

# PROCESS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Exploring the Process of Organizational Change within the Sport Industry: A Stakeholder  
Perspective

Chandler McFall, BSM (Honours)

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Faculty of Applied Health Science. Brock University.

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### **Abstract**

Stakeholders in sport organizations often hold unique and diverse perspectives on organizational change, yet literature has been shown to evaluate these perspectives from a static point in time. With change more recently being found to be a dynamic, unpredictable process as opposed to being predictable in nature (Dawson, 2019) this research sought to understand how stakeholders responded to a large-scale organizational change over time. Thus, this study examines the implementation of Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) within a community sport organization, with a particular evaluation of how these stakeholder responses shifted over time.

To investigate this, a constructivist approach was adopted, drawing on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved at various levels of the organization. A total of 12 interviews were conducted, capturing a range of perspectives across paid staff, coaches, and parents. This open-ended method enabled a deeper exploration of the underlying beliefs, emotions, and contextual factors that shaped stakeholder engagement with the change process.

Findings were interpreted through the lens of stakeholder theory (Mahon & Waddock, 1992; Freeman, 1984), revealing how individuals navigated personal meaning and emotion during change, and further how their positioning in the organization influenced their responses. Stakeholder reactions were categorized through an updated spectrum of the stakeholder responses to change created by Welty Peachey & Bruening (2011, 2012) (e.g., acceptance, ambivalence, resistance), ranging from proactive engagement to active opposition. These responses were marked by positive or negative shifts in response as new information and experiences emerged, largely dependent on personal goals, values, and expectations. Overall,

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these reactions were not static but found to be dynamic, shaped by both personal values and organizational actions.

This research contributes to sport management literature by offering a deeper understanding of stakeholder engagement in times of change, and highlights the importance of communication relating to stakeholder needs. The findings further demonstrate the value of capturing the unique dimensions of change and stakeholders commonly found within community sport organizations and youth sport.

***Keywords:*** *organizational change, stakeholders, stakeholder theory, sport, evolving responses*

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Organizational change is rampant in the sport industry and impacts individuals and organizations (Wagstaff et al., 2016). With increasingly competitive and unsteady market environments, the onus remains on organizations to embrace change as a means of immersing and engaging in sustainable, equitable competitive advantage (Rengkung, 2021). This has led to changes like new non-profit laws (Parent et al., 2021), restructuring boards to appear more professional (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2020), and focusing on equity and inclusivity in leadership and programs. With change being described as "a planned or unplanned response to pressures exerted on the organization that result in modifications to structures, processes, or behaviors" (Lines, 2005, p. 8), adapting to change has further become a key factor in organizational success (Burchell, 2011), thus placing an onus on organizations to respond to these environmental shifts to remain competitive.

To date, an increasing number of scholars have examined organizational change in the sport industry. Research has examined change at varying levels, such as professional (Cousens & Slack, 2005; O'Brien & Slack, 2003), intercollegiate (Thompson & Parent, 2021), and nonprofit sport organizations (Amis et al., 2004; Legg et al., 2016; Slack & Hinings, 1992). Studies have focused on forces driving change (e.g., Cousens & Slack, 2005; O'Brien & Slack, 2003; Slack & Hinings, 1992), professionalization (e.g., Clausen et al., 2018; Lang et al., 2019) policy changes (e.g., Legg et al., 2016), interest, power, and capacity for change (e.g., Amis et al., 2004), and culture change (e.g., Feddersen et al., 2021; Hemme et al., 2021; Thompson & Parent, 2024). In addition, a small number of studies in sport management have examined stakeholders and organizational change. For instance, Thompson and Parent (2024) compared how different stakeholder groups experienced organizational change, noting how experiences with change

varied between different stakeholders. Similarly, Wagstaff et al. (2016) and Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011) examined stakeholder responses to organizational change and respectively found that responses were both positive and negative and ranged from acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance. Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012) further developed the notion of ambivalence and found that stakeholder responses to change were rooted in both positive and negative emotions simultaneously. While these studies were foundational in demonstrating how stakeholders respond to the change process in terms of emotional response, they also identified some key gaps which future research could address. In particular, these studies tended to examine stakeholder reactions to organizational change within a static perspective, in which stakeholder perspectives were examined within one specific moment in time. This is problematic as change has been found to be a dynamic process, unfolding over time in unpredictable ways (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Thus, by examining the stakeholder experiences around change cross-sectionally, there is an inherent assumption that these experiences remain stable. As change processes may alter as a result of updates to organization goals, objectives, or the dynamic external environment of the organization (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012), stakeholder reactions and perceptions of change may further evolve as they navigate through the effects of change themselves.

In addition, these studies examined change at varying levels, such as professional sport teams (Wagstaff et al., 2016) and intercollegiate sport (Thompson & Parent, 2022; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012). Given these contexts, there remains a limited understanding of stakeholders and organizational change within the community sport setting. Community sport organizations (CSOs) often operate with unique structures, resources, and cultural values, making their change processes and responses distinct from those in professional or elite sport

contexts. Focusing on community sport stakeholders is crucial for understanding the dynamics of organizational change, particularly as these groups possess unique expectations regarding organizational outcomes (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2006). Thus, stakeholder perceptions in CSOs are particularly relevant to understanding change theory, especially as these organizations continue to implement long-term changes within organizational philosophies, such as Long-Term Player Development (LTPD). As a result, community sport stakeholders, such as coaches, parents, and volunteers, often have distinct needs and perspectives that shape their engagement with these change initiatives.

This notion of dynamic change can be directly translated to the community sport level, where stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, parents, volunteers) may similarly experience mixed emotions toward organizational changes. Understanding change is crucial for community sport leaders, as it can help them manage both the positive and negative aspects of stakeholder reactions to change. In the context of community sport, change is often reflected by complex, layered emotions that arise when change challenges established norms or values. For example, a coach or parent might appreciate the potential benefits of a new training model, such as enhanced athlete development, but also feel nostalgic or protective of the current system, especially if it has fostered strong community bonds. This emotional complexity means that reactions stemming from experiences with change are not simply "for" or "against" the change; rather, they involve a push-and-pull between hope for progress and fear of disruption.

Therefore, given the aforementioned research gaps, the purpose of this study is to explore stakeholder responses and evolving perceptions of organizational change in a CSO. With stakeholder theory as a framework, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the different stakeholder responses during change?

2. Why do stakeholders respond in this manner?
3. How do those responses evolve over time?

This study will aim to provide insights into how various stakeholders within community sport, such as paid staff, parents, and coaches, respond to change. It will examine the variety of reactions stakeholders exhibit when faced with change, investigate the underlying factors that shape why stakeholders react the way they do, and analyze how stakeholder responses shift as the change process progresses.

This research confronts the gap existing within sport management literature by acknowledging the importance of stakeholder interaction towards successful organizational change (Freeman, 1984; Mahon & Waddock, 1992) while also exploring the driving forces defining stakeholder reactions to organizational change processes (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012; Thompson & Parent, 2024). Empirical research exists that demonstrates the need for stakeholders to participate in change processes to ensure overall success (Bouckennooghe, 2010; Esteve et al., 2011; Mahon & Waddock, 1992; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012). However, sport organizational scholars and leaders remain unclear about how unique stakeholder groups engage with organizational change, especially in terms of how their responses evolve over time. Although there has been research on stakeholder reactions (Wagstaff et al., 2016; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012), there has been a gap in understanding how these responses shift and develop as the change process unfolds. This long-term perspective is essential to comprehending the full scope of stakeholder engagement throughout ongoing organizational transitions.

From a practical standpoint, grasping stakeholders' perceptions of responses of the change process is essential for fostering successful integration and buy-in among these groups. Understanding how these community sport stakeholders navigate and respond to changes can

significantly impact the effectiveness of long-term initiatives like Long-Term Player Development (LTPD), which has been a cornerstone of community sport-programing delivery (cf. Legg et al., 2016). While evolving perceptions of change among stakeholders are likely to occur as familiarity builds with the change, the specific ways in which community sport stakeholders respond to and adapt to these changes remain underexplored in existing sport management literature. This research can highlight the intricacies of stakeholder engagement in community sports, providing insights that can help organizations effectively manage long-term changes by addressing the evolving needs and expectations of their stakeholders throughout the process.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Overview of Organizational Change

Traditionally, scholars have conceptualized organizational change as planned and episodic, emphasizing a more top-down initiative and furthering the belief that change is predictable (cf. Van de Ven, 2021). However, over time, theorists considered change to be more unplanned, continuous, and unpredictable (Van de Ven & Poole, 2021; Dawson, 2019). This view is underpinned by emergent and bottom-up change initiatives that are rarely planned or prepared (Van de Ven, 2021). Through examination of both the successes and failures attributed to these two perspectives on change (planned and emergent), more recent literature has identified a process approach.

Through the process approach, it is understood that change is unpredictable, is both planned and emergent, and is shaped by unstable forces (Dawson, 2019). The process approach ultimately denotes that while planned change may be intended or desired, organizations remain subject to external forces that alter or affect initial planning (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Poole and Van de Ven (2021, p. 6) succinctly describes the process approach, which shares tenets of both planned and unplanned approaches, when they note:

While planned and unplanned change may be viewed as opposite ends of a continuum, it is also useful to consider them together. ... Because of the complexity and uncertainty of most organization change initiatives, plans go awry, and alternative goals and directions emerge during the process.

As such, the present study follows a process approach to organizational change and defines change as “the process by which organizational characteristics, activities, or ideas are altered” (Thompson et al., 2024, p. 663). Further to this definition, literature has demonstrated

the ability for change to involve the implementation of new practices or a substantial alteration of organizational philosophy (Legg et al., 2016).

With the sport industry remaining volatile and turbulent, the need for change to be adopted and proceed within organizations has increased exponentially (Wagstaff et al., 2016). As a result, the necessity for change can arise from sources both internal and external to the organization, such as pressures stemming from stakeholders external to organizations or the inherent desire to heighten organizational effectiveness (Slack & Parent, 2006; Thompson & Parent, 2024). Thus, sport organizations have identified strategy, size, environment, and technology as areas deemed critical to adapt to survive and grow (Slack & Parent, 2006).

Organizational change is multidimensional (Heckmann et al., 2016). Researchers have identified various types of changes which occur in organizations, including culture changes, product changes, changes in people, structural changes, and policy changes (cf. Daft, 2021; Legg et al., 2016; Thompson, 2022). Culture change is reflected by the “modification of beliefs, values, basic assumptions, attitudes, and behaviours of people in an organization” (Thompson, 2022, p. 30). Product changes involve the modification of goods or services within an organizations outlook (Thompson, 2022). Changes in people involve the alteration of organizational personnel (e.g., staff, volunteers), including their associated skills and abilities (Thompson, 2022). Changes in organizational structure involve “modifying aspects of an organization’s administrative domain (i.e., its supervision and management)” (Thompson, 2022, p. 29). Last, policy change refers to the adoption or modification of written rules and regulations by an organization (Lachance & Parent, 2023), such as the use of the long-term player development (LTPD) policy by many sport organizations (e.g., Legg et al., 2016). Research has shown that sport organizations will undergo multiple changes simultaneously rather than in

isolation, where one type of change may bring about other types (e.g., Legg et al., 2016; Thompson & Parent, 2021, 2024). Therefore, organizations must consider how multiple changes will affect both the organization itself, and its members (c.f. Heckmann et al., 2016). Given that change often does not always occur in isolation (Heckmann et al., 2016), it remains important for researchers and practitioners to understand and consider the potential for multiple changes to occur at one time.

Overall, organizational (process) change is a complex and dynamic action that blends planned and unplanned elements, often involving multiple simultaneous changes across different levels. Organizationally, each level may experience change uniquely, presenting distinct challenges and adaptations required for successful implementation. As a result, resistance stemming from change remains a frequent response, underpinning the multifaceted nature of change implementation.

### **Research on Organizational Change in the Sport Sector**

Research on organizational change in sport management has garnered increased scholarly attention since its inception in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Researchers have studied organizational change in different contexts as well as different topics. For instance, change has been examined in national sport organizations (e.g., Kikulis et al., 1995), provincial/territorial sport organizations (e.g., Legg et al., 2016), collegiate sport (e.g., Thompson & Parent, 2021, 2024) and athletic departments (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012). Among these levels, it remains apparent that organizational change maintains unique pressures, challenges, and stakeholders that contribute to the potential success of change implementation.

In other words, much of the prior research on change within the sport sector has focused on the national or provincial/territorial level. Little research has examined change at the

community sport level. Shifting the focus of change toward the community sport setting allows for a deepened understanding of organizational change in sport as a result of the unique stakeholders, environments, and structures associated with community-level sport (Legg et al., 2016). This shift in focus allows for a heightened exploration of the dynamics among organizations maintaining a diverse group of stakeholders, including parents, volunteers, coaches, and community leaders. These organizational members, unique to community sport to varying degrees, are likely to have different expectations and engagement with the change process.

Furthermore, in terms of the topic or content examined, sport management scholars have examined different areas of change, with many of these studies focusing on why and how organizations undertake change (e.g., Amis et al., 2004b; Clausen et al., 2018; Cousens & Slack, 2005; Kikulis et al., 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Legg et al., 2016; O'Brien & Slack, 2003; Slack & Hinings, 1992; Thompson, 2022). Further to these studies, different, more specific, types of change have been shown to be examined within literature, including studies focused on radical (e.g., Kikulis et al., 1992; Thompson & Parent, 2021;) and convergent change (c.f., Greenwood & Hinings, 1996), resistance to change (c.f., Danylchuk et al., 2015), the implementation of new policies or systems (e.g., Legg et al., 2016), and the interplay between technology and change (Thompson et al., 2024). These studies create a framework for the underpinnings pertaining to the purpose and rationale behind change initiatives.

More recently, other scholars have identified specific areas of interest within sport management research revolving around organizational change and stakeholders. For instance, Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011, 2012) and Wagstaff et al. (2016) examined stakeholder responses to change processes. Thompson and Parent (2024) looked at how internal and external

stakeholders experience the change process, noting unique experiences with change among each group. Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003) identified stakeholder motivations through the change process, detailing interest and identity perspectives as key drivers. These studies offer valuable insights toward the unique ways in which stakeholders interact with change, demonstrating the elements associated with stakeholder response. Across the depth of literature on change and stakeholders, it remains clear that organizational change adopts distinct pressures and challenges, influenced by the structure and background of the organization. The range of involved stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, administrators, sponsors, etc.) further adds a unique element to the change process. Their varying interests, attitudes, and levels of engagement have been demonstrated among literature to shape how change is perceived and adopted, presenting stakeholder dynamics as key in organizational change.

