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## THE ROLE OF TEST EVENTS IN MAJOR SPORTING EVENTS

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Test events are important in the preparation of major sporting events. Nevertheless, there are few studies of how such tests are carried out to combat risks and build capacities to manage the unexpected incidents during implementation. This article explores two questions: (1) What role did the test event in 2010 play in the preparation and execution of the FIS Nordic World Championships (SWC) in Oslo 2011? (2) To what extent can experiences from this project be viewed as a successful attempt to apply an overall model of mindful organization? The study is based on in-depth interviews with key leaders in the organizing committee of SWC as well as different documents and media coverage. Data collection and analysis is organized around key concepts from theories of mindful organizations. The study shows that even if project leaders had a conscious and consistent mindful approach to preparations, the test event demonstrated a number of important shortcomings relating to facilities, support, and the event organization itself. The way such shortcomings were analyzed and acted upon was essential for a successful world championship. An important aspect of this was the realization that the real challenge was to reorganize and fine tune the organization to combat risks and manage the unexpected.

Key words: Test events; Major sporting events; Risk management; Mindful organization

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### Introduction

Risk is pervasive in the preparation and implementation of any sporting event, regardless of size (Chappelet, 2001). Such risks include incidents (Fuller & Myerscough, 2001), injuries (Fuller & Drawer, 2004), crowd control (Appenzeller, 2005), security for sporting facilities (Ammon, Southall, & Blair, 2004; Preuss, 2004; Walker & Stotlar, 1997), and terrorism (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010).

Test events play a key role in reducing risk in major events. This article focuses on how the 2010 Nordic Ski World Cup was used as a test event for the Nordic Ski World Championship the following year. Emphasis is placed on whether and how test event experiences strengthened organizational capacities for risk reduction and management of the unexpected. It is an intensive case study that draws upon the framework of mindful organizations. Mindful organizations are characterized by

leadership strategies and mechanisms that support reliable experience-based learning. Such characteristics are essential in exploiting lessons from test events (Andersen & Hanstad 2013; Weick & Sutcliffe 2007).

A key focus for organizers of major sporting events is providing an environment within which athletes can perform at their best. This is a requirement for fair competition and positive experiences for spectators. Great prestige and media pressure are involved. Planning and implementing an elite sporting event is very demanding and requires strict attention to detail. Even small mistakes can have serious consequences. Test events are common and often required by event owners (Bowdin, Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2011). However, with an exception of spectator research conducted at the test event for the 1995 FIS Nordic World Ski Championships in Thunder Bay (Johnston, Twynam, & Shultis, 1996), there is almost no research on test events and, more specifically, their contribution to delivering major events and developing the capacity of organizations that deliver them. This article fills this gap by focusing on how the FIS Nordic World Cup 2010 (WC 2010) was exploited as the major test event for the FIS Nordic Ski World Championship (SWC) 1 year later. Both events were held in Holmenkollen, Oslo.

In contrast to many other types of project (e.g., large-scale construction or technology development) (Flyvbjerg, 2011), major sport events have limited opportunities to reduce or mitigate risks through delays or by transferring tasks to other people/partners (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a, 2009b). However, as Perminova, Gustafsson, and Wikström (2008) point out, planning and risk analysis cannot fully grasp all future contingencies. Like Weick and Sutcliffe (2007), they argue that the key to successful risk management is conscientious reflective learning and sense making that enables detailed planning and flexible situational responses. These are typical characteristics of a mindful organization. Mindfulness implies attention to the many small failures intrinsic to preparing and implementing major sporting events. In mindful organizations, considerable effort goes into finding people with the right expertise and experience to fill the key roles, to practice and continuously learn from

feedback coming from all parts of the organization (Andersen & Hanstad, 2013).

The article attempts to answer two major questions: 1) How did the test event WC 2010 impact on SWC 2011? 2) To what extent were the characteristics of a mindful organization evident in this process? The study utilizes in-depth interviews with key leaders in the organizing committee of SWC 2011 as well as documents and media coverage. The study shows that even if project leaders had a conscious and consistent mindful approach to preparations, the test event can illuminate important shortcomings that may create problems during the main event. The way such shortcomings were analyzed and acted upon was essential for a successful world championship. An important aspect of this was the realization that the real challenge was to reorganize and fine tune the organization to combat risks and manage the unexpected.

The article is organized in the following way. First we introduce the concept test events, and the background to the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships and its test event. The theoretical framework of mindful project organization is then discussed, followed by the methods section. Subsequently we present analyses of the empirical findings. The concluding section discusses the use of the test events in the context of a mindful organization, and some implications and a route for further research.

