

EFFICIENT LEADERSHIP IN SPORTS VOLUNTEERING

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Abstract. *Sports volunteering becomes increasingly important as different non-governmental organisations are getting more and more involved in organising and conducting numerous sports activities through partnerships and collaboration contracts with various sports structures. Volunteers fulfil formal functions in sports organisations at different management levels and thus become responsible for empowering collaborators with the delegation of tasks necessary to establish and achieve the objectives of a sports activity. The extension of leadership abilities specific to volunteer managers will largely determine the efficiency and completion of activities carried out by managerially subordinate volunteers. Several studies conducted over a century have tried to answer the question: what is the best leadership and what does an efficient manager do? Studies show that this problem cannot be solved by definitive truths or generally valid rules for maximum leadership efficiency. However, most authors and studies demonstrate a thorough knowledge of this topic, which is much superior to its recognition to the general sports public. The purpose of this research is to establish the prospective directions of efficient leadership in sports volunteering, to analyse leadership actions and to process data related to effectiveness in sports volunteering at different management levels in volunteer organisations. The research presents various management methods and techniques applied to increase the efficiency of voluntary sports activities. The main conclusions and directions of strategic action in the efficient leadership of sports volunteers are presented, as well as the importance of achieving the proposed goals, the effect of increasing responsibility and the role of efficient sports leadership.*

Keywords: *sports volunteering, sports organisations, management, leadership.*

Introduction

Studies conducted by most authors demonstrate that the organisational capacity of the physical education system has increased in importance due to the involvement of volunteers. The management system, which ensures the exercise of managerial functions and relationships in a sports organisation, is defined as the set of decisional, organisational, informational and motivational elements (Cuskelly et al., 2006) by which all processes and relationships are developed so as to obtain the highest possible effectiveness and efficiency.

On the other hand, leadership is one of the most studied topics in the organisational theory of volunteering and lots of theories have been proposed to explain this concept. A relationship-based approach to leadership has resulted in the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory used by many researchers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Gómez & Rosen, 2001; Northouse, 2001; Hoye, 2004; Gooty et al., 2012) because it provides a useful framework to explore the dynamics of leadership in the context of volunteer-assisted boards in sports organisations. These studies address issues such as the structures, processes and optimal planning of activities, the role of paid executive directors in relation to volunteers (Fletcher, 1992), the conduct of activities aimed to develop the management board of a sports structure (Csataljaj et al., 2009), the role of volunteer board members (Parent & Hoye, 2018), personal

motivations of board members (Taylor et al., 1991) as well as the influence of a cyclical pattern on the life of organisations.

A number of studies have also examined leadership in sports organisations and explored topics such as the nature of managerial work in sports organisations, including the role of volunteer managers in providing leadership (Chelladurai et al., 1983), the link between leadership styles and perceived leadership effectiveness and satisfaction of coaches and methodologists (Bradshaw, 2009), the relationship between optimised dynamic leadership styles and organisational effectiveness.

In Romania, voluntary sports organisations take many forms, ranging from small local organisations, volunteer circles, associations or observers, which participate in activities along with different teams, to regional associations that coordinate competitions between federations, State organisations such as the Olympic Committee and the Olympic Academy, county associations for various sports or military associations, which not only facilitate sports competitions but also ensure the stability and functioning of the entire sports system.

Numerous directions of action have been developed during the emergence and evolution of volunteering in Romanian sports structures for sports organisations to follow in fulfilling their managerial responsibilities. According to Herman and Renz (1996), these guidelines are based on both legal requirements and moral assumptions about the role of the management board in relation to volunteers. In many countries, governments impose by legislation slightly different legal conditions on voluntary sports organisations but all agree that the ultimate responsibility for these organisations lies with the management board to which volunteers belong.

Research purpose

The current research aims to establish the prospective directions of efficient leadership in sports volunteering, to analyse leadership actions and to process data related to effectiveness in sports volunteering at different management levels in volunteer organisations.

Research hypothesis

The research assumes that the management and leadership of voluntary sports organisations are performed by boards that capitalise on the activities carried out by volunteer managers, which increases the managerial efficiency of the organisation for the benefit of its members.

