It ain't about Words – The Role of Aesthetics in Enhancing an Organizations Capacity to Act. The Case of a Semi-professional American Football Team in Europe

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Abstract

Much has been written about Knowledge Acquisition and supporting factors in order to build an organizations capacity to act. This case study reports insights from an entire year of managing a collegiate semi-professional American Football team in Europe and the implications for Knowledge Management in practice. Among the most important findings is the observation that the success of even the most elaborate and well-intentioned strategies for individual, as well as organizational knowledge acquisition and capacity building relies heavily on the individual´s aesthetic perceptions of respective measures and actions taken. Furthermore, in the context of non-professional organizations, the perceived success of the organization appears to be strongly tied to the fulfillment of each stakeholders value expectations towards the organization.

Keywords: Organizational Aesthetics, Capacity to Act, Case Study, non-rational Knowledge, Knowledge acquisition

1. Introduction

Athletes who engage in competitive sports want to win. Thus, it would be easy to say that the purpose of a sports team is to win games. Yet, the problem is that winning is not an action itself, but a result of other actions. In order to win, a sports team has to build up its *capacity to act* (Sveiby, 2001), represented through the players skills. However, particularly in the case of non-professional sports, the main motivation for the individual player to improve, stems from his or her perception of the benefit that he/she gets from participating in the sports team. This perception can be *rational* (e.g. improving one's fitness for the sake of health) or *aesthetic* (e.g. the pleasure of throwing a football in a perfect spiral) and there are many different reasons and benefits to engage with a team.

The intention of this study is to explore the process of enhancing a team's capacity to act from the perspective of Knowledge Management (KM) and to link the findings to recent developments in the field of KM. In contrast to many other studies that emphasize a very technically-rational approach to the dealing with knowledge (Adams & Ingersoll, 1990; Mele, 2010), this study pays particular attention to aesthetics as a source of meaning (Shrivastava et al., 2017) that drives the process of capacity building.

Overall, the question that motivates this study is *how aesthetics influence an organization´s capacity to act?*

The case of a non-profit, semi-professional sports team provides for interesting data, because the overriding factor of money as a primary motivation to engage with the organization is subordinate in this context. This in turn requires an organization to be sensitive to other value expectations – apart from financial profits – that it must fulfill for its stakeholders in order to be considered successful.

2. Theoretical Background

According to the knowledge-based view of the firm, knowledge is a key resource for organizations to build competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Penrose, 1959; Spender, 1996). Hence, it is said that firms who effectively manage their knowledge are more likely to be successful and can adapt better to changing environments. The same holds true for non-profit organizations (Lettieri et al., 2004).

There are different approaches to the management of knowledge that adapt different definitions of the term 'knowledge'. For this paper, we will draw to the definition of knowledge as *capacity to act* (Sveiby, 1997, 2001), because it emphasizes that organizations are groups of individuals who have created a shared frame of reference, yet each individual has to re-create his or her own reality through personal experience. This view goes well with the second concept that is leading this article, namely aesthetics. Aesthetics can be seen as the counterpart to rational

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knowledge and is considered one of the two components in the theory of knowledge (Baldessarelli et al., 2022). The term was introduced in the 18th century by German philosopher Alexander G. Baumgarten, and describes knowledge and meaning that stems from sensorial perceptions, as opposed to rational knowledge that mainly stems from thought (Baumgarten, 1750). This idea later also influenced the works of M. Polanyi (1962) and his conception of tacit knowledge that roots in the idea of direct personal experience as an invaluable source of (new) knowledge. Such aesthetic perceptions and tacit knowledge are mostly inexplicable, meaning that they are inherently bound to the knower and cannot be put into explicit terms. However, as has been argued for example by Barnard (1938) or Strati (1999), some aspects of organizing and organizations can be better, if not only, understood through aesthetics. During the collection of data for this study it became evident that we would need exactly such a concept which would cover non-rational forms of knowledge in order to explain the situations and behaviors we observed.