### Test Events

With few exceptions, most major sporting event projects utilize project management approaches. Event organizations, like projects, are temporary, have a predetermined life cycle, and bring together people and organizations with special skills and capacities to deal with unique challenges (Morris, Pinto, & Söderlund, 2011; Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013). Some events are recurring, limited in scope, and can be organized on the basis of tested routines and competence. The WC in Holmenkollen has a long tradition. The SWC, on the other hand, was a unique event, covering many more competitions and activities outside the sporting arena. This required a reconstruction and expansion of sport facilities as well as the project organization. The 2010WC event was therefore useful test of the new arena as well as the project organization for SWC.

In the literature on project management we find that organizations prepare and practice for contingencies in a number of ways (Starbuck & Farjoun, 2005). Desk-top exercises and scenario exercises are thought experiments that mostly involve the leader and not the whole organization. Exercises in crisis organizations and military exercises may be viewed as test events involving whole organizations (Darling, Parry, & Moore, 2005). Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) argue for conscious experimentation in a local context to establish practical, reliable evidence-based knowledge. This is close to a test event.

Planning is a key mechanism for learning and risk reduction. However, the management of many big and small risks during the actual event requires *operative* experience. Consequently, the notion of testing, or test events, is key. For example, both the Fédération Internationale de Ski (FIS) and International Olympic Committee (IOC) have specific requirements for test events prior to the “main” event. For the IOC, the purpose of these events is to “put the sports installations to the test in an ‘Olympic situation’ with maximum use of the human resources required, and all the systems, arrangements and methods used in the Games, as fully as possible within the given constraints of time and expense” (IOC, n.d., p. 44). The 2012 London Summer Olympics is a recent example. From May 2011 to May 2012, approximately 350,000 spectators watched 42 test events in 28 venues (British Olympic Association, n.d.). Before the two test events at the Olympic Stadium in May 2012, the British Universities & Colleges Sports Championships and the London Disability Grand Prix, the director of venues and infrastructure for the London Organizing Committee, James Bulley, told *The Telegraph* that every aspect of the stadium would be tested.

We are testing all the operational areas for ticketing, entry and exits, the kiosks that we have opened up for the first time for food and drink, the toilets, the merchandising. We are also in full athletics set-up, so all the sports equipment has to be installed, the hammer cage and such like, the broadcast and press camera positions, mixed zones and the like. Our teams have one opportunity to test with 40,000 people in the stadium before we lock-down on May 12 to begin preparations for the opening ceremony. (Kelso, 2012)

Getting large crowds in and out of the Olympic Park several times a day was regarded as a major logistical challenge. Up to 62 security lanes were tested.

#### *The FIS Nordic World Ski Championship and the Test Event*

Norway was awarded the 2011 Nordic World Ski Championships in 2006 by FIS as the event owner. The project organization Ski-VM 2011 A/S was jointly owned by the Norwegian Ski Federation (60%) and the Association for the Promotion of Skiing (40%). The Association for the Promotion of Skiing (Skiforeningen in Norwegian) has 70,000 members and its main objectives is to promote skiing to the people and to organize the Holmenkollen ski races. The organization is also responsible for maintaining the Holmenkollen national ski arena, owned by the City of Oslo. The project organization was established in 2007 and responsible for the planning and delivering the test event in March 2010 (World Cup) and the main event SWC in February 2011. The termination of the project was in July, 2011.

The SWC can be viewed as two partially overlapping projects. The first project was construction of the new national arena in Holmenkollen, owned by the City of Oslo. This facility includes two ski-jumping arenas, cross-country tracks, and a renovated ski stadium. The second project was the preparation and implementation of the 2011 SWC, with WC 2010 as an important milestone. Since preparations are intrinsically linked to the successful implementation of SWC, it makes sense to think of the whole as one project. The successful construction of the new arena was a prerequisite for the second project. As SWC was the first major sporting event in the new arena, there were also great demands for coordination. An overview of the main stages and activities in the period 2007–2011 are presented in Table 1.

The SWC 2011 was different in scope from other Nordic Ski events (Table 2). The event was not just confined to Holmenkollen arena. A number of activities also took place in the city center of Oslo. Such factors created a number of leadership challenges for the event organization. The CEO of

Table 1

Different Phases Within the Projects and Main Activities for the 2011 FIS Nordic World Ski Championship in Oslo, Norway

| Initiation<br>2007  | Planning<br>2008                                      | Preparation<br>2009–2010–2011                                       | Implementation 2011  | Wrap up<br>2011  |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| Ski-VM 2011 AS established. CEO and key personnel appointed | Planning and staffing project management organization | Building capacities, recruiting volunteers, engaging local partners | WC 2010 as test event, March 2010:<br>- Gathering feed-back<br>- Training organization<br>- Small test/training events | FIS Nordic Ski World Championship, February. 2011<br>Closure of the project. July 2011 |

the project organization did not have experience as a leader of a major sporting events. However, she recruited people with considerable experience from such events, and in many areas the organizers employed people with experience from former Word Cup events in Holmenkollen.

