

Involving athletes and other internal stakeholders in organizational change in sports clubs: The crucial role of autonomy support

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Many sports clubs are facing organizational problems (e.g., a lack of coaches), challenging them to implement organizational changes. Therefore, the central aim of this study was to develop and evaluate a group discussion that sports clubs can use to discuss necessary change initiatives in an autonomy-supportive environment. The athletes as well as other important internal stakeholders (i.e., parents, coaches, leaders, volunteers) participated in this discussion. This group discussion was implemented in 18 Flemish nonprofit and voluntary sports clubs. The quantitative measures indicated that the participants of the group discussion (N =144) perceived the group discussion as autonomy-supportive and useful, which related to their readiness for change, and in turn to their intention to convince others to support the change. The focus groups conducted in three sports clubs further emphasized the importance of appointing a neutral facilitator that can guide the group discussion in an autonomy-supportive way and provide theory-based guidance.

KEY WORDS: Autonomy support, Competing Values Framework, organizational change, Self-Determination Theory, sports clubs.

Introduction

Sports clubs serve as the ideal setting for athletes to enhance their technical skills as well as skills that can be used in daily life including endurance, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, responsibility, self-discipline, and a sense of initiative (An et al., 2020). However, many sports clubs are facing existential problems (e.g., a lack of coaches to train the athletes or a shortage of volunteers to organize the competitions) which challenge them to imple-

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ment essential organizational changes (Breuer et al., 2017). Yet, organizational change does not happen easily and many change efforts fail (Devos, 2007; Fernandez & Rainey, 2017). A crucial factor of successful change is the active involvement of all important internal stakeholders in the discussion of possible change initiatives (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Fernandez & Rainey, 2017). In the context of sports clubs, internal stakeholders' active involvement means that athletes as well as other important internal stakeholders (parents, coaches, sports club leaders, volunteers ...) can actively participate in the organizational change. In addition, to effectively involve the internal stakeholders in the organizational change, sports clubs need to provide autonomy support (Endrejat et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2000). Indeed, when internal stakeholders' need for autonomy is nurtured during the change process they will be more willing to endorse the upcoming change (Endrejat et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2000). Therefore, this study aims to develop and evaluate an evidence-based method that allows sports clubs to organize a discussion around organizational change with the key internal stakeholders in an autonomy-supportive way. To identify the areas of possible change, this study uses the Competing Values Framework. We rely on quantitative and qualitative analyses to evaluate the appreciation of this group discussion, and give suggestions on how sports clubs can use this newly developed group discussion in their organization.

Organizational Change: The Role of Autonomy Support

In order to achieve their objectives more effectively and efficiently, sports clubs need to introduce more professional management (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). To obtain internal support for possible change initiatives towards professionalization, literature in the domain of organizational psychology has pointed to the importance of autonomy support (Endrejat et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2000). Autonomy support may not only diminish change resistance, it also enhances people's readiness for change, which is the belief that change is needed and that the organization is capable of this change (Devos et al., 2007; Endrejat et al., 2021). According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), a broadly applicable theory on human motivation, personality, and well-being, autonomy support means that the internal stakeholders (e.g., athletes, parents, leaders, coaches, volunteers...) are involved in the change process through consulting their perspective and welcoming their input, accepting possible negative feelings toward the changes, providing choice in how to reach change goals, using invitational language, and giving meaningful rationales (e.g., Gag-

né et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The creation of an autonomy-supportive environment around the change initiatives nurtures the stakeholders' need for autonomy, which refers to a feeling of being the initiator of one's own acts (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This is crucial, since when internal stakeholders are involved, yet feel that their doubts and critical thoughts are suppressed when change initiatives are developed, they are unlikely to undertake change.

Dozens of SDT studies in the sports context confirmed the importance of autonomy support, pointing out a positive relation between the provision of autonomy support and autonomy satisfaction, self-determined motivation, well-being, and optimal functioning of athletes (e.g., Schinke et al., 2018) and volunteers (e.g., De Clerck et al., 2019). In the context of organizational change, SDT research revealed a positive relation between autonomy support and a positive attitude of the people within the organization towards change (e.g., Endrejat et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2000). Most of this research has been conducted in for-profit and public organizations. For instance, Gagné et al. (2000) found that employees of a company in transformation were more likely to accept the organizational change when the implementation and communication were conducted in an autonomy-supportive way.

More recently, Endrejat et al. (2021) analyzed organizational change at a university, revealing a direct negative relation between autonomy-restrictive communication (i.e., using threats and rational logic to “press” for a behavior change) and readiness for change, and an indirect positive relation between autonomy-supportive communication (i.e., valuing the others' point of view and opinions) and change readiness via the satisfaction of basic psychological needs including the need for autonomy.

