Looking to the past to understand the present: organizational change in varsity sport

Daniel Parker, *Halinova Trading, Halifax, Canada*
Gina Grandy, *Commerce Department, Mount Allison University, Sackville, Canada*

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how varsity football athletes and coaches negotiate meanings when faced with the unmet expectations of a new head coach brought into lead a turnaround process. It also aims to pay particular attention to the role of history in this meaning making process.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with players and coaches at two points in time. To preserve the richness of their experiences and illuminate the historical aspects of change, it focuses on the stories of three players and one supporting coach.

Findings – Numerous symbols of change emerge that have multiple and contradictory meanings. The meanings around success and failure are renegotiated over time as individuals struggle with the unmet expectations of change. Moreover, individuals are unable to shed the failures of the past and move forward.

Practical implications – Change is a complex and messy process of managing multiple meanings. Understanding change entails more than a snapshot picture of an organization. New leaders have no control over the past, yet they need to be aware of how individuals experienced the past in order to increase the likelihood of success in the present.

Originality/value – Success and failure are experienced as an ongoing process as athletes and coaches experience, reflect on and interact with others. In illuminating the role of history in how change is experienced in the present, the paper demonstrates that the past can serve as both an immobilizing force, as well as a comparative point enabling individuals to rationalize their emotions.

Introduction

Estimates from the 1980s, 1990s, and through into the 2000s indicate that up to 70-75 percent of all change programs fail (Higgs and Rowland, 2005; Miller, 2002) but give little attention to how we determine the extent to which organizational change is successful. We argue here that the evaluations of the "success" and "failure" of organizational change are subjective in nature and that we need to look to the meanings constructed by individuals over time and through interaction with others to understand better the experience of organizational change. Experiences of organizational change are complex and multifaceted (Podlog, 2002) and when change does not result in the outcomes expected the sense making processes of individuals involved in the change are likely to become even more problematic. In this research we set out to understand how individuals make sense of organizational change when it does not result in expected outcomes. We look to a sports organization, that is, a varsity football[1] team, to explore how athletes and coaches negotiate meanings when faced with the unmet expectations of a new head coach brought into lead a turnaround process. In doing this, we pay particular attention to the role of history in this meaning making process.

We contend that an appreciation of the organization's past performance, leadership, and change efforts will help new leaders understand how individuals make sense of these change processes and, in turn, allow leaders to better manage change. In looking to the past to understand intergroup conflict and change in the present, Wolfram Cox (2001, p. 183) asks us, "Does the past lead 'up' to a better future? Does the present allow us to gaze 'back' fondly on the past?". Our aim is to build upon her argument and explore the stories of those involved in a major change process to understand how individuals draw upon the past in their struggles to make sense of ongoing organizational change and its perceived success.

The team under study is a university football team that has undergone and continues to undergo major change processes after experiencing six consecutive losing seasons. The team, which produced a dismal one win and 23 loss record in three seasons under one head coach, hired a new head coach to lead a turnaround process. Replacement of a coach or manager in professional sports when team performance is poor is common (Audas et al., 1997). McTeer et al. (1995) contend, however, that the extant literature on performance and replacement is ambiguous. McTeer et al. (1995) examine mid-season replacements of coaches in professional team sport and their results indicate short-term replacement does predict performance; however, the impact is minimal over the long-term. McTeer et al. (1995) suggest exploring how players experience leadership change to uncover a deeper understanding of the replacement and performance relationship. We take our lead from this suggestion; however, our focus is not upon performance per se. We are interested in how players and coaches draw upon the past to make sense of their experiences when a new leader is unable to produce expected results.

In exploring how individuals struggle with and make sense of change our contribution is three-fold: first, as suggested by McTeer et al. (1995), in depth interviews offer a deeper understanding of how players experience leadership change and the complexity of the relationship between replacement and performance. We interview players and coaches at two different points in time to access rich descriptions of their stories of change. Second, Podlog (2002) argued that success and failure is a socially constructed sense making process whereby meanings are renegotiated over time. In a similar way, our research reveals that that sense making about success and failure is experienced as an ongoing process as athletes and coaches experience events, reflect upon these events and interact with each other. Third, by taking into account the history of the organization we acknowledge that organization and change are processual phenomena always in a state of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Understanding change entails more than just taking a snapshot picture of an organization. In fact, our findings indicate that the past can serve as an immobilizer to change. We also offer support for Dawson's (2004) and Collins and Rainwater's (2005) argument that change is a complex process of managing multiple, contradictory meanings. In this messy process we argue that the past matters in understanding how change happens in the present. New leaders have no control over the past, yet at the same time they need to be aware of how individuals experienced the past in order to increase the likelihood of success in the present.

Literature review

Change as processual

Helms Mills (2003) notes that the number of written pieces concerned with organizational change has increased substantially since the 1970s. Thousands of articles and books have been published to date. Throughout the literature hundreds of different interpretations of meanings and definitions of change in organizations are offered (e.g. Amis et al., 2004; Boeker, 1997; Bruch and Sattelberger, 2001; Kraatz and Moore, 2002). We interpret change as ongoing processes in organizations (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Change does not result in a final state of stability, rather change is understood as a process of "becoming" (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). In this process of becoming there may be certain disruptions that serve as triggers for individual and organizational sense making (e.g. death of a leader, merger, entry into new market). The "shape" of organizational life, however, is always in movement, never achieving a final state. Our interest in the organization in question was triggered by a key change event, that is, a change in leadership that impacted upon the strategy and structure of the organization. In sports organizations, the impact of leadership change on performance has received considerable attention (e.g. Audas et al., 1997, 1999, 2002; Gamson and Scotch, 1964; Grusky, 1963; McTeer et al., 1995; Pfeffer and Davis-Blake, 1986). The expectations of a new leader coming into turn around a team and lead it to success, however, do not always come to fruition. In the organization studies literature more broadly, a growing body of research has begun to critique the somewhat euphoric view of change as the successful top-down initiative with managers and employees working together toward a common goal (e.g. Buchanan, 2003; Badham and Garrety, 2003; Dawson, 2004). Such a top-down view neglects and suppresses the political nature of change and change failure (Butcher and Atkinson, 2001; Collins, 2003; Dawson, 2004). Dawson (2000, 2004) and Collins (2003) argue for research that examines multiple change narratives over time to provide a better understanding of the complex and contested nature of change processes in organizational life. Our study responds to this growing critique and represents a processual account of a case study of organizational change; one where multiplicity and contradiction are embraced. To do this, we draw upon the tenets of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective (Armstrong, 1999; Prasad, 1993) developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Fidishun, 2002). Central to it is that an individual creates meaning through her social interaction with others. Symbolic interactionism is concerned with how social interactions (e.g. events and situations) are interpreted through individual sense making processes (Prasad, 1993). Meaning is explored at the individual level of analysis. Blumer (1969) discusses the premises of symbolic interactionism. He contends that individual actions are determined by the meanings that the individual has constructed about the events, objects or individuals she encounters. Action and meaning cannot be separated. Second, meanings are constructed through social interactions with others. Third, meanings are constructed and reconstructed through an interpretative process as the individual experiences life. Overall, as we interpret it, symbolic interactionism emphasizes ongoing individual meaning making over time through interaction with others. Symbolic interactionism encourages us to explore change at the individual level and how individuals make sense of change through ongoing construction and negotiation of meanings.