The CEO of the project organization had a clear leadership philosophy and organizational understanding consistent with the demands of international elite sport. As a former leader of the national elite sport organization in Norway, she had experienced how important it was that everyone identified with overall objectives, understood what was expected of them, had a strong sense of responsibility, and had good relationships within and across sections that could enhance communication, interaction, and learning (Andersen, 2012). From the first days, the focus of SWC 2011 project was on creating a culture supporting such values and attitudes:

My philosophy was that we should not only manage an event, we should build culture. . . . I feel that I managed to develop a close relation to all the 35–40 people in the leadership group. We needed to develop the individuals and the teams. Also volunteers should be involved in the process of building culture, but with somewhat less ambitious goals. (Interview January 4th, 2012)

The ambition of the CEO and her leadership team was to transfer their mindset and expectations to the whole organization. This process started in August 2009. It included both paid staff and also 2,300 volunteers. Twenty percent of the volunteers were defined as leaders (e.g., section leader, assistant section leader). In the recruitment process, all candidates for leader positions and other central positions were interviewed to ensure management

competence and professional knowledge. Before the test event WC 2010, considerable efforts went into creating high-quality relationships between volunteer leaders and followers (Hanstad, 2012a).

WC 2010 represented the bridge between preparations and the “main event,” as a test event is provided an opportunity to understand the challenges associated with delivering a successful SWC 2011.

#### Theoretical Framework: Mindful Project Organizations

The literature on major sporting event literature identifies a wide range of risk factors, and also reviews how various risks are clarified and managed (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a, 2009b). This study focuses on some aspects related to key functions in the project, and how they may be accommodated

Table 2

A Comparison of the Nordic Ski World Cup in 2010 (Seen as the Test Event) and the Nordic World Ski Championships in Oslo 2011

|                       | World<br>Cup 2010 | World<br>Championships<br>2011 |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Events                | 6                 | 21                             |
| Participating nations | 24                | 49                             |
| Duration of days      | 2                 | 12                             |
| Athletes              | 370               | 650                            |
| Media representatives | 300               | 1600                           |
| Ticket sales          | 40,000            | 270,000 <sup>a</sup>           |
| Volunteers            | 1100              | 2300                           |

<sup>a</sup>In addition it was estimated 300,000 spectators outside the arena and in the forest during the events. Approximately 50,000 spectators at the opening ceremonies and approximately 650,000 spectators at the 11 medal ceremonies in down town Oslo.

through a strategy of mindful project organization that strengthens learning and capacity building for improvisation in critical situations. As Johnston et al. (1996) point out, test events not only enable hosts to demonstrate their preparedness, they also “allow the testing of operational plans (and the) assessment of facilities. . . . Through this process hosts may be able to learn about necessary improvements . . . that may add substantially to . . . the satisfaction with the feature event’ (p. 67). A mindful project organization is likely to experience fewer critical incidents and have a greater capacity for managing the unexpected during the major event (Weick & Sutcliffe 2007).

A standard model of project organization distinguishes between initiation, planning and preparation, implementation, and completion (Karlsen & Gottschalk, 2008). Project organizations prepare for the operational stage through various forms of personnel training and desk-top exercises and tests. However, in many projects, risks in the implementation phase are handled on an ad hoc basis. It is common to observe delays, budget overruns, and/or new test periods in which deficiencies can be corrected, or risk transferred to participants or stakeholders (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

A major sporting event project differs from such a standard model for risk management in two ways. First, there is a clearer distinction between the preevent stages (i.e., initiation, planning, and preparation) and the operational phase of the event. Time for implementation is fixed. There is no room for delays or extended preparations. Second, organizers have limited possibility for transferring risks to athletes. Competitions can be rescheduled when weather conditions may unfairly influence results. Nevertheless, it is expected that the organizers will do everything to minimize the consequences of such factors.

Planning and preparation is a major source of risk reduction. However, the many factors that may affect competitions require a broad perspective on risk and great attention to small detail. In other contexts, many of these details might be seen as insignificant. During competitions, challenges must be resolved there and then, and the margins for error are often small. Almost any unforeseen incident may unfairly affect results, and consequently the experience of athletes, spectators, and

other stakeholders like the media, sponsors, and the local authorities (Andersen & Hanstad, 2013).