Methodology

The research method used in this study involved two stages as follows:

- the first stage used quantitative methods to identify the quality of the relationship between leader-member exchanges and perceptions of board performance in various volunteer organisations in Romania. The investigated sample included volunteers and officials from the Olympic circles in Bucharest and across the country;

- the second stage used qualitative methods to explore perceptions about how leader-volunteer relationships develop and work, about who provides board leadership and how leadership performance is achieved.

Self-administered questionnaires were developed and used for volunteers from the Olympic Academy, voluntary sports associations in Bucharest, youth and sports departments, public and local sports organisations that were acknowledged and included volunteers in their structures to support organisational management. The proposed questionnaire was aimed at collecting data on perceptions about leader-volunteer member exchange and opinions about managerial performance.

The quality of the relationships between board members, board chairs and directors of each board was identified using the LMX model, a 7-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). The mentioned authors claim that “LMX contains three dimensions, namely respect, trust and obligation” [...] “but these dimensions are so highly correlated that they can be tapped into with the single measure of LMX”, suggesting that “the massive redundancy resulting from using more than one measure of LMX at this time can add little unique information” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 237).

The questionnaire asked respondents to assess on a Likert scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that each of the items accurately described the relationship with other board members. Data collection involved the distribution of self-administered questionnaires to all volunteer members, board chairs and directors in each of the 42 organisations.

The questionnaires were distributed between November 2020 and February 2021. The overall rate of return was 66.7%, with a total of 204 self-administered questionnaires returned from the 318 participants in the study. These questionnaires included 32 directors (94.1%), 25 (73.5%) board chairs and 147 (61.8%) volunteer members of the governing boards from various sports structures.

In the second stage, a stratified sampling technique was used to facilitate data analysis, especially the comparison of data collected from unequal organisations.

Data analysis for the first stage generated an average performance score of the governing board for each organisation, which was based on the perception of management within the boards of voluntary sports organisations in Romania.

Larger organisations may be able to attract highly-qualified volunteers to the management board, have a larger group of potential board members if membership in a sports organisation is required for the election or appointment to the board and may be able to devote more time to approaching development work - all of this could have an impact on the quality of leader-volunteer member relationships.

It should be noted that the percentage of volunteers in the surveyed organisations differed significantly. Directors and chairpersons of governing boards were selected for the interview, as well as a randomly selected volunteer member from each management board. Following the procedures recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the interviews were stopped when we acknowledged that no new data were being collected.

In order to identify differences associated with the leader-volunteer member relationships between various organisations, interviews were conducted, which focused on asking respondents to describe the performance of their boards, the quality of the relationships

within their boards, leadership sources within their boards, the grounds of poor relationships versus good relationships and how those relationships developed subsequently.

Using the convergence process, these issues were taken into account for both larger and smaller volunteer sports organisations.

A limitation of the study may be the small size of the sample.

Twelve interviews were conducted, each providing rich data on the perception of relationships between different sports structures.

Results

The analysis of the interview data is presented in three sections: perceptions about the quality of leader-volunteer member exchanges, sources of the board management and the development of leader-member exchanges.

These data were classified as top-performance outcomes, which were perceived by the management boards as working “very well” or operating “quite professionally”.

When asked to describe the performance of their boards, respondents often mentioned that they were part of a “very well-balanced board”, were part of a group with “excellent balance of expertise and skills”, or that their boards included people who were “highly respected and well recognised”. In contrast, respondents from management boards classified as having a low level of training perceived that their boards “did not work efficiently” and were too much “focused on operational issues” rather than on the strategic management of their organisations.

The development of high-quality leader-member exchange relationships was perceived by respondents as being associated with performance-based boards that placed emphasis on respect and trust. When asked to describe on what relationships they relied, respondents mentioned “trust”, “respect” in general and showing “respect for new ideas and opinions”, which were considered important prerequisites for the development of working relationships. Trust and respect seem to be related to the respondents’ notions about the qualities of volunteers associated with the management boards to which they belonged. For example, one respondent from a high-performing board noted the following: “If a new executive and a new board had a lot in common, then the transition would be easy and I think they would have a good working relationship within a few months”.