### **Stakeholder Theory and Stakeholder Engagement in Organizational Change**

The idea of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) has commonly been utilized to investigate stakeholder responses to the change process. Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011) describe stakeholder theory as a framework for understanding managerial decision-making. They determine this through the definition presented by Freeman (1984), which defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s purpose” (Freeman, 1984, p. 53).

As described by Donaldson and Preston (1995), there are three approaches to stakeholder theory: (1) descriptive/empirical, which “is taken in descriptions of the organization’s nature and of board members’ thinking related to stakeholder interests” (Parent, 2008, p. 138); (2) instrumental, which “establishes a framework for examining the connections, if any, between the practice of stakeholder management and the achievement of various corporate performance

goals” (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 67); and (3) normative, which indicates that “stakeholders are persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of corporate activity” (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 67). For the purpose of this study, stakeholder theory will be approached as descriptive, as a means for examining stakeholder salience and comparing internal and external stakeholder responses.

Stakeholders can be classified as primary or secondary to an organization. Clarkson (1995) defines primary stakeholders as individuals, groups and organizations “whose continuing participation the corporation cannot survive (without)” (p. 106). In comparison, Clarkson (1995) further identifies secondary stakeholders as individuals and groups that have the power to affect or be affected by the actions of the organization. These secondary stakeholders have further been described to be important to the survival of an organization, but not critical.

Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011) further denote that stakeholders occupy different levels within an organization, often unique to their organizational role, and have distinct experiences as a result. The authors further build upon research by Gallivan (2001) and perceive that these backgrounds impact the way stakeholders receive messages and react to change. Thompson and Parent (2021) take a different approach to stakeholders and stakeholder theory, noting that the performance of an organization is often directly linked to the successful interaction between the organization and its stakeholders.

According to Wolfe and Putler (2002), stakeholders are often grouped through generic, broad classifications. For example, while stakeholders have traditionally been listed as one large group, stakeholders can be divided into parents, coaches, and paid staff. Based on the depiction of stakeholders as primary or secondary, these stakeholders, whether primary (e.g., paid staff) or secondary (e.g., parents) directly maintain unique effects on organizational outcomes. Coaches,

however, blur the lines between primary and secondary stakeholders. While coaches maintain critical importance to the operation of organizations, they too can be affected by organizational actions.

Contrarily, CSOs demonstrate unique rationales for change. Specifically, stakeholder objectives and experiences associated with the change process are often unique to each organization. Although organizational success and performance remain imperative to the operations of CSO's, change within organizations at this level is often predicated on the perceptions of the unique stakeholders belonging to organizations (Legg et al., 2016). For example, CSO's must engage with stakeholders aiming to accomplish varying personal and organizational goals (e.g., players aiming for development, coaches obtaining success, organizational gain). As a result, CSOs are unique in relation to organizational change processes, as the aforementioned pressures, management structures, and stakeholder responses present unique challenges, results and responses to change different from those commonly found within provincial/territorial or national level sport.

Pertaining to these unique aspects of stakeholders at the CSO level, it further remains clear that the stakeholder groups involved in the change process are different than the PSO or NSO level. For example, CSOs often involve more parents as stakeholders within the organization and further have unique groups often uninvolved at the PSO or NSO levels. Community groups, being local residents and community organizations with a vested interest in sport and/or its impact on the community, are unique to CSOs (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2006).

Within CSOs, organizational members can include those primary (i.e., paid staff) and secondary (i.e., parents) to an organization. As organizational change may affect these individual

members in unique ways according to their organizational role, they may experience varying responses to the changes they experience. Researchers have uncovered that individual and group responses to change can include both positive and negative emotions (Thompson & Parent, 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2016). Wagstaff et al. (2016) deem that both positive and negative responses to change are largely a result of the member's view of the change and how the change directly affects their own work environment. Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011, 2012) identified three main responses to organizational change: acceptance, resistance, and ambivalence. Acceptance is demonstrated through support toward a change initiative, including buy-in and/or participation. Resistance is the opposition or lack of participation and support toward a change initiative. Moreover, in some instances, stakeholders may experience mixed emotions, as an immediate opinion is not possible and stakeholders experience both positive and negative emotions toward change. This notion, sometimes viewed as ambivalence, typically arises through mixed emotions (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012). Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012) note that this emotion of ambivalence occurs through the belief that change is necessary whilst simultaneously fearing the emotional impacts. Welty Peachey and Bruening note an article by Thompson et al. (1995), that indicates the primary response for attitude formation toward change is ambivalence. Essentially, it remains apparent that social identity is a primary driver for ambivalent response, as stakeholders may look to others within their stakeholder group for attitude formulation.

As previous literature has examined stakeholder perceptions and response to change among multiple single change-based events or dynamic response to change within a single season (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012), it remains unknown how response to change or forces driving change evolve over the course of years, and with different types of changes

undertaken. Thus, as stakeholders may move among a spectrum regarding their response to processes of change, such as shifting from resistance to ambivalence, it remains unknown how experiences with and responses to change evolve over time. Moreover, these experiences and responses to change may be unique in the community sport context where the line between internal and external stakeholders could be blurred (coaches, and parents; Legg et al., 2016).

### **Chapter III: Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods**

#### **Epistemology**

This study adopted a constructivist epistemology. Constructivism is commonly viewed as the theory that iterates that researchers co-construct knowledge rather than just passively taking in information (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Through the use of constructivism, it is understood that each person understands the world differently due to ranging experiences and perspectives (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Essentially, constructivism delineates that as individuals develop new ways of knowing, meaning is constructed as new knowledge is added to prior knowledge to further an overall sense of knowing.

Through constructivism, the selection of the research methodology, data collection techniques, and data analysis will be selected in order to address the research questions (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). In doing so, individuals, being organizational stakeholders, can be utilized within the research site to view the research phenomena in context and additionally use theories of interest presented within an area of practice (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). More formally, constructivism offers valuable insights into how evolving experiences and responses to organizational change unfold within the context of an organization. This perspective emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and shared experiences, making it particularly relevant for understanding stakeholder dynamics during periods of change (Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

Constructivist epistemology further supports employing qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, that facilitate a thorough and comprehensive description of the organizational context through both data collection and analysis. These methods allow researchers to capture the complexity of stakeholder perspectives, revealing how their

experiences shape their responses to change (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Furthermore, by recognizing that knowledge is not static but rather evolves with interactions, constructivism encourages organizations to foster open communication and collaboration among stakeholders. This approach can lead to more adaptive strategies that are responsive to the changing needs and perceptions of those involved, ultimately enhancing organizational resilience (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Engaging stakeholders in this way can create a shared understanding of the change process, facilitating smoother transitions and greater commitment to organizational goals.

### **Methodology**

To fulfill the research purpose and answer the research questions, this study adopts a case study methodology. As described by Stake (1995), a case study approach positions researchers as gatherers of interpretations. The research is structured to understand the constructed reality or knowledge being investigated. In doing so, Stake (1995) lends insight into the subjective nature of a constructivist approach to case studies, contending that “there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view” (Stake, 1995, p. 108). With experiences and reactions to change being the focus of the research, a Stake (1995) approach to case study design further assists and guides the intentions of the study.

To address the study purpose, an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) design was adopted. Instrumental case studies are single cases where the issue, in this case, evolving experiences and responses to change, as opposed to the case *context*, remains the dominant focus. As Stake (1995) defines, a case is a specific, yet complex integrated system which has a boundary and is purposive in nature. In this study, the specific case under investigation is a policy change, where a CSO’s stakeholders’ (i.e., parents, coaches, and paid staff) experiences

with the adoption of a Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) framework was explored.

Details regarding the case context and organizational change are further described next.

### ***Case Context and Organizational Changes***

Soccer in Ontario operates at multiple levels, comprising provincial, regional (i.e., district associations), and community-level governing bodies (i.e., clubs). The OSA is at the highest level in the province and is responsible for governing the sport of soccer in Ontario. At the regional level, 18 district associations make up the voting members of OSA, with each association having its own community-level member clubs (OSA, 2023).

In 2014, the OSA developed an LTPD policy which outlined a development pathway for youth soccer participants. The LTPD policy framework is split into three distinct areas: Grassroots (U4-U12), Soccer for Life (13+), and Talented Pathway (13+) (OSA, 2023). These areas emphasize that the development pathway focuses on moving participants from grassroots community soccer to either recreational and lifelong participation (e.g., Soccer for Life), or competitive leading to playing opportunities at the provincial, collegiate, national and professional level (e.g., Talented Pathway) (OSA, 2023).

As youth sport practices have demonstrated issues with youth sport participation over the past four decades (Gould, 2019), the LTPD framework aims to address some of these issues within current youth sport practices. Specifically, as outlined by Gould (2019), youth sport presents four general classes of issues in the current day: physical issues (e.g., physical inactivity); psychological issues (e.g., stress and burnout); access and structural issues (e.g., lack of opportunity for less skilled); and cultural issues (e.g., professionalization). The LTPD policy framework aims to create a soccer environment that focuses on skill development appropriate for each age group (OSA, 2014) while also increasing player enjoyment, decision-making, skill

development opportunities, and age-appropriate playing environments (OSA, 2014). As the LTPD framework was novel within the OSA, stakeholder perceptions of the change were formed with little precedent. As a result, stakeholders' responses to the change may have shifted in the following years of the implementation.

For clubs, the enactment of the LTPD policy required these organizations to also undergo different types of organizational changes to adhere to the requirements of the policy. For district associations and their associated members, various changes were implemented to better cater to the idea of development among youth soccer players. As part of changes mandated by the OSA (Table 1), clubs were required to change their existing competitive structures, coaching mandates, and previous goals and objectives toward a more inclusive and equitable development pathway. Specifically, within the club level, changes at U12 levels included the removal of standings and scorekeeping, smaller playing fields, fewer players per game, and travel and playing time restrictions to enhance perceptions of fairness and development. These new structures and rules for all OSA-affiliated club-level programs started in 2014 for players under the age of 12 (OSA, 2014).

**Table 1**

*LTPD Changes*

<b>Change</b>	<b>Stakeholders Impacted</b>
Small Sided Games	Parents, Coaches
Removal of Scores and Standings	Parents, Coaches, Staff
Heightened Licensing Requirements	Coaches, Staff
Creation of Competitive/Recreational Pathways	Parents, Coaches, Staff
Removal of Tournaments/Travel Restrictions	Parents, Coaches

While the creation of the LTPD policy impacted all clubs to varying degrees, clubs operating within the Ontario Professional Development League (OPDL) were required to make the most changes as they operated under distinct structures where the LTPD framework was of primary focus as it guides the OPDL development pathway. For OSA clubs that are part of the OPDL, the OPDL acts as the primary venue in which potential provincial and national team players are identified (OSA, 2023). Thus, clubs operating within the OPDL are permitted unique access to the ‘talented pathway’ of the LTPD program (i.e., high performance, professionalized), not permitted to clubs outside of the OPDL structure.

### ***Club Selection***

Club selection followed a purposive sampling strategy (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). To participate in the study, clubs must have: (1) been affiliated with OSA; (2) been a current OPDL-affiliated club attempting to maintain OPDL status moving forward; and (3) made changes within the club to adhere to the LTPD framework. Through this selection criteria, clubs with no OPDL affiliation were not considered for this study. As the LTPD policy has been in effect since 2014, a club must have been a part of the OPDL for an extended period (a minimum of five years) to allow for full perceptions of club changes over time. As some clubs had been in the OPDL for sporadic periods, this inconsistency may have altered stakeholder perceptions of the LTPD-related club changes, thus skewing potential results regarding evolving experiences and responses to the changes within the club.

### ***Club Recruitment***

A prior personal connection to the OSA as a former research intern provided an opportunity to facilitate access to a club. Support from OSA’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was obtained for this research study. In conjunction with OSA’s CEO, one club was identified

that meets the above inclusion criteria. In addition, the CEO assisted in recruiting the club by forwarding an information letter and consent form to the club's lead staff member on behalf of the principal student investigator (Appendix A). Upon the club agreeing to take part in the study, the club's lead staff member was asked to forward a consent form (Appendix B) to individual participants: that is, current coaches, parents, and paid staff (see below for individual participant recruitment and selection).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, which focused on understanding the CSO's stakeholders' experiences and evolving responses to organizational changes as a result of the LTPD framework. This method offers a flexible approach to data collection where interview questions can be altered as new lines of inquiry arise, thus aligning with the case study methodological approach (Stake, 1995). In attempting to understand the evolving experiences and responses to organizational change among stakeholders within one CSO, interviews were conducted with the club's parents, coaches, and paid staff and focused on exploring these stakeholders' experiences and responses to change. One interview was conducted with each participant to explore how the creation of the LTPD led to changes at the club level (e.g., changes in structures, changes to playing conditions, changes to team rules), and how the aforementioned stakeholders' responses to these changes evolved over time.

Specifically, an interview guide was created to address the research questions (see Appendix C). Interview questions relate to participants' backgrounds (e.g., *How long have you been involved with [name of club]?*), the changes undergone at their club as a result of the LTPD adoption (e.g., *When the LTPD policy came into effect, what types of changes did your club have to make to adhere to this new policy?*), their reactions to these changes (e.g., *What was your*

*reaction to these changes?*), and how their experiences and perceptions of these changes evolved over time (e.g., *Have your initial perceptions and responses to the LTPD policy-related changes changed over time?*). The use of probes via follow-up questions was incorporated within each interview as a means of generating further thought and discussion among questions to enrich the data collected and to further obtain data regarding stakeholder responses to change (probing for acceptance, ambivalence, anger, etc.).

As varying stakeholder groups (e.g., club coaches, parents, and staff) were recruited, specific probing questions were tailored for each stakeholder group. As a result, parents were asked to reflect more upon their experiences and responses to change as a result of the LTPD policy creation as it affected their child. In contrast, coaches were asked questions based on specific factors, such as how their coaching ability may have been affected. Staff participants were asked to reflect on the implementation procedures of the LTPD policy while also providing insight into their firsthand experience and response to change resulting from the implementation of the model.

### ***Participant Selection***

A purposive sampling strategy was employed where participants were deliberately selected as they were assumed to provide insight into the phenomenon being investigated (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). To be eligible to participate in the study, participants must have: (1) been a current parent, coach, or staff member of the selected club; (2) been familiar with the LTPD model, and what it entails; (3) a minimum of two years of experience with the LTPD model. Thus, individuals who were unaware of the LTPD model or were new to the club and had little to no experience with the LTPD model were not included in the study.