Importantly, it is essential that for each important stakeholder group, a (select) number of opinion leaders are actively involved in the organizational change (Hammond et al., 2011). Opinion leaders are individuals from whom others may ask advice, and are thus carrying a significant amount of informal influence (Hammond et al., 2011; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000). When these key internal stakeholders are ready to support the change, they can play the role of internal change agents, actively seeking out other individuals in the sports organization to share change initiatives and convince others to support the change (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Gerwing, 2016; Hammond et al., 2011).

Changing the Organizational Culture: The Competing Values Framework

Organizational psychology literature provides further insight into how organizational change can be successfully implemented. It suggests that suc-

cessful change can only be achieved by changing the organizational culture, which refers to the values and beliefs that guide the behavior of the members of an organization (Beus et al., 2020; Denison et al., 2014). Sports organizations - and more specifically the change agents - thus first need to diagnose the organizational culture before they can develop initiatives to change the organizational culture.

A review of Schneider et al. (2013) suggests that the Competing Values Framework (CVF; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981) is the most comprehensive and useful framework to diagnose and change the organizational culture. It has been used extensively in the sports context (e.g., Balduck et al., 2008; De Clerck et al., 2019, 2021; Shilbury & Moore, 2006). The CVF integrates major indicators of effective organizations, which are represented by two axes. The horizontal axis reflects the extent to which an organization focuses on its internal functioning (that is, the functioning of the people within the organization) or external functioning (that is, the functioning of the organization itself). The vertical axis reflects the extent to which an organization emphasizes stability or flexibility (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981). Together these two dimensions constitute four quadrants, each representing distinctive organizational culture models: the internal process model (internal, stable), human relations model (internal, flexible), open system model (external, flexible), and rational goal model (external, stable; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981). The CVF proposes that effective sports organizations manage to find a balance between these quadrants (or culture models) and are thus (to a certain extent) engaging with each of the models (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981).

Sports clubs can use these frameworks to assess their organization's current and desired culture. Based on the discrepancies between these culture profiles, organizations are then able to identify areas for essential organizational change (Denison et al., 2014).

Internal Stakeholders' Active Involvement and Autonomy Support in CVF Literature: Empirical Evidence

Several CVF scholars have incorporated elements of internal stakeholders' active involvement and autonomy support (as suggested by SDT) in their organizational change studies. Most CVF researchers used the Organizational Cultural Assessment questionnaire (OCAI; Cameron & Quinn, 1999) as a means to involve internal stakeholders in the organizational change (e.g., Adams et al., 2017; Coyler, 2000). The OCAI consists of 24 questions tapping into the four CVF dimensions. It can be distributed among impor-

tant internal stakeholders, with respondents expected to give scores for each component while thinking of the organizational culture as it is now, and how it should be in the future for it to be highly successful. Based on the differences in the average scores between the existing and desired cultures, essential change initiatives can be proposed. For example, in a study by Colyer (2000) in Western Australian sports clubs, the questionnaire was completed by employees and sports club leaders (i.e., board members). The developed change initiatives included the clarification of work roles of staff and volunteers (i.e., internal process model), and more teamwork between staff and volunteers (i.e., human relations model; Colyer, 2000).

Other authors have relied on interviews instead of questionnaires. Grabowski et al. (2015), for example, interviewed board members, staff, and clients in a voluntary public services organization. The results indicated that the organization would benefit from more stability and structure (e.g., the creation of task forces) and a greater internal focus (e.g., an effective volunteer management).

Although these are useful tools to involve internal stakeholders in the development of change initiatives, additional autonomy-supportive strategies to actively involve key internal stakeholders in the change development can be added to these methods. That is, for successful change, it is crucial that internal stakeholders can discuss their opinions and ideas with other internal stakeholders in an autonomy-supportive setting (e.g., Endrejat et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, internal stakeholders at best also participate in the final, most important step of identifying the necessary change initiatives. In previous research, this part was mostly conducted by scholars or external consultants, although the role of external parties should be restricted to supporting the internal stakeholders' participation in the change process (e.g., Gerwing, 2016). Finally, it is important that all internal stakeholders groups are involved in the development of change plans, including athletes, parents, coaches and volunteers who were often overlooked in previous studies (e.g., Colyer, 2000). Especially coaches have an important role in the discussion as they interact with both athletes (and their parents) and sports club leaders and can stimulate athletes and parents to help diagnose problems that may lead to organizational change.