Respondents from low-performing boards complained about the (partial) lack of respect and trust within their boards, which hindered their ability to develop high-quality relationships. For example, these respondents mentioned that people could choose to run for a board “because of an issue they want to change... they do not necessarily choose this for a construction reason but for an accidental term”, which might influence their ways of developing relationships with other board members; they also said: “Get a few people who are employed and a few other volunteer people who are there because they have a common interest that they serve”, and this will certainly influence the development of trust among board members.

Respondents of all types (board members, chairpersons and directors) perceived that the offers to develop mature working relationships were usually made by those already associated with the management board. In other words, if an executive were employed for a

significant period of time before the election or appointment of a board chair, the executive would usually be the one to facilitate the development of the working relationship. Similarly, if a board chair existed for several years before employing an executive, the board chair would be the one to take the lead in developing or offering to develop the working relationship.

The newly elected or appointed board members are introduced and oriented to their roles by the incumbent executive, who should take the initiative (instead of the board chair) of developing the relationship and should also have a well-defined strategy.

All of the data collected for the current study are shown in the following tables and figures (Table 1, Table 2 and Figure 1 to Figure 6).

Table 1. *Sports organisations whose management boards include volunteers*

County	Sports structures	Other structures with volunteers	CSS	LPS (cls)	Palaces, Cl, students	Total pre-university	CSU	Total MECT network	Local ADM	Total organisations with volunteers
1. Alba	1		1	3		4		4	1	6
2. Arad	1		1	1		2		2	7	10
3. Argeş	2			4	1	5	1	6		8
4. Bacău	2		2	2	1	5	1	6	1	9
5. Bihor	1	1		7	2	9	1	10	1	13
6. Bistriţa N.	1			1	1	2		2		3
7. Botoşani	1		1	2	1	4		4		5
8. Brăila	1			1		1		1		2
9. Braşov	1	2	5	3	1	9	1	10	1	14
10. Buzău	1		1	2	2	5		5	1	7
11. Călăraşi	1		1			1		1		2
12. Caraş S.	1		2	1		3	1	3	1	6
13. Cluj	1		1	4	2	7	1	8	1	10
14. Constanţa	1		2	3	1	6	1	7	2	10
15. Covasna	1			3		3		3		4
16. Dâmboviţa	1		1	3	1	5		5		6
17. Dolj	1		1	4	1	6	1	7	3	11
18. Galaţi	1		2	2	1	5	1	6	1	8
19. Giurgiu	1		1		1	2		2		3
20. Gorj	1		1	2	1	4		4	1	6
21. Harghita	1		4		3	7		7		8
22. Hunedoara			3	1	1	5	1	6	2	8
23. Ialomiţa			1			1		1		1
24. Iaşi	1		1	3		4	1	5		6
25. Ilfov			1			1		1	7	8
26. Maramureş	1		3	1		4	1	4		5
27. Mehedinţi			1	1	2	4		4	1	6
28. Mureş	1	1	2	4		6	1	7	1	10
29. Neamţ	2		1	2		3		3	1	6
30. Olt			3	1		4		4		4
31. Prahova	2		2	3	1	6	1	7	6	15
32. Sălaj	1		1	2	1	3		4		5
33. Satu M.	1			2	2	4		4		5
34. Sibiu	1		3		1	4	1	5		6
35. Suceava	3		3	4		7		7	7	17
36. Teleorman	1		3		1	4		4		5
37. Timiş	1		3	4	1	8	2	10	3	14

38. Tulcea	1		1		1	2		2		3
39. Vâlcea	1		1	4	1	6		6		7
40. Vaslui	1		1	1	1	3		3		4
41. Vrancea	1		1	2		3		3		4
42. București	4	5	7	9	1	17	2	19		28
TOTAL	46	9	69	92	34	194	18	212	49	318

Table 2. Statistical indicators specific to volunteer structures in different sports organisations

Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Level of importance of the dynamic leader (LMX)
6.09	4.20	2.36