Major sporting events require risk management (Getz, 2005; Wideman, 1992). However, as Perminova et al. (2008) have pointed out, the traditional planning and risk analysis does not cover unforeseen incidents. In the words of Weick and Sutcliffe (2007): “Unexpected events can get you into trouble unless you create a mindful infrastructure that continuously tracks small failures, resists oversimplification, is sensitive to operations, maintains resilience and monitor shifting locations of expertise” (p. 21). Successful risk management therefore requires the organization to develop critical self-evaluation and learning abilities in a way that provides increased capacity to cope with the many unexpected incidents that may occur in a major sporting event. Capacity for rapid and flexible response is crucial in operational situations.

Major sporting events, like all projects, bring together people with different skill and experience in a temporary organization. Before a major sporting event can accomplish its task, it must be designed, manned, and trained. The project management literature emphasizes challenges related to the bridging of different skills, experiences, and expectations. These all reflect different previous project experiences as well as those from permanent organizations. In all organizations individuals look for confirmation of existing knowledge when planning, preparing, and implementing tasks. Such tendencies create special challenges in projects that bring together diverse people and organizations (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Mindful organizations specifically direct attention to mechanisms that increase the quality of coordinated action and reliable learning in complex organizations. This perspective is also applied in a number of studies of large technical projects, including space technology (Starbuck & Farjoun, 2005). The US military use a model called *After Action Approach* to actively identify small failures and enhance learning from practical exercises (Darling et al., 2005). Similar approaches are also used in an organization when preparing for crisis management (Veil, 2011).

Mindful organizations are a special form of high reliability organization. In such organizations the culture emphasizes an approach to learning

characterized by: a combination of ongoing scrutiny of expectations, continuous refinement and differentiations of expectations based on newer experiences, willingness to and capability to invent new expectations that makes sense of unprecedented events, a more nuanced appreciation of context and how to deal with it, and identification of new dimensions of context that improve foresight and current functioning. In the context of project management this requires active and conscious leadership to ensure that such a culture is anchored and acted upon at all levels of the organization, as a context for exploiting experiences in the development of capacities for mindful event management. (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, p. 42)

Being mindful is an individual property. Mindfulness implies a willingness to engage in critical reflection. It is a mind-set that emphasizes the conditional nature of knowledge by continuously questioning underlying *assumptions* and *beliefs* in light of new experiences (Langer, 1989, 1997, 2000). Mindful organizations are characterized by having a culture and routines that support mindfulness on all levels. An important part of this is a shared understanding of challenges, open and frank communication, attention to details, and a strong sense of shared responsibility (Levinthal & Rerup, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999).

Characteristics of mindful organizations are often found in elite sport organizations that strive for excellence (Andersen, 2009). The pursuit of excellence necessitates that such a management attitude must also be reflected in major sporting event projects. This is the context for how the 2010 WC was utilized as a learning opportunity and the basis for training exercises leading up the 2011 SWC.

### Method

The article is based on a case study. The focus of the study is to create and exploit principles of a mindful organization to reduce and manage risks in a major sport event. The major question is how experiences from a test event can be used in such efforts. Sport events are a complex phenomenon, posing a number of challenges for the development of reliable knowledge and capacities for dealing with the unexpected. The study is theoretically informed (Yin, 2009) (i.e., designed to explore such efforts within the framework of mindful organization theory).

The project utilized organizational files, internal documents, and clips from the media. These were used to establish an overall understanding of the project, main stages, and activities as a context for how the test event was exploited in the preparations. Such information was also important in identifying major incidents and challenges to be explored. The major data source was in-depth interviews with key actors within Ski-VM 2011 AS. The six participants of the project organization represent a strategic sample (Charmaz, 2006). They were responsible for key functions in the project and knew the organization well. Nevertheless, we know that leaders are not able to capture everything that happens in the whole organization. Also, senior leaders tend to view their organization more favorably than the rest of the organization (Payne & Pugh, 1976). They have vested interests as they may become targets for blame when objectives are not achieved (Starbuck & Hedberg, 2006). Consequently, the picture of SWC presented in this article is not representative of the whole organization. Nevertheless, in light of the insights acquired during the research process, the participants in our sample come across as self-critical with nuanced pictures of their role and the organization.

The six informants were interviewed individually approximately 5 months after the test event. In light of the experiences during the main event, three were also interviewed after this event. This gave us a total of 10 in-depth interviews, each lasting between 45 and 95 minutes. Information about the research project and the central topic of the interviews was provided to the participants in advance so that they were sufficiently prepared.