Stakeholder participants were delimited to coaches, parents and staff members of the club for several reasons. Primarily, participants must have been aware of the changes involved as part of the LTPD implementation. Individuals such as players, specifically at younger ages, were deemed less likely to know and understand the connection between LTPD and these practices, and thus were omitted from the sample. Further, officials were excluded from the sample as these individuals were seen to be too far removed from the impact of the change compared to the groups mentioned above.

Furthermore, participants had to be current members of the club to ensure their experience with the LTPD changes was reflective of the most recent aspects of the changes. Particularly, individuals who no longer remain part of the club may have maintained a perspective of the LTPD policy that is no longer relevant. Said otherwise, aspects of the LTPD policy that drove these experiences with the policy may have since been addressed or adapted, thus creating a perspective toward the policy that potentially no longer exists.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

As noted above, to recruit participants, an information letter and consent form (Appendix B) was sent by the club's lead staff member, on behalf of the principal student investigator, to all of the club's staff, coaches, and parents. To ensure rigour within the recruitment process, all the above-mentioned club stakeholders had the opportunity to review the study's inclusion criteria and decide for themselves if they met the requirements of the study. Stakeholders were asked to email the principal student investigator if they were interested in participating. Four individuals from each stakeholder group were interviewed via a videoconferencing platform (Zoom) for a total of 12 participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure the transcribed data was reflective of the thoughts and experiences of participants, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) occurred, where transcripts were sent to participants to be reviewed and modified (if needed). As a means of analyzing the data collected from interviews, a thematic analysis of the data was conducted. Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach was used, which includes six phases: (1) Familiarization with data; (2) Coding; (3) Theme generation; (4) Reviewing Themes; (5) Defining and naming themes; (6) Writing up. First, all data were imported into the NVivo qualitative analysis software. These transcripts were further familiarized through reading and re-reading to note initial analytic observations (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Second, the phase of coding began through a primary coding cycle. In this coding stage, data was categorized through short, descriptive codes encompassing themes of experiences and responses demonstrated in interviews.

Moreover, both inductive and deductive coding were utilized. Inductive coding is the process of recording underlying meaning from participant thoughts and responses within the data, allowing codes to be derived from the data (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Deductive coding is the determination of codes based on existing theories and research questions, which helped account for the potential differentiation of responses from participants (accepting, ambivalence, etc.) (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). As part of the coding process, both latent and semantic coding ensued. Semantic coding was used to identify meaning through surface-level interaction, while latent coding aided in recording underlying meaning (Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

Third, themes were generated based on the gathered data from familiarization and coding processes. This process identified patterns, consistencies, and critical data through codes to create larger, more encapsulating thematic categories. These themes were then examined through

discussion to ensure consistency pertaining to previously determined codes. Fourth, the review of themes ensured that the themes ‘worked’ in relation to the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The third and fourth steps occurred with several code and theme review meetings with two senior researchers with experience with change and change literature. Fifth, themes were defined and named based on a detailed analysis of each theme. With the ‘essence’ of each theme examined, this led to the construction of a concise and informative name for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Sixth, the write-up was conducted to synthesize the analytic narratives and data extracts from the gathered data. In doing so, the findings were contextualized in relation to existing literature to depict coherence pertaining to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To further ensure that the elicited themes reflected the data collected from interviews, this data was reviewed by an external researcher.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that positivist terms and concepts from the quantitative paradigm, such as reliability, are largely inapplicable to qualitative research studies and the nature of this data. As such, the four perspectives proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that address the soundness of analyses from fieldwork were used within this study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Furthermore, this study attempted to explain the various data collection and analysis techniques used throughout, specifically as a means to be transparent regarding how research will be conducted within this research process. Among the chosen research methods, the strategies adopted to ensure that the case description remained an authentic and trustworthy representation of the stakeholders’ depictions of their experiences and responses to organizational change will be outlined in relation to each of the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility refers to “the audience’s belief that the way a researcher conducted the study, and the analytic processes and outcomes of the work have generated findings that make sense and persuade readers that an effective or trustworthy job was done” (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 243). As outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is achieved through a multitude of techniques aimed at ensuring the researcher’s interpretations of the data represent the constructed realities of the participants in the most accurate manner. The initial research design was primarily carefully conceived and implemented to demonstrate pre-existing materials and key authors cited. In doing so, the use of publicly credible sources provides a foundation for which credibility within this study can be developed. Specific to this study, member checking, negative case analysis and persistent observation were among the techniques proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that may lend credibility to this study.

First, *member checking* is the act of “providing sample participants with the transcripts and/or interpretation of the findings to check the accuracy of the work” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Burke, 2016, p. 331). Participants were provided with the opportunity to review their thoughts, words, and expressions and ensure their own personal assumptions and viewpoints were accurately reflected within the data. Second, negative case analysis is about identifying or highlighting specific aspects of the data that contradict similar, emergent themes from data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analyzing negative cases established the underlying strengths and limits of the data collected. On first review of the transcripts, participants largely noted an accepting position relating to the change process. However, on second review, these positive statements were accompanied by descriptions of negative experiences. As a result, these contradictions became a focal point in the analysis process, resulting in closer attention to the nuances embedded within participant responses. Specifically, participant responses were noted

and further examined through the coding process to denote underlying and contrary emotions attached to the stated response. Coding was utilized not only to categorize what participants said, but to further interpret the contextual layers within their responses. Negative case analysis, therefore, functioned as a critical tool for uncovering these inconsistencies and for challenging initial assumptions about stakeholder alignment with the LTPD changes.

Third, *persistent observation* is demonstrated through the onus placed on aspects that are most relevant to the problem or issue being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through this approach, the generation of rich qualitative data was utilized in understanding the studied phenomenon and can help to provide further insight into the more complex and subjective aspects of human experience among the phenomena.

In addition to the use of techniques highlighted by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to achieve credibility within the study, this study further aimed to attain dependability through both the research process and its results. As defined by Guba and Lincoln (1989), achieving dependability is reflected by obtaining data that remains stable regardless of time and conditions. Essentially, through the use of an inquiry audit, or a detailed account of the steps and decisions made throughout, which will enable an outsider to learn and understand how specific themes were derived, this study intended to achieve consistency within its results and accuracy pertaining to the stated research process (Burke, 2016). In doing so, the methods employed have been described sufficiently, and interview excerpts provide critical foundations for any assertions (Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

In addition to credibility and dependability, this study further displays transferability towards external work within sport management scholarly literature. Transferability is achieved through the use of a thick description or the demonstration of sufficient supporting evidence and

explanations of assumptions central to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); it is intended that this study will provide the reader with an opportunity to describe the findings of this study as transferable. Through crafting an approach to obtain a thick description of the case, where depictions of individual experiences with the change process and the associated responses are fully described, this study looked to provide transferability to its findings as reflective of the subjective experiences presented by participants (Tracy, 2013). In conjunction, a thick description allowed for a detailed case description so that readers can perceive the findings as credible and trustworthy. In line with the qualitative research tradition, this study did not intend to find results that are objective but aimed to portray the subjective responses of participants in the most accurate manner. As a result, it remained a primary intention to cultivate findings that were sincere and credible. Thus, it further remained imperative that sport management scholars and practitioners can rely upon or trust the findings conveyed within this study.

Lastly, as part of the four criteria put forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985), this study sought to attain confirmability as part of the research quality. Demonstrated through steps researchers take to depict that the findings of the study are derived strictly from data (Burke, 2016), this study intended for the results to mirror the experiences and viewpoints of participants as opposed to the perceptions of the researcher. In order to work towards confirmability within this study, a reflexive journal was utilized to depict the preconceived notions put forth by the researcher, specifically through the background interests of the researcher in relation to the study (Burke, 2016). As this study further utilized an inquiry audit to achieve dependability, outlining the steps taken by the researcher, the reader can then use this inquiry audit to deem the confirmability and acceptance of the study and its extenuating results (Burke, 2016).

### **Ethical Considerations**

As this case study approach involves interviewing, ethical consideration was required. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) suggest that research ethics “are the ‘correctness’ of a particular behaviour” (p. 319), thus furthering the belief that the researcher’s moral principles direct the treatment of research subjects in a particular study. While studying this organization, its stakeholders, and the organizationally mandated documents, the interests of organizational leaders and individual research participants were respected and considered. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013), qualitative researchers must consider ethical aspects of the research methodology, including informed consent, privacy and confidentiality. As a result, strategies to ensure that both trustworthiness was built, and the organization and individual employees were treated ethically were mandated and followed throughout the study process.

Primarily, formal approval and consent from the club was sought to study the organization and its stakeholders. Moreover, to respect the right to privacy of the stakeholders themselves, confidentiality was granted to all stakeholders participating in the study by intentionally excluding the participant names in the final research report, instead utilizing pseudonyms. All research participants were granted confidentiality to respect their personal privacy and to provide each person protection in the case that any individual shared a controversial opinion. Concerning the ethical treatment of individuals, all organizational stakeholders of the study were informed of the outline of the research project and the potential benefits to both them and the organization. It was further emphasized that there was no obligation to participate and that there was no further punishment or penalty for a lack of participation or withdrawal from the research at any point within the process. Lastly, all collected data was stored on a password-protected USB storage device that was accessible only by the

supervising professors and the lead researcher to ensure that data were secure and that the individual identities of participants remained confidential.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

In this chapter, the findings are described by discussing the data related to the case organization and its stakeholders. In doing so, I address the purpose of the study data collected from interviews with organizational stakeholders (parents, coaches, and paid staff). First, results related to the changes experienced by stakeholders as part of the Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) implementation are described. Second, stakeholder-related responses to change are presented to develop an understanding of this change process further. By examining these responses across stakeholder groups, more profound insight into how different stakeholders initially perceived, interpreted, and reacted to the changes is outlined. Lastly, as organizational change has been found to be unpredictable and dynamic (Dawson, 2019), evolving stakeholder responses in the data are explored in depth to build upon current understandings of change. A new framework is presented related to how stakeholder responses to change evolve over time. This exploration highlights the diversity of stakeholder perspectives and uncovers the underlying motivations, concerns, and expectations that drive their perspectives. Together, these data present a dichotomy of the case organization and its stakeholders that assists in answering the three research questions and further fulfilling the purpose of the study.

### **Changes Experienced as Part of LTPD**

This section examines the changes experienced by stakeholders as part of the LTPD framework. LTPD, a structured approach designed to optimize athletic performance and development across the careers of young athletes, introduced a variety of changes that affected parents, coaches, staff and the chosen organization. These changes (e.g., alterations in training methodologies, competition structures, and developmental milestones) demonstrated a distinct impact on different stakeholders, which was influenced by their specific roles and perspectives.

Training methodologies were adapted to emphasize holistic athlete development over early specialization. This shift prioritized age-appropriate skill acquisition, motor development, and physical literacy, aiming to reduce burnout and injury while fostering well-rounded athletes. Training regimens became more focused on progressive, multi-stage development that considered the physical, mental, and emotional stages of growth, rather than pushing athletes toward peak performance at an early age. Smaller-sided games, specialized coaches, and pod training were some of the tactics utilized to accomplish these objectives.

Competition structures were also revamped to align with developmental principles. Traditional formats that placed heavy emphasis on early success and winning were restructured to focus on participation, skill development, and enjoyment. This included changes such as reducing the frequency and intensity of competition for younger athletes, modifying rules to encourage skill development over results, the removal of scores and standings, and implementing tiered competition to better match developmental stages rather than chronological age.

Developmental milestones within the LTPD framework shifted from being performance-centric to developmentally appropriate. The new milestones recognized the importance of gradual progression, ensuring that physical, cognitive, and social development occurred in tandem with athletic growth. These benchmarks were designed to guide athletes through various stages of sport participation, from early introduction and skill development to the eventual pursuit of high-performance pathways or lifelong recreational involvement.

The implementation of LTPD brought about shifts in how stakeholders engaged with the organizational changes. For parents, these changes influenced their child's training routines, performance expectations, and long-term goals. Parents noted specific changes, such as the implementation of "pod training" (Parent 2) where players were grouped based on skill level into

red, white, and green teams, and the shift towards the competitive pathway with the implementation of the Ontario Player Development League (OPDL). In addition to these, parents also described changes such as player-to-coach ratio in practices, the removal of scores and standings, smaller-sided games (7v7, 9v9), training expectations and opportunities, and the increased fees associated with participation.

Coaches experienced a transformation in their coaching strategies and pedagogical approaches, requiring them to adapt to new frameworks prioritizing long-term growth over immediate success. Coaches specifically noted updates to licensing as a primary change within their position, as licensing became more frequent, specific, and specialized in terms of coaching opportunities. Coaches further alluded to annual audits for licensing as change involved as part of LTPD. Additionally, coaches were expected to adhere to development-focused guidelines in terms of coaching mandates, including new development-focused coaching courses, overall education, and changes to training and scheduling that were reflective of this development-focused initiative. Specifically, this training shift involved focusing on physical literacy and the technical components of the sport, where coaches were asked to specialize in one specific technical area as opposed to an array of areas.

Staff further faced new changes in job descriptions and roles, including the need to partake in knowledge translation of changes to subordinates, and further had to adjust and understand the new rules and regulations, such as small-sided games, in place as part of the change process. Staff members depicted incorporating buy-in among stakeholders as a primary change to their responsibilities, specifically in terms of providing knowledge translation in terms of the new changes to subordinate stakeholders. Staff reflected on structural changes within the organization, noting a shift towards a more development-focused initiative which included hiring

new coaches, changes in the reporting process, and equitable play regulations. An increased focus on hiring qualified coaches and ensuring coaches were adequately trained were among the key changes identified as involved within the change process.

### **Stakeholder Response to Change**

Stakeholders responded to the LTPD change in diverse and often layered ways, reflecting their varying levels of comfort, trust, and familiarity with the organization. While some stakeholders quickly accepted the change, seeing it as an opportunity for growth or improvement, others reacted with ambivalence, uncertain about the impact on their roles and responsibilities. A notable few stakeholders demonstrated instances of resistance to the change, driven by concerns over potential disruptions or perceived threats to their established ways of thinking. These responses revealed the complex and often personal nature of stakeholder engagement during periods of organizational transformation.

Initially, many stakeholders perceived these changes on a personal level, interpreting them as threats or opportunities depending on their position and outlook. This personal perception led to the three primary responses presented by acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance. Those who accepted the changes often viewed them as beneficial and aligned with their goals, quickly adapting to the new expectations. Stakeholders who felt ambivalent were unsure of the changes' impact, leading to mixed emotions and a wait-and-see approach.