The Present Study

Given these gaps, we developed an evidence-based method that stimulates sports clubs to bring together opinion leaders within the organiza-

tion including athletes, parents, coaches, leaders (i.e., board members in our study), and volunteers to have a group discussion around the current and the desired organizational culture. Based on differences between these culture profiles, necessary change initiatives were developed. This CVF-based group discussion was guided by an external facilitator. To increase the likelihood that these key internal stakeholders would be ready for change and would convince others to support the change, the development of change initiatives was conducted in an autonomy-supportive setting. To achieve this, the facilitator was taught to create an autonomy-supportive environment in a 3-day SDT-based training. During this training, they were introduced to the theoretical principles of SDT. Additionally, practical sessions were organized to train facilitators in adopting an autonomy-supportive style and stimulate internal stakeholders to rely on an autonomy-supportive style themselves.

In order to evaluate the appreciation of this evidence-based method, we examined (a) how the participants perceived the autonomy-supportive style of the facilitator and other internal stakeholders during the group discussion, (b) how the participants perceived the usefulness of the CVF-based group discussion in identifying the change initiatives, and (c) whether the participants were ready for the change, hereby relying on quantitative data (i.e., mean scores of self-report questionnaires) and qualitative data (i.e., focus groups). Focus groups were chosen in addition to the self-report questionnaires because they allowed for a more in-depth discussion of feelings and opinions regarding the group discussion, which may yield complementary information. Furthermore, we used regression analyses to gain more insight into (d) how the perceived autonomy-supportive style and usefulness of the group discussion related to the participants' readiness for the change, and (e) how the perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion, and readiness for change of the participants related to their intention to convince others in the organization to support the change initiatives developed during the group discussion. We also explored whether readiness of change mediated the relation between the perceived usefulness of the group discussion and perceived autonomy-supportive style (i.e., predictors), and the intention to convince others in the organization to support the change initiatives developed during the group discussion (i.e., dependent variable).

Method

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 18 nonprofit and voluntary sports clubs participated in the newly developed CVF-based group discussion, after positively responding to a call from the

Flemish Sports Federation, the umbrella federation of all Flemish sports federations. These sports clubs were located in Flanders (Belgium). This sample included mostly middle-sized clubs with between 100 and 250 members (44%) and large clubs with more than 250 members (44%), providing sports disciplines such as football (22%), athletics (17%), korfbal (17%), and volleyball (11%) on a recreational level. In total, 19 athletes, 21 parents, 29 coaches, 52 board members, and 23 volunteers (providing logistic support) participated in the group discussion, which means that 144 internal stakeholders (61.8% men; $M_{\text{age}} = 41.69$ years ($SD = 11.86$)) were involved in our research. The number of internal stakeholders per club participating in the group discussion ranged from 8 to 12.

PROCEDURE

All participants were asked to participate in a group discussion in which they identified important areas for change. After participating, they filled in a self-report questionnaire that assessed their appreciation of the session. In three sports clubs (of the 18 participating sports clubs) focus group sessions were organized after the group discussion.

A CVF-Based Group Discussion to Identify Areas for Essential Change

The CVF-based group discussion was attended by representatives (i.e., opinion leaders) of important stakeholder groups in the sports club (i.e., athletes, parents, coaches, board members, and volunteers). The group discussion, which was guided by a trained facilitator, was designed in such a way as to foster an autonomy-supportive interaction style among the stakeholders. Specifically, at the beginning of the group discussion the facilitator emphasized the importance of listening to each other and using invitational and constructive language such as “I understand your perspective to be ...”, “How did you come to that position?”, and “I can see how you came to such stance.” The facilitator also mentioned that it was important for participants to explain the rationale behind their beliefs and ideas. Furthermore, facilitators were taught, in line with the principle ‘practice what you preach’, to rely on an autonomy-supportive style themselves. For instance, they were trained to value the input of all participants and involve everybody in the discussion. When conflicting ideas or positions occurred, they were taught to search for common ground in what different stakeholders were saying.

At the beginning of the group discussion, the participants (i.e., the internal stakeholders) were asked to sit down around a template. The template, which represented the two axes and four quadrants (or models) of the CVF, provided a structure to the session. The facilitator of the session wrote down a question/problem identified by the sports club’s board members in the center of the template. As an example, a central question in a sports club was “We want to attract more athletes/volunteers to help organize the competitions but do not manage to do so”.

Next, the facilitator used the four quadrants of the template to construct the organizational culture (and necessary culture changes) in three different steps. In the first step, participants discussed the existing organizational culture (i.e., where are we today) in relation to the central question. This was realized in three consecutive parts. In the first part, each participant received cards on which (s)he could note his/her thoughts and opinions regarding the current situation in the sports club. In the second part, the group was divided into subgroups. In these subgroups, participants were asked to find consensus on which cards were

to be discussed in the whole group. In the third part, these cards were placed in one of the quadrants of the template, either by the facilitator or by the participant. This method allowed to construct an existing culture profile based on the participants' own input. Examples were: "Workload of the current volunteers is high" and "Communication in the sports club is chaotic, especially with the young athletes", with the former being placed in the human relations quadrant, and the latter in the internal process quadrant.