During the interviews, the main questions were asked first, then the follow-up questions in order to get the informants to explore particular themes. Where relevant, concepts and ideas of special interest were discussed (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). In summary, the main topics in the interviews were: respondents' background and experience; identified risk factors and challenges related to SWC 2011; experience-based learning from the test event; decision-making processes; the leader's role; and decision-making processes in the implementation phase. The objective was to illuminate what Ski-VM 2011 AS learned from WC 2010 test event and how it affected the planning and delivery of 2011 SWC.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after they were completed. Both inductive and deductive approaches were utilized for analyzing the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To obtain an initial overview, the first coding represented a categorization of risk issues and challenges that the participants viewed as the most critical. The second coding concentrated on initiatives and processes employed to identify and reduce risks in preparations and to develop flexible capacities for managing the unexpected during the 2011 SWC. These codes were underpinned by concepts related to mindful project organization. Before presenting and analyzing our findings we elaborate on the concept of a mindful project organization as introduced above and how it relates to risk management.

### Findings and Discussion

In a major sporting event project, a key concern is reducing the likelihood that something goes wrong, and to reduce the impact of unforeseen issues or accidents. In SWC 2011 such efforts were guided by an explicit leadership philosophy in line with a mindful project organization approach. The first period between 2007 and 2009 was dominated by the 40 or so staff within the Ski-VM 2011 AS. In the fall of 2009, the organization was expanded as part of the transition to its operational phase. The WC 2010 was the first real test of its operational capacities. In the following three sections we present and discuss findings related to (i) experiences during the test event, (ii) how such experiences were evaluated and acted upon in further preparations, and (iii) how such efforts influenced the implementation of the 2011 SWC.

#### *Experiences During the Test Event*

The project organization Ski-VM 2011 consisted of several different partners. The municipality of Oslo was responsible for snow removal, Oslo Public Transport (*Ruter*) was responsible for transport, the police were in charge of security, and the Association for Promotion of Skiing ("Skiforeningen") was responsible for sponsorship. Representatives from these organizations brought different experiences, expectations, and ways of working into the organization. Ski-VM 2011 AS was responsible for

recruiting key personnel and volunteers, and for managing everything and everyone during preparations as well the event itself.

The test event was conducted in a new arena, which was only completed a few days before the test event started. This created problems in preparing for the test. As pointed out by the CEO of Ski-VM 2011 AS: "We arranged WC 2010 in an arena that was not completed. It was still a construction site!" When floodlights were switched on during WC, 15 people from the electricity company had to stand by and connect the wires on command. There was no button or switch ready for use. These 15 people also needed to be there when the light was switched off. The Director of Sports had other challenges. In one of the two ski jump arenas (the normal hill, Midtstuebakken) it was not possible to arrange a proper ski jump competition prior to the test event. The Director stated, "We tested it on plastic, but it is not comparable to arrangements with winter conditions and with snow."

SWC 2011 faced complex organizational challenges when moving into the operational stage. This occurred despite efforts to identify all contingencies. Given the various uncertainties and risks, the test event was an important milestone that would define key elements of the agenda delivering the main event in 2011. Critical experiences involved structural challenges of the arena as well the capacity of the project organization to implement plans and deal with the unexpected.

Participants emphasized the rich prior experience held by the leadership group, but noted that such experience is ultimately insufficient. The new Director of Sports of Ski-VM 2011 AS, who took over when the former director quit, had experience from key leadership positions in two Winter Olympics from start to completion. Both were 6-year projects. He was involved in the design of the 2002 Olympic arena, and was asked to do the same in Vancouver 2010. He also had a central role during the World Ski Championships in Sapporo 2007. His expertise covered technical as well as organizational matters. On top of this he had participated as an athlete in two Olympic Games. Still, he did not believe that his broad background and experience was sufficient to resolve all the challenges of SWC 2011. He emphasized that tests were needed to adapt general knowledge to the challenges of every major event: "Every



event is unique; you have to use your experience, but you cannot do the exact same thing as you did in other projects and organizations.”

One unique aspect of SWC was activities in the arena outside the city were too coordinated with medal ceremonies and cultural events in the city center. Another informant pointed to the coordination between these activities as a particular challenge:

I believe the biggest challenge will be to coordinate the events happening at the arena and the city center of Oslo. I believe the sporting event and the happenings in Holmenkollen [the event arena] will go smoothly, and I think that the event in the city center will be fine. But I think we have some challenges to tie these two together as a whole.