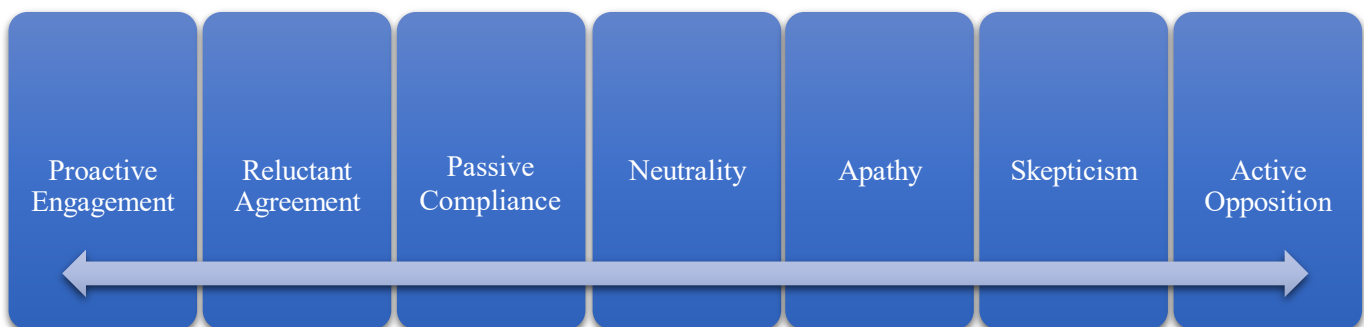
Meanwhile, those who resisted the changes did so out of concern for how their roles and responsibilities might be negatively altered, leading to reluctance or even opposition in their engagement with the change process. While stakeholders initially discussed responding in these ways, stakeholder experiences of change varied within each response group. For example, while two stakeholders may have identified themselves as accepting of these LTPD changes, the

degree to which they were accepting appeared vastly different. Given this variation and building upon the work of Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012), stakeholder responses were identified through subgroups within each response classification (acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance).

As stakeholders began to share their experiences with the change, it became clear that the traditional responses of acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance were expressed through a range of more specific behaviours within subgroups. Those who accepted the change often did so in a more thorough manner, actively contributing to and promoting the new direction. In contrast, stakeholders who felt ambivalent expressed their uncertainty through various degrees of reluctance or compliance, adhering to the changes but with varying levels of enthusiasm and commitment. Some stakeholders displayed a more detached position from the change process without clear support or opposition. Among those who resisted the change, responses ranged, with some stakeholders questioning the necessity of the change, while others took deliberate steps to challenge or obstruct the new initiatives. In the initial phases of the change process, responses from stakeholders varied widely, reflecting a spectrum of attitudes and engagement levels. These subgroups of stakeholder responses (reflected in Figure 1) highlighted the complexity of stakeholder reactions. Each of the responses will be discussed in detail in the next sections, including quotations from the data to support each theme.

**Figure 1**

*Stakeholder Response Sub-Categories*



### ***Proactive Engagement***

Proactive engagement, in the context of the LTPD implementation, involved individuals actively buying into and promoting the change initiatives. Two participants exhibited proactive engagement, actively seeking to understand and contribute to the change initiative. Their enthusiasm and initiative significantly influenced the momentum and direction of the project, leading to the outspoken promotion of the initiative: “However, there's so many positives to the LTPD. So, I would encourage more coaches, parents, players to be more open-minded about it. But yeah, from my, from my experience, I mean, it's been very positive up until now” (Coach 2). This meant not only accepting the new mandates or policies but also advocating for and promoting them within the organization to other stakeholders. For both personal and organizational benefit, proactive engagement required a commitment to supporting and fostering the changes. Stakeholders engaging in proactive engagement further exhibited a high level of interest and involvement as opposed to simply adhering to the changes. Typically, these stakeholders sought out information and advocated for the benefits of the change, including in instances where the change presented potentially negative implications.

The motivations behind proactive engagement varied among different stakeholder groups. For parents, the primary driver was the potential for advancement that the change represented. This included opportunities for their children to progress towards university education and professional soccer careers, making the change highly beneficial for their future aspirations. For coaches and staff, the motivation stemmed from an agreement between personal values and beliefs with the organization's goals, specifically in terms of youth player development. This alignment was demonstrated by the changes being promoted resonating with their professional values and principles, leading to a genuine commitment to the process. By

aligning their ethical beliefs with the organizational objectives, coaches and staff were more likely to engage proactively and supportively, often promoting the change and its potential benefits to other organizational stakeholders. As one staff member highlighted, “But I’ve seen the products at the end of the line with our League One teams, with kids getting scholarships to schools in the States and Canada, with players moving to the pro-environment” (Staff 2). These examples of proactive engagement demonstrate how acceptance of change can translate into active participation, fueled by both personal motivations and alignment with organizational objectives.

### ***Reluctant Agreement***

Reluctant agreement occurred through stakeholder agreement to organizational changes, but with hesitation or reservations. Three stakeholders initially showed reluctant agreement, demonstrating some hesitance in their acceptance. Although they consented to the change, their support was marked by reservations indicating a need for further reassurances and clarity. This form of agreement was defined by a cautious acceptance where individuals were not fully convinced or satisfied with the change but, recognized the need to comply or support it to some extent as a result of participation within the organization. The hesitation stemmed from various concerns or disagreements with specific aspects of the change, such as new rules or policies introduced (e.g. removal of scores and standings), yet there was an underlying acknowledgment of the encompassing necessity or potential benefits:

So yeah, I am still very supportive of the policies and the approach, like the tenants of long-term player development. But I don't think we always do a good job of... Yeah, I don't think we always walk the walk. I think we like to say we do it (Staff 1).

Despite their reservations, individuals occupying a position of reluctant agreement chose to align themselves with the organizational direction, albeit with a degree of reluctance.

The reasons behind reluctant agreement differed among stakeholder groups but generally involved a balance between personal reservations and perceived benefits. For parents, the reluctance often demonstrated itself through disagreements with certain ideologies (e.g., pod training) or past experiences associated with the change. However, they recognized and advocated for the potential advancement opportunities LTPD presented for their child's endeavours, such as more equitable opportunities for development, better prospects for university admission, or participating in their child's desires. Coaches shared a similar sentiment, disagreeing with certain aspects of the implementation (e.g., licensing), yet saw value as their personal values and beliefs with the broader goals of player development and equal opportunity. These coaches noted the opportunity for all players to have a place to play and noted the development they had personally witnessed as a driver for acceptance. For staff, the reluctance also included loyalty to the organization, believing in the long-term development-focused initiatives behind the change rather than its immediate outcomes. While staff members may have opposed certain elements or outcomes associated with the change, alignment to LTPD principles was demonstrated as a significant driver to reluctant agreement. As staff believed in the objectives of the LTPD implementation, they became more accepting to initial negative outcomes. This blend of personal values and beliefs and loyalty compelled them to agree, even if hesitantly, to support the change for the greater good of the organization and its objectives. As noted by a staff member, "And I don't, I'm not saying that with a negative, negative light, like it's definitely made the job more difficult. But I think it's the right thing to do" (Staff 2). This quotation demonstrates that while stakeholders noted the challenges involved with implementing

the changes, many noted the importance of the changes in relation to the organizational goal of fostering development.

### *Passive Compliance*

Passive compliance responses were demonstrated through the acceptance of organizational changes without active engagement or enthusiasm. Four stakeholders displayed initial passive compliance, adhering to the new directives without enthusiasm or noticeable engagement, in which their compliance was more a matter of following protocol than genuine commitment. Individuals who exhibited passive compliance demonstrated trust in the organization and showed a form of blind loyalty, not fully engaging in the change but believing that the change would ultimately have a positive impact on them as a result of their position within the organization: “So no, no, I didn't have any very strong expectations, but overall, it remained positive” (Parent 2).

As a result, these stakeholders adopted an ambivalent response to change that presented itself as more accepting than resistant. This compliance was characterized by a lack of proactive support or advocacy for the change, instead relying on the assumption that the organization essentially knew best and had their best interest. Stakeholders demonstrated a position of following directives and implementing changes as required but did not go beyond expectations. Their compliance was rooted in a fundamental trust in the organization's decisions and a belief that adhering to these changes is the correct course of action in achieving personal goals. As changes were imposed on stakeholders and were presented as benefiting their interests, this passive compliance stage was often a starting point for stakeholder responses to change processes.

The motivations behind passive compliance varied among different stakeholders but generally revolved around trust and obligation to the organization. For parents, passive compliance meant they demonstrated some hesitation about the changes and the associated rule changes; however, they chose to adhere to the changes because of their child's desires, particularly in contexts like the OPDL that is geared towards high performance athlete development as Parent 2 described:

And my own son thinks he's going to become a professional soccer player. We are supporting his hobby. We're not necessarily thinking that he should become a professional soccer player, but it is clear that the kids who go to OPDL have a strong motivation and, potentially, think that they will become professional players.

In addition, parents also chose to abide by the changes for the perceived potential of advancement as part of LTPD (recreational vs. talented pathway and their benefits). Ultimately, parents opted to believe in the organization's authority and trust its decisions regarding their child's development. When asked about the differences between OPDL and non-OPDL clubs, Parent 1 depicted a significant contrast: “And so, it was pretty clear to me that there was a distinction, real or perceived, between OPDL and non OPDL clubs, in terms of exposure and playing the best players at one's age.” (Parent 1).

Coaches demonstrated passive compliance due to faith in the organization to make decisions that enhanced the coach and player experience. Their compliance was based on a belief in the organization's overall mission and values, and a desire to create positive work environments for coaches alike. Typically, this passive position resulted in coaches putting their blind faith in the organization to adhere to the proposed plan of development that is outlined in the LTPD. For instance, when asked about their initial reactions to the change, Coach 2 noted:

Yeah, for sure. I think, initially, I would.. like I said, I was indifferent because I didn't know what it would look like. So, it was kind of like, oh, okay, this is kind of how we do things in Ontario. So, I kind of... I kind of thought I'd run with it and see, see what happens, and see where it takes it.

For staff, passive compliance was often a matter of adhering to their position. As the organization implemented the change, staff followed along with their job duties: "So again, I think because I was lucky that when I first came in, that's when it started. So, I've just lived it" (Staff 3). Their compliance was rooted in their role within the organization, making it a part of their professional responsibilities to adhere to and execute the changes as directed.

### *Neutrality*

Neutrality in the context of the LTPD change involved maintaining a detached perspective, where individuals neither supported nor opposed the change. One participant remained initially neutral, neither actively supporting nor opposing the change. This stance suggested a 'hands off' approach, influenced by a desire to observe the change's impact before taking a definitive position. The participant who exhibited neutrality maintained a wait-and-see approach, choosing not to engage actively with the change process. This position of neutrality caused stakeholders to experience the changes without feeling the need to advocate for or resist the new directions, leaning neither positively nor negatively. As depicted by a parent participant, this neutral position was often based on an initial response to information: "I heard good things, and I heard bad things. That was my first impression" (Parent 1). This stance further allowed them to remain uninvolved and unaffected by potential impacts involved with the immediate impacts of the change. Instead, these stakeholders focused on their usual roles and responsibilities without additional emotional or practical investment in the change itself.

The rationale behind adopting a neutral stance varied among stakeholders but generally involved passivity. For parents, neutrality occurred from a lack of understanding about what the LTPD changes entailed, making it difficult for them to form a strong opinion: “Yeah, for sure. I was definitely open, open minded on, you know, this is how we're going to do it and see, let's see if it works. Let's see if our kids benefit from it as well” (Coach 2).

Without clear information on the change (and further, potential benefits or risks), these stakeholders noted a preference to observe rather than commit to a stance. Coaches demonstrating a neutral response stated the change having little effect on their coaching routine as a key component for this response, specifically as if they already focused on player development, the new directives often aligned with their existing practices, causing minimal disruption or change. As a result, these coach stakeholders preferred to remain stationary in their approach toward the change. For staff, a neutral reaction was difficult to maintain due to the nature of their roles, as they were the ones responsible for assisting with the implementation of the changes. Thus, it was difficult for staff to detach themselves from the change: Given the longitudinal nature of LTPD and its implementation in the club, many staff felt the changes in LTPD were simply just part of their job. As stated by Staff 3, “I've lived it. So, I haven't had to make a change”. As a result, it was depicted that staff could not adopt a position in which the change did not first significantly alter their responsibilities. Thus, staff felt they wanted to see how the change unfolds before making any judgments or adjustments in their response.

### *Apathy*

Apathy towards organizational change was characterized by an overall disengagement and a lack of interest in the change and its mandates. In particular, one staff member demonstrated initial apathy, showing little to no interest or concern about the changes, which

potentially posed a challenge to fostering a unified approach, “My understanding of you know, actual long-term athlete development, player development and what it is, I don't really, like if I'm being honest, I haven't read up on it all. I've lived it. And I have my own” (Staff 3). This individual felt they understand their own version of player development, and therefore had not taken the time to understand LTPD, resulting in apathy. Individuals displaying apathy did not invest emotionally or practically in the change process, and their actions reflected an underlying resistance to the change itself. This apathetic response was characterized by stakeholders choosing not to look into the change or further their understanding of the change, and maintaining their previous routines, beliefs, and motivations.

The motivations behind stakeholder apathy typically arose from past experiences and disillusionment with previous change initiatives. For parents, apathy was apparent as a result of previously witnessing or partaking in multiple change-related efforts that failed to deliver meaningful results, impacts, or a uniqueness from the status quo, leading to a lack of faith or overall interest in the current initiative. When asked about their initial thoughts about the LTPD implementation, Parent 1 whose child was on a non-OPDL pathway provided: “And up until a point, I thought, wow, he's developing just as fast as OPDL players, so we're not missing out on anything” (Parent 1).

Coaches shared a similar sentiment, often having experienced prior changes that did not significantly affect their coaching philosophy or outcomes. As a result, these coaches chose to recognize the new rules, but continued to adhere to their own coaching methods and principles, showing little interest in the change in the process, “I think the smaller group, I think was pretty... I didn't see too much of a difference” (Coach 3). Through an apathetic response, staff maintained their own interpretation of development, having become disconnected from the

LTPD changes that did not affect their own responsibilities. This disconnect fostered a unique environment where they fulfilled their roles without genuine engagement or belief in the new direction. As noted by a staff participant: “But yeah, it hasn't really affected me to be perfectly honest. So honestly, I didn't read up on it” (Staff 3). This passive stance can be indicative of a lack of perceived relevance or benefit, leading to minimal effort in adapting to or advocating for the change.