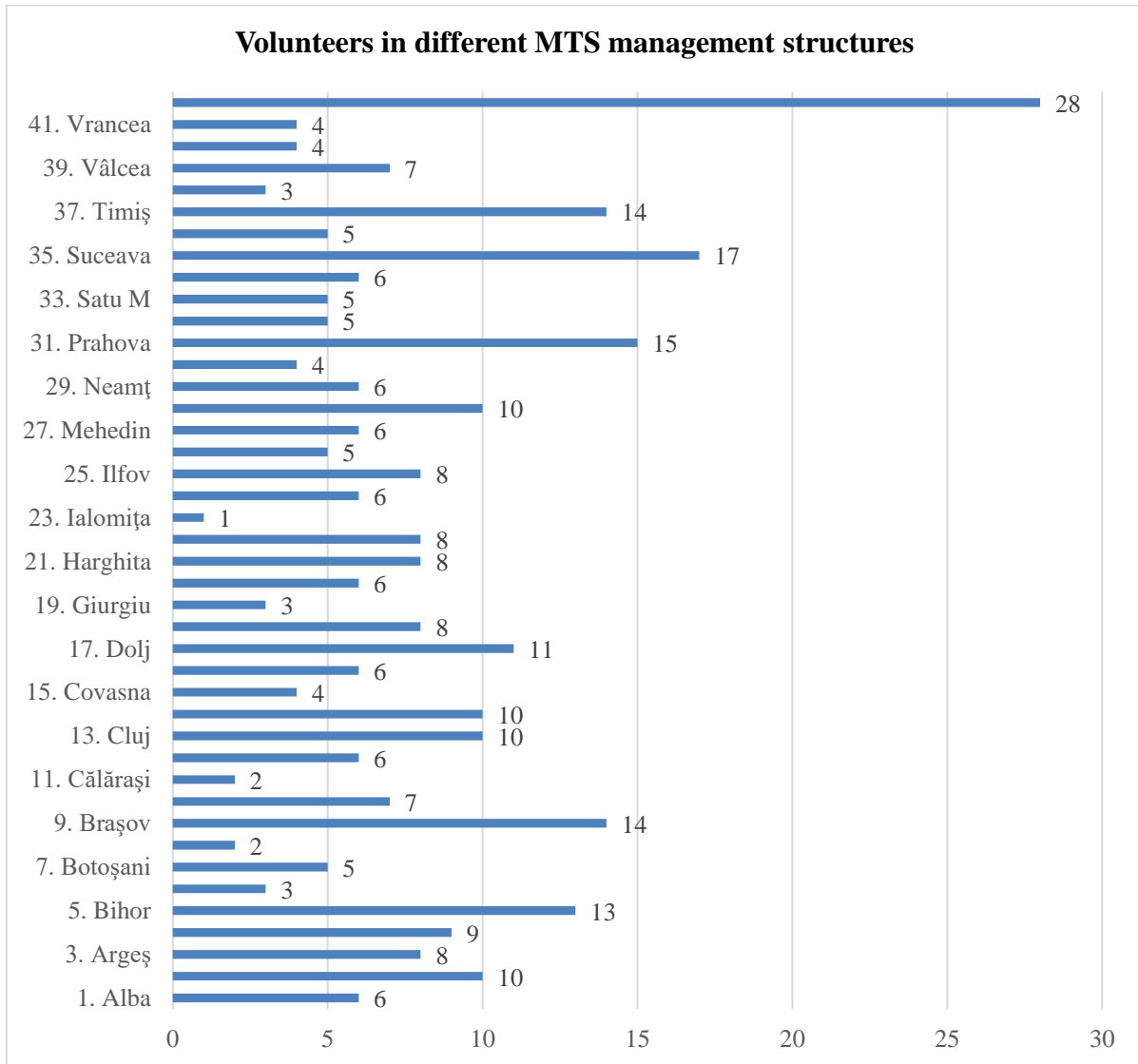


Figure 1. County associations of sports structures that include volunteers

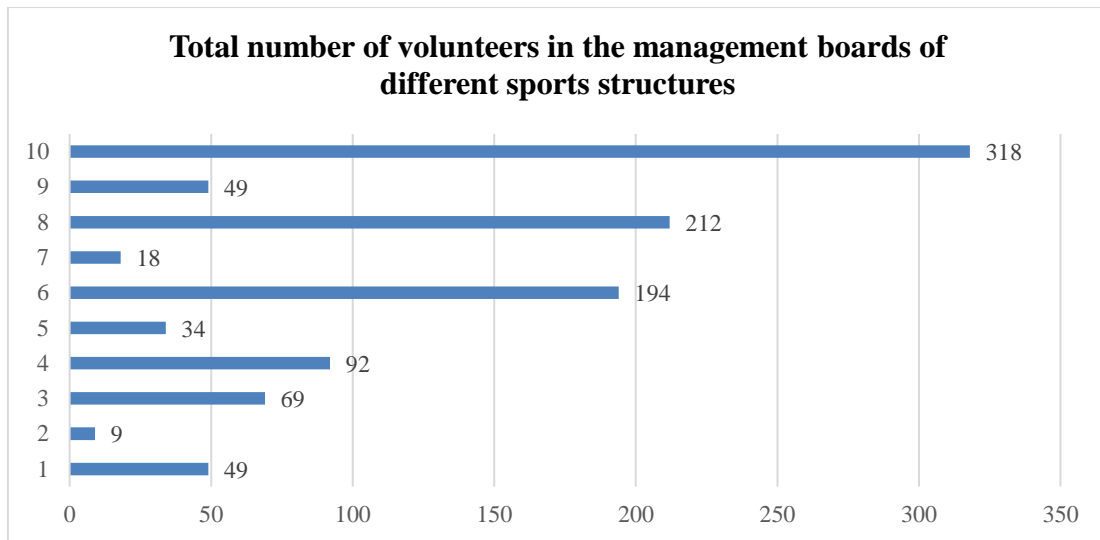


Figure 2. Total number of volunteers