional expertise, as well as “outsider” perspectives.

The two NSO boards involved in the study had a similar composition and were in keeping with the growing global trend toward a “hybrid” style of composition (Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009), as noted above. The New Zealand Football board, for example, comprised seven members with one additional position co-opted. While all members were nominated and elected by the membership,

four of the seven were subject to an additional nationwide recruitment process that included interviews. This model encouraged three of the board positions to be drawn from the provinces/regions and four external positions to be recommended by a recruitment panel for their governance skills and independence. In actuality, most board members were “close” to the game. There were three former international players and two heavily involved in club and/or regional administration of the game before their appointment. There was one female member and six male members. The CEO, also a male, was appointed by the board and was a nonvoting executive at board meetings. The Squash New Zealand board comprised one “independent” member and five members with considerable knowledge of squash and its regional and national administration system. Nominations for the elected positions came only from the regions/provinces. As with the other NSO, the CEO, was a nonvoting participant at board meetings. All six board members were male, as was the CEO.

In the opinion of the researchers (derived from individual interviews, and a review of board member credentials), board personnel for the NSOs appeared to be highly capable, concerned for the wellbeing and future of the organization, knowledgeable about the issues of their respective sport, and skilled in governance processes and practices. Many held senior positions in organizations such as law firms, accounting firms, commercial companies, and large corporations. Aside from an apparent lack of diversity (including female and ethnic perspectives which are considered to be increasingly significant; Pugliese & Wenstøp, 2007; Skirstad, 2009), there appeared to be few gaps in expertise in relation to current understanding of the sport governing function. Such was the context within which an exploration of meaning attached to NSO board strategic capability commenced.

## Exploring the Notion of a Strategic Board

Drawn largely from a focus group setting, the lead researcher, acting as facilitator, used mind-mapping techniques to directly draw out perceptions of strategic function from the research participants. Working initially with the Squash New Zealand board and CEO, the first question posed was: “If I say strategically capable – what does that mean to you?” In response, the participants noted six different aspects (in no particular order) they believed contributed to a strategically capable board. These were: a range and mix of skills; big picture or long-term thinking; a vision or picture of the future; experience in relevant areas especially knowledge of squash; looking externally; and being focused on the work at hand. Responses to the next question, “What characteristics would you assign to strategic behavior?”, included an ability to be impartial, objectivity, being inquisitive, open-mindedness, and creating a group dynamic that is conducive to meaningful discussion where viewpoints can be debated in a nonthreatening environment.

For New Zealand Football, also largely derived from a focus group situation, the board and CEO noted eight different aspects they believed contributed to a strategically capable board. These were: has an overview that covers all areas of the business; determines the long-term goals and provides the roadmap; a highly-focused board; a board that is detached and beholden to no particular faction; is paternalistic in approach; can determine the strategic focus and is able to facilitate execution (as distinct from doing); monitors against progress; and can distinguish the line between setting policy and executing it. As a board grouping, all members contributed to this list of characteristics and there was general agreement once the elements were finalized.

### Distinguishing Between “Strategic” and “Operational”

As highlighted by Edwards and Cornforth (2003) and Pugliese and Wenstøp (2007), a significant aspect of board strategic function may be the complex interplay between what is traditionally understood to be “strategic” aspects, and notions of “operational” detail. The lead researcher, therefore, asked how the board distinguishes between strategic activity and operational activity. One Squash New Zealand board member (1b) responded by explaining that he sees the board’s role in terms of questioning and inquiring based on a structured framework (that is, the strategic plan). Another response related to the idea that the board seeks evidence that things are happening rather than being too involved in the actions (1f). Other responses noted that the board monitors what is going on rather than “doing”, and the difference between strategic aspects and operational aspects is often the level of detail sought and discussed. Being strategic “... is staying with the big picture, operations is considering the day-to-day issues” (1c).