### *Skepticism*

Skepticism towards organizational change demonstrated stakeholders expressing concerns and hesitancy, often with a negative outlook. Initially, one participant exhibited skepticism. This skeptical stakeholder voiced doubts and reservations about the change, highlighting potential flaws or issues they perceived. resisting its implementation, being critical of its potential outcomes, and mentioning the apparent risk for themselves as part of the initiative, while some stakeholders noted skepticism due to a lack of overall knowledge. While stakeholder skepticism was reminiscent of reluctant agreement, this response to the change demonstrated stakeholders often focused on potential drawbacks rather than benefits. This focus on drawbacks was often rooted in a lack of understanding or knowledge pertaining to the change. When asked to provide background on the changes felt through LTPD, Staff 1 noted: “So, I feel like we all kind of do know a little bit about it, but we don't know enough about it” (Staff 1).

The rationale behind skepticism generally revolved around a lack of clarity and distrust in the change process. For parents, skepticism arose from unclear communication about the change, leading them to question the club's intentions and leadership, as well as a lack of apparent distinction compared to previous initiatives. These stakeholders questioned the heightened fees and debated whether the change was created with the intention of profit rather than a genuine

effort to improve the system: “On some level, people are just wondering whether or not we're paying a bunch of money to organizations from a revenue-generating perspective, and that's really what they really care about” (Parent 3). In contrast, coaches were skeptical due to the lack of clear details about the change and the club's rigid implementation, which left little room for feedback or adjustments that could enhance coaching practices. Many coaches noted new structural requirements for additional licensing, limiting coaches from coaching at levels that were preferable or aligned with their desires. When describing the negative implications of the LTPD implementation, Coach 1 noted the new aspects of the change on the coaching structure, including updates to policies and overall expectations and requirements to adhere to development principles, and depicted how it affected their outlook: “The only thing that may be impacting my perception on a go-forward basis is how Ontario Soccer is restructuring the leagues to support long-term player development” (Coach 1). Staff members questioned the necessity of specific rule changes, such as the removal of scores and standings, as well as the outcomes arising as part of the change implementation, “I don't think it's LTPD. And I think it's more some of the initiatives that have, like, kind of grown out of the principles. And they've all been designed with the best intentions, I just don't think they've been thought through entirely” (Staff 2).

While staff were steadfast in their belief in the change's core principles, they remained skeptical of whether the outcomes would be reflective of these principles/intentions, leading them to doubt the rationale behind these decisions and the overall direction of the change.

### ***Active Opposition***

Active opposition to the LTPD change involved stakeholders actively resisting and combatting the change, largely through their words/beliefs instead of their actions. These stakeholders perceived threats to their own interests, demonstrated fear of change, worried about

negative outcomes, or detested organizational change processes entirely. This resistance was characterized by outspoken criticism and disengagement from the change itself. As noted by Staff 3 when asked about the changes, they noted their disapproval of the removal of longtime aspects of youth sport: “And again, that's when it comes into scores and standings and medals. Why are we not doing it?” (Staff 3). Essentially, stakeholders who actively opposed the change were not just unconsciously disengaged but took concrete actions to oppose and disengage from the change. Specifically, outspoken criticism and a lack of policy adoption highlighted combative actions. This opposition was largely driven by a strong belief that the change was fundamentally flawed and detrimental to their interests or the organization's.

The motivations behind active opposition were unique to stakeholder groups but originated from disagreements and a perceived threat to personal interests. For parents, active opposition also stemmed from the belief that the change was a cash grab, with the club promoting advancement opportunities without providing clear guidance on how to achieve them or promising development opportunities without proper action. This perceived exploitation of their investment drove parents to resist the change entirely:

I'm like, well, how is that elite? If you're taking 30 players on a team? That sounds more like a cash grab because the more people you sign, the more fees you get. And, you know, to me, that waters down the elitism. (Parent 1)

Coaches opposed the change due to fundamental disagreements with its principles and implementation methods. They believed the change undermined their personal philosophy and practice, asking them to change their coaching styles, thus prompting them to combat the LTPD mandates:

I think that they, I mean, I think on a couple of levels, it's not obvious to me that they're upholding club standards across the board. They seem to be a bit forgiving, at least from my perspective on what I see other clubs doing. I'm also not clear that they're creating a level playing field in terms of academies versus clubs. And then I don't think they're doing enough to stay on top of those standards by way of auditing the clubs and, to be honest, auditing the coaches and the player experience (Coach 1).

This quotation from Coach 1 demonstrates a firm stance within active opposition. While maintaining their own interpretations of development, staff members demonstrated resistance because they did not agree with the premises and rationales behind the change: “I don't agree on participation medals” (Staff 3). The lack of understanding of the core principles of LTPD – fuelled by the lack of agreement and a strong attachment to their own methods/beliefs – defined their active opposition, and thus, led participants to reject the change or parts of its implementation.

### **Changes in Stakeholder Response**

Initially, stakeholders may respond with varying degrees of acceptance, ambivalence, or resistance, depending on their initial perceptions and understanding of the change. However, as participants gained more experience with the change and received further information, their responses shifted. Positive experiences and a deeper understanding led to increased acceptance and proactive engagement, while unresolved concerns or negative outcomes intensified resistance or developed ambivalence.

The changes in stakeholder reactions, ranging from proactive engagement to active opposition, illustrate the complex dynamics of the change process. Through findings, some stakeholders begin with a neutral or ambivalent stance, characterized by a lack of engagement or

understanding of the changes. This initial ambivalence can evolve into passive compliance or reluctant agreement as stakeholders gradually become more familiar with and recognize some benefits of the changes, though they may still harbour doubts or reservations. Over time, continued exposure and observation of the outcomes can lead some stakeholders to proactive engagement, where they fully embrace and advocate for the changes, seeing their positive impacts. Conversely, others may transition into active opposition as they critically assess the changes and perceive flaws or inconsistencies, ultimately resisting the new system. These varied responses highlight the multifaceted nature of stakeholder engagement in the change process, encompassing acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance, each influenced by personal experiences, observations, and evolving perceptions of the change's effectiveness and fairness.

### ***Positive Changes in Response***

The response to the change process saw notable positive transformations among several participants, underscoring the potential for constructive outcomes when addressing stakeholder concerns. Five participants demonstrated a positive change, reflecting an evolving alignment with the new directives. These individuals initially approached the change with varying degrees of hesitation or uncertainty but ultimately exhibited a shift towards enthusiastic support and active engagement. Their positive change was marked by an increased willingness to embrace new practices, contribute ideas, and support the overall goals of the initiative. For instance, those who had previously shown reluctance or passive compliance began to actively seek ways to integrate the changes into their routines and workflows. Their transformation highlights the potential for growth and adaptation within the change process, demonstrating that with the right support and interventions, stakeholders can move from resistance and skepticism to acceptance and proactive engagement.

**Reluctant Agreement to Proactive Engagement.** In the change process, participants moved from reluctant agreement to proactive engagement, as seen with Coach 4 and Staff 4. Initially, coach 4 accepted the provided guidelines but often modified them to better suit their needs. They expressed a willingness to follow the guidelines but adjusted fit their coaching style: “I accepted what they gave you. I took what they had offered, but I always changed [it]” (Coach 4). These actions indicate a reluctant agreement, where they complied with the changes but did not fully embrace them, preferring to adapt the principles rather than follow them strictly. Despite this initial reluctance, over time, Coach 4 began to see the value in the approach, recognizing that understanding and adapting to the principles as part of the change was crucial for effective coaching. They realized the importance of the foundational guidelines of development, enjoyment, and sustained participation within youth soccer: “This is something that the kids need to know” (Coach 4). As such, this acknowledgment marked the beginning of a shift towards proactive engagement. Coach 4 noted their embrace of the LTPD principles more fully, continually learning and building on them: “I build on that, I work from that, and I learn from what they put in place” (Coach 4). This proactive attitude reflects a deeper commitment to the change process, driven by a growing appreciation for the long-term benefits and effectiveness of the LTPD guidelines.

Similarly, Staff 4 was initially cautiously accepting, questioning some aspects of the change, particularly regarding scores and standings. They recognized the potential benefits but also saw room for improvement: “Definitely a step in the right direction, and a lot of areas to improve on” (Staff 4). This cautious acceptance reflects a reluctant agreement, where they accepted the changes but maintained reservations and a critical perspective on certain aspects. Their response was often characterized by hesitation and a wait-and-see attitude, which often

stemmed from uncertainty about the change's benefits, a lack of clear communication, or a fear of potential negative impacts, “Yeah, I remember questioning a lot of it. Especially with the scores and standings. It took me a while to wrap my head around it” (Staff 4). However, observing the long-term benefits and potential for advancement, such as players earning scholarships and moving to professional environments, transformed this cautious support into proactive engagement. Staff 4 described their observations of the program's successes by referencing League One teams, which are the professional-amateur teams at the senior level of soccer in the province: “I've seen the products at the end of the line with our League One teams, with kids getting scholarships to schools in the States and Canada, with players moving to the [professional sport] environment” (Staff 4). Witnessing these tangible results appeared to foster a deeper commitment to the change process and reinforced their belief in its overall positive impact. For instance, when asked about the newfound changes introduced as part of the program, Staff 4 noted: “... as a sport, like holistically, I think it's better that way” (Staff 4). This participant's proactive engagement was driven by the observed benefits and a holistic understanding of the long-term advantages of the new approach. These examples illustrate how participants evolved from reluctantly agreeing with changes to actively engaging with and championing them, driven by observed successes and a deeper understanding of the underlying principles of LTPD.

**Passive Compliance to Reluctant Agreement.** Some participants demonstrated a transition from passive compliance to reluctant agreement, as illustrated by Parent 3. Primarily, Parent 3 supported the changes because they benefited their child, expressing satisfaction with the opportunities provided: “We were happy that he was playing” (Parent 3). This indicated their passive compliance, as they accepted the new structure and policies due to the immediate

benefits for their child. However, over time, this compliance turned into reluctant agreement as Parent 3 recognized some additional benefit. Specifically, Parent 3 spoke about the newfound tiers of development that existed within the club's structure. Players were sorted into coloured teams (e.g., white, blue) based on skill level, and trained accordingly within these groups. Parent 3 expressed this shifting perspective by noting:

The existence of a white team giving an opportunity for my kids to play games and continue on in soccer? Yes, that was effective. But there was a stigmatization of being a white team player versus being a green or red team player. So, there was some negative to that as well, but it did give them an avenue to play in and I think that if we were at a different club, he would have been kind of lost in the shuffle and or cut and wouldn't have been playing and wouldn't be playing now" (Parent 3). This statement reflects their growing appreciation about the openness of the program and how it might affect their children's opportunity for advancement.

Despite appreciating the overall benefits of the program, Parent 3 acknowledged its limitations and stigmatizations. They recognized the positive impact of the club's model while also noting areas for improvement: "Like, I mean, I'm not gonna sit here and say I agree with every single aspect of what the club does. But for sure, from a general perspective, like it's been an actual positive for both my children to be involved in the model and the club" (Parent 3). This illustrates their reluctant agreement, as they continue to support the program while harboring reservations about certain aspects of LTPD, such as defined player levels and differences in opportunities. Parent 3's journey from passive compliance to reluctant agreement reflects a view shaped by both positive outcomes and practical challenges. Their initial compliance was driven

by the immediate benefits for their children, but as they encountered some perceived realizations over time, their support became more qualified.

**Neutrality to Reluctant Agreement.** A shift from neutrality to reluctant agreement was further present among some participants. For instance, Coach 2 was initially indifferent, coming from another organization and having to adapt to a new system. Their initial reaction was shaped by their unfamiliarity with the North American approach: “I was probably indifferent, just because I was coming from [name of country]. And it was something new to me” (Coach 2). They approached the change with an open mind, willing to see how the new LTPD system worked: “I was definitely open, open-minded on, you know, this is how we're going to do it and see, let's see if it works” (Coach 2). This neutral stance reflects their willingness to observe and understand the new system without preconceived judgments. Over time, as Coach 2 observed the practical implementation and outcomes of LTPD principles, their stance shifted towards reluctant agreement. They began to recognize both the benefits and drawbacks of what was referred to as a “pay-to-play system”, where an individual’s participation is directly linked to the associated fee. While the newfound pathways and development practices within the club’s structure led to more opportunity for players, these opportunities came with an increased fee. Thus, Coach 2 depicted this “pay to play” ideology, specifically as part of the OPDL being the primary league model of competitive soccer within Ontario Soccer: “The pay-to-play system here, I think, has its benefits. But also, I think it has its negatives as well” (Coach 2). Despite their initial neutrality, the firsthand experience of seeing the system in action and witnessing its impact on players led to a more supportive, albeit cautious, stance. They acknowledged the positive outcomes they observed: “Seeing it in action, and seeing the results of it have definitely made me more

supportive” (Coach 2). However, this support was tempered by a continued recognition of the system's limitations and drawbacks (e.g. cost, lack of resources).

Coach 2's gradual shift from neutrality to reluctant agreement highlights the importance of firsthand experience and observed results in shaping stakeholders' attitudes towards change. Their journey reflects how direct engagement with the change process and seeing tangible outcomes influenced participants' perspectives, moving them from a neutral stance to a more supportive position, even if that support remains cautious. This transition shows the complexity of change management, where stakeholders may start with an open mind but need to see practical benefits and outcomes to move towards agreement.

**Skepticism to Reluctant Agreement.** The transition from skepticism to reluctant agreement was experienced by Parent 1, who was initially skeptical about the OPDL, perceiving it as a potential cash grab and doubting its elitism due to the large number of players accepted per team. This skepticism was rooted in the belief that their child was developing just as well outside of the OPDL, which led to a stance influenced by mixed information: “So, my impression was that I was kind of indifferent. I heard good things, and I heard bad things” (Parent 1). Parent 1's initial stance was shaped by the conflicting feedback and doubts about the program's true value and effectiveness towards high performance development (OPDL). However, this skepticism began to shift as they observed their child's enthusiasm and positive attitude towards the OPDL: “He plays soccer- football- because he loves the sport, and we support him” (Parent 1). Seeing their child's passion and commitment, Parent 1 started to recognize the potential benefits of the program, including higher levels of competition, better player exposure, and future opportunities: “The level of competition and quality of player and exposure appears to be higher with an OPDL club versus non-OPDL” (Parent 1).

This gradual acceptance was driven by their child's positive experience and the perceived advancement opportunities the OPDL offered. Despite remaining cautious and relying on their instincts rather than concrete evidence, Parent 1's evolving perspective reflected a shift towards reluctant agreement: "I actually expected to stay indifferent, so I guess... I want to say pleasantly surprised" (Parent 1). This statement captures their transition from skepticism to reluctant agreement, highlighting how firsthand observations and perceived benefits can influence stakeholders' acceptance of change.