In her study on the symbolic processes involved in the computerization of work in a health maintenance organization, Prasad (1993) notes that symbolic interactionism would be a useful lens from which to capture the multiple, local realities of leadership transition. Taking our lead from Prasad (1993), in this study we explore the stories of individuals to determine how they make sense of change processes involving a new organizational leader. Moreover, in drawing upon symbolic interactionism we emphasize the "becoming" aspect of change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). In this way, change is experienced and understood as a dynamic and fluid phenomenon, rather than a final state of achievement. Change as becoming involves an appreciation for both retrospective and prospective sense making efforts of individuals, whereby individuals draw upon the past, present and future in their re-tellings of their experiences with change. We theorize here that history plays a significant role in understanding how individuals (and organizations) experience change.

History and organizational change

In the discussion that follows we draw attention to three considerations relevant to our exploration of meaning making and organizational change. First, we argue that history (or the past) is critical to understanding how individuals (and organizations) make sense of organizational change in the present. Second, in making sense of organizational change, individuals may revise the past to allow them to rationalize their experiences in the present. We also theorize that individuals may revise the past to make it easier for them to make their experiences more "visible" to those around them (in this case to the researchers who ask questions about their experiences prompting processes of sense making). We propose then that history is a malleable resource whereby the "facts" of the past are not altered (e.g. number of wins) but the meanings associated with those facts are renegotiated (Gioia etal., 2002). History is a revisable resource available to individuals as they make sense of their experiences of change. Finally, we argue that the past creates continuation into the present and future. As noted earlier, change is processual in nature whereby the past, present and future are in many ways inseparable. In order to understand the present and future we appreciate that the past bridges our experiences.

Employing the tenets of symbolic interactionism Wolfram Cox (1997, 2001) explores how a group of Australian employees of an American multinational manufacturing firm talk about change retrospectively and how they draw upon the past, present and future in their re-tellings. Wolfram Cox (1997, p. 626) sets out to understand, "how does consideration of background, or past of an organization help to describe views of its change to the present and beyond?". Wolfram Cox (1997) analyzes how individuals have different orientations to time in their talk of change through a lens of loss. She discusses four different constructions of loss including, loss as regret for what has been in the past, return to the past and loss of what might have been, loss of relief to move on to what can be in the future, and loss as release from constraints of the past. In 2001 Wolfram Cox explores similar questions about the role of the past in understanding change; however, this time she focuses upon intergroup conflict. In this latter piece, she makes sense of the stories of change through the theories of team development, paternalism and nostalgia. While we do not focus upon intergroup conflict or loss, we do build upon Wolfram Cox's (2001, p. 168) work so that "further attention can be given to theorizing and researching subtleties in talk of the past". Similar to Wolfram Cox (1997, 2001) we adopt an approach that views talk about change as retrospective sense making. Moreover, in probing into participants' stories of change we recognize that we are likely triggering their sense making

processes. Drawing upon the past may enable participants to make their experiences more "visible" or concrete to us as researchers, in that the past is used as a comparative "constant" by participants in describing their experiences. Unlike the participants of Wolfram Cox's (1997, 2001) research, the individuals interviewed for this study are making sense of change as they are experiencing it under a new leader (in "real" time) at two different points in time.

In different ways, Gioia *etal.* (2002) and Shamir *etal.* (1994) also explore how the past plays a role in constructing change in the present (or future). Gioia *et al.* (2002) theorize that organizations and their members sometimes revise the past in order to fit with how the organization wants to be perceived in the future. They argue for a revisionist history perspective that draws upon future perfect thinking, that is, "imagining the future in a way in which one considers the consequences of present actions that will constitute the past sometime in the future" (Gioia *et al.*, 2002, pp. 624-5). They go further to draw links between organizational change, organizational identity and history. While our study is not concerned with how the future is constructed using the past, Gioia *et al.*'s (2002) notion that history is malleable and plays a role in making sense of organizational change is useful for our present study. Gioia *et al.* (2002) argue that as organizations (or individuals in our research) attempt to adapt to current or future situations the past is always susceptible torenegotiation. We too contend that meanings of events in the past may be altered to make better sense of experiences in the present or future.

Shamir *et al.* (1994) draw our attention to how past leadership can be used to understand the present. They deconstruct Jesse Jackson's speech to the National Convention of the Democratic Party in 1988 to illuminate how he symbolically aligned himself with successful historical figures to present himself more favourably to voters. Shamir *et al.* (1994) do not focus upon organizational change *per se*, however, issues of leadership transition and how individuals might draw upon the past to create continuance to the present are relevant to our current study. The hiring of a new leader was the trigger of change that ignited our interest in the organization under study, thus it was appropriate for us to be open to, if and how, players and coaches perceive the efforts of the new coach relative to past leaders of the organization. To do this, we asked participants to reflect upon the circumstances surrounding the hiring of the new coach to allow space for sense making around past and current leadership as it pertains to change in this organization.

Methods

The theoretical and empirical contributions offered here were developed through an iterative process. This involved both authors going back and forth between the existing literature, interviews with participants and the ethnographic reflections of the first author in theorizing the role of history in how individuals manage and understand change in the present. The original research question was to explore the role of symbols and individual meaning making in the identified organization's turnaround change program (e.g. identify symbols of change and the meanings of those symbols). Data were collected at two points in time throughout the season. As we progressed through the data collection and analysis, the unmet expectations of change and the individuals' struggles to make sense of these changes relative to the past, became more prominent in the stories of participants. As a result, the research question was refined to explore how players and coaches make sense of organizational change when it does not result in the outcomes expected and the role of history in the mean making process.

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study to access thick, rich descriptions and embrace the localities of the research site in an exploratory manner (Alvesson, 2002; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Mason, 2002). Our interest in this organization stemmed from the first author's four years as a player on the team. The first author had experienced a variety of organizational changes over that period of time that led to a diverse range of feelings including: excitement, frustration, hope, and disappointment. His connection with the team facilitated access that would have otherwise been difficult to secure. His insider experiences of the mundane aspects of organization life also offered a richness to the data collection process unavailable to the second author. The stories re-told in this paper are co-produced representations of the experiences we heard (and read) by the individuals we encountered (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). In other words, we are making sense of how individuals make sense of their experiences (Thomas and Davies, 2005).