The Squash New Zealand participants were then asked if this distinction “works” in their boardroom situation. The response was twofold: the first related to the idea that sometimes the lines get blurred and that often professionally-skilled board members are asked to operate at two levels. For example, “An accountant on the board takes an interest in implementation aspects of the accounts” (1c) and, if money is scarce, the professionally-skilled board members do some of the work instead of paying for it externally. The second point related to board impartiality: “Sometimes board members have their own agenda and when they’ve got that agenda they drop down into the operational level to achieve it. So, if they don’t have impartiality then they can drop down into operational matters” (1a).

When the New Zealand Football board members were asked how the board distinguishes between strategic aspects and operational aspects, one responded by stating: “I think there’s a lack of understanding about what a board of governance actually is and ... in football, historically, we have not been that clear about it, but now we know what we should and should not be doing”

(2a). There was agreement from two other longer-serving board members that, historically, the board had been too involved in management. One noted: “Yes, there’s been a shift in the way we work ...” (2c). Another board member offset this in stating: “I would also caution that the balance for us is fragile”. He further added that “... in the absence of strategy you force the CEO to act in a certain way and then you wake up and realize the CEO is calling the shots” (2f). In emphasizing the significance of an agreed strategy developed by the board, the same board member offered that, “If we have a good strategy we can step back, but we have some work to do there. We are still getting involved in management because we don’t have a well-defined strategy” (2f).

A further point was offered by the New Zealand Football board on the matter of how the board distinguishes between strategic aspects and operational aspects in the context of personnel changes. “Every time the board changes, or the CEO, you get a different understanding and you have to re-confirm what it means” (2a). This point related to instances when it is considered helpful to have board members contributing operational expertise. “A good board has people who can do operational functions, so you don’t want to isolate the board from doing those functions either and you need those skills in sport” (2d). The same board member also stressed that, “As long as the operational work is within the strategic framework then being involved operationally doesn’t undermine the strategic focus” (2d).

### Propositional and Practical Knowing

In an attempt to differentiate between “propositional knowing” (knowing through ideas and theories, expressed in informative statements) and “practical knowing” (knowing ‘how to do’ something, expressed in a skill, knack or competence; Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 183), the opportunity arose to ask the Squash New Zealand board to describe situations and initiatives they felt had been approached with a strong strategic focus on their part. These included the process in working through the regional funding and support strategy. In this situation it was noted the board first “... looked to the future, then we considered our options and weighed up the pros and cons ...” (1b). The board is now in the process of choosing the best option. Once this is done “... it’s down at the operational level” (1b). Another example is the high-performance program. There was general consensus that this program is well-designed, well-structured and organized, and there are clear boundaries and established goals within which to make ongoing decisions. These examples led on to a general feeling that the board is good at establishing frameworks and structures for operations people to work within, and that in both instances there has been clarity about the desired outcome.

Metaphors and/or visual images that create a sense of the tangible from the intangible have been found to be helpful in explicating meaning in this domain (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2002; Lambert & Parvinen, 2003). The next

question posed by the lead researcher, therefore, asked the board to articulate an image of strategic capability. “If you were asked to assign an image to the concept of ‘being strategic’ – what would that be and why?” Three images were offered:

- “A ball – because it’s got no sharp edges and looks in every direction” (1f)
- “The sun – because it is overreaching, overlooking and has no edges” (1d)
- “A sponge – because you have to absorb a lot of information you have to relate to, both internal and external, and you can get swamped but you have to keep on absorbing and what you do with it is like squeezing it out through a sieve” (1b).

The New Zealand Football board were also asked what kind of image they thought would represent a strategically capable board. The response was also threefold:

- The sun—representing a life force
- Rainbow—the board is overarching
- Paddock/field—the board sets the boundaries.

### What Does this Mean?

This exploration of what a strategically capable board means to the Squash New Zealand and New Zealand Football boards appeared to fit with generic theoretical concepts of what constitutes “being strategic”. Wheelen and Hunger (2000) considered a strategic perspective to include a big-picture, long-term view of the organization and one where there is a focus on the whole organization. A consideration of both internal and external environmental factors is also considered an important component (Pugliese & Wenstøp, 2007). Along similar lines, van der Walt and Ingle (2003) considered that the “... strategic function of the board involves making critical decisions, particularly in relation to strategic changes, so the organization can adapt to environmental change” (p. 17).