in the management boards of different sports structures

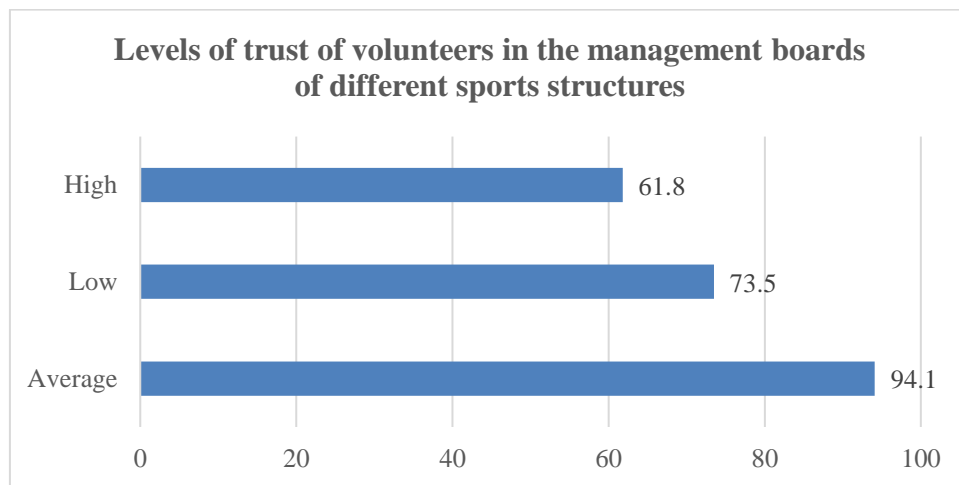


Figure 3. Levels of trust of volunteers in the management boards of different sports structures