Site of study

This study takes place in a small university, referred to here as University Y, with a varsity football team competing on a national level in Canada. The football program has been in existence for over 50 years and has played a significant role in the university's identity and community links. During the season the roster usually employs 70-75 players, while the off season roster is usually smaller and fluctuates with greater frequency. Off season roster size can range from 45 to 70 players. Coaching staff employment

follows a similar trend with seven to ten coaches during the season and two to three in the off season. The previous head coach was relieved of his command post after two winless
seasons. The new head coach began his term not long after the end of that second winless season. This research site provided an ideal opportunity to study the unfolding events of a turnaround change program. The new head coach was hired to improve team performance and this study analyzes how individuals experienced that change.

This site serves both as an intrinsic and instrumental case study (Stake, 2000). It is an intrinsic case study in that the site is of interest in and of itself. The first author had devoted four years as a player to the team under study. His interest in this case study derived from his commitment to the team and his genuine desire to uncover ways through which the team could experience a successful turnaround process. It is an instrumental case study in that it extends our understanding of the complexity of the replacement and performance relationship in sport organizations, as well as in other organizations. For example, there are numerous factors that need to be considered in understanding the relationship between a new leader and organization performance (e.g. skills of employees, resources, management style, time lag on results). Moreover, many of these factors are out of the control of the leader. This research also extends current knowledge on the role of history in organizational change to theorize new ways of understanding how individuals draw upon the past to make sense of change processes in the present.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews with players and coaches were conducted and taped by the first author. No first year players were interviewed. The first author was both researcher and senior member of the organization and we felt that his placed him in a position of power over first year members of the organization. We were concerned that first year players would not have felt comfortable expressing their "real" emotions for fear of a lack of confidentiality; despite assurances that confidentiality was of the utmost importance. A certain level of trust had already been established between the first author and the senior players and we believed that this would increase the likelihood of participants "speaking their minds". Upon reflection, the decision to include only players with more than one year on the team likely contributed to the significance that the past played in the stories from the data set. We developed a semi-structured interview guide so that the process was flexible enough to allow space for new and interesting themes to emerge. This also allowed individuals the opportunity to talk about what was meaningful to them (Wolfram Cox, 2001). Participants were asked to describe critical incidents they had experienced since the change efforts began or were experiencing at the time of interviewing (e.g. Can you tell me why you decided to play football at Mount Allison?, How do you feel about your experiences so far?, Can you describe the events that led up to the hiring of Coach Sam?). It was through an iterative process of reviewing the existing literature, collecting material and analyzing interview transcriptions (McCracken, 1988; Mason, 2002) that the past was theorized as a means through which to understand how individuals made sense of change in the present.

To understand the processual nature of meaning making, each individual was interviewed at two different points in time throughout the football season. In total, nine participants were interviewed (18 interviews) holding a variety of positions within the organization. Three coaches and six players participated. Of the coaches, two were full-time employees and one was a volunteer. Of the six players interviewed, three played offence and three played defence. Interviews ranged from 50 to 100 minutes in length.

Following the tenets of the long interview (McCracken, 1988) each interview was analyzed individually first to identify symbolic themes that each participant used to create meaning. Once each interview was reviewed independently, themes across interviews were identified. Both authors were involved in the analysis of data. Both authors also reviewed secondary documents
 (newspapers, university news releases) as a part of this process to ensure a balance between objectivity and subjectivity in the data collection and analyses processes. The interview notes and transcriptions, reflective notes of the first author, and secondary data produced a large amount of material for discussion. As a result, decisions about what to include were difficult. Similar to Thomas and Davies (2005) who represent the stories of four participants in order to preserve the richness of the interplay between resistance and identity, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) who represent the story of one manager to demonstrate the advantages of depth in identity exploration, and Wicks and Grandy (2007) who represent the stories of six tattooists in their exploration of ambiguity and culture, we trade

off on generalizability for depth in the presentation of data. We believe than in order to preserve the richness of participants' experiences and to illuminate the particularities of how history played a role in the meaning making process for these individuals, it is better to present in depth stories of three players and one coach, rather than a thematic representation of the entire data set. In this way, the multiple meanings and contradictions within stories and across stories become more vivid (Wicks and Grandy, 2007). The three players selected demonstrated the critical role of history in how meanings were constructed in the present, as well as the contradictions within and across stories. The coach was selected because of his past experience with the team, as well as his balanced approach in the evaluation of the past and present leadership.

Findings

The football program at University Y has had a colourful history, winning four conference championships and participating in the national championship (Vanier Cup) game twice over the past 50 years. The program has been home to a long list of All-Canadians and national award winners[2]. In addition, nine former players have progressed from varsity football at University Y to play in the professional ranks. The six seasons prior to 2005, however, left a blemish on the program's history. One of the most notable events took place during the first game of the 2001 season when University Y suffered the worst defeat in Canadian university football history losing to a conference rival by a score of 105 to zero. This event made headlines all over North America and left some calling for an end to football at University Y. In the hope of restoring the team to its former glory, a former Canadian Football League (CFL) Coach, Jim, was hired after the 2001 season concluded. Many believed Coach Jim would be the answer to University Y's football troubles. Coach Jim went on to build the largest recruiting class in the country. Unfortunately, Coach Jim achieved only moderate short-term improvements to the team and University Y would go on to experience 20 consecutive losses under his leadership. Immediately following the 2004 season, Coach Jim was relieved of his post. Following the dismissal of Coach Jim, Sam was hired to take the helm of the team. Once again, new hopes emerged as Coach Sam promised to entertain the fans with a new and exciting offence. Coach Sam inherited a talented team that experienced a number of close contests, but had not achieved victory. Many believed that the new coach was exactly what the football program needed to turn the corner. It was felt that Coach Sam would offer a fresh approach to reshaping the entire image of football at University Y and its surrounding community with events such as the first-ever outdoor spring camp held on an artificial surface and a Football 101 lecture to help fans brush up on the rules of the game.

We picked up this story at the beginning of the 2005 season under Coach Sam's leadership. The first set of interviews was conducted soon after the official football season began and up to this point the team had still not won a game under the new leadership and strategy. The second set of interviews was conducted after the season with the team ending the season as it had the year before, winless. Mixed emotions of frustration, disappointment, and hope emerged in individuals' struggles to make sense of the change process. Individuals reflected upon their past experiences with the team in their sense making processes. These past experiences served as a force leaving individuals frozen in time and unable to move forward, as well as a comparative point enabling them to rationalize their emotions. These experiences were also often marked with confusion and contradiction as to who was to blame, the appropriate leadership style and the best strategy to organizational success. The stories of three senior players (Thomas, Edward and Richard) and one coach (Harry) are re-told in the paragraphs that follow.