### *Negative Changes in Response*

The response to the change process also revealed some negative transformations among several participants, highlighting challenges in managing stakeholder concerns. Five participants showed negative changes, indicating difficulties in aligning with the new directives. Initially, these individuals approached the change with varying degrees of resistance or skepticism, and this hesitancy evolved into a more pronounced resistance over time. Their negative change was characterized by a decreased willingness to adopt new practices, contribute ideas, and support the initiative's goals.

For example, those who had initially been ambivalent or passively compliant began to exhibit overt resistance, such as refusing to integrate the changes into their routines or workflows. Their reaction delineates the potential for setbacks and illustrates that, without effective support and interventions, stakeholders may transition from initial hesitation to more entrenched opposition and disengagement.

**Proactive Engagement to Reluctant Agreement.** In the change process, participants transitioned from proactive engagement to reluctant agreement, as demonstrated by Staff 1 and Staff 2. Initially, Staff 1 recognized the benefits of the change process, seeing it as a positive step

towards long-term player development and increased personal satisfaction. They believed that the new approach would reduce pressure on coaches and provide enhanced development opportunities for all involved. Staff 1 expressed their enthusiasm by stating, “I think this is going to be much better for getting everybody more appropriate competition and training for where they are at the time” (Staff 1). This quotation highlights their initial proactive engagement, showing their optimism and support for the changes. However, as practical challenges began to surface, this proactive engagement waned toward reluctance. Staff 1 expressed encountering resistance and difficulties in implementing the changes across the board. When asked about the various changes involved with LTPD and the way the implementation unfolded, they were hesitant regarding the organization’s capabilities to carry the process out: “So, I’m still very supportive of it. I just don’t know; I don’t know that I believe that we always have the mechanism in place to truly support it” (Staff 1). Despite the club’s strong emphasis on the new approach, not all coaches were fully on board, making the implementation process more challenging. Staff 1 expressed this growing reluctance, stating: “I’d say I’ve remained supportive. I think there are parts of it that I still like, you know, sometimes, I mean, I don’t know if I fully understand sometimes when long-term player development, what the philosophy would dictate” (Staff 1). This statement reflects the shift from proactive engagement to reluctant agreement, as practical obstacles and a lack of full support from colleagues tempered their initial enthusiasm.

Similarly, Staff 2 began with total support for the LTPD principles, particularly valuing the focus on training and development. They were surprised by the absence of standardized practices that aligned with these principles and expressed their initial support with the statement: “I couldn’t believe that we weren’t doing that sort of stuff” (Staff 2). This reaction depicts their proactive engagement, showing their eagerness to implement and adhere to the LTPD principles.

However, as Staff 2 began to navigate the complexities of their role, they encountered challenges in execution, misinterpretation, and unintended consequences of the new policies: “I just think it’s been misinterpreted. I think it’s been misunderstood at many levels” (Staff 2). These issues led to a shift in their stance, moving from proactive engagement to reluctant agreement, as reflected in this quotation. The above quotation illustrates how the initial support was diminished by the practical difficulties and misunderstandings that arose during the implementation phase. As Staff 2 faced these challenges, their confidence in the change process slowly eroded, leading to a more reluctant and cautious approach. Both examples illustrate how initial enthusiasm and proactive engagement can be tempered by practical challenges, misunderstandings, and gaps between policy and practice, leading to a state of reluctant agreement among stakeholders.

**Passive Compliance to Skepticism.** As illustrated by Coach 1, Coach 3, and Parent 2, some participants moved from passive compliance to skepticism. Coach 1 initially accepted the LTPD changes without any issues, expressing a supportive attitude: “I was in support of the changes” (Coach 1). This demonstrates their passive compliance, as they were willing to follow the new guidelines and believed in the potential benefits without questioning the details. However, skepticism grew as doubts about Ontario Soccer's restructuring and the inconsistent application of the changes emerged. Coach 1 began to question the clarity and direction of the organization, stating: “I’m just not sure that Ontario Soccer has been clear in articulating a plan going forward” (Coach 1). This shift from passive compliance to skepticism reflects their growing concerns about the lack of a clear and consistent plan, which hindered their initial acceptance of the changes. The unclear communication and perceived lack of direction led Coach 1 to doubt the efficacy and feasibility of the LTPD initiative, and thus, their response wavered.

Similarly, Coach 3 initially supported changes like small-sided games and training courses, indicating a willingness to comply with the new practices: “I thought it was a good course” (Coach 3). This illustrates their passive compliance, as they participated in and supported the training initiatives without resistance. Over time, skepticism arose due to concerns about cost, managing multiple soccer tiers, and the challenges posed by video training. Coach 3 expressed these concerns by noting: “I mean, it is, I mean, it's, it's not cheap, and some clubs will cover it, some won't” (Coach 3). This statement highlights the practical difficulties and financial burdens associated with the new training methods involved in the change, as well as the inconsistent support from clubs and the high costs led Coach 3 to question the overall effectiveness and accessibility of the changes, marking a transition from passive compliance to skepticism. The realization of these practical challenges caused them to doubt the value and implementation new change aspects.

Parent 2 initially supported the OPDL because their child was happy and motivated, expressing satisfaction with the program: “Yeah, I was happy because he was happy” (Parent 2). This shows their passive compliance, as they accepted the program's benefits based on their child's positive experience without questioning further aspects. However, over time, skepticism developed due to perceived elitism, high costs, and dissatisfaction with the coaching quality. Parent 2 voiced these concerns by stating, “Of course it comes at the price, that in my view is very high” (Parent 2). This highlights their growing frustration with the financial burdens and perceived exclusivity of the program. Additionally, the dissatisfaction with coaching quality further fueled their skepticism, leading them to question the overall value and fairness of the OPDL. This shift from passive compliance to skepticism was driven by the financial strain and perceived lack of equitable opportunities within the program. These examples show how initial

acceptance and passive compliance can shift to skepticism as practical challenges, financial burdens, and perceived inconsistencies in implementation become apparent.

**Apathy to Active Opposition.** While uncommon, one participant did shift from apathy to active opposition in the change process. Staff 3 displayed a lack of engagement and interest in the changes. In addition to their vocal opposition, this stakeholder often avoided engaging with the materials provided to support the change, such as reports, training documents, or presentations, “Honestly, I learned as I went on. There wasn't anything that I read up on” (Staff 3). This statement highlights their ambivalence and lack of proactive engagement with the new policies. Staff 3's stance suggested that they had not deeply considered the implications or read extensively about the changes. Their initial apathy was characterized by a superficial acceptance without a thorough understanding or interest in the new framework. However, this indifference gradually transformed into active opposition as Staff 3 began to form their own critical perspectives. This was marked by disagreement with specific aspects of the changes, such as participation medals and the exclusion of scores and standings. These criticisms marked the beginning of a shift from passivity to questioning the value and effectiveness of the implemented changes.

Staff 3's hesitance deepened as they argued that clubs were merely "ticking boxes" without genuine adherence to the long-term athlete development principles: “But I know from experience that clubs tick boxes, and it's not been done” (Staff 3). This sentiment reflected their growing disillusionment with the superficial implementation of the changes. Their active opposition was further fueled by independent research and conversations with others: “Because I've done my own reading or speaking to people, and I've kind of just gathered my own ideas that are lots of research, research based, and that's been, that's influenced my own education” (Staff

3). This shift from apathy to active opposition demonstrates how initial disengagement can evolve into resistance as stakeholders gather more information and form critical viewpoints on the changes implemented.

**Reluctant Agreement to Reluctant Agreement.** Stakeholders may further remain stagnant in their response to change, noting no change, as demonstrated by Parent 4. Of the participants, Parent 4 was cautiously supportive of the changes, recognizing the club's seriousness and the potential benefits of the professionalized club (i.e., academy) route: “The change signals seriousness from the club” and “I was supportive. I mean, I think what [the local club] did by going... I'll call it the academy route, is good, actually” (Parent 4). This demonstrates an initial reluctant agreement, where Parent 4 saw the potential positives but approached the changes with caution and some reservations. However, this support was tempered by concerns about increased costs and the corresponding expectations for higher value: “With more cost becomes my expectation that the coaches deliver more value, let's just say, for the price that I have to pay as a parent” (Parent 4). Parent 4 expressed a desire for the program to meet higher standards given the financial investment required.

Despite recognizing the benefits of the program, Parent 4 remained concerned about the emotional impact on the children: “The only challenge for me has been around some of the coaches and just the emotional roller coaster it sets some of the kids on” (Parent 4). This ongoing state of reluctant agreement highlights a balance between seeing the program's merits and grappling with its practical and emotional shortcomings. Parent 4 appreciated the overall structure and opportunities provided by the academy route but remained critical of certain aspects that affected their children's well-being, and the value received for the cost. Parent 4's experience reflects how stakeholders can maintain a state of reluctant agreement over time,

where they acknowledge the benefits of a change but remain cautious and critical due to ongoing concerns.

### **Summary of Results**

The analysis of the data revealed three main insights into stakeholder dynamics during periods of change: the range of responses to change, commonalities among these responses, and the evolving nature of stakeholder attitudes. First, stakeholder responses spanned from proactive engagement to active opposition, influenced by factors like role impact, communication clarity, and alignment with personal values. Second, despite varied reactions, there were common patterns, such as initial uncertainty, followed by cautious optimism as stakeholders sought reassurance. Many shared a critical view, indicating that responses often shifted over time. Finally, the study highlighted the fluidity of stakeholder responses, showing that initial resistance could turn into support as positive outcomes emerged, or initial support could wane if expectations were unmet. These findings emphasize the importance of recognizing diverse and evolving responses to manage change effectively.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

Through an overall analysis of the data, key findings emerged, providing valuable insights into stakeholder dynamics during periods of change, including stakeholder responses to change, changing stakeholder responses to change, and the drivers behind this change. Factors influencing these responses include the reception of change processes among stakeholders, the alteration of current understandings among responses to change, stakeholder involvement within the change process, and how stakeholder responses change. This chapter synthesizes these findings from the research to provide a comprehensive analysis of stakeholder dynamics during organizational change, offering insights that are both theoretically rich and practically relevant.

### **Reception of Change Among Stakeholders: Reserving Judgement and Mixed Emotions**

Pertaining to both Research Question #1 and Research Question #2, stakeholder responses to change varied in terms of both how stakeholders responded to the change and why they responded in varied ways. Specifically, among the initial responses to the change demonstrated by stakeholders within the study, these responses ranged from acceptance (proactive engagement, reluctant agreement, passive compliance) to ambivalence (neutrality, apathy) to resistance (skepticism, active opposition). Essentially, nearly all possible responses were demonstrated among stakeholders pertaining to their initial response to the LTPD change. However, while this range was found to be rather wide, as only 2 of the 12 participants noted unwavering support (proactive engagement) as their initial response.

As a result, the other 10 participants within the study noted some form of hesitance from a supporting perspective, pure ambivalence, or some support from a resistant perspective. These findings build upon Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012) who identified that stakeholders could adopt both positive and negative emotions toward the change process simultaneously. In the case

of the present study, stakeholders often exhibited some support of the change initiative, noting an agreement with the idea of player development, whilst commonly maintaining a grievance with some aspect of the implemented changes (e.g., communication, resources, training). However, while these findings show support for this work by Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012) in this regard, there remain some differences in terms of how these responses were framed by participants.

In particular, while many of the stakeholders within the present study described mixed emotions related to the LTPD changes, the findings indicate that stakeholders' responses shifted as they described their perspective over time. In particular, the interview guide questions allowed participants the opportunity to reflect on how and why perspectives may have (and continue to) shift. Thus, when probed regarding their statements of ambivalence, stakeholders alluded to the idea of 'reserving judgement' to give time to form a concrete opinion of the change. For example, stakeholders viewed their initial responses retrospectively, leading to a majority of stakeholders discussing expectations that feelings toward the change would differ as they obtained further information and gained experience with the LTPD changes. This builds from Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012) study whose participants were examined within a static perspective, in which the authors noted that participants (namely those responding with ambivalence) were exhibiting mixed emotions.

While the results of the Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012) study are similar to the results of the current study in terms of stakeholders experiencing mixed emotions through ambivalence, examining stakeholder responses outside of a static perspective provides insight as to how stakeholders understand their feelings of ambivalence. Stakeholders initially weighed both the pros and cons of the impending change and aligned themselves somewhere along the

‘acceptance, ambivalence, resistance spectrum’. However, many then went on to discuss further anticipated change to their initial stance, adopting a “wait and see” approach as opposed to the aforementioned idea of simply ‘mixed emotions’. Thus, understanding whether these stakeholders approach this stance of reserving judgement with optimism or pessimism can provide further insight as to how stakeholders are likely to alter their response to change over time. Specifically, stakeholder responses are shaped and influenced by individual expectations and experiences of the change (Mahon & Waddock, 1992). The varied reactions to LTPD, including mixed emotions, were not independent from the change but rather directly influenced by how each stakeholder anticipated the change would affect them, their child or their organizational standing. Thus, stakeholders who perceived the change as aligning with or meeting their expectations were more likely to engage positively, while those whose expectations were unmet tended to respond with resistance or a “mixed” response. As stakeholder expectations fluctuated what they placed value on within the LTPD changes also fluctuated. Stakeholder theory accounts for the subjective nature of stakeholder engagement emphasizing that responses to LTPD changes were directly related to how stakeholders interpreted and weighed their expectations of the changes against perceived value and impact.

### **Integrating New Response Categories**

Throughout the study, participants exhibited diverse responses to organizational change, which were initially categorized into acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance. Those in the acceptance category found themselves supportive of the change, often viewing it as a positive development or a necessary step for improvement. They demonstrated enthusiasm and adaptability, aligning their efforts with the new direction. Conversely, participants displaying ambivalence experienced a mixed set of feelings, characterized by both support and

apprehension. These individuals were often uncertain about the long-term benefits and were cautious, navigating between their initial skepticism and the evolving facets of the change. Resistance, however, was evident among participants who strongly opposed the change due to perceived threats to their roles or dissatisfaction with the change process. These individuals voiced concerns and exhibited behaviours that undermined the implementation efforts, reflecting a significant barrier to successful change. This aligns with work Wagstaff et al., (2016), who, through work by Fineman (2006) stated that individual and group responses to change can include positive and negative emotions. They further noted that these emotions can further coexist toward any change. Thus, while stakeholders experienced both positive and negative responses to the change, these responses existed together within each individual stakeholder group. For example, while some coaches experienced positive responses to the change, other coaches signified immense resistance, albeit often for unique reasons.