While some board members contributed more than others, it was clear there was consensus among the group regarding the responses. The lead researcher then provided the groups with a summary of points (hand-outs) relating to board strategic function drawn from academic literature (as set out earlier in this paper). Many of the points noted by the board appeared in this description of a strategic board. As stated by one of the New Zealand Football board members: “... if we go through the hand-outs, we cover off most bases” (2e). The Squash New Zealand board noted the concept of accountability was not emphasized in their earlier discussion. They considered it an important element to strategic function, however. In contrast, the New Zealand Football board did note the monitoring function as part of a strategic board’s role in the initial series of questions. Importantly, both boards and CEOs emphasized the significance of a well-defined strategy or “framework” in enabling the board to maintain a strategic focus. For New Zealand Football, this

was mainly to ensure the CEO did not dominate, and for Squash New Zealand, this was mostly in relation to ensuring the board did not become too operationally involved.

As noted earlier, the strategic contribution of the board may well traverse multiple aspects of the generic governance themes of performance and conformance. In discussing the place of accountability (or conformance) within the strategic function of a board, both boards appeared to affirm the need to include this aspect. The Squash New Zealand board also considered they had a strong social dynamic and felt that enjoying themselves during board engagements was an important facilitator of strategic debate and expansive thinking in the board room. While not included in the hand-out provided, van der Walt, Ingle, Shergill, and Townsend (2006) emphasized board dynamics as a key aspect of board effectiveness.

Overall, it was clear the groups had a sound grasp of their role in “being strategic” and were able to articulate and critique this during the focus group sessions. In addition, the use of metaphors and/or visual images that were offered by both groups helped to create a shared understanding of the notion of strategic capability (between board members and for the purposes of the current study). Similarities across the two boards such as associating the notion of strategic capability with the sun, a rainbow, and a ball, pointed toward the overarching nature of “being strategic” while also establishing boundaries for the CEO (paddock/field). The idea of seeking relevant information for good decision-making was embedded within the metaphor of a “sponge” that needed to be “squeezed” and filtered, and related to the environmental scanning role of a strategically capable board.

The next part of the data generation process was to ascertain how each board considered it was performing in relation to this picture of strategic function, and in particular, what might impede and enable board strategic function. This was done to contextualize the emerging meaning attached to board strategic function.

### Contextualizing the Ideal: How Are We Doing?

The Squash New Zealand board was asked a series of questions designed to highlight aspects considered to both impede and enable board strategic function. Once again, mind mapping techniques were used and captured on a white board to help structure the discussion as it took place. The first part identified what the Squash New Zealand board considered to be their strengths and weaknesses in relation to strategic function. The strengths centered largely on their relationship with their internal stakeholders, that is, provincial and club personnel and volunteers: “... we have a strong relationship with the squash community and we have a lot of goodwill. It’s not our way or the highway” (1a). Another board member noted: “We don’t have direct representation (on the board), we work on goodwill; it’s consensus decision-making” (1b). Another noted strength, as established above, was the board’s understanding of strategic gover-

nance processes and its work in implementing these, such as having a strategic framework in place and using this framework to structure the work of the board during and outside of meetings. “In terms of what’s talked about at governance training sessions, you get the impression we are talking about the right things. We have our strategy in place and good board processes around that” (1a).

Of the aspects noted in terms of weaknesses for Squash New Zealand, one stood out and was explained as:

Our biggest dissatisfaction has been our inability to improve numbers; for the clubs to grow. You can operate strategically at national board level but you have to be able to roll that strategy out to club level and make an impact there. (1f)

Another member noted that, “... it seems that we do most processes pretty well but if you judge yourself on the end result (i.e., high performance, participation, growth etc.), then we’ve got some way to go” (1b). A further comment was, “It feels like we have no control over the level of input and expertise at the district level” (1d). During a further focus group discussion, at which time the lead researcher also checked emerging interpretations with the research participants, the same impediment arose in relation to the board realizing its strategic potential. “It’s always been an issue about leadership at the district level and the lack of leadership ...” commented one board member (1d). Another followed with: “And lack of strategy at district level – there’s no strategy at all, it’s all day-to-day” (1f). The discussion was summarized by the following sentiment in explaining board strategic capability: “Things that we can do as a board to help our overall strategy, end goal and ability to reach clubs” (1b).