Thomas' story

At the time of interviewing, 2005 marked the fourth year of varsity football for Thomas at University Y. Recruiting efforts of Coach Jim in 2001 had been effective in depicting an attractive future for Thomas at University Y. At the time, Thomas was interested in the team despite its troubles because he wanted to be a part of leading this team to success. He wanted to make history as this team reinvented itself. He anticipated the challenges the team experienced in years one and two of his tenure, however, the continued struggles and disappointments in years three and four, left him discouraged and concerned about his career options and the possibility of being recruited by a professional team:

I really wanted to be one of the guys who was able to say, I went to University Y the year after they lost 105 to nothing and then look where we are three years, four years down the road. But that hasn't been able to happen. I think, when the losing piles up and the only thing you can really do is look to individual accomplishments and for me, I'd like to take football to the next level. I'd like to play CFL football so I'm just trying to go out there, do my job, play as well as I can so that someone will take a chance on me and give me an opportunity to play in the pros. I

mean winning is the most important thing, but I think you want to get the maximum effort out of your team. I think as a team you want to be able to say that we played our best in all eight games.

In the quote we also see how, in the face of zero wins, Thomas contemplated the meaning of success. Four years of losses exaggerated the need to reconstruct meanings around success and failure in this context as if to provide some purpose or rationale for his continued commitment and effort to this team. For Thomas, winning games was still the most important indicator of success; however, given the performance of the team, his motivation shifted primarily to the hopes of opening doors for his career in professional football. Thomas began to move from wins to individual accomplishments in order to take something positive away from his experiences with the team. Coupled with this, in the absence of wins, Thomas constructed maximum effort from the team, that is, playing their best, as an indicator of success.

With only five years of eligible varsity playing time, the tenure of most of the players with University Y had been marked by no wins. The team's performance in the years prior to the 2005 season had made the players vulnerable and emotionally fragile. Thomas noted that going into the first game of the 2005 season, the team was confident, but the score was not even close, and that was followed by another big loss:

The confidence is fragile and you go into that first game and we had a terrible first game, getting killed by "another team" andI think that really destroyed a lot of people's confidence. It really hurt everybody moving forward.

Building the confidence of players and managing the disappointments was a constant battle. Thomas contended that in the past and carrying over into the 2005 season, the players and sometimes even the coaches expected the team to lose, "so once you make that one mistake it almost kills the whole team". Furthermore, football at University Y is a tradition, a symbol of spirit and pride for many alumni. Meeting the expectations of alumni, faculty and administration of the university, as well as maintaining the support of disillusioned fans, in particular the student base, was daunting for both players and coaches. The inability to win a game jeopardized the meaning of football as pride and spirit to a diverse range of constituents. The players and coaches were left feeling responsible, yet helpless in controlling this:

Whenever we go to Montreal and you see the ex-players and alumni from the school and how passionate they are into it, and how bad they feel for what we're going through, you can tell there['s] something, there's a real strong connection to the University Y's football team. The team has been struggling in the past and where it is right now, it's not a good place at all. We don't have the financial backing that other teams in our conference have. The support of faculty around the school isn't there right now. When we're winning it would come, but right now we're losing, so people don't want to support the team and that's tough for the players who are going out there and playing every weekend when everyone else isn't behind them. We need financial and moral support from everybody else to help us get back to the winning ways. But without the winning then they don't want to support it.

For Thomas, leadership also played a critical role in determining the meaning of success for the team. The frequent changing of coaches since 2001, both head coach and supporting coaches, brought with it new hope of success. At the same time, these frequent changes contributed to the uncertainty and fragility experienced by players:

It's been a revolving door as far as coaches. It sucks in not knowing who's going to be my position coach. What kind of defence are we running? It's a lot easier to prepare when you know where you fit into things.

The 2005 season had not resulted in the outcomes expected under the leadership of Coach Sam; however, Thomas expressed gratitude for the expected stable line-up of coaches for the 2006 season

that would be led by Coach Sam. Thomas reflected upon the leadership styles of Coach Jim and Coach Sam in making sense of the team's performance. It was unclear, however, if Thomas felt the current "regime", as he referred to it, was better or worse than the previous one:

Well it's definitely a completely different philosophy. Jim was a lot more outside of football type things. He was really organized and he was into the community and he wanted to get all the little things correct. Where Sam is more of a on the field, trying to give everyone as much free time as possible and trying to make football seem fun, more enjoyable to the players. Basically just trying to be the opposite of what he thought Jim was.

Thomas depicted different images of Jim and Sam. He started by simply describing these differences, that is, in regard to organizational skills, community links, time commitment required, and culture (e.g. serious versus fun). Jim was constructed as an organized, community focused individual, whereas Sam was constructed as "good guy" interested in freeing up time for the players and making the game fun. Thomas also noted how Sam's "good guy" approach was influenced by Sam's image of the previous coach. In effect Sam was trying to start fresh so that players could move away from the past and see the game differently than under the past leadership.

In offering a specific example of these differences Thomas' discontentment with the change process began to emerge. Thomas was uncertain if Sam's decision to cut down substantially on the number of meetings and the amount of time spent watching performance film was a good strategy. He noted how the new players needed to see their mistakes in order to improve upon them:

A lot of these guys "new guys" need to be watching film and seeing what it is that they're doing wrong. It's one thing to tell somebody "you can't do this", but it's another thing whenever you have video evidence to show them.

Thomas constructed a sense of professionalism and legitimacy around the old regime, something he implied was lacking under the new leadership. He commented that using film as a feedback and learning technique was a better, more "professional" way through which to improve upon the team's performance:

I think it makes it more professional when we're actually in there watching film and taking the time out to correct the little things and fix mental mistakes which I think is our biggest problem.

Despite the "failures" of the previous regime and that "the players all just quit on Jim and there obviously had to be a change made because the players wouldn't play for him anymore", Thomas still constructed the past leadership in a positive way to make his critique of the current regime more persuasive. In this way, Thomas reconstructed history in a favourable light to make better sense of his disappointment under the new leader:

Just little things. I think Sam is more "this sounds like a good idea so let's do it". Whereas Jim was a guy who [says] "okay what's the consequences of everything", like he took in the consequences of all of his actions. We were all promised black jerseys to play in this year. It was definitely something that wasn't needed and I don't think it was ever really feasible considering the budget that we have. As well, playing in [nearby city] for a game this year. I think if Jim had decided to do that he would have made sure everything went off. But Sam just kind of, "yeah lets play in [nearby city] it sounds like a good idea" and then doesn't follow through with those kind[s] of things. So I just don't think Sam has a set schedule, like "I need to do this, this, and this". It's just kind of, he goes into the office does what he wants to do that day.