Leaders were acutely aware that the test event was not a full-scale rehearsal for the Ski VM 2011 AS. There were fewer disciplines and fewer athletes. For instance, during WC 2010 there were 40 ski-waxing areas, compared to the 140 during SWC 2011. One informant summed this up in the following way:

It will be a completely different atmosphere [at SWC 2011]; 14 days versus one weekend. You need more people. . . . You may need three people to do the same task, considering only this area there are major management challenges. . . . We have arranged one World Cup event in the arena in Holmenkollen. Now we will arrange a World Championship in Oslo. That is the difference.

At a World Championship venue, there are several practical challenges related to the arena, slope preparations, billboards and logistics concerning the athletes, managers, media, sponsors, food, toilets, and cleaning. Everything needed be coordinated in a way that created a good experience both for athletes and spectators. The WC 2010 produced useful experiences for the management group. A number of deficiencies were mentioned in the media and even more in internal reports. In the following examples are given related to facilities, support functions, and organizational challenges. The most important lessons were related to weaknesses in the leadership and organizational model.

*Facilities.* After the test event (WC 2010), two ski jumping judges publicly criticized the new Holmenkollen ski jump arena. The positioning of

the judge tower made it difficult for judges to see where the ski jumpers landed. Some referees were not able to see the ski jumpers until they were airborne. In some spectator stands, it was not possible to see the ski jumpers either. During the test event this issue was solved with a big screen. Before SWC 2011 it was decided that these stands should not be used. Another problem was that the system installed to ensure that take-off ramp would always remain frozen did not work properly. No one was able to fix it. The system required special expertise, and a specialist from Canada was later hired to train local personnel for SWC event.

The cross-country sprint track produced some of the greatest media headlines. These included: “It will become the scandal track” (Farchian, 2010) and “Disapprove of WC-track” (Mangelrød, 2010). One main issue was a narrow corner of the track 400 meters before the finish line. The narrow corner led athletes to collide and fall during WC 2010. A concrete wall used for protecting biathletes from the shooting range was troublesome. The solution was to adjust parts of the wall and make the track wider.

*Support Functions.* Some of the support functions in the arena were not properly considered. In some areas the detail of test event planning was insufficient. For example, video equipment for use by judges was not available for inspection when they arrived 2 days before the event started. This gave them no time to familiarize themselves with the equipment. A representative from the leadership group stated: “The jury judges need to have one television and one video system/recording system. . . . When the jury came 2 days before the test event started there was no such equipment there. We will go through everything so that it will be ready when the jury arrives.” Accreditation was not satisfactory at all: “We did have accreditation, but it was not satisfactory. . . . Everyone went wherever they wanted to go.” The radio system/communication also caused problems: “This was a total failure.” Information billboards were also problematic. One participant stated, “The boards were wrong and there were not enough of them.”

*Organizational Challenges.* The examples above refer to specific issues that demanded action to ensure better preparation and the ability to solve

the problems that might occur. However, all these shortcomings pointed to serious problems with the structure of Ski-VM 2011 AS organization:

We were organized in the wrong way; there were too many decision-makers. . . . There were five or six people in charge all of whom wanted to make decisions. This created chaos and a bit of confusion and stuff. . . . It was like two or three different organizers, not one organizing group. It was like you were working in a “silo.” No-one was talking to anyone else.

All in all, WC 2010 was considered a successful event by the media and the general public, but with some important shortcomings. However, it was the conscious strategy of the CEO to document and utilize the many experiences as learning opportunities to improve the organization in the remaining period towards SWC 2011. In the following section, we examine how experiences were evaluated and used to implement the necessary corrections and develop capacity for contingency thinking and flexible responses to challenges that might occur.

#### *Evaluations, Corrections, and Contingency Preparations*

The report, *The Overall Plan of Planning and Implementation of the World Ski Championships 2011* (Ski-VM 2011, 2010) describes the test event evaluation process. The evaluation of the test event was quite extensive. The Director of Sports summarized the process as follows:

We received reports from all the different departments—we gathered everything in one document and had several internal meetings at the office. . . . We got their opinion. Then we included volunteer leaders who explained what they had reported etc. We explained how we thought we could solve it. . . . Then we worked with the information we had in each area. (p. 6)

By mid-June 2010, 3 months after the test event, updated implementation plans existed for all departments within Ski-VM 2011 AS. Needs and resources were defined in relation to the operational challenges identified in further preparation for SWC 2011. The action plan was changed. From August there was a strategic planning group and separate operating groups for the arena in Holmenkollen and

for Oslo’s city center. In addition, several rehearsals and events were carried out.