For New Zealand Football, the richest data to emerge in relation to exploring aspects that might impede or enable board strategic function (and thus create a sharper contextual focus for this board), were derived from individual interviews with board members and the CEO. The overwhelming barrier identified was the lack of strategic framework for decision-making. This was expressed in a number of different ways. “We haven’t really looked ahead and if we could change that, it would be a massive leap forward” (2c). Another stated, “I think there is a lack of identifying strategic priorities” (2d). A further board member stated that, “acting strategically doesn’t come naturally - to help us with this we need a process or framework for decision-making that makes us look at the long-term direction and where we want to be going” (2a).

A second aspect in terms of barriers and enablers to board strategic function, that emerged consistently for New Zealand Football, related to the need to “get more out of the board” (2i). Along similar lines, one board member felt that the board needed to be more involved and that, “We need a board that is not marching to the CEO or any other person’s agenda”. (2f). For him this meant a “... board operating as being in charge ... where the tail is not wagging the dog” (2f). Another noted,

“... our meetings are very institutionalized, we are just following previous formatting and not really thinking about the best way to structure them” (2i). A further board member felt that sometimes boards hide behind the word governance and do not become informed enough to govern. In his words, “We have been very much in the hands of the office ... for the way the board operates” (2h). A different board member also expressed the notion that: “New Zealand Soccer (football board) takes the lead from the CEO, rather than the other way around” (2d).

### What Does This Mean?

As the above discussion demonstrates, a key impediment for the Squash New Zealand board was the capability of the districts in delivering on the national board’s strategic priorities. Ferkins and Shilbury (2010) examined the national-regional governing relationship with regard to board strategic capability in sport, and found that Tennis New Zealand also considered the provincial delivery mechanism to be an impediment to board strategic function. They stated that, “In particular, the board’s ability to enact its strategic priorities could be enhanced by creating a more collaborative partnership with its regional entities and engaging in a power-sharing approach that seeks to develop regional capability” (p. 235). There are few studies in sport and in the wider nonprofit literature that consider the relationships between regional and national associations (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Even fewer make the connection between board strategic function and interorganizational relationships (IORs). Ferkins and Shilbury (2010) promoted “the significance of the federated network on board strategic capability, specifically in relation to the board’s ability to enact its strategy” (p. 252). In doing so, IORs were linked with board strategic capability. Similar findings were also evident within the current study. Given this, further empirical investigations of this aspect, in relation to board strategic function, is certainly warranted.

The Squash New Zealand board considered it had sound processes in place, was acting and thinking strategically, but was not achieving the organizational outcomes as effectively as desired. In this regard, board discussion around strategic capability for Squash New Zealand also focused on outcomes as well as processes. McNulty and Pettigrew (1999) argued, there exists a “... crucial analytical requirement to study both the content and the process of board involvement in strategy” (p. 51) and that the “what” of strategic involvement can only be effectively examined through its inseparable links with the process, or “how”, of strategic involvement. The Squash New Zealand board members were clearly considering both process and content (or outcome) in their consideration of aspects that might prevent or enable board strategic function.