In these comments Thomas constructed Jim as a "doer" who held himself accountable to his promises. Jim was involved and interested in the team and the community. Interestingly, Thomas reconstructed the past of the organization in a positive manner even though the team produced two winless seasons under the leadership and strategy of Jim. He also discussed how the team had, in effect, come to a point of no return under Jim's leadership, virtually refusing to play for him. Yet Thomas represented Jim as an organized, devoted, methodological leader who delivered on his promises. In contrast, Thomas painted a different picture of Sam, one comprised of less order and broken promises. At the same time, the "laid back" style of Sam had resulted in stronger relationships, between players, coaches, and players and coaches. It has also brought back some "fun" on the field:

One thing they "current head coach and supporting coaches" have achieved is, up until recently, I think they made football a little bit more fun to play. That's a huge change. I think that's the first thing that going to have to happen before the winning. I mean they go hand in hand, but you have to enjoy playing before you can win.

Again, the fragility of the team was revealed and how the failures of the past had drained the passion and excitement from the team.

In Thomas' retellings, the past played a significant role in how he understood the present and future of football at University Y. His crushed hopes of being a part of leading the team to change when he arrived four years before and the "revolving door" of leaders, both head coach and supporting coaches, were critical in his negotiation of the meanings of success and failure in this context.

Moreover, the history of football at University Y symbolized many different images. For example, football symbolized tradition in the minds of alumni, wasted resources in the minds of administration, and failure in the minds of faculty and students. For Thomas, this history made the process of managing competing emotions more complex.

Edward's story
Coach Jim also played a role in Edward's decision to select University Y in 2001. Edward reflected upon Coach Jim, and recalled him as "inspiring" and that he "got us involved with the school and felt that success on the field could be found beyond the field". Edward started his season four in 2005 with great hope, but the huge loss of the first game brought back feelings of doubt and uncertainty as to the future of the team and the program as a whole. The 2005 season, similar to the three seasons before it, was marked by disappointment, frustration, confusion, and doubt. As Thomas' experiences illustrated, the team's past continued to haunt the present performance and even the future of the organization. As a result, Edward too struggled with taking anything positive away from his four years of football at University Y:

Where is the program going? If you asked me that question last year I would have told you it is going up, or at least somewhere. I would have told you that before our first game this year. And then after that first game, the turnaround just wasn't there. So to say where it is going now, I have no idea. Football has encompassed all of my life for the past four years. Year four has been the icing on the cake of making it a negative experience on the whole. I can't go and talk to people about how I'm playing football and how great our team is, or even that we're a competitive team.

Edward appeared unable to separate the past from the present in regards to dealing with the disappointment of the continued losses in 2005, specifically the big loss of the first game. It was as if the past failures exaggerated the pain and torment of the present season's unmet expectations. Ironically, in other ways he drew upon the past to illuminate how the past failures paled in comparison to the present season's performance. In the quote that follows, Edward emphasized how performance had worsened under the current leadership. This illustrated how the present and past were connected, but the present symbolized new meanings of how he understood loss. As was the case with Thomas, in managing the mixed emotions of the unmet expectations of change, meanings around "success" and "loss" were renegotiated over time:

I want to say the only worthwhile measure is the win – loss category. But there is more to that. The way we've lost has been different than the past. In the past we did score points, but we still lost. Now we're getting shut out by teams. Last year we only had one, maybe two losses that were in the category of the losses that we had this year.

Edward looked to the leadership of the team to explain the team's performance. Edward drew attention to organizational skills and work ethic, as well as building a sense of community among players, coaches, and various other constituents:

Jim got us involved with the school. He was very good at being the head coach and doing the administrative stuff. He was a much harder worker and he was motivated. Jim was very interactive with all his players on a personal level. With Jim it had to look all pretty all the time. Jim felt that success on the field could be found outside, like beyond the field.

Edward did discuss how Coach Jim was not well liked by many players, who found him to be a "stickler and not open to, or understanding the team's needs". In an effort to find someone to blame, make sense of his tenure with the team and the unmet expectations of the current season, however, Edward used the past to construct the present less favourably. In the quote that follows, Edward contemplated Sam's style of managing. Edward commented that Coach Sam's focus upon football on the field without devoting attention to the administration of the team and his lack of focus upon building relationships with various constituents affected the legitimacy of Coach Sam's leadership style. Edward used wins as a moderator to rationalize his meaning making process of constructing the present leadership in a negative light compared to the past: "if he was producing wins, then who cares, but it's not so I think, the other things which can make the program look better or good should be addressed". Edward's comments revealed that his interpretations of success and effective leadership shifted over time as Coach Sam was unable to deliver wins. Edward looked to other symbols of legitimacy to determine success (e.g. relationships), but was unable to produce meaningful indicators of success in those symbols as well:

I guess Sam's idea was to just focus on football. I haven't seen any of his head coaching talents put on the playing field and I haven't seen them on the administrative side. For me, the legitimacy of Sam, kind of, dissipates. I look in other places where he could be effective, but when I look in other places I don't see anything either. Sam started off very personal. He was very interactive and sociable with the players, myself as well. He doesn't seem to be highly interested in forming relationships with people's families or, or the alumni class, or the school itself. He doesn't seem to be as active. Everything is so isolated this year. Whatever happens up in that office happens up in that office and no one knows about it outside of the office.

Similar to Thomas, Edward drew upon various symbols of legitimacy and professionalism expected of organizational leaders in making sense of the current change processes and Sam's role in this. Edward reflected upon how his interpretations changed over time and how the meanings he constructed about Sam and the change processes shifted. In doing this, he constructed the current organizational situation in a negative manner.

Edward also commented on the problems associated with the past leadership and the difficult task the present coach had in overcoming these problems and leading the team to success. Overall, in coming to terms with the disappointment and frustration of the zero wins in eight games the team had experienced in the present season, Edward reflected upon the past and reconstructed it positively as a point of comparison to make sense of his more recent experiences.

Richard's story
Richard decided to attend University Y for football because he wanted to make a difference and "to be valued by the team and be a part of the building process". This was his third season with the team and he emphasized the difficulty of letting go of past failures when faced with challenges in the current season. He felt that this inability to let go of the past in effect immobilized the team and prevented it from moving forward. Richard hoped that the downward spiral that the team had suffered for so long would soon come to an end and that he would get to experience some of the success yet to come:

When we played [another team] and we started to get blown out again, all I could think about was this is same thing that happened last year at this time and it's crumbling down again. And I just shut down, I almost shut down. I think faith and being able to continue on without getting down is the big thing for the team, the whole team. It's hard not to be cynical at this point, after almost three years of losing. I think the losing streak is a real big cancer for everyone. The emotional support when the team is down is lacking. It doesn't help when we don't have the emotional support after a big loss.