Considerable feedback was related to what was considered a lack of clear responsibilities within the leadership group. This became a key area of improvement for the Director of Sports (who was hired after the test event): “There needs to be some kind of direction and there should not be too many people making the decisions.” Ski-VM 2011 AS had representatives from several organizations, with different responsibilities and their own ways of working. It was necessary to clarify who would be in charge at Holmenkollen, who would be in charge in the city center, and how coordination between the two would be carried out. The municipality of Oslo helped facilitate this process. A joint working group was established to avoid involving too many parties when making decisions. For instance, if there was a massive snow fall, the working group would be in charge of snow removal throughout Oslo. This was an important move since it simplified communication, learning, and decision making. It provided increased flexibility and capacity to deal with the unexpected.

The CEO of Ski-VM 2011 AS stressed that WC 2010 was a test event and important learning arena towards SWC 2011:

Experience has come from WC 2010 and other events that we have organized. We do not practice just to get to know the sporting arena; it is just as much in order to get to know the interaction within the organization and the leadership—so that lack of leadership can be revealed.

Experiences from WC 2010 also defined new areas of practice: “We gathered different decision-makers and gave them a scenario, like a spectator being injured. We practiced and discussed such scenarios several times.”

In some areas, the test event did not provide the organization with actual tests of planning and preparation. However, it was evident that the duration and extent of SWC 2011 would require special measures related to track preparation, and training of key personnel at all levels, including volunteer management and waste disposal. The Director of Sports summarized these challenges:

During the 2011 SWC, we have to be even better than during the 2010 WC, in regard to planning

and preparation of ski tracks. . . . We need . . . quality snow for the whole period. What to do if it is raining. . . . Things like that.

Efforts were made during preparations to identify all possible incidents. However, the Director of Sport also emphasized the importance of preparing for the unexpected:

We do our best to make sure that everything is organized, but there might be things that we did not prepare for. . . . We are absolutely sure that we have good plans, but we are also absolutely certain that this plan will stay fixed until the first day of the Championship, after that we will just have to do the best we can.

To summarize, it is not possible to plan for every possible contingency at a major sporting event. However, detailed plans and preparations increase the event organizers' capacity to manage unexpected incidents. The CEO of SWC was a former assistant head of the Norwegian national elite sport organization, Olympiatoppen. Not only did she bring considerable experience from elite sport into the project, she also represented an explicit approach to the project organization reflecting core elements of a mindful organization.

#### *The Real Test: World Championship 2011*

SWC 2011 had its challenges. Inclement weather, mainly fog, and public transport chaos did not overshadow what was otherwise a successful event ("Vinter-OL til Oslo," 2011). Key persons within Ski-VM 2011 AS expressed satisfaction with the event. Several informants emphasized the capacity to handle the unexpected as a key to success:

I think we are better than average when we look at the organization we created and what we managed to do. . . . [W]e are probably far above the average when it comes to managing challenges along the way. The ability to take action.

The biggest challenge occurred on the first Saturday, also known as "Black Saturday," when the subway had major problems. This created serious problems at the Holmenkollen arena. The newspaper *Aftenposten* wrote about "Chaos-Oslo 2011" and the anger and frustration among spectators (Henriksen, 2011). In another newspaper, *Verdens Gang*, the

headline was: "Apologize—and return the money" (Dæhli, 2011). The incident was described as "a complete scandal" where "spectators were treated as sheep."

Representatives from the public transport company, *Ruter*, serving as a partner to Ski-VM 2011 AS, acknowledged the mistake and stated that it was not good enough. They promised that the next day would be better—and it was. The company managed to double transport capacity. The person responsible for logistics in Ski-VM 2011 AS emphasized organizational training as a key success factor: "The organization as such was trained . . . to meet the challenge. . . . Have the right people available."

Through various meetings and events the project organization was welded together. Some exercises were like a role-play in which different scenarios were played out, while others revolved around practice for specific tasks. Small, local events also provided the opportunity to practice, although on a smaller scale. This was in line with the organizing team's overall management philosophy as the CEO, Åsne Havelid, stated:

To facilitate a systematic training program . . . you need to have a plan of action with several intermediate goals along the way to reach the overall goal. Like athletes, coaches and trainers need intermediate goals, or a plan for the training.

To summarize, a capacity to manage the unexpected is the key flexible responses under time pressure. After the first Saturday, when "everything went wrong," employees could have said: "This did not work very well." Instead, they mobilized and each one of them thought "I really need to do something about this." This is an example of adaptability, and having the right focus. It reflected a deliberate and systematic strategy to handle such difficult situations.

#### Concluding Comments

##### *Exploiting Test Events in a Mindful Organization*

In this article two research questions were addressed: 1) How did the test event WC 2010 impact on SWC 2011? 2) To what extent were the characteristics of a mindful organization evident in the way SWC managed this process?