In the second step of the group discussion, participants described their desired culture. To create the desired culture profile based on the participants' input, the three parts of the first step were repeated, with each participant receiving cards on which they wrote down their ideas regarding the warranted future situation. Examples were: "A sports club that is open for everybody" and "More structured communication", with the former being placed in the open system quadrant, and the latter in the internal process quadrant. Plotting the current and preferred culture profiles on the template helped to identify possible discrepancies. Furthermore, it became clear which quadrants were less or more present in the organization.

In the third step of the group discussion, initiatives that could resolve discrepancies between the current and preferred culture or could tackle the absence of crucial processes in the organization were discussed. Examples of change initiatives were: "Adopting more innovative communication strategies to reach the young athletes (e.g., through Instagram, WhatsApp)" and "Appointing a person responsible for communication". At the end of the discussion, change initiatives were given a level of priority.

MEASURES

Self-report Questionnaire

All participants of the group discussion (N= 144) filled in a self-report questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate the items of the self-report questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). This questionnaire consisted of the following items:

Perceived Autonomy-Supportive Style. To measure the perceived autonomy-supportive style (of the other internal stakeholders and the facilitator) during the group discussion, we relied on a slightly adapted version of the Teacher as Social Context Questionnaire (TASCQ; Belmont et al., 1988). The Dutch version of this questionnaire has been validated (Sierens et al., 2009) and used (e.g., Haerens et al., 2013) in previous research. For the current study, the questionnaire was adapted to the context of the developed group discussion by including the stem "During the group discussion . . ." and by replacing specific references to academic subjects. We used three positively worded items from the TASQ autonomy support scale (e.g., "... others listened to my opinion."). This scale had a solid internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.72$).

Perceived Usefulness of the Group Discussion. To measure the perceived usefulness of the group discussion, we used the one-item scale "The group discussion was useful in helping to identify change initiatives" (see also Aelterman et al., 2013).

Readiness for Change. Nine items from the (Dutch-language) questionnaire developed by Bouckenoghe et al. (2009) were used to measure three dimensions of readiness for change. Three items assessed emotional readiness for change (e.g., “I have a good feeling about the change initiatives”). Three items measured intentional readiness for change (e.g., “I want to devote myself to the process of change”). Three (negatively worded) items measured cognitive readiness for change (e.g., “I think that most changes initiatives will have a negative effect on the members we serve”). Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Kirrane et al., 2017), we averaged across these three dimensions. To this end, the items of the cognitive readiness for change dimension were reverse scored. The internal consistency of this 9-item scale was excellent ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Intention to Convince Others to Support the Change Initiatives. To measure the stakeholders’ intention to convince others to support the change initiatives developed during the group discussion, we included the item, “I intend to try to convince others to support the change initiatives developed during the group discussion.”

Focus Groups

Focus group sessions were organized in three (randomly selected) sports clubs after the group discussion. In total, 3 athletes, 3 parents, 6 coaches, 9 board members, and 6 volunteers, who also participated in the survey, were involved in the focus groups interviews (68% men; $M_{\text{age}} = 42.84$ ($SD = 13.71$)). The number of stakeholders participating in the focus groups sessions ranged from 7 to 10.

The three focus groups sessions were facilitated by a trained moderator and an assistant moderator. The facilitator of the group discussion was not present during the focus group interviews. The (assistant) moderator used a semi-structured questioning route that was developed to facilitate conversation amongst participants. Furthermore, it ensured consistency in the questions asked across focus groups. The main themes included (a) the perceived autonomy-supportive style during the development of the change initiatives, (b) the perceived usefulness of the group discussion, and (c) the participants’ readiness for change.

An entire focus group interview lasted on average 29 minutes. All sessions were audiotaped, and the recordings were later used to conduct a content analysis of the conversations.

PLAN OF ANALYSES

To analyze the use of the newly developed group discussion, we first calculated the mean scores of the perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion, and readiness for change. The qualitative data (i.e., focus groups recordings) were used to gain a more in-depth insight into the meaning of these quantitative mean scores. We used thematic content analysis (NVivo 12 Pro) to analyze the focus group transcripts. Two researchers independently conducted a priori (deductive) content analysis on each of the three transcripts. The transcripts were coded using a presupposed tree structure, including 3 parent nodes representing the different topics of the focus group questioning route (i.e., the perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion, and readiness for change).