Aesthetics allows us to convey meaning that would not be accessible otherwise (Strati, 1992), but still the focus of organizational research has mainly been on instrumental, rational analysis (Adams & Ingersoll, 1990; Taylor & Hansen, 2005). This also holds true for the field of knowledge management (KM), where, as far as the authors knowledge goes, aesthetics have not made its way into the debate so far.

Although Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) have raised awareness for the importance of tacit knowledge for organizational knowledge creation, superordinate study of aesthetics as a source of tacit knowing has not taken place. The present study hence attempts to address this gap in the KM literature and examines, how aesthetics blend in to organizational knowledge and the development of an organizations capacity to act.

Despite the lack studies on aesthetics in the KM literature, the field of organizational aesthetics offers already some interesting perspectives on this form of non-rational knowledge from our sensory perceptions. The concept has been observed, for example, in the context of leadership (Hansen et al., 2007), creative work and work routines (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007), performing arts (Stephens, 2021) and sustainability (Shrivastava et al., 2017) but also in terms of a meta theory for organizing (Adams & Ingersoll, 1990; White, 1996). As such the concept allows for the consideration of individual and subjective perceptions of the organization which makes it predestined for the analysis of meaning and individual value expectations.

Besides the definition of knowledge and aesthetics, we encountered the topic of organizational purpose during the analysis of the case data. This concept was raised to describe, what the organization under examination was about, starting from the perspective of its stakeholders. Accordingly, we took up recent literature on organizational purpose to find a matching definition for this work. George et al. (2021) define purpose in for-profit firms as "*the essence of an organization's existence by explaining what value it seeks to create for its stakeholders. In doing so, purpose provides a clear definition of the firm's intent, creates the ability for stakeholders to identify with, and be inspired by, the firm's mission, vision, and values, and establishes actionable pathways and an aspirational outcome for the firm's actions*" (George et al., 2021, p. 7) another definition by Kragulj (2022) is applicable to all sorts of organizations and also emphasizes stakeholders value expectations: "*purpose [is] the fundamental configuration of those value expectations of legitimate stakeholders that cause them to organize as and engage in an organization in order to fulfill them.*" (Kragulj, 2022, p. 132). Considering the definition of Knowledge as *capacity to act*, and the shared frame of reference inherent to this conception of organizational knowledge, these definitions of organizational purpose blend in neatly into our understanding of organizations.

3. Method

The presented work follows a single in depth interpretative case study design. It is an attempt to empirically examine, from a KM perspective, how an organization, in this case a sports team, can achieve the best possible performance and what is important therefore. Particular emphasis is put on non-rational elements of knowledge, i.e. aesthetics, that accompany the process. As such, the case study is exploratory in terms of the factors that play a role for the team's success. Yet, wherever the data allows to draw conclusions on the underlying mechanisms, it takes up an explanatory perspective. The idea for the study stems from the author's personal experience with the observed organization that also allowed for extensive data collection over a longer period of time.

The author has been an active member of the observed sports team for over six years, before stepping down as a player and taking up a new role as the teams head coach. This step also led to the idea of using the rich experience of participating in and co-creating the organization in a more systematic way, and triggered the research project presented in this paper.

From the described circumstances together with the research question, a case study design appeared to be the most feasible and appropriate methodological approach to understand the real world case

and derive pertinent conditions for that context (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) defines a case study as "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth […] within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident." (Yin, 2018, p. 45).

Case studies are generally well suited to explore little understood processes or behaviors that are the aim of *how* or *why* questions (Meyer, 2001). Additionally, they allow for the study of different aspects and their relation to each other in management research (Gummesson, 1988). Furthermore, the case study design (unlike other qualitative research methodologies like Grounded Theory or ethnographic approaches), allows the use of existing theory and conceptual categories in the analysis of the data, as it was intended in this research (Meyer, 2001, p. 331).

Selection of the case: The case of the American Football Team was selected for two reasons. The first is that the team provides a rare opportunity to observe an organization continuously from an insiders perspective over a longer period of time. The second reason is for the fact that the team is an organization that depends on the voluntary engagement of its members. Therefore, the rationale was that it would be easier to identify different factors for building the capacity to act, apart from monetary interests. For reasons of access, the choice was made for a single case study design (see Limitations).