Efforts to reduce risks and prepare for the unexpected permeated all stages of preparation. The leadership philosophy emphasized mindful learning that would focus attention on critical details and capacities for managing of the unexpected (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). The test event revealed the gap between thoughtful, detailed conscientious planning and a fine-tuned operational organization involving people who had limited time and opportunity to practice. The fact that the arena was not fully completed before the test event made it even more important as a critical learning experience. However, some of the shortcomings such as not discovering design errors in the new ski jump facility, a lack of planning in some support functions, and uncertainties involving roles and responsibilities suggest a failure to fully implement important elements of a mindful organization.

The test event demonstrated classical problems relating to complex projects. The creation of a shared foundation of values and operational understanding, as well as organizational training, is often neglected.

Considerable time and energy was invested in the evaluation of experiences from the WC 2010. The way evaluations were carried out and acted upon in preparing for SWC 2011 were more consistent with a mindful learning approach. The event took place at an arena where construction was not yet finished, and it was the first time staff and volunteers worked together. For this reason, the experiences from WC 2010 were crucial for developing Ski-VM 2011 AS. The top management group emphasized the importance of implementing the organization's vision and values among all those involved.

Initially, the core organization responsible for preparation and implementation had considerable expertise and resources. However, also at this level adjustments were needed, and new people were recruited to solve specific tasks. At the operative level, especially among the volunteers, experience, skills, and values associated with a mindful organization varied. Lack of leadership and clear routines was an equally important challenge (Hanstad, 2012b).

In the period leading up to SWC 2011, practice was needed to prepare the organization for the unexpected. Several minor events were used, but the World Cup was the major test. The Director

of Sports was very clear. Without the test event, Ski-VM 2011 AS would not have been able to implement a successful World Championship:

“No, not a chance. We need to test the arena, you also need to test the people, and there are also a lot of things we cannot test. . . . There are unexpected things. . . . There always is.

Two factors seem essential in understanding the successful exploitation of the test event. 1) Although specific issues were targeted, the main effort went into improving organizational quality relating to structure, recruitment of key personnel, and training relating to both specific and imagined contingencies. 2) Although the number of risks was reduced or eliminated, the critical test event success factor for the main event was increased organizational capacity to manage the many small and the few major unexpected incidents.

There are few studies of how test events are used to prepare for major sporting events, but conscious attempts to use such learning experiences to enhance quality and reduce risks are characteristics associated with mindful project organizations.

Organizations are groups of individuals, and groups that act collectively. However, individuals and groups tend to differ with respect to assumptions and what they pay attention to. In this sense organizations may be viewed as collections of subcultures. The CEO of Oslo 2011 invested considerable effort into the anchoring of values and perspectives contributing to mindfulness among individuals, groups, and levels. This would imply trained sensitivity to the local task environment and the ability to discover and respond to the unexpected. As Ray, Baker, and Plowman (2011) have pointed out, however, the capacity for mindful thinking and action is likely to differ throughout an organization. High-level staff will apply a broader, more conceptual perspective in their everyday work. Other staff will tend to rely on more technical and practical repertoires of actions.

In the case of Oslo WCS 2011 senior managers stimulated mindfulness, and were given the time and opportunity to build a culture that strengthened such attitudes. On lower, operative levels people were brought in late, just before the test event, with limited time and opportunity to absorb core values and corresponding mind-sets, and to develop relationships

and skills. This is probably the reason why project organization missed out on some rather basic shortcomings during the World Cup 2010. However, the way experiences from this test event were exploited point towards a high level of organizational mindfulness, both in preventing mistakes and in having a capacity for managing the unexpected.

### Implications and Further Research

The study directs attention to the interplay between organizational capabilities for reliable experience-based learning from test events. Test events play a key role in preparing for major sporting events, but how it can be exploited as a learning arena in preparing the event organization for the main events has been largely ignored in the literature on event management. The present study directs the attention of both practitioners and researchers to a number of issues of great importance for risk management in complex projects. In mindful organizations risk management is an integrated part of best practice. Such organizational characteristics are increasingly viewed as the key to success for project-based learning.

The present study has focused on the role of the CEO and of senior managers in the pursuit of a mindful learning strategy. This represents a top-down perspective. One possibility for further research could be to go deeper into the processes involved, looking at different kinds of events. Another is to capture such processes from the volunteers' point of view. A third possibility could be to integrate a stakeholder perspective in the analysis—for example, by studying the challenges of integrating a shared mindful perspective among different organizations involved.

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