Although many participants initially defined themselves within one of the three original response groups, these responses often included conflicting messages. Specifically, as most participants classified themselves as initially accepting of the organizational change, their responses frequently revealed underlying apprehensions and concerns. While these stakeholders expressed general support and a willingness to adapt to the change initiatives, they also articulated reservations about specific aspects of the change process. For example, they might have acknowledged the potential benefits and the necessity for the change, but simultaneously voiced concerns about its challenges, potential disruptions, or the communication from leadership. These findings illustrated that acceptance was not always unwavering, but rather a complex stance that included critiques and doubts. Thus, this duality in response highlighted the importance of recognizing and addressing all elements of stakeholder response to ensure a more

complete understanding of stakeholder responses and further expand beyond the foundation provided by Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011, 2012) to observe the intricacies involved in these responses.

While Welty Peachey and Bruening's work (2011, 2012) revealed a foundational spectrum of responses (acceptance, ambivalence, resistance), the findings from this study show how participants' responses often extended beyond and between these broad categories, capturing the complex and layered range of stakeholder reactions. These categories included: proactive engagement, reluctant agreement, passive compliance, neutrality, apathy, skepticism, and active opposition. This new categorization provided a more advanced framework for understanding stakeholder reactions within the change process. The identification of new sub-categories demonstrates that stakeholder reactions to change cannot be fully captured by rigid typologies, commonly depicted as acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance. Instead, these responses demonstrate a continuum informed by varied expectations and value placed on the LTPD changes. Thus, these findings engage stakeholder theory (Mahon & Waddock, 1992) to explain dynamic and context-based approaches to stakeholder engagement and expectations during organizational change.

### **The Multitude of Changes Within the Change Process**

Through the results of the study, it was found that multiple changes occurred within the organization simultaneously. These changes, including both macro and micro-level change, occurred as part of the LTPD implementation, with some changes affecting multiple organizational levels, and other changes being standalone implementations. These findings align with Heckmann et al.'s (2016) work, which highlights the complexity of organizational change and the potential for varying changes occurring at different levels. Heckmann et al. (2016)

emphasized that change does not always occur in isolation, but often occurs as part of a dynamic process in which many changes occur simultaneously. The findings within this study support this perspective, emphasized by both macro-level and micro-level changes unfolding within the organization at the same time, influencing different stakeholders in unique ways.

For example, macro-level changes, being the full-scale policy change, represented a structural shift that primarily impacted paid staff, who had to implement new policies, adjust program structures, and accommodate the needs of stakeholders within each pathway. Simultaneously, micro-level changes, such as the introduction of smaller-sided games and revised training regiments, had a more immediate effect on parents and coaches. These modifications altered day-to-day experiences, requiring stakeholders to adjust their expectations and goals upon newly implemented changes. Supporting the tenets of stakeholder theory (Mahon & Waddock, 1992), the degree to which each stakeholder was personally affected by the LTPD changes and perceived the change as matching their expectations of development influenced the manner in which they experienced and responded to the changes.

Moreover, the findings of this study build upon work by Heckmann et al. (2016), emphasizing that changes occurring simultaneously can create both challenges and opportunities for stakeholders. For instance, while the macro-level changes introduced through the change process provided a framework for long-term development, micro-level changes required immediate adaptation from stakeholders. Coaches, for example, had to modify their training methods in response to the revised formats, while parents had to reassess their expectations regarding player development and competition. This duality of needs and responses among stakeholders further demonstrates the complexity of change within sport organizations, demonstrated by different stakeholders experiencing and responding to change in unique ways.

Additionally, while micro and macro-level changes occurred simultaneously among different levels of the organization, findings indicated the potential for overlap between macro and micro-level changes. For example, the macro-level, structural changes introduced through LTPD implementation may have facilitated certain micro-level changes, such as aligning training methods with the newly introduced pathways. This overlap among changes further demonstrated the potential to provide positive, ambivalent, and negative responses. For example, in some cases, stakeholders supported macro-level changes, such as the inclusion of a recreational pathway, but disapproved of micro-level changes, such as new training guidelines, leading to ambivalent responses.

### **The Dynamic Element of Change**

To address Research Question #3, which explores how participants adapt their responses to change, it is crucial to examine the evolution of findings from static to dynamic reactions to the change in this organization. The study's findings highlighted how stakeholders' responses to change may be as dynamic and unpredictable as change itself. Throughout the change process, participant responses toward the change exhibited a shift over time. Initially, participants recalled a rather rigid initial response to the change, emphasized by simply supporting or resisting the change. However, participants demonstrated a different response to the present day change initiatives. Notably, findings revealed that many stakeholders engaged in prolonged adjustments in their response to change, viewing the LTPD change process as a long-term process for both personal and professional development rather than an alteration to existing practices.

Process views of change have been found to be both planned and unpredictable (Dawson, 2019). The study's results emphasize this evolution, showcasing stakeholders who displayed openness, and a commitment to engaging with the change process rather than simply accepting

it. This proactive mindset allowed stakeholders to adjust, seek feedback, and alter their responses to create new goals. As the nature of change has been seen to be dynamic and unpredictable (Dawson, 2019), responses further showed be increasingly flexible and dynamic. This shift reflects an understanding that effective adaptation now requires not only reacting to change but proactively engaging with it. As stakeholders embraced change as an opportunity for growth, the study's findings suggest that organizations can expect to see more dynamic and constructive engagement from participants as a result of process change. Such responses are critical for the success of initiatives like LTPD, where evolving stakeholder engagement encourages continuous learning and improvement.

The results of the study further provide evidence for the evolving nature of stakeholder responses to the LTPD change process, shedding light on how attitudes shifted over time. For example, many stakeholders reacted with initial uncertainty, questioning the implications and benefits of the change. This hesitation was often tied to concerns about personal interests and the overall effectiveness of the new approach. However, as stakeholders engaged more deeply with the process, their responses began to shift, moving from cautious skepticism to a more accepting stance. This furthers the work by Thompson and Parent (2024), which suggested that stakeholder involvement was important for the enabling of change. Essentially, as stakeholders found themselves further immersed within the change process, they became more likely to accept or even help spearhead the change. Contrarily, as stakeholders demonstrated disdain toward the change, the effect of change on these stakeholders was halted.

The process approach to change management, as outlined by Dawson (2019), emphasizes the fluid and evolving nature of change within organizations. Dawson's (2019) work provides a thorough understanding of how change unfolds, focusing on its unpredictable and emergent

characteristics. This perspective acknowledges that change processes are not linear or static, but rather they are dynamic and influenced by a range of factors that can shift over time. This approach highlights the complexity of managing change, as it involves navigating various, often conflicting, elements that affect how change is perceived and implemented.

Unique to Dawson's (2019) conceptualization is the idea that change processes are unpredictable and are often adaptable by organizational managers. This again suggests that the responses and strategies of stakeholders during change are not fixed, but can vary significantly as they adapt to ongoing developments. As a result, these factors contribute to the varied interpretations and experiences of change within an organization. This approach from Dawson (2019) was reflected by the results of the study. Specifically, the study identified a spectrum between active opposition and proactive engagement, revealing opportunities for movement from outright resistance to acceptance. This reflects the fluidity of process change, and further demonstrates how stakeholder responses can be affected by the dynamic nature of change. This shading between active opposition and proactive engagement builds upon Dawson's (2019) work by highlighting how, like process change, stakeholders' responses to change are not fixed, but can evolve through ongoing engagement and adaptation. Such transitions reflect the unpredictable and influential nature of not only change, but stakeholder responses.

In summary, this study builds upon Dawson's (2019) framework by demonstrating how stakeholder responses to change are influenced by the dynamic factors associated with the change process. The findings reinforce the idea that change is a fluid process, characterized by shifting responses that emerge through interactions within the organization. In alignment with Dawson's (2019) perspective, the study found change was not static, and evolved over time. Furthermore, it was observed that participants responses also remained unpredictable and

evolved, either positively or negatively, as time progressed. This shift in responses furthers Dawson's (2019) assertion that change processes are inherently unpredictable and complex.

### **Drivers Behind Stakeholder Responses to Organizational Change**

To address Research Question #2, participants indicated that their personal core values and goals significantly influenced their reaction to change, shaping their responses in complex ways. Specifically, some participants expressed a degree of ambiguity toward the change due to unique perceptions among core values. Essentially, while individual core values and goals played a crucial role in guiding how participants formulated their responses, these values and goals were not uniformly shared or aligned among all stakeholders. As a result, responses to change varied widely, reflecting the similarities and conflicting values that stakeholders maintained.

Despite the varied nature of stakeholder reactions, there were notable similarities in how stakeholders responded to change. Common patterns included initial uncertainty followed by a period of adjustment as participants sought to understand the implications of the change. Many stakeholders exhibited a phase of cautious optimism, where they were open to change but required reassurance and evidence of benefits before fully immersing themselves within the change process. These similarities suggest that while individual responses varied, the change adaptation process has shared stages and themes for these participants. While stakeholders adopted differing responses to the change process, many simultaneously shared a critical perspective of the change. Thus, this shared perspective among participants demonstrates how evolving responses to change occur among stakeholders. This further highlights how responses to change often evolve within a framework, shaped by both individual goals and collective experience.

Drawing on stakeholder theory, largely in relation to Mahon and Waddock (1992), it became evident that stakeholders' responses to organizational changes are intricately tied to their perceived ability to achieve or protect their interests. As the theory posits that stakeholder responses are influenced by how well changes align with their personal and professional interests, results from this study demonstrated that individuals often based their responses largely on how the changes would affect personal opportunities, whether it was advancing in professional soccer, achieving academic success, or furthering their own personal interests. Those who perceived that the organizational changes would benefit their personal goals were more likely to engage constructively, while those who felt threatened or disadvantaged by the changes displayed reluctance, neutrality, or active opposition. This alignment with Mahon and Waddock's (1992) perspective further demonstrates that stakeholders act based on their assessments of how change may affect their ability to advance personal interests.

For instance, parents who saw the LTPD model as beneficial to their child's advancement in soccer were more inclined to support the change. They perceived the new approach as beneficial to their child's development, which aligned with their primary objective of promoting their child's athletic career. Conversely, parents who worried that the new model might hinder traditional pathways to success, such as immediate competitive success, expressed reluctance or skepticism, reflecting concerns that the change did not align with their goals.

Coaches' responses also exemplified this alignment. Those who recognized professional development opportunities within the LTPD model, such as advanced training techniques or improved team management skills, were more open to adopting the change. They viewed it as a chance to enhance their skills and broaden their expertise. In contrast, coaches who felt that the changes disrupted their established coaching methods or threatened their team's competitive

standing were more likely to resist or remain neutral, showing reluctance to embrace a model that appeared misaligned with their professional success.

These examples reinforce Mahon and Waddock's (1992) assertion that stakeholders assess change based on its alignment with their interests. These findings further highlight the importance of understanding stakeholder responses to organizational change, particularly within the context of the LTPD implementation, as they reveal the unique and often shared stages of adaptation that stakeholders experience, despite varied interests or values. This alignment with stakeholder theory provides valuable insights into why stakeholder reactions unfold in predictable stages, including acceptance, ambivalence, or resistance.

The findings of this study further build upon those of Legg et al. (2016) by highlighting how change in community-level sport differs from that in higher-level sport due to the unique stakeholders involved, such as coaches and parents, and their interests. While Legg et al. (2016) identified that community-level sport present distinct challenges, this study provides a deeper understanding of the specific ways in which community sport stakeholders experience and respond to change. Unlike elite or professional sport, where structural and performance-based goals often drive change, CSOs must navigate a more complex social environment where development, participation, and volunteer involvement are at the forefront of change initiatives. (cf. Legg et al., 2016)

One key distinction pertains to the role of stakeholders in community sport, represented through coaches and parents demonstrating varying levels of expertise and investment in long-term development models. The findings of this study reinforce that these individuals approach change differently than those in high-performance settings, as they are typically more focused on resources, long-term goals, and balancing sport with community. For example, while a national

governing body may prioritize national and international performance, community-level coaches and parents may be more concerned with fostering enjoyment and ensuring accessibility (cf. Legg et al., 2016). These differing priorities create a dynamic in which change at the community level must be optimized to compensate for the diverse and sometimes competing interests of stakeholders.

Furthermore, this study expands on Legg et al. (2016) by illustrating how community level sport stakeholders exhibit unique responses to change, often influenced by their personal investment in the sport and their role within the organization. While stakeholders in elite sport may be more focused on structure and top-down decision-making, stakeholders in community sport often engage with change in a unique manner. Resistance and acceptance of change were often shaped by personal goals and needs rather than adherence to the larger implemented framework. These findings reinforce the work by Legg et al. (2016), noting the consideration of the nuances of community sport as crucial, ensuring that change initiatives are available to fit the needs of stakeholders of all levels.

These findings remain significant, specifically in identifying the stages that might predict how different stakeholder groups move toward acceptance or resistance. As parents saw the LTPD model as a pathway to support their child's future in soccer, they were more supportive, as it aligned with their personal interests. Coaches who saw development opportunities similarly embraced the change. However, both groups exhibited caution when the changes did not align well with their goals, showing that alignment with individual interests is essential in achieving meaningful engagement. By recognizing that individual responses are intertwined with personal and professional aspirations, the study contributes to a more thorough understanding of stakeholder theory and stakeholder dynamics in the context of organizational change.

## **Chapter VI: Conclusion**

The purpose of this thesis research was to explore stakeholder responses and evolving perceptions of organizational change in CSOs. One overarching change (i.e., LTPD) was explored in the case of one community sport club. As a means of better understanding parent, coach, and staff member responses and reactions to this change, change was viewed as a process and stakeholder theory guided the design of the study. Within this conclusion chapter, a summary of the research, along with theoretical and practical implications, limitations, future directions, and concluding comments are presented.

Building on the work of Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011, 2012), this study adopted and refined response categories to reflect a varied spectrum of stakeholder reactions within the change process. By distinguishing between proactive engagement, reluctant agreement, and passive compliance, the results identified the extent to which stakeholders support change within their club, and further articulated the extent to which stakeholders may have reservations regarding their support. While the findings by Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011, 2012) lay the groundwork for understanding how stakeholders demonstrate their overall acceptance, ambivalence, or resistance to change, the present study expands upon their insights by categorizing ambivalent responses into neutrality, and apathy, offering a more detailed lens to analyze the levels of ambivalent reaction.

By distinguishing between these reactions, the findings enhance understanding of how stakeholders may appear compliant or neutral on the surface while harbouring underlying attitudes that could influence their response to the change process. Furthermore, the inclusion of skepticism and active opposition as response categories builds upon the previous research by highlighting the more critical or adversarial positions that stakeholders might adopt. This

extension of literature allows for a better understanding of the potential barriers to change, and the strategies needed to address and mitigate such opposition.