Not only did Richard reveal his struggles of letting go of the past in making sense of the present challenges, he also emphasized the emotional fragility of the team. A history of defeat had meant that when confronted with a similar situation as faced in the past, it was as if the team became frozen. This required significant reflection time and confidence coaching in order to move them ahead, something Richard felt was lacking under the current leadership. Leadership aside, he felt that the only way to beat the "cancer" was a win for this team. In the absence of wins, however, he noted that there were other positive indicators of success including, quality of play, relationships, trust and "happiness" among the team and coaches. These positive indicators in many ways he attributed to the new head coach and his leadership style, despite Richard's earlier comments about lack of emotional support after a loss. Here, the contradicting meanings around the success of the team and the current leadership began to emerge:

He's [Sam] very approachable.
I find it a lot easier to talk to coaches or just even just to be around them. Approachability and general family feeling of this whole team is a lot better. It feels like you are a part of something and everybody cares about you and you are all in this together. It helps me because it makes it easier not to blame anybody. When you're all in it together it is harder to point fingers. I think one of the main measures of success is whether the team is happy. We are a losing team again, so in that respect no one is happier. But general happiness I think is a change. I mean that kind of ties in with family, the feeling of family.

Richard appeared torn with regard to his evaluation of the current leadership of the team in comparison to the past. He noted that emotional support was lacking, yet the team still felt similar to a family built on trust and concern. Interestingly, the inability to move forward with wins and to shake off the past had resulted in confusion and contradiction in how Richard evaluated the success of the current leadership. Unlike Thomas, Richard noted that Sam's decisions to spend less time viewing videos and provide free time to the team were positive aspects of his leadership style. For Richard these decisions symbolized Sam's recognition that the team needed time outside of football without constant supervision and scolding. Moreover, contrary to Edward, Richard felt Sam had created a culture of inclusiveness and a sense of family whereby relationships were much stronger than under the past leadership. Richard was critical of Jim's need for order and control and noted that "he tried to teach us order in the most childish ways possible", yet at the same time, Richard reflected upon how the team always knew what was happening under Jim's leadership and that Sam was not as "go get'em" as Jim.

The past weighted heavily upon Richard's assessment of the team's ability to move forward. Although Richard did offer some points of criticism of the new leader, overall Richard drew upon on the past to construct the present more favourably. Sam was considered to be a reflective, approachable, easy-going leader who was sensitive to the needs of the players and coaches. Jim, on the other hand, was presented as a micro manager of players' time who did not give appropriate consideration to the diverse demands (e.g. school, social life) placed on players' time. In this way, the past was constructed less positively and Richard drew upon this to make his story of the present more positive. Despite a stronger bond between team members and coaches, something Richard attributed to the leadership style of the new head coach, moving the team out of the past required constant emotional support and an actual win.

Harry's story
This was Harry's third year as a supporting coach with University Y's football team. Harry's sense of duty to the team went beyond that of simply a coach. Harry was also a former graduate of University Y who had once been a member of the varsity football team. Coaching the team was about being a part of the tradition, respect, and pride that football at University Y symbolized to him and others. Coaching was also an opportunity to give something back. Harry felt that his time with the team as a player had allowed him to grow as an individual, both emotionally and physically, and he wanted to

ensure others were afforded the same opportunities that he had experienced as a student at University Y:

I wanted to give back a little from my experience and I've always had people who coached me. Being a "University Y" football player, there's a certain amount of pride that I wanted to see the team succeed and be successful as well and hopefully be able to give back.

He rationalized the challenges that he faced with the team over the last three years as a part of the process of competing and growing. "It's been a challenge from day one, that's why, I guess we compete and we play, because we like challenges".

Despite the challenges, he expressed that the present season had been more fulfilling personally than the two before. Under Coach Sam, relationships were stronger (among coaches and between coaches and players), responsibility was shared among coaches and players, and players began to see the "fun" in football again. Harry expressed how the coaching staff was more connected than in the past and this made a difference to how the coaches felt about the game and the players: "We eat together every night, we play cards you know together as a coaching staff. I've never done that with any of the other coaches 'in previous years'". For players it meant that they were treated as adults, trusted to make their own decisions without fear of being reprimanded:

It treats them more like men and gives them more responsibility, they don't need to check in all the time. Coach Sam is a players' coach, he's more fun to play for. I see the guys opening up and being able to be themselves around coaches without feeling they're going to be condemned.

Harry drew attention to Coach Sam's emphasis upon empowering both the players and the coaches. Harry felt that Coach Sam recognized the competing demands for time and emotional energy that these players faced outside of football. Football needed to be an escape from the negativity in the rest of their lives, something that the players were excited about. "Micromanaging" their time would not achieve that. Coach Sam's style facilitated a sense of family whereby players and coaches could be "themselves", feel comfortable and be at home:

Coach Sam is a good delegator, he gives you responsibility for a certain aspect of the team and entrusts you with that and gives it to you to accomplish. It's just more family oriented than a bunch of people working toward a common purpose sort of deal. From a coach's perspective it helps them to feel empowered to be able to do their job. During special teams time each coach has their individual special team they oversee. He [Coach Sam] says, "Harry you got seven minutes" and I take the seven minutes and say whatever I want, the way I want. He's completely hands off and lets you do your job. The negative side is that sometimes we're not as organized. Communication isn't as effective as it was before.

The informal relationships built by Coach Sam manifested through his special teams time, his "open door policy" and loosening up of rules were critical to Harry's sense of personal fulfillment as a coach. At the same time, however, Harry drew attention to how the lack of formal communication and practices under Coach Sam's leadership led to confusion and disorder on and off the field. Harry noted that there were not nearly as many meetings as under the leadership of Coach Jim. He felt that regular meetings were important for keeping up to date and also served as "training/learning time for other coaches". He also noted how Coach Sam had not formally articulated team goals and that the formalization of goals would have really helped the team. He was, however, critical of Coach Jim's need to control everything and hold meetings all the time to an extent that "the relevance got lost after a while for both players and coaches":

Before games in the last two years the special teams chart would be on the board in the locker room at the same time every week so when players came in they would know exactly what position they were playing, what time the bus is leaving and when they need to be there. Everything is laid out for them and no having to guess or ask around. Now you ask around, talk to figure out what's going on. It creates more community I guess.

Harry struggled with evaluating the effectiveness of the leadership style of Coach Sam. He contradicted himself in describing Sam's effectiveness in empowering the coaches and players. On the

one hand, there were stronger relationships among coaches and between coaches and players because Coach Sam did not micromanage the coaches or players. On the other hand, the lack of rules, something established as a norm under the previous Head Coach, affected players' and coaches' clarity and learning curve. Coach Sam had an open door and players felt connected to him, however, less order and fewer rules resulted in confusion and limited opportunity to learn from each other.

Similar to the players, Harry struggled to make sense of the meaning of success and failure given the team's lack of wins. He emphasized the importance of dealing with adversity, work ethic, academic performance, physical growth and the number of the incoming recruits as indicators of improvement and success:

Winning is not everything in life and it is how you respond to winning and losing. We're building young men who are learning to respond to adversity in life. Whether we're successful on the football field or not, it will help them down the road.