We relied on regression analyses to further analyze the relations between the perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion, readiness for change, and intention to convince others to support the change initiatives. First, we calculated bivariate correlations between the study variables. Next, a hierarchical regression analysis (SPSS version 25) was conducted with the perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion as the predictors, and readiness for change as the dependent variable. Age, gender, and the role in the sports club (i.e., athlete, parent, coach, board member, or volunteer) were added as covariates. In addition, we conducted a second hierarchical regression analysis with the perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion, and readiness for change as the independent variables, and intention to convince others to support the change initiatives as the dependent variable. Again, we added age, gender, and the role in the sports club as covariates. In both regression models, covariates were entered in the first step, and the predictors were entered in the second step. Finally, to test whether readiness of change mediated the relation between the perceived autonomy-supportive style and perceived usefulness (i.e. the predictors), and intention to convince others (i.e., the dependent variable), we relied on the 95% confidence interval obtained by bootstrapping (Hayes et al., 2009). The indirect effect was significant at $p < .05$ if the 95% confidence intervals do not include the value of zero.

Results

Participants' Perceptions of the Autonomy-Supportive Style, Usefulness of the Group Discussion, and their Readiness for Change

QUANTITATIVE FINDING (i.e., Mean Scores)

The mean scores of the perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion, and readiness to change on a five-point scale revealed that participants indicated that they perceived the style of the facilitator and other internal stakeholders as highly autonomy-supportive ($M = 4.39/5$), that the group discussion was very useful ($M = 4.33/5$), and that they were ready for the change ($M = 4.40/5$).

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS (i.e., Focus Groups)

Qualitative findings indicated that the *autonomy-supportive setting* of the group discussion stimulated participants to voice their opinion: "I felt that every contribution was considered useful in its own way. Every time my idea was well-received, I was motivated to bring up another idea." Another participant "appreciated the fact that there was trust among the participants, that you could say anything without being criticized. Everyone had the opportunity to say his/her opinion." The openness during the group discussion contributed to the participants' positive feelings about the outcome of the group discussion: "I liked the fact that we could sit together with people who already do a lot for the sports club, but also with people who are less familiar with the sports club's operations. Even though we sometimes disagreed, I had the feeling that we were all on the same page at the end of the evening. That is a satisfying feeling, especially for the young people." Another participant commented: "I felt that the sports club was one big family, with the same intentions and goals."

According to the participants, the facilitators played a key role in the creation of an autonomy-supportive environment, as revealed by the following comments: "The facilitator was a very good listener. He gave everybody the feeling that their opinion mattered. He did not impose his opinion on the group." and "He never said that your opinion was wrong. He was receptive to our ideas and neutral." The facilitator also tried to involve all participants in the discussion: "People who were less involved in the group discussion were asked for their opinion. The facilitator asked if they wanted to add something to the discussion."

Yet, the participants indicated that the (autonomy-supportive) role of the facilitator in the development of the change initiatives should also be clarified. That is, during the group discussion, cards were mostly placed on the template by the facilitator, hereby frustrating the participants' need for autonomy as it was sometimes unclear why the facilitator put the card in a certain quadrant. Therefore, participants suggested that anyone who placed a card on the template (facilitator or participant) should explain her/his decision.

Qualitative findings further revealed that the participants perceived the developed CVF-based group discussion as *useful* in identifying the change initiatives as it urged them to think about the existing club culture, the preferred culture, and possible change initiatives. Especially the discussion about the preferred culture was considered innovative, as shown by the following quotes: "Many group discussions involve discussions about existing problems and possible solutions. Yet, also the discussion about the preferred culture is crucial." and "It is important to have a concrete idea about the ideal organizational culture as it allows to evaluate whether change initiatives to improve the sports club were successful."

The three steps provided a clear framework for the group discussion. For example, one participant commented: "Without the three steps, we would have been brainstorming without structure, and the group discussion would have lasted much longer." The four quadrants of the template were also considered an added value, as they enabled participants to organize their thoughts: "The template with its four quadrants allowed us to structure and visualize our ideas and suggestions related to the existing and preferred culture and change initiatives."

Yet, at the end of the group discussion, the practical implications of the culture profiles were not clear for some participants, as indicated by the following comments: "In our sports club, most cards were placed on the internal processes quadrant. Does this mean that we should focus on our internal processes in the (near) future? Or are all four quadrants important?" and "The template indicated that we should work on our task distribution. Or should we also work on our human relations? We only placed a few cards in this quadrant." The participants provided us with several suggestions to optimize the use of the four quadrants, which included "The (final) purpose of the four quadrants should be introduced at the beginning of the group discussion." and "The group discussion should end with a clear conclusion based on the position of the cards on the template." Another suggestion was to hang the template on a wall instead of placing it on the table. This way everyone could see the template and follow the discussion.