Sampling: The aim of sampling in case study research is to select cases that are likely to extend emergent theory and are rich in information. Thus cases are selected purposefully rather than randomly. (Meyer, 2001, p. 333). The reason for selecting this particular case represents the goal to go into depth on aesthetics as a part of the process of building an organization´s capacity to act. This requires profound access to the organization under examination which seemed to be given through the role of the author as a member of the team (see Birnholtz et al., 2007 for a similar approach). Additionally, the situation of the team was that there had been considerable change in personnel just before the beginning of the observation period, starting from a new head coach (the author) towards a new general manager and many new players. This would make up for interesting power dynamics during the quest to shape the organization in a way that would be beneficial for everybody involved.

Sampling time: The observation period lasted for almost an entire football season, starting in August with initial preparations for the first practices in fall, and ended with the end of the regular season in the beginning of June. During that time, observations were made continuously through the entire time.

Data Collection: During the observation period, data was collected through all sorts of different encounters with the team. The most regular point of data collection were the teams practices, three times each week, amounting to about 130 sessions in total. Another regular encounter were weekly coaches meetings, about 50 in total. The author disclosed on more than one occasion that besides his occupation as the teams head coach, he would do research on the organization. Still, he was generally not perceived as a researcher but entirely as a member of the organization, who – as people knew – had a second affiliation as a researcher. Hence, the type of data collection through observation can be best described as completely participant in the setting (Meyer, p. 340). Those data collection points were complemented by occasional team events, smaller meetings with some players, and many informal talks before and after practices. Formal data sources include meeting minutes, written memory logs, messages in group chats, notes on practice scripts, communication with internal and external parties via email as well as the teams appearance in different social media channels.

4. Case Description

The study focuses on a semi-professional American football team, the Tigers, which was founded roughly seven years ago as part of an initiative to introduce college sports in Austria. Despite not earning money from the sport, the athletes, who are all students of the university that the team stands for, demonstrate a high level of professionalism in terms of their training and commitment. The team trains three times a week on the field, and athletes additionally conduct independent strength training three to four times a week. Adding to this, there are several meetings a week for each position, or sometimes the whole team, to discuss tactics, or analyze upcoming opponents together. All in all, this can lead to about 20 hours of work that the players invest in their sport each week.

All players, coaches, and members of the organizational staff participate out of personal interest and do not receive any financial compensation. In contrast to American collegiate athletes, their European counterparts usually do not have any chances turn professionals after their college football career, as there are no professional leagues in the country and the level of American football in Europe is not high enough to take a leap across the pond to the US or Canadian professional leagues.

The team comprises around 50 active players and 9 coaches, some of which also assume roles in the team's management. Additionally, there is a changing number of volunteers that perform different tasks,

from helping at practices and games to promoting the team and organizing social events related to the team. Regarding formal roles, the team has a general manager who is responsible for all organizational matters and a head coach overseeing the team's athletic performance. Then there is a social media manager, who is – in collaboration with the league officials – responsible for the corporate image and branding of the team.

While training and playing American football is a significant aspect of the team's activities, other factors also play a vital role in the organization's purpose. The team's vision emphasizes not only achieving athletic success, but also facilitating personal growth among the young individuals involved. The belief is that sports, and in particular team sports, have many positive effects on the development of young people. The team competes against other university teams and, due to past successes and the potential for new players offered by a large university, is considered one of the favorites to win the league. However, in the last season, the Tigers unexpectedly lost in the semifinals to a seemingly weaker team. At the beginning of the following season, the team then experienced some major personnel changes in key positions and the former head coach decided to return to active play.

This situation led to a reorganization of the team, the teams management and some changes in the general philosophy of the organization, making it an opportune case to study the dynamics that would occur during this restructuring. This case study hence accompanies and observes the Tigers throughout an entire season, analyzing how they could effectively come together as a cohesive unit in order to achieve the ultimate goal of winning the championship and building a team where everyone would feel "at home".