The inability of the team to deliver a win, however, was emotionally challenging for both the players and the coaches to such an extent that Harry had to constantly coach himself in the face of what seemed to be hopeless. Moreover, the need for a win to shed the trauma of past failures created tension among coaches, despite the strong relationships they had build under Coach Sam's leadership. Harry also expressed how Coach Sam's focus on wins placed the coaches and players in a position where they always felt like losers. An emphasis upon other goals that were clearly articulated to coaches and players would have helped the team understand success in different ways and might have enabled the team to move forward slowly:

When I challenge guys to not give up, to stay focused and to keep working hard, as much as I tell them that I have to tell myself that as well. What keeps me coming back is that I'm helping these guys prepare for life. I'm challenging the guys to keep persevering andI need to tell that to myself at the same time. We [coaches] all want to win and this really complicates the relationships. A tension exists with being competitive and wanting the win and not knowing what it's going to take to do it. I haven't seen any clearly stated team goals where we can all say we're working toward that, we're getting closer. I think a lot of emphasis has been placed on winning and what it takes to win. Just setting the goal of winning I think is an unrealistic goal.

In the face of continued losses on the field, Harry attempted to convince himself (or perhaps the first author as a player on the team) that winning was not the only goal. We acknowledge that our presence and questioning may have triggered his sense making processes here, as opposed to this appearing to be an expression of rationalization. Harry argued that success could be and should be measured in terms other than wins. Wins alone as the symbol of success, however, was so engrained that the players and coaches found it difficult to reconstruct the meaning of success and failure in this context. In order to rationalize his continued commitment to the team Harry worked hard to negotiate the meaning of success. He looked to Coach Sam to provide leadership in changing how the team and other constituents measured success and failure. This he felt would be necessary for the team to move forward. If this did not change he feared for the future of the program at University Y:

We can still improve all of the athletes from the point they arrive until they leave. I think by focusing on the smaller goals, we can help develop a program of pride and of excellence. Hopefully some day, when we get the right combination of athletes and students, that we're able to go to a playoff or a championship game. I think success is reached when clearly defined, predetermined goals are set and attained. When [Coach Sam] is able to communicate a vision and clearly define some goals, and we attain those, we can measure if we are successful or not.

It is also important to note that all individuals emphasized various moderating factors that made this change process more complicated. Discussions about the challenge of recruiting and retaining staff and players, as well as a small operating budget that restricted growth and development opportunities

were common in the stories. These challenges were not new to the present leadership; they were challenges that also haunted the previous coach. Individuals recognized these challenges in rationalizing the limited success of the team under the new and old leadership. Overall, individuals involved in this change process struggled to make sense of their experiences amidst a variety of complicating factors. Meaning making was a complex process of to-ing and fro-ing between past and present to make sense of the present and even the future. In this case study, these struggles were further complicated by the lack of perceived success under the present leadership. If under Sam's leadership the team had been able to produce "a win", the relationships between past and present and the meanings constructed around it might have been different.

Discussion

The symbols of change
The stories of Thomas, Edward, Richard and Harry revealed various symbols that served as cues for them in making sense of their experiences of the change processes with this football team. Organizational symbols are manifestations of an organization's culture used by members to make conscious and unconscious actions, beliefs, emotions and values more comprehendible (Armenakis *et al.*, 1995). The endless rules of Coach Jim, the community relationships built by Coach Jim, the reduced play back video times required by Coach Sam, the unmet promise of new jerseys by Coach Sam, the special team coaches' time under Coach Sam's leadership, the special teams' chart under Coach Jim's leadership, and the free time on Sundays encouraged by Coach Sam all played a critical role in the meaning making processes for the players and coaches of University Y's football team. The meanings attributed to these symbols, however, were not always consistent from individual to individual, illuminating the complexity of meaning making and change. The individuals' histories with the organization served as their base of knowledge in the meaning making process. History was a resource that allowed individuals to go back and forth between the past and present as they struggled to make sense of their experiences of change.
Armenakis *et al.* (1995, p. 229) argue that triggers of change "set in motion a series of mental shifts as members of the change target strive to understand and redefine a situation". The change experienced by the members of University Y's football team was marked by several triggers including the dismissal of Coach Jim, the hiring of Coach Sam, the first loss of the 2005 season and the end of the 2005 without a win. As change occurs (e.g. hiring of Coach Sam) Armenakis *et al.* (1995) further argue that individuals may interpret events as a double exposure, whereby the established norms of the existing culture (or the past) are used to interpret events that are a part of the change. This double exposure involves interpreting the new actions and events as different from the existing norms (or the past), as well as cues of the new culture not yet fully articulated (Armenakis *et al.*, 1995). In other words, as was evident in the stories of these members, the history or past of an organization plays an active role in the meaning making of change and its associated symbols in the present.
Thomas drew attention to the reduction of video play back time, the absence of a set schedule, and the promises of Sundays off and new jerseys as symbols of the new regime. Norms established under Jim's leadership formed the basis through which Thomas negotiated the meanings of these symbols. He recognized that Sam's decisions to reduce video play back time and Sundays off were about building trust and respect among the team in a way that was different than under Jim's leadership. At the same time, for Thomas extensive play back time and a well communicated formalized schedule symbolized accountability, professionalism and legitimacy based upon his experiences with the past. In comparison to the past, under Sam's leadership these decisions represented a lack of legitimacy and disorder. Moreover, the promise of Sundays off (which Thomas noted was a practice that ended part way through the season) and the promise of new jerseys that never materialized represented broken promises and in turn a lack of accountability. It was felt that these were promises on which Jim would have delivered or for which Jim would have accepted responsibility. For Richard, however, some of these same symbols took on different meanings. The Sundays off, less video play back time and the general loosening up of rules that had been established under Jim leadership symbolized respect and trust. Coach Sam was seen to be both friend and coach, something Jim was unable to accomplish. Contradictions also emerged within Harry's story. Sharing meal times and connecting socially outside of football symbolized a sense of family among coaches. The special team coaches' time symbolized trust and empowerment. The absence of rules manifested through limited meetings and no special teams' charts, both established norms under Coach Jim's leadership, however, symbolized a lack of order, confusion and a lost opportunity to learn from each other.
Isabella (1992, cited in Armenakis *et al.*, 1995) notes that the time frame following organizational change events will be marked by a search for indicators of the effectiveness of the change process.

For the members of University Y's football team, wins served as the ultimate symbol of success. In the absence of wins, individuals looked to different cues and engaged in a process of renegotiating the meanings of success and failure in this context. Players shifted their focus to individual measures of success (e.g. opportunity to play in professional league), the effort of the team, and the relationships among players, coaches and the community. Even the meaning of failure was renegotiated during this process and again the past played a critical role in the renegotiation of this meaning. Edward commented that the past had been marked by failure or a lack of wins. In making sense of the unmet expectations of the current change process, however, the past became a symbol of respectful failure whereby the team had loss by a reasonable score. In contrast, failure in the current season took on new meaning. Loss came to symbolize "real" failure, whereby the gap in the scores of the games between University Y and their competitors was so wide that failure under the new leadership symbolized humiliation, loss of respect and hopelessness. Harry pointed out that the coaches also struggled to reconstruct the meaning of success as more than simply wins. Despite offering numerous additional measures of success, Harry noted that the supporting coaches and players continued to experience feelings of failure in the face of no wins. Harry also argued that Coach Sam played a critical role in the likelihood that the meaning of success in this context could be changed. We argue that the engrained meaning of success as wins in this context may be transferred to other discourses of organization success beyond the sports context (e.g. share price, net income, growth).