In relation to New Zealand Football, in the sport governance domain there has been strong interest in the interaction between the CEO and board resulting

in a number of studies that have considered this aspect of board dynamics (Auld & Godbey, 1998; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009; Hoye, 2006; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003a,b; Inglis, 1994, 1997b; Kikulis, 2000; Searle, 1989; Shilbury, 2001). In particular, these studies have explored the balance of power and influence that the CEO holds in relation to the board. Often referred to as “shared leadership”, the primary outcome has been a noted increase in influence by the CEO (Shilbury, 2001). Ferkins, Shilbury, and McDonald (2009) also found that it was unhelpful for the CEO to dominate the board in terms of developing board strategic function and that “greater board involvement in strategy advanced the board’s ability to perform its strategic function” (p. 245). A further finding determined, “the importance of shared leadership between the board and the CEO, the complex interplay in balancing this relationship and the need to integrate strategy into board processes” (p. 245). This finding sits alongside a growing body of evidence from the commercial setting, indicating that an increasingly accepted “definition” of board strategic function is the expectation that the board will be involved in strategy alongside the CEO (Pugliese & Wenstøp, 2007; Ruigrok, Peck, & Keller, 2006; Stiles, 2001). Findings from the New Zealand Football case study also indicates that greater board involvement, to create a shared leadership situation, would be desired for developing strategic function.

## Mapping Meaning Attached to Board Strategic Capability

Huff and Jenkins (2002) considered cognitive maps, and visual images to be tangible and flexible tools that can help reveal and articulate knowledge. “As a means to make knowledge more explicit and more likely to be shared, debated and revised, maps become a dynamic basis for knowledge creation” (p. 15). It is with this approach in mind that the final section of the discussion has been developed. It is also important to note that the use of a cognitive map in this way does not provide a direct portrayal of individual or collective knowledge (Huff & Jenkins, 2002). Instead, this technique has been employed to “sketch out” the boundaries and key elements of board strategic capability, drawn from what we currently know and integrated with the meaning that the two NSO boards attach to this concept. This section explains the development of a cognitive map (Figure 1).

There are, of course, many different ways to interpret the conversations outlined above. It is, therefore, acknowledged that the following map provides but one interpretation. As per the research process, much care has been taken to ensure logical links between data as they are transformed into evidence. The concepts presented are also derived or influenced by the literature outlined earlier. In asking what meaning board members attached to the notion of board strategic capability, the responses