5. Findings & Discussion

Theory on Knowledge Creation in the field of KM is already very rich. Thus, it is not surprising that some of our observations will yield to established concepts and theories. However, we think that there are some findings that have the potential to broaden our understanding of building an organizations capacity to act. In this section we will take the reader through the football season, along with all its challenges and try to explain why and how we discovered the findings that we present. We will also give examples of particularly remarkable situations contextualize these findings.

Offseason – Preparations

Before the actual football season begins, there is a period of planning. In the case of the Tigers, the offseason lasts from July to Mid-September, where the first practice is usually scheduled. In the Offseason, players usually do other things than football and gather strength for the upcoming season. Strength, however, does not (only) mean physical strength. Even more important in the semi-professional environment is the gathering of motivation. Most players need the summer break to gain some distance to their sport in order to come back motivated in fall. From an aesthetics perspective, it seems to be the feeling of freedom (not being bound to something) that is particularly important here. For the coaches the off-season was an interesting time, because it was a time of major changes. As the former head coach returned to be an active player, he left a void to be filled. The author was then asked whether he wanted to become the next head coach, because he knew the team well and was commonly accepted as a mediating person. Although reluctant to accept the offer at first, he agreed to assume the position. The decision had both rational and aesthetic components. Interesting for the case is a strong aesthetic feeling of conscientiousness – feeling obliged to the organization. This perception generally turned out to be a powerful driver for engagement in the organization. From self-reflection and talks to other team members we found that this perception often roots in the wish not to let anyone down. Speaking about capacity building, the more important the team and the players are to somebody, the more conscientiousness the person was likely to experience and thus, the more this person was willing to sacrifice for the team. The downside of this is that when people feel their actions unappreciated, their negative reaction is also stronger. Perceiving appreciation is almost entirely aesthetic as it showed. For coaches, this can be a player just enjoying practice and excelling on his position, while players can get greatest joy from making a good play and noticing how others admire that moment of peak performance.

Coach A.: "Watching S. is a real highlight. His drive towards the ballcarrier is just amazing. I love it!"

Player N.: "Boys, we were looking so crisp as a whole unit in today´s team session. That is exactly the way to go!"

Such appreciation often led to a positive reinforcement of what has been appreciated.

First Practices – Wins that feel like losses

Due to the unconventional schedule of the season, where there are games in fall, followed by a winter break and then again games in spring, preparation time for the first game is short. Adding to this, the team had not yet found its modus operandi. This was not because people would not try hard enough, but because the many new roles had not yet found their

"style" of managing. During the off-season, new coaches built an expectation, how they would be as a coach, what they would do and how they would design practice. In the first practices these expectations had a clash with reality. This led to the perception of unease that was further reinforced by an implicit (and probably even unintended) power struggle of the former head coach and the new offense coaches. Although on paper, the team had a roster almost as good as ever, not much went further. Reflecting on the situation we find that much of this quasi-standstill was caused by people feeling annoyed of the situation, forcing them into defensive positions.

Coach D.: *"Let me be honest with you. I'm pretty [profanity] fed up with that situation right now. Way too much bickering and nothing positive or constructive..."*

At that time, especially on offense, it felt like there was no room for experimenting with the playbook (the strategies that the team would play) which would have been urgently needed to find the best strategy to progress. If something would be wrong, in a sense that it did not work for the team, the initiator would face glee from players or coaches with opposing opinion. This is remarkable because the general tone of interacting in the team has always been very friendly and supportive. Yet, it seemed at that point, people were missing a feeling of appreciation for what they had done in the past, or for what they would do now that caused them to throw a wrench in the works. This was despite the fact that gratitude for all previous achievements had been verbally expressed several times. A takeaway from that finding is that the process of building capacity is hindered by a negative prevailing mood. Still, the team managed to win their first game in fall due to some key players individual qualities. That win, however, felt like a loss to many, because everyone knew that the team could have performed much better had they been able to get a hold of the internal power struggles earlier. Instead of celebrating the win together, some players and coaches quickly left, feeling frustrated. This showed impressively, how the expected value towards the team is more than winning games, although everyone believed that winning was the only thing that counted at first. Instead, one of the most prevalent aspects of the teams purpose seems to be to act as a platform to fulfill the desire of being an important part of something – being valuable.