As revealed by Podlog's (2002) research on amateur athletes in Canada, negotiating success and failure is a challenging and complex process. Many varsity athletes make a commitment to the sport and team for four to five years and this involves a lot of hard work and sacrifice (Podlog, 2002). The individuals interviewed for our research grappled with the meaning of no wins over time and struggled with constructing a satisfying rationale for their continued commitment to a "losing" team. We also saw how multiple meanings were constructed around the same events and actions. For example, the organizational skills and emphasis upon meetings evident under Jim's leadership were re-told positively by Thomas and negatively by Richard. Furthermore, through interaction these meanings were constantly negotiated and reconstructed (Podlog, 2002).

Immobilized by the past

Great hope is created when a new coach, manager or leader is brought into a poorly performing sports team. It is common in professional sports, however, for a team to experience a decline in performance initially when a new leader is hired (Audas *et al.*, 1997, 2002). With so much invested in the success of the team, whether professionally or personally, this process can be difficult for professional (and amateur) players and existing coaching staff. In this organization, the past immobilized the players to such an extent that they could not see beyond this transition period. The coaching staff, as evidenced through Harry's story, also struggled to let go of the past. In his work on the strategic presentation of history Ooi (2002) contends mediators and recipients engage in processes of negotiation and persuasion in presenting the past in a particular way. For the individuals in this study, the reconstruction and negotiation of the past served as a tool to facilitate sense making around emotionally stirring experiences.

Ooi (2002, p. 618) notes, "history is a resource that can mobilize emotions" and "is interpreted by recipients in relation to their own existing experiences". The senior players interviewed for this research revealed that their experiences of failure under the past regime were so emotionally stirring that when faced with similar challenges in the present season, they effectively became frozen in time, unable to move forward and shed the trauma of the past. The team's inability to move forward was further compromised by the complexity of the situation whereby the team felt as if they had to take responsibility for the emotions of other constituents. Thomas noted how the team members not only had to manage their own fears of history repeating itself, but also manage the emotions of disappointment experienced by alumni and anticipated failure felt by faculty, students and administration. Overall, the past made the team emotionally fragile to such an extent that it prevented them from moving forward.

In reflecting upon the role of leadership and the unmet expectations of change, individuals drew upon the past to make sense of their present experiences. Team members began the season under the new leadership with great hope expecting to shed a past marked by failure. The change process was viewed as an "upward release from the weights of the past" (Wolfram Cox, 1997, p. 642). Over time, in making sense of the feelings of disappointment, frustration, and confusion that accompanied the unmet

expectations of the new leader and his strategies, however, some individuals rationalized the situation by reconstructing the past more favourably. Similar to the stories of participants who had experienced organizational change in Wolfram Cox's (1997) research, these individuals engaged in a process of "loss as regret" whereby the present was compared to a rosier past. It was an organizational nostalgia of sorts whereby disappointment in the present triggered an attachment to the past (Wolfram Cox, 2001). Given the two winless seasons under the previous head coach, it is also likely that some of these individuals reconstructed the past more favourably than it was experienced at the time. "Memory itself is a reiterated act of interpretation. As we remember the past, we reconstruct it in accordance with our present ideas of what is important and what is not" (Berger, 1963, p. 70, cited in Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, p. 575). For others,

such as Richard, despite the disappointment of the present change process, the past served as a negative comparison point that provided him with some hope that the present was better and that the future could be brighter. Harry also emphasized the possibilities of the future in his discussion of the need for clearly defined goals, so as to shift his focus from the past and present to what could be in the future (in relation to what was in the past).

Gioia et al. (2002) contend that history is malleable and in this organization reconstructing the past allowed individuals a means through which to make better sense of their present experiences. Whether re-told positively or negatively, the past offered continuity into the present (Ooi, 2002) to such an extent that many organizational members were unable to move forward. In this way, change can best be understood as a process of to-ing and fro-ing between past and present (and even future).

Practical implications and conclusions

The multiple meanings associated with the symbols of change and the inability to let the past go in this organization allude to the difficulty leaders face in coping with the multiple realities of change (Beech and Cairns, 2001). Many different interpretations emerged; meanings were constantly renegotiated and these meanings played a role in individual action. Yet, as argued by Kan and Parry (2004, p. 487), identifying and reconciling paradox facilitates the illumination of underlying issues and "offers an in-depth insight into the processes leading to both negative and positive perceptions of change". If leaders become sensitive to the different interpretations of events and actions it offers them a better means through which to "grapple with success" (Fowler and Fowler, 1964, cited in Beech and Cairns, 2001, p. 1305) among the complexity, ambiguity and fluidity of organizational change and meaning. The change processes described in this study were a situation of "multilayered reality", whereby underlying assumptions about the "world behind the scenes" were broadly shared, but multiple meanings were constructed by individuals involved (Beech and Cairns, 2001). Members of the football team spoke the same language; they were highly committed to the organizational purpose and were motivated primarily by non-monetary factors. At the same time, however, we could see how individuals constructed different meanings around events and these subtleties had "real" implications. Beech and Cairns (2001, p. 1321) contend in this type of situation, leaders "should seek to develop and support shared meaning for coping with difference, recognizing, however, that alternatives are not necessarily set in opposition to each other". Coping with this multilayered reality is not an easy process with clear "answers", but it is nevertheless an important one for the individuals and organization involved.

It is also important to note that in representing the stories of these individuals, our intent was not to uncover "what really" happened at the organization. Similar to Buchanan (2003) and Collins and Rainwater (2005) (who argue it in different ways), we offer a number of alternative and local understandings of change processes so as to embrace the contradiction, multiplicity and fluidity of change. Moreover, by taking history into account we illustrate that the past cannot be separated from the present (or future) and that the past can serve as a force that prevents the organization and its members from moving forward. That the past can also be reconstructed (Gioia et al., 2002) makes it even more problematic for those experiencing and coping with change.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Atlantic Schools of Business Conference 2006, Sackville, Canada.
2. Football refers to "American football" not soccer.
3. University Y is a member of Canadian Inter-University Sports (CIS). The CIS consists of 27 teams divided into four conferences including: Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario and Canada West. Conference championships are held among teams within each of the four conferences. The winning teams from each of the conferences compete to play in the national championship. Annually, CIS awards All Canadian Awards to the top players in each position across the four conferences, as well as five national awards to varsity players who exemplify various aspects of excellence.

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