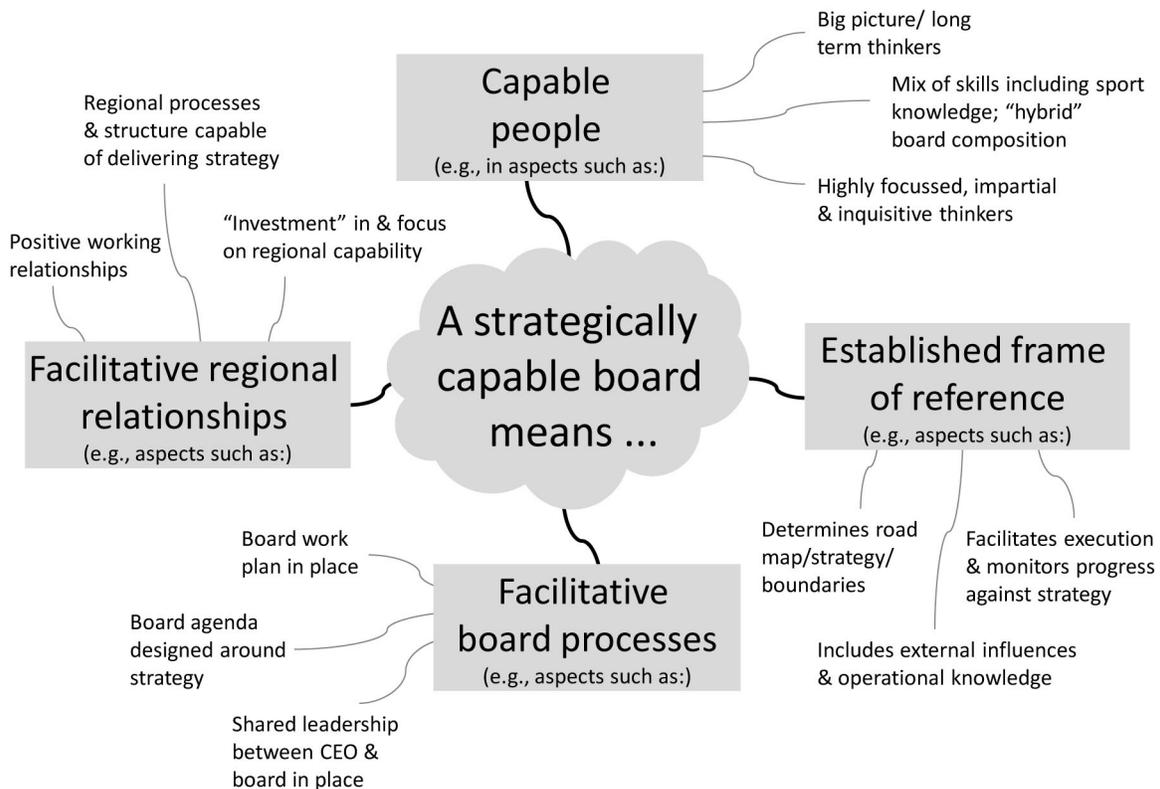


Figure 1 — Mapping board strategic capability.

focused on the capabilities of individual board members and therefore the collective capability of the group. A range and mix of skills including a “hybrid” board composition; big picture or long-term thinking; a board that is detached and beholden to no particular faction; experience in relevant areas especially knowledge of the sport; and being focused on the work at hand, for example, relate to the capability of people sitting around the board room table to be able to undertake these functions. As the data generation and analysis process unfolded, the emphasis on capable people as a primary element of board strategic capability became increasingly obvious. The idea of who the board comprises and the skills they bring as an indication of board performance is, of course, well-established in theory and practice (Balduck, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2010; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1998). As set out in Figure 1, this element was, therefore, chosen as one of four “directional signposts” that served to map out the meaning of board strategic capability. To further flesh out this element, three representative examples relating to “capable people” were also chosen based on the emphasis both NSO boards gave to these aspects (see Figure 1).

The second element, shown in Figure 1, when mapping out board strategic capability related to having an established frame of reference. There were a number of statements made by board members and the CEOs from both NSOs (across all question categories) that connected strategic function with having a road map, strategy, or defined boundaries to work within. In particular, both NSOs emphasized the importance of the board determining the overall direction of the organization and ensuring there were clearly marked out boundaries for all members of the organization in terms of purpose (mission) and aspiration (vision). This element was also chosen because of growing scholarly debate regarding the need for active board involvement in strategy (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009; Kerr & Werther, 2008; Stiles, 2001). Two further subelements were chosen as examples of establishing a frame of reference. These were also representative of the responses offered by the two board groups, and provided empirical evidence of the deeper meaning attached to board involvement in strategy (e.g., Edwards & Cornforth, 2003; Pugliese & Wenstøp, 2007).

The third element chosen was “facilitative board processes”. Again, a number of statements were made by the NSO boards that indicated the importance of sound meeting process. Such aspects related to ensuring a board work plan was in place and that the board meetings had a purpose that revolved around the agreed organization strategy. Board processes also emerged within the discussion relating to the role of the CEO versus the role of the board, and the need for the board to be actively engaged, thereby sharing the leadership responsibility with the CEO. There is strong empirical evidence that points toward shared leadership and facilitative board processes as key qualities of strategic function (Inglis, 1997a; Inglis, Alexander, & Weaver, 1999; Pye & Pettigrew, 2005).

The next element chosen was “facilitative regional relationships”. While this element was primarily derived from the Squash New Zealand discussions, it was also an underlying aspect for New Zealand Football as the board grappled with the need to establish a frame of reference for the regions to operate within. Again, three examples of this element were chosen to provide more detail as to what was meant by this concept. Stiles and Taylor (2001) noted that the board is also responsible for “the structural context of the firm, which includes determining the organizational architecture ...” (p. 35). In the sport governance literature, however, there has been little reference, as yet, that links the governing role of the board in general and the strategic function in particular to the complex “architecture” of and relationships with the sport’s affiliated regional entities. As detailed earlier, Ferkins and Shilbury (2010) have empirically established the link between strategic function, regional relationships and governing structure. In addition, Hoye and Cuskelly (2007) made reference to the potential impact of inter-organizational relationships within the governing role of sport boards. Based on this emerging knowledge and data generated from the NSO focus groups and interviews, this aspect formed the final element of the conceptual map.