Team Tryouts – Acquiring new talent

The goal of every sports team is to get the best players possible to play for them. But following up on the previous argument on the organizations purpose, the question is whether the "best" players are really the best players for the team. When selecting new players in a non-professional team, sportive skill is only one amongst many aspects which is undoubtedly important but can be overrode by others. Sympathy, for example, is a huge factor when new players join the team. The decision whether a player fits into the team or not, is almost entirely based on aesthetics. At the same time, it is one of the most essential decisions for the functioning of the whole system as it impacts organizational culture. Selecting the wrong people, as skilled as they may be, can ruin the pleasure of being in the team for others. Worst case, some people who are important for the team on a sporty level might even leave because they do not like what new players bring into the team. This is again an encounter with an aesthetic value expectation towards the organization.

The second interesting finding when selecting new players for building an organizations capacity to act is the assessment of recruits. There are two considerations that are very important. First, whether a player is coachable, meaning whether he is able to react appropriately to the inputs he gets and can improve his game by working together with his coach. Coaches usually assess this skill by having the player perform some drills, giving some inputs and looking at the results. It is difficult to describe what leads to the impression that a player is coachable, because again this perception is mainly aesthetic.

Coach D.: *"I have a problem with people who are not coachable, talk back from their first practice, just disappear and then come back just to spread a bad mood throughout their unit."*

The second consideration regards the position that the player could be assigned to. This decision is in part depending on the physical appearance of the player but also depends on what kind of person the player seems to be. As one coach so thoroughly put it

Coach R.: *"[laughing] Some guys are meant to play defense!"*

There have been players stagnating on one position, who completely exceled on another position that aligned better with their identity as a player. Thus, to create a well performing team, coaches need to have a distinct sense for their players identity that goes far beyond the rational analysis of a players strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, some players have the unique capability to influence other players through their presence and actions. It is extremely difficult but also very useful to identify those key persons and know how they influence their surroundings. Such players can leverage team performance in both directions, thus coaches need an eye for those persons and must be able to direct their energy towards where it is needed (or control it when it is not needed).

As has been shown through these observations, the management of players as the people they are, is crucial for the sportive success of the team. Yet, by no means is this possible through rational analysis let alone rule-based decision making. We observed that the better a coach can feel and understand who his players are, the better his unit would perform but also the more fun players would have at practice.

Winter Break – Building a shared identity

An important learning from the fall games was that in an organization like this team, one cannot force anything. If the goal is not appealing, nobody will pursue it. Thus, in order to achieve what is necessary for athletic success, respective actions or at least the reasons for them, need to be desirable for players and coaches alike.

In winter, the team usually prepares for the spring season by working on the basics. This means building athletic capabilities like strength, endurance or agility, things that require hard work which is not always as entertaining as the sport itself. Winter is also the only time where there is enough time to substantially improve player's individual skills. Thus, this time of the season is very important but also notoriously known for lower attendance rates at practice. Usually the narrative would be to 'force' players to come to practice through the introduction of a minimum attendance in order to be allowed to play in games. Yet, the approach by the team during the observed time was different. Coaches tried to address the players pride and self-conception as determined individuals, creating positive aesthetic appeal around the strenuous and uncomfortable winter workouts. What initially started as an attempt to get people to practice through the metaphorical idea of "pull" not "push", turned out to build a new sense of cohesion. "Being in this together because we want to, not because we have to" seemed to be the motive that players perceived as attractive. This insight also points to the concept of increased self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982).