As for the participants' *readiness for change*, many participants felt that everybody was willing to devote themselves to the change process. For example, a participant commented: "I felt that everybody had the drive to achieve the same goal, that is, making sure that everyone can enjoy what the sports club has to offer." Another participant said: "I felt that there was a broad support for the change initiatives that were formulated today." All participants agreed that a broad support base is essential for the success of the change initiatives: "I think that if everyone is on the same page, has the same vision and is willing to put energy into the development of the change initiatives, we can successfully implement the change initiatives in our sports club." To create a broad support base for the change initiatives in the sports club, participants believed that it is essential "to involve important people within the sports club in the change process as these persons can talk to other individuals in the sports club about the change initiatives", as well as "develop initiatives that can have a substantial impact on the sports club's way of doing things."

Furthermore, participants indicated that the sports club should implement change initiatives as soon as possible. Participants made some suggestions for a feasible and realistic implementation of the change initiatives: "It is important to distinguish between short-term, middle-term and long-term initiatives" and "We should have a clear action plan which includes the content of the change initiatives, how we want to implement the change initiatives and a clear task distribution."

The Relations Between the Perceived Autonomy-supportive Style, Perceived Usefulness of the Group Discussion, Readiness for Change, and Intention to Convince Others to Support the Change: Findings from Regression Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the study variables are presented in Table I.

TABLE I
Descriptive Statistics And Correlations Among Study Variables

Variables	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Autonomy-supportive style	143	4.39	.48				
2. Usefulness	144	4.33	.65	.40**			
3. Readiness for change	139	4.40	.50	.44**	.40**		
4. Intention to convince others	141	4.28	.65	.29**	.22*	.60**	

* p<.05, **p<0.01.

In the first hierarchical regression model (see Table II), none of the covariates related significantly to readiness for change. R^2 was not significant. In the second step, we added the perceived autonomy-supportive style and usefulness of the group discussion as predictors to the regression model. These variables contributed significantly to the explanation of variance in readiness for change (R^2 change = 0.25, $p < .001$). The results revealed that the perceived autonomy-supportive style ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < .01$) and usefulness of the group discussion ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < .001$) related positively (and uniquely) to the participants' readiness for change.

As for the second hierarchical regression model (see Table III), R^2 of the model with only covariates was not significant with the covariates relating insignificantly to the intention to convince others to support the change initiatives. The perceived autonomy-supportive style, perceived usefulness of the group discussion, and readiness for change explained a significant amount of

TABLE II
Multiple Regression Model Predicting Readiness For Change ($n = 137$)

	Readiness for change			
	B (S.E.)	β	B (S.E.)	β
Intercept	4.12 (0.21)		1.80 (0.41)	
Covariates				
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.05	0.00 (0.00)	0.06
Gender ^a	0.10 (0.09)	0.10	0.06 (0.08)	0.06
Athletes ^b	-0.04 (0.17)	-0.03	-0.27 (0.14)	-0.18
Parents ^c	-0.06 (0.16)	-0.04	-0.07 (0.14)	-0.05
Coaches ^d	0.25 (0.15)	0.20	0.21 (0.13)	0.17
Board members ^e	0.15 (0.13)	0.15	0.15 (0.11)	0.14
Predictors				
Autonomy support			0.30 (0.09)**	0.28**
Usefulness			0.25 (0.06)***	0.32***
R^2	0.05 (0.50)		0.30 (0.43)***	
R^2 change			0.25***	
F (df)	1.14 (6,130)		6.29 (8, 128)***	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

^a Men = 0; women = 1

^b Athletes = 1; other roles = 0

^c Parents = 1; other roles = 0

^d Coaches = 1; other roles = 0

^e Board members = 1; other roles = 0

TABLE III
Multiple Regression Model Predicting Intention To Convince Others To Support The Change Initiatives (n= 137)

	Intention to convince others			
	B (S.E.)	β	B (S.E.)	β
Intercept	4.26 (0.27)		0.96 (0.53)	
Covariates				
Age	0.00 (0.00)	-0.04	0.00 (0.00)	-0.07
Gender ^a	0.11 (0.12)	0.09	0.03 (0.10)	0.03
Athletes ^b	-0.18 (0.21)	-0.09	-0.15 (0.17)	-0.08
Parents ^c	-0.15 (0.20)	-0.07	-0.09 (0.17)	-0.05
Coaches ^d	0.15 (0.19)	0.09	-0.07 (0.16)	-0.04
Board members ^e	0.26 (0.17)	0.19	0.12 (0.14)	0.09
Predictors				
Autonomy support			0.08 (0.11)	0.06
Usefulness			-0.05 (0.08)	-0.05
Readiness for change			0.77 (0.11)***	0.59***
R ²	0.06 (0.64)		0.40 (0.52)***	
R ² change			0.34***	
F (df)	1.50 (6,132)		9.37 (9, 127)***	