These four elements were checked with research participants to ensure they “rang true” (Mertens, 2005) in terms of the emerging map. This was done with the two CEOs in interview and via a written memo, as well as with the board members in a subsequent board meeting. In comparing the two NSO boards in relation to their own assessment of current strategic function, the Squash New Zealand board appeared to be more “advanced” in the elements assigned to the cognitive map. While both boards seemed to have capable people who matched those elements deemed important for strategic function (as noted earlier), New Zealand Football had a more immediate hurdle in the absence of an articulated strategy that the board had been involved in designing. In this comparison, it also became obvious there was a sense of progression between the four elements within the cognitive map.

## Conclusion

This study sought to probe meaning attached to the notion of board strategic capability. In working with two NSO boards in New Zealand, a cognitive map was developed that expressed four primary elements, three of which were also evident within related literature. In essence, the meaning of board strategic capability was found to be related to the need to have capable people, a frame of reference, facilitative board processes, and facilitative regional relationships. The latter was found to be a new element, especially significant for models of ‘sport’ governance because of the existence of affiliated regional entities and the necessary reliance on these entities and volunteers in delivering strategic priorities for the sport.

In terms of the sense of progression noted earlier, these elements might also be expressed as a sequence of steps through which the NSO board might travel on

its journey toward achieving a high-performing strategic board. For example, to even begin to function as a strategic board, a first step is having people around the board room table who can think and act strategically, have knowledge of the sport, and can be inquisitive and impartial. As a second step, there was also a strong indication from both boards as well as evidence drawn from the literature (Kerr & Werther, 2008; Stiles, 2001) that an organization needs to have a clearly articulated strategy, where the board has been involved in its development.

“Facilitative board processes” appeared to be the next advancement that Squash New Zealand had achieved, and that New Zealand Football was still seeking to develop. Squash New Zealand board’s next challenge was to create a governing system whereby the organization strategy could be effectively implemented via the regional delivery mechanism. For this element, the emphasis was on building better relationships and processes which may or may not include a change in the sport’s governing architecture.

Increasingly, scholars have argued for greater depth in understanding in relation to the strategic role of the board, and an understanding of the process and context within which this role takes place (Pugliese & Wenstøp, 2007; Pye & Pettigrew, 2005; Stiles, 2001). In sport governance, while it is acknowledged that the strategic role of the board is crucial to organization performance, it has also been noted that there is a critical gap in our knowledge regarding this aspect of sport governance (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). The present study serves to add additional meaning to the notion of board strategic function. By their very existence, maps and metaphors frame a particular landscape, establishing more clearly the subject of consideration (Huff & Jenkins, 2002). “What is included in the frame is much easier to identify, and challenge. Alternative frames are easier to imagine once a first alternative is made more explicit. Maps even make the absent more obvious” (Huff & Jenkins, 2002, p. 3).

The map and metaphors derived from this study provides a starting point in further explicating the meaning of board strategic capability. Further investigation could “tease out” a better understanding of the need for balance between elements (such as between those identified as conformance and performance), noted as a tension within the governing role (Mankins, 2007). Another aspect that warrants further investigation is the balance between what is considered to be a strategic focus versus an operational focus. Highlighted by Edwards and Cornforth (2003), there was also an emphasis given by the NSOs’ boards involved in this study regarding the need to understand operational aspects to contribute to strategic decision-making. Finally, the extent of board involvement in strategy (captured within the frame of reference element) is also a theme worthy of more empirical focus within the sport setting. Perhaps the use of figurative language and techniques to present research findings can help unlock not only greater clarity in meaning for scholars but also provide governance practitioners with more accessible guidelines and models in their endeavors to become high-performing strategic boards.

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