Spring Games – Building trust through consistency

The first game after the winter break always feels special because nobody knows what to expect after the long winter break with all the new players that made it into the team. The implicit expectation was that the team should be able to win the first game against an allegedly weaker opponent. However, nobody dared to openly proclaim that the Tigers were the better team. The problem at that time was that the factors for success had not yet been identified. Thus, for many players it was a time of uncertainty, whether the team would be good enough to actually win. Coaches had to somehow convey a sense of trust and stability

in order to counter tendencies of unrest, when e.g. practices did not go as planned. It turned out that a consistent, level-headed approach to dealing with problems helped, but required coaches to accept the fact that there was no guarantee that whatever they did would in the end work for the team – a feeling that some coaches reported to be inconvenient. However, this stability during a crucial time of the season – combined with a win in the first game – had very positive effects on players trust in the coaching staff. As pointed out in the limitations, it would nevertheless be interesting what would have happened in case of a loss. As a takeaway, we figured that leadership can have an impact on capacity building through enduring uncertainty and maintaining consistency for the team. This also requires leaders personal strength to endure when people get restless and push for change because they are eager to see results faster than they appear. There is, however, a fine line between maintaining consistency and being stubborn. Knowing when to adapt is hence an indispensable counterpart to being consistent. Both skills require tacit knowledge and an attentive perception of the situation.

Approaching the Playoffs – Prioritizing value expectations

The team got better with every game they played which made room for other value expectations to surface. While having to maintain sportive success, it became challenging to give everybody the opportunity to play. From an entirely rational, performance oriented standpoint, the best players should be on the field as long as necessary to secure the win. Then it would be time to bring in substitutes to rest key players and allow others to collect game experience. However, especially in close games, this strategy almost certainly leads to a disappointment of all those who did not get to play. Nevertheless, those players have a very important role for the team, because they enable more repetitions in practice and thus contribute significantly to building the team's capacity to act. Losing them, because they feel unappreciated is not an option (remember the context of voluntary commitment). Thus, there must be something in there for every player on the team. In this regard, it is crucial to know what each individual player expects from his participation in the team in order to give him something that makes his engagement meaningful, even if he cannot play in a game. To our understanding, this is one of the most important applications of non-rational knowledge in building an organization's capacity to act. It requires the highest degrees of empathy and discretion to be successful, but, if done properly, it seems to leverage the perceived meaningfulness not only of the players

directly concerned, but of the entire team and thus yields to an increase in overall athletic performance.

Again, this requires player's trust and confidence in the good intentions of coaches. Otherwise, people will feel betrayed and stripped from their chance to play, which is fatal for the engagement of a player in the absence of other value expectations to be met. In general, what many observations yield is that building an organizations capacity in a non-profit context is very much drawn to the management of personal sensibilities and emotional states. This can only be achieved through non-rational means, including aesthetics and tacit knowledge.

Synthesis

Apart from athletic success and the wish to engage in a sport, we found that there are far more value expectations than we initially expected. Contrary to our initial idea, where we thought that value expectations could be "collected" and written down, we found that on many occasions, it is not feasible to think of those value expectations in explicit terms at all.

Firstly, this is because many decisions in the team have to be taken instantaneously, there is simply no time for explicit considerations of how to fulfill certain value expectations. The decision-maker is forced to rely on immediate judgment that is based on his or her tacit understanding of a situation. Nevertheless, the decision can substantially impact other people's perception of the effectiveness of the organization.

Secondly, when inquiring for value expectations, people have a hard time articulating their own value expectations in explicit terms. This is partly because they are hard to put in words, partly because people seem to not know what they expect unless they experience it. When asked, players are sometimes unable to say why they actually pursue this particular sport but, nevertheless, they feel attracted by it and enjoy themselves participating in it.

Another impression we got from the data, yet this one is impossible to confirm through this type of research, is that sometimes, people do not want to admit a particular value that they expect from the interaction with the organization (e.g. feeling superior, achieving higher status, …). Still, these expectations might exist and seem to influence how people behave within the context of the organization. If there were such consciously hidden value expectations, they could contribute to explaining actions of people that would otherwise appear irrational and inconsistent.

Concluding, we observed that most everyday decisions are made on the basis of aesthetic perceptions and tacit knowledge. Knowing what to do in a given situation and acting according to the organizations purpose (understood as shared value expectations) goes hand in hand with the tacit feeling for the situation of the deciding agent. Thus, building an organization's capacity to act, at least in this context, requires a sense of the organization's purpose, through which that purpose can be continuously deployed in all actions taken in, or on behalf of the organization.