* p<.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

^a Men = 0; women = 1

^b Athletes = 1; other roles = 0

^c Parents = 1; other roles = 0

^d Coaches = 1; other roles = 0

^e Board members = 1; other roles = 0

variance in the intention to convince others to support the change initiatives (R² change = 0.34, p <.001). The results further revealed a positive (unique) relation between readiness for change and the intention to convince others in the organization to support the change initiatives ($\beta = 0.59$, p <.001). The perceived autonomy-supportive style and usefulness of the group discussion were not related to the intention to convince others to support the change initiatives.

The findings also pointed to an indirect positive relation between the perceived autonomy support and the intention to convince others via readiness for change ($\beta = 0.34$, CI= .14 to .60), and the perceived usefulness and the intention to convince others via readiness for change ($\beta = 0.25$, CI= .14 to .36). The direct relations between the predictors (i.e., autonomy support and usefulness) and the intention to convince others were no longer significant in the mediation models, indicating that readiness for change fully mediated these relations.

Discussion

In this study, we developed a CVF-based group discussion in which all important internal stakeholders, guided by a trained facilitator, identified essential change initiatives in an autonomy-supportive setting. We used quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the potential of the group discussion.

Perceived Autonomy-Supportive Style During the Group Discussion

During the group discussion, we attempted to nurture the participants' psychological need for autonomy by organizing the group discussion in an autonomy-supportive setting. According to SDT research, this positively relates to their readiness for change (Endrejat et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2000). The quantitative data were in line with these theoretical premises, revealing a strong positive relation between the participants' perceptions of the autonomy-supportive interaction style and their readiness for change. The qualitative findings confirmed the importance of an autonomy-supportive setting, revealing that this open and constructive atmosphere allowed the participants to freely express their opinion without the fear of saying something wrong or being interrupted. Furthermore, the participants indicated that the facilitator played a key role in the creation of an autonomy-supportive environment by offering choice during the group session and acknowledging their opinions towards organizational change. Although these (autonomy-supportive) strategies are indeed effective in the context of organizational change (Gagné et al., 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000), SDT scholars indicated that these practices can be embedded with other autonomy-supportive strategies (Gagné et al., 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Especially the provision of a meaningful rationale deserves special attention as this form of autonomy-supportive behavior related to greater acceptance of change in previous studies (Gagné et al., 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Specifically, these studies revealed that when people were given a clear rationale for why the change is enacted, they generally became more interested in the change initiatives and were more likely to continue their engagement in the change process, especially when their ideas and feelings with respect to the change initiatives were also taken into account (Gagné et al., 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Since our qualitative findings revealed that the facilitators often failed to give a clear rationale for their decision(s) to place the card(s) on a certain quadrant of the template, this specific ingredient of an autonomy-supportive style may require particular attention when optimizing the group discussion.

Perceived Usefulness of the Group Discussion

Apart from providing an autonomy-supportive setting, we also used the Competing Values Framework to help the participants of the group discussion identify the necessary change initiatives. The participants indicated, in line with other CVF-based interventions (e.g., Colyer, 2000), that the group discussion was indeed a useful tool to develop essential change initiatives in the sports club (the mean score of usefulness was 4.33 out of 5). Interestingly, the perceived usefulness of the group discussion also related significantly to readiness for change, underscoring the importance of the development of a useful group discussion for the participants' readiness to support the change. The qualitative data were consistent with the quantitative findings, revealing that the three steps used to develop change initiatives and the four CVF quadrants allowed the participants to discuss their ideas in a structured and effective way. Based on the quantitative and qualitative results, we can thus conclude that these three steps and the template with its four quadrants are useful and essential parts of the group discussion.