### **Contributions to Theory and Research**

This study contributes to existing research on stakeholder theory and organizational change in sport management in several ways. First, this study extends the framework created by Welty Peachey and Bruening (2011, 2012) pertaining to how stakeholders respond to change. Through an examination of change, this new framework highlights the need for not only identifying unique stakeholders as part of change, but further exploring their extending responses over time. This study demonstrates how contextual factors such as the types of changes taking place, the timing of the changes, and the levels at which the change occurs (e.g., community vs. provincial/territorial) play a crucial role in shaping how stakeholders engage with and adapt to change. As a result, this perspective aligns with the work of Thompson and Parent (2024), reinforcing the idea that stakeholder responses are complex and dynamic. By considering variations of change both within and across stakeholder groups, this framework provides valuable insights into the fluid nature of stakeholder engagement throughout the change process.

The development of the refined response subcategories for understanding experiences with and reactions to change within a sport club moves beyond simplistic categorizations and offering a complex and varied perspective. Primarily, these subcategories allow for a more precise examination of stakeholder attitudes, providing a richer understanding of the factors influencing support and resistance. Future research can leverage this refined framework to explore how varying degrees of acceptance, ambivalence, and resistance are shaped by specific elements such as perceived benefits and alignment values. This precision can lead to more accurate patterning and explanations of stakeholder behaviour in response to change.

By differentiating between proactive engagement and reluctant agreement, or between neutrality and apathy, these subcategories highlight the complexity of stakeholder engagement with change. This research provides some insight into how these subcategories interact with one another, and further how shifts between them occur over time. This dynamic view encourages researchers to explore the conditions under which stakeholders transition from one subcategory to another, thereby deepening the understanding of the drivers behind stakeholder reactions.

In addition, this study contributes to existing research on organizational change in sport management by highlighting the layers involved with change. As large-scale initiatives, such as the implementation of LTPD, encompass multiple smaller, interconnected changes, stakeholders engage with and react to the incremental adjustments that occur within the broader change process more frequently than the overarching change. Thus, these smaller changes may include shifts in policies, programming, or roles, each resulting in varied responses from different stakeholder groups. This demonstrates that in order to understand how stakeholders navigate and adapt to change over time, recognizing these complexities is critical.

Finally, this study underscores the need for theoretical understanding of the unique dynamics involved within community-sport organizations. Unlike larger, more structured institutions, these organizations often operate with distinct governance models and resource constraints, and further include heightened stakeholder relationships. As such, traditional knowledge, such as stakeholder theory, may require refinement to adequately capture the uniqueness involved through stakeholder engagement within community sport settings. By emphasizing change in relation to the unique aspects of community-sport organizations, this research contributes to advancing theoretical perspectives in organizational change within sport management.

### **Contributions to Practice**

The findings have implications for practitioners seeking to navigate stakeholder dynamics and foster a smoother transition during periods of change. Primarily, understanding the specific subcategories of stakeholder responses allows for the development of more targeted communication strategies. For example, stakeholders exhibiting proactive engagement may benefit from further opportunities to provide feedback and take on leadership roles in the change process. In contrast, those demonstrating a response marked by hesitance, such as reluctant agreement or skepticism, might require more detailed information and reassurances on potential benefits. Tailoring communication to address the unique needs and concerns of each subgroup can enhance understanding and support.

Moreover, the study's findings emphasize the importance of aligning change initiatives with stakeholders' core values and perceived advancement opportunities. By ensuring that the change aligns with the values and advancement goals of stakeholders, leaders in sport organizations can foster higher levels of support and reduce resistance. This alignment can be achieved through involvement in the decision-making process, aligning goals with organizational values, and clearly communicating the benefits of the change with specific stakeholder interests in mind.

The insight that stakeholder responses evolve over time additionally suggests the need for a dynamic approach to change management. Practitioners should anticipate shifts in stakeholder attitudes and adapt strategies accordingly. This might involve periodic reassessments of stakeholder feedback, adjustments to communication strategies, and responsive actions to address emerging concerns or reinforce positive attitudes.

### **Limitations**

A notable limitation was the retrospective nature of the study, as participants were required to recount experiences from up to 10 years prior. This distance introduced several challenges that could impact the data collected. Over time, memories can become distorted or fragmented, leading to potential inaccuracies in participants' recollections. When asked to recall events or responses from a decade earlier, participants may have unintentionally altered details or provided generalized accounts that do not fully reflect their original attitudes or experiences. Participants' recollections may also have been influenced by their current attitudes and experiences, which could alter their interpretations of past events. Essentially, retrospective bias may lead individuals to reinterpret past experiences through the lens of their present views, thereby skewing their responses. In an attempt to mitigate some of this bias, interviewees were probed for further examples describing their responses to the change. For example, as some participants would initially state a response of *acceptance*, the example provided by the participant aligned more with elements of *ambivalence* or *skepticism*.

Another limitation of this study was the omission of certain stakeholder groups, such as officials and players, whose perspectives might have provided additional insights into the dynamics of the changes associated with the club adoption of LTPD. By focusing on specific stakeholders (parents, coaches, and paid staff), the study may not fully capture the range of responses and concerns relevant to all affected groups. Officials, for instance, often play a regulatory and enforcement role, which could influence their views on the feasibility, compliance, and overall impact of the changes. Similarly, players, as the primary participants within the LTPD framework, might offer unique perspectives on how the changes directly affect their development, motivation, and engagement with the sport. Specifically, these individuals were omitted from this study as they were unlikely to have prolonged experiences with the

change. As many players may have joined the club at a later age, largely for heightened competition or opportunity, players may not have experienced many facets of the change or formulated responses toward the change that could be seen as evolving. This omission suggests that while the study provides valuable insights, a broader examination of stakeholder groups would offer a more complete understanding of the LTPD change process, helping to identify any unaddressed needs or concerns that could impact the success of future initiatives.

### **Directions for Future Research**

With change being seen as unique and often unpredictable, future research should consider applying the subcategories in diverse contexts and settings. Testing the subcategories across different industries, organizational sizes, and cultural environments can validate its applicability and uncover context-specific intricacies. This broader application will help refine the subcategories, and emphasize varied responses by stakeholder groups. Researchers should also explore how external factors, such as societal trends, influence stakeholder responses and interactions with change.

Furthermore, examining the timing and frequency of communication during change is crucial. Primarily, research should assess how regular updates and feedback contribute to stakeholder confidence and participation in change. The effectiveness of two-way communication channels, where stakeholders have opportunities to voice concerns and offer input, should be investigated. This approach not only helps in gauging real-time reactions but also fosters a more inclusive change process, which can mitigate resistance and enhance stakeholder alignment. Furthermore, examining change among varying timelines should be of priority. As this study required participants to reflect on change 10 years prior, examining how

responses to change alter among varying timepoints (e.g., 1 year, 5 years, 10 years) may prove to be beneficial in understanding stakeholder change patterns.

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**Appendix A**  
**Letter of Invitation**  
**OSA Soccer Club**

**Project Title: Exploring the Process of Organizational Change within the Sport Industry:  
A Stakeholder Perspective**

**Principal Student Investigator (PSI):**

Chandler McFall, MA Candidate  
Department of Sport Management  
Brock University  
705-716-0458  
[Cm18hw@brocku.ca](mailto:Cm18hw@brocku.ca)

**INVITATION**

Members of your organization are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to learn about how organizational stakeholder experiences and responses to change processes evolve over time.

**WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As an organizational figure of authority, you will be asked to provide permission for the researcher to conduct a single-site case study of your organization, where the researcher will interview organizational stakeholders and analyze organizational documents. This case study will be conducted during the period of two to three months (December 2023-February 2024).

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

Possible benefits of participation in this case study include a greater understanding of your organizational employee's experience and response to change within your club due to the LTPD model. Additionally, this research will contribute to a greater understanding of management in the sport industry, so academics and practitioners can continue to improve the effectiveness of sport organizations.

There may be risks associated with participation, as knowledge of organizational management strategies may be shared during the publication of this study. Additionally, participants may have a risk of obligation, due to the existence of a personal relationship with the parent organization or member club.

To manage these risks, the organization's leaders will maintain the right to keep the organization's name confidential (through the use of a pseudonym) during the publication of this study. To manage a risk of obligation specifically, it is strongly noted that participation in this research is not mandatory, and any participant maintains the right to withdraw from the research project at any time. Participants' withdrawal will not result in any consequences.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

If desired, a pseudonym will be used to keep the organization's identity confidential. Upon the completion of the research, leaders of the organization will be provided the opportunity to review the research and decide whether the use of a pseudonym is preferred. For individual participants, the case study will explore evolving stakeholder experience and response to change specifically and will not name individual stakeholders. The only individual identifier reported will be the position level of an interview participant (e.g., parent, coach, paid staff).

However, if the organization chooses to be named in the research's publication, an individual's confidentiality would be limited, due to the limited number of individuals at each position level. Data recorded digitally during this study will be stored on a password-protected USB storage device, which when not in use, will be stored in a locked storage box. The password to the USB storage device will be known only by the PSI. After 12 months, these digital files will be deleted.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If stakeholders wish, they may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, they may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which they are entitled. As such, any stakeholder's choice to participate, not participate or withdraw from the research study will not impact their status in the organization.

## **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

The results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available through Chandler McFall ([cm18hw@brocku.ca](mailto:cm18hw@brocku.ca)) six months after the conclusion of the case study.

Additionally, following the completion of the research project, the PSI will create a research report that summarizes the research's purpose, methods, analyses, and findings. The PSI will provide this (approximately 1 page) research report to organizational members. This document will serve as an accessible overview of what research was completed, its central purpose, and what the PSI found during the study. The PSI will disseminate the report to both research participants and all organizational employees by electronic mail.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Chandler McFall using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [file #]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

**CONSENT FORM**

- I agree that my club will participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Participant Letter of Consent**

**Project Title: Exploring the Process of Organizational Change within the Sport Industry:  
A Stakeholder Perspective**

**Principal Student Investigator (PSI):**

Chandler McFall, MA Candidate Department of Sport Management  
Brock University  
7057160458  
[Cm18hw@brocku.ca](mailto:Cm18hw@brocku.ca)

#### **ABOUT THE STUDY**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Chandler McFall, a graduate student researcher at Brock University. The purpose of this study is to explore how stakeholder experiences with and responses to change evolve over time. Specifically, this study aims to explore these concepts in relation to the Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) model developed by the Ontario Soccer Association.

#### **WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As a participant, you will be invited to participate in one interview, approximately 30-60 minutes. Questions will be utilized to examine stakeholder experience with club change due to the LTPD model and to further understand how both experiences and responses to change within clubs from the LTPD policy evolve over time.

#### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

Your participation in this study will help to ensure that the concept of evolving experiences and responses to change is raised, understood, and discussed. There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study.

With the letter of invitation coming from the OSA, you may feel obligated or added pressure to be involved in this study. This is confirmation that the OSA will not have access to any information on who did or did not participate. Being involved in the interviews and any subsequent analysis is optional.

#### **FEEDBACK**

We will provide a report of results to all individuals who are involved in the study and wish to receive more information. This report can be received by emailing Chandler McFall with the information above. The report will be available after April 2024, specifically after all data is analyzed.

**KEEPING YOUR INFORMATION PRIVATE**

All information you provide is considered confidential; if you provide your email address, it will not be included in our written results or our communication with the OSA. Data will be kept until the study is completed, and results have been published, after which data will be permanently deleted.

Access to this data will be restricted to the research team, including the principal investigator. The principal investigator will be a part of the research team and will have access to the data. Findings from this study may additionally be published or presented at conferences at a future date. For any information regarding feedback availability, please contact Chandler McFall using the Information above.

The OSA has allowed access to this evaluation. However, the OSA will not have access to any raw data. They will receive the summary of results from the research team and use the results and recommendations around the perceptions of the LTPD model in relation to a better understanding of how the change process can be implemented to ensure organizational success.

**THIS IS VOLUNTARY**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any impact on your participation at the OSA.

Should you desire to withdraw from the research process, please contact the principal investigator via telephone or email with your desire to withdraw from the study. Withdrawn data attributed to a withdrawn individual through interviews will be removed entirely.

**CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Chandler McFall using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University []. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

**CONSENT FORM**

- I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in this letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study, and I understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.
- I acknowledge I have been involved (e.g., coach, staff, parent) in soccer under the LTPD guidelines for at least 2-5 years.

I consent to be involved in the above-described research project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Introduction**

- Welcome and introductions.
- Explain the purpose of the interview: To explore stakeholder experiences and evolving perceptions of the changes in the club as a result of LTPD policy adoption.
- Assure confidentiality and informed consent for participation.

#### **Participant Background**

- What is your role in [name of club] (e.g., coach, parent, paid staff)?
- How long have you been involved with [name of club]?
- Have you had a previous role with a district association or with Ontario Soccer?
  - Probe: If so, what type of role?
  - Probe: If so, for how long?

#### **Club Changes and LTPD**

1. When the LTPD policy came into effect, what types of changes did your club have to make to adhere to this new policy?
  - Probe for: changes in league structure/play, changes in people (hiring new staff), changes in job descriptions, changes in coach or staff training, etc.
  - Probe: What were the benefits or successes of implementing these changes?
  - Probe: What challenges did you face (if any) in implementing these changes and adhering to the LTPD policy?
2. Are there any other ways Ontario Soccer's LTPD policy impacts your club?
  - Probe for coaches: How have these changes impacted your job as a coach?
  - Probe for parents: How have these changes impacted your child's experience?
  - Probe for staff: How have these changes impacted your job as a staff member?
3. (Based on the changes noted by the participant) What was your reaction to these changes? (Support, indifferent, against)
  - Probe: Why did you feel that way?
4. Have your initial perceptions and responses to the LTPD policy-related changes changed over time?
  - Probe: If so, how/if not, why not?
  - Probe: Did your perceptions and responses change consistently or inconsistently (Always positive/negative, mixed, etc.)?
  - Probe: Did you initially expect your perceptions and responses to change over time?
5. How did these changes impact (positively or negatively) your overall experience as a [parent, coach, staff member]?
  - Probe: Was this impact on your experience (whether positive or negative) significant?
6. If applicable: Are there any documents related to the LTPD framework that helped you navigate this implementation?
  - Probe for: documents linking to implied change.

**Conclusion**

- Thank the participant for their time and valuable insights.
- Offer the opportunity for any additional comments or thoughts they may have.
- Reiterate the importance of their input in adapting and improving Ontario Soccer's Long-Term Player Development model in response to evolving experiences and responses.