This is important because our observations showed that building the teams capacity to act relies on the engagement of the organizations members which is linked to the degree of meaning that people perceive in their actions. Thus it is necessary to generate a meaningful environment for the members of the organization. Studies already identified a connection between purpose and meaningfulness (Gartenberg & Serafeim, 2022; Jasinenko & Steuber, 2022) which makes purpose a good concept over which to address meaning.

6. Limitations

Due to the research design, there are several limitations to this study that will be addressed in this section. First, it is important to note that the goal of this work was primarily to explore the context of capacity building in a semi-professional sports team. The work does not claim to provide an exhaustive theory on the basis of the case. Rather it aims to report noticeable insights from practice and link them to existing theories to deepen their understanding.

Regarding the research methodology, one limitation is the single case study design. Due to a lack of access to other teams, it was not possible to acquire data that would allow a comparison between two cases (Yin, 2018, p.98). Comparing the sports team with a another team, similar organizations (e.g. some other club) or even for-profit organizations would be beneficial for future theorizing.

In general, it is debatable whether the findings of this case are transferable to profit oriented organizations. Thus, comparing the sports team with an organization where money plays a bigger role would be interesting. However, as has been mentioned in the introduction, we believe that the case of a non-profit organization can indeed provide insights for all organizations because it cuts out monetary interests and sharpens the view for other value expectations. Especially since our modern-day world expects organizations to contribute more to society than just profits for their shareholders. This requires them to align their actions to *all* stakeholder's value expectations (e.g. to attract the best employees, companies regularly need to offer more than just money). Hence, the analysis of a non-profit shows the dynamics of value expectations more clearly. From existing theory, we expect the underlying mechanism to be the same in profit and non-

profit organizations, yet with profit as an overriding factor that lets people compromise their value expectations in exchange for money.

Content-wise, we have to acknowledge that we observed a success story. The team won all its regular season games, which certainly added to the positive dynamics and let people perceive their contribution as more meaningful. It is questionable what would have happened if the team weren't as successful.

To sum up, further research should aim to validate the findings of this study in two terms: First there should be more qualitative research in other, especially for-profit organizations. Second, the field would benefit from quantitative approaches to measure the effect of meaning on the capacity to act i.e. individual and team performance to draw substantially convincing conclusions.

7. Conclusion

Meaning plays a crucial role in capacity building within the context of a semi-professional sports team. When players perceive that their contribution leads to the team's success, they find their roles meaningful and are motivated to invest significant time and effort to improve their team.

Meaning can be elicited through both rational and aesthetic aspects and is linked to individual's value expectations towards the organization. In a competitive sports team, a predominant and explicit value expectation is to find a place to perform a specific sport and achieve success. However, there are other nuanced value expectations that significantly shape the team's purpose, including desired aesthetic experiences within the organization. While the explicit parts of the value expectations were relatively easy to address, the aesthetic facets posed greater challenges but nevertheless had considerable impact on the perceived effectiveness of the organization.

In order to enhance the teams capacity to act and put it in a position that it could win games, it is the responsibility of the team´s leaders to address individuals' value expectations. Conceptually this presents several challenges which were also encountered in the case study:
First, the perception of value expectations. How can people realize what is important for their team members? The greatest challenge here is the perception of not-yet made explicit value expectations. Those are best summarized as the feeling that there is 'something missing' of which we do not know what it might be yet. Identification of such requires high levels of attentiveness towards aesthetics. Perceiving such implicit value expectations closely resembles tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1967).

The second challenge is to translate value expectations into respective actions. Given that there is a fair perception, implementing actions that address value expectations can be very challenging and ambiguous. Often, value expectations are conflicting and require a high degree of sensitivity regarding the actions set to fulfill them through the organization. Which lead to the third big challenge.

The allocation of resources to stakeholder's value expectations. In an ideal world, all value expectations would be met to create an organization that is flawlessly enacting its purpose. However, in reality, at least in our case, this is anything but possible. In fact, there are far too little resources to address even the most basic value expectations entirely. The challenge is to manage the allocation of resources in a way that satisfies the members of the organization, without compromising the shared purpose of the organization (winning games in our case).