Yet, the qualitative findings also indicated that the final purpose of the position of the cards that were placed on the template was not clear. This finding suggested that the participants were not familiar with the theoretical foundations of the CVF, that is, the importance of finding a balance between the four competing CVF quadrants or models. However, a deeper understanding of the CVF theory and its practical implications is important as it may broaden the participants' thinking about their organization's culture and stimulate them to look further than the obvious (operational) actions (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). To illustrate, many sports clubs in our study had a strong people-oriented culture and therefore often focused on change initiatives related to the human relations and internal processes quadrant (e.g., better communication with the athletes). As such, most cards were placed in these quadrants, with the open system and rational goal quadrants receiving less attention. Yet, it can be suggested, in line with CVF theory, that also a focus on the open system quadrant (e.g., implementing innovative initiatives) or rational goal quadrant (e.g., developing a mission and vision) may help these sports clubs to strengthen the organization's operations and processes. Similarly, CVF postulates that (sports) organizations with a more growth-oriented culture (with clear and challenging goals) might benefit from (also) focusing on human relations and internal processes. It is therefore important that these theoretical principles are introduced and explained by the facilitator during the group discussion.

The Crucial Role of the Participants' Readiness for Change

Organizational psychology literature suggests that the participants' readiness to support the change is crucial for the success of the developed change initiatives (e.g., Endrejat et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2000). Indeed, participants who are ready for change will not only help implement the change, but will also share change initiatives with other people within or outside the (sports) organization (e.g., Gerwing et al., 2016). In this respect, it was encouraging to find that participants reported high levels of readiness for change after having participated in the group discussion (the mean score was 4.40 out of 5). The quantitative data were consistent with the literature, revealing that the participants' readiness for change related positively to their intention to convince others in the sports club to support the change. The importance of readiness for change for the success of organizational change was also revealed in the qualitative analyses, with participants stating that it was crucial to find a broad support base for the change in the sports club. According to the participants, the sports club can do this by involving key internal stakeholders or opinion leaders in the group discussion as they can approach other individuals in the organization to share their thoughts about the change initiatives.

Overall, quantitative and qualitative data indicated that participants of the group discussion intended to play the role of internal change agents. This is an important finding as previous literature has indicated that internal change agents are critical to the entire change process (Gerwing, 2016). Indeed, although internal change agents might not always possess the required knowledge, skills, and objectivity to implement change successfully (for which sports organizations can appoint an external facilitator), they help to develop a realistic and feasible action plan as they know the organization, the type of business, the process, the culture, and the people. Furthermore, they can influence other individuals in the organization as they are already known and respected by others (Gerwing, 2016). It is thus imperative that all important stakeholder groups are represented in the group discussion, as without their involvement a broad support base for the developed change initiatives is not possible (Hammond et al., 2011).

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the extant literature by adopting a more integrative approach towards successful change in sports clubs, integrating the principles of an autonomy-supportive style, change agents, and the CVF in

a newly developed group discussion that sports clubs can use to realize an inclusive and thus more sustainable organizational change. In addition, the results of this study provided further practical recommendations on how sports clubs can optimally implement this group discussion. First, active involvement of internal stakeholders in the group discussion is best fostered in an autonomy-supportive climate. Therefore, the facilitator should adopt participative approaches such as offering opportunities to provide input and suggestions, and more attuning strategies such as the provision of a meaningful rationale when cards are placed on the template (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Second, to ensure that the theoretical principles of the CVF are clear, it is important that the facilitator provides theory-based guidance during the group discussion. Facilitators can do this in a motivating way by clearly explaining the CVF theory (including the optimal balance between the quadrants) and offering appropriate help and assistance when some of the theoretical principles are not clear (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Third, since our results confirmed the important role of the facilitator, sports clubs can appoint a neutral facilitator that possesses the necessary skills to enhance internal stakeholders' readiness for change through autonomy support and theory-based guidance. This is essential, as internal stakeholders who are ready for change, can take on the role of internal change agents (Gerwing, 2016).

Limitations and Future Directions

An important limitation was that our study could not shed light on the directionality of the link between the study variables. A very interesting next step is the implementation of an intervention study with pre- and post-measurements in an intervention and control group, as it will allow to investigate whether this group discussion effectively has an impact on the participants' readiness for change and intention to convince other individuals in the organization to support the change. In addition, intervention studies can also reveal the (broader) impact of the group discussion on the organizational culture of sports clubs. Specifically, it will be interesting to investigate whether the group discussion affects internal stakeholders' positive feelings towards the change, or their feelings, attitudes and behaviors in the sports club including their motivation and perceived cohesion.

Another limitation was that we conducted our study in the specific context of Flemish nonprofit and voluntary sports clubs. We therefore urge scholars to implement and study the effect of the group discussion in other sports contexts and geographical locations.

Conclusion

In this study, we developed an innovative evidence-based method that integrates key elements of successful change as proposed by organizational psychology literature. Sports clubs can use this newly developed method and the practical recommendations formulated in this paper to initiate an organizational (culture) change.

Ethics: This research was approved by the Ethical Committee of the faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (Ghent University).

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