In conclusion, what we observed in the case is that from a management perspective, enhancing an organization's capacity to act relies heavily on recognizing and addressing individuals value expectations. Providing value led to the perception of ones engagement in the organization as more meaningful and improved individual performance which leveraged the overall organization's capacity to act.

At the core, what we encounter here, is a problem of knowledge acquisition. Yet, the knowledge to be acquired is not some sort of domain knowledge but it is knowledge about the organization itself. Knowledge that explains what value the organization ought to create in order to fulfill its effective cause. We figured that the acquisition of this knowledge can only partly be explained through explicit means i.e. asking and talking to people about their value expectations or engaging in consumer research. Instead much of it requires a feeling for what is hidden in the context. While dealing with explicit value expectations can be taught and facilitated through management models and metrics, to our understanding, there is currently a lack of offerings regarding the aesthetic and non-rational aspects.

Another finding is that non-rational knowledge is invaluable when it comes to managing individual sensibilities and emotional states. Managing those appears to be key in the management of non-profit organizations, because they are almost a precondition for the building of the organizations capacity to act. If not considered, they reduce engagement in the organization and have the potential to ruin the organizations climate, leading into a vicious circle.

Future research in the field of KM could contribute significantly by exploring the acquisition and exploitation of various forms of *non-rational*

knowledge (aesthetics, spiritual knowledge, tacit knowledge, intuition,…) with regards to organizational purpose both conceptually and empirically. The focus of research in the field would need to shift from the examination of domain specific knowledge creation towards knowledge about the organization itself and its place in the world (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2019, 2021). In this regard, questions to consider in further research could be

- How people can build the skill of recognizing non-rational aspects of value expectations.
- What elements do value expectations consist of and how can people become aware of hidden facets of value that they expect from an organization.
- How (tacit) knowledge about value expectations can be shared, stored and combined in order to enable the enactment of purpose in larger organizations. It is currently challenging to store and convey such knowledge adequately, as it is often considered ineffable. Therefore, it is desirable to investigate alternative methods of knowledge transmission and how they can be integrated into the training of managers and leaders.
- How value expectations can be translated into strategies to enact organizational purpose. Taking into account the allocation of resources in an organization.
- The synthesis of rational and non-rational knowledge. Depending on the view that authors pursue, the focus of research is either technical-rational or non-rational / aesthetic. Holistic accounts which examine the combination of both approaches are to-date scarce but could be relevant not only for the understanding of organizations but also for the knowledge transfer of academic work into practice.

There exist already some approaches directed to non-rational forms of knowledge, for example Scharmer's (2009) Theory U, which builds on different forms of attention. But in the KM literature respective accounts are still scarce. Only recently, have scholars begun to approach the topic. Notable examples include Rocha & Pinheiro (2021) on organizational spirituality, Bratianu (2017) and Bratianu & Bejinaru (2019, 2020) on knowledge fields and knowledge dynamics, including spiritual knowledge, or Kaiser (2023) on spiritual knowledge management. Also, the growing discourse around wisdom can be mention here (Jakubik & Müürsepp, 2021; Rocha et al., 2022).

After all, the findings of this study indicate the importance of aesthetics as a counterpart to rational sources of knowledge in organizations. Important aspects of organizational life, in particular those related to meaning, motivation or belonging rely on aesthetics

to be perceived and addressed within the frame of an organization. Put bluntly, one cannot 'argue' meaning, motivation or belonging into existence – those concepts have to be conveyed and understood through the means of aesthetics. What we can observe most drastically in non-profit organizations, is likely also the case in profit oriented businesses, where money may cover other value expectations to some degree, but hardly displace them entirely.

Hence, if we aim to enhance an organizations capacity to act, we need to purposefully combine rationality and aesthetics as sources of knowledge and consider that especially motivation and commitment to an organization rely on the aesthetic side of the coin - which is, indeed, not (only) about words.

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