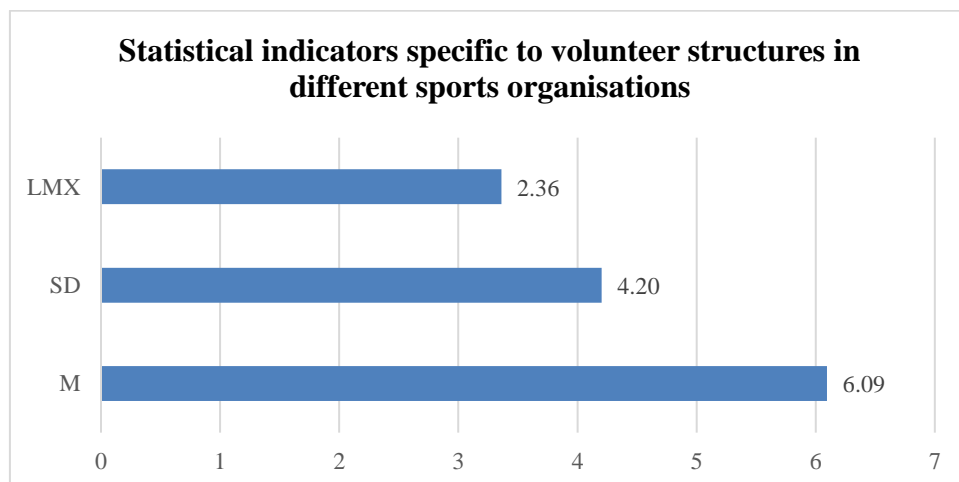


Figure 4. Statistical indicators specific to volunteer structures in different sports organisations

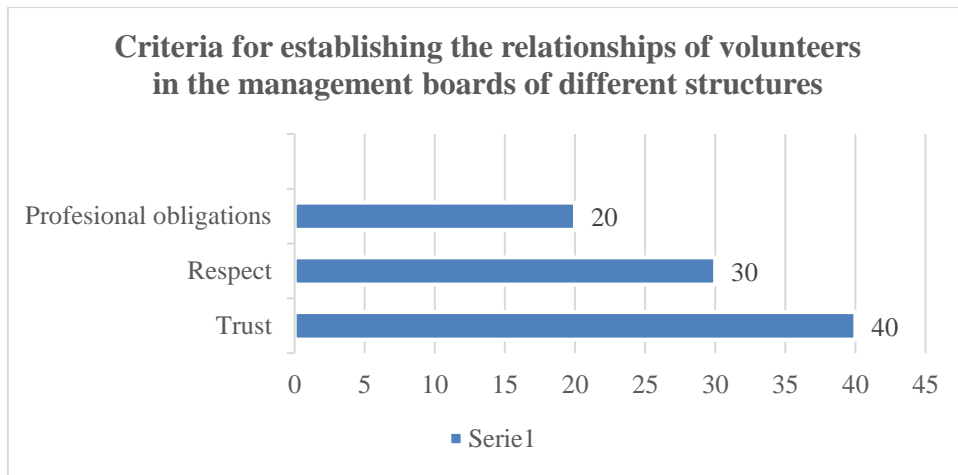


Figure 5. Criteria for establishing the relationships of volunteers in the management boards of different structures

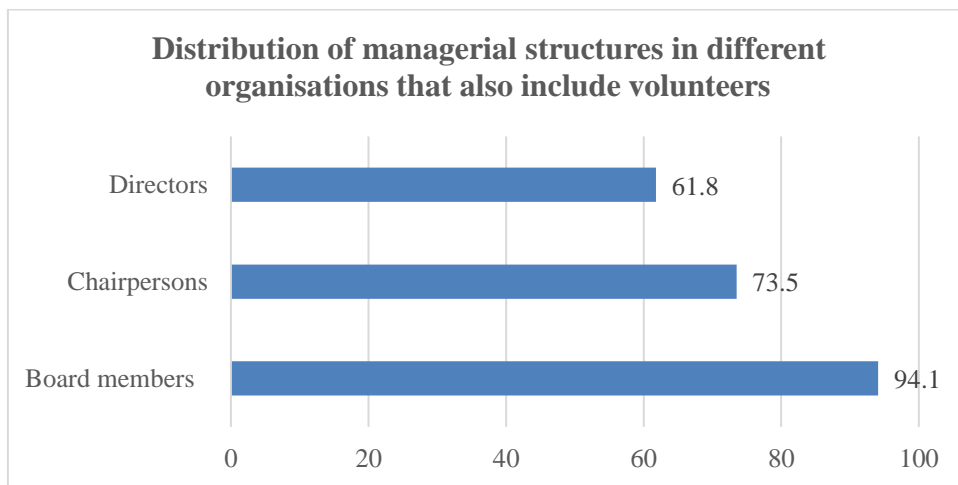


Figure 6. Distribution of managerial structures in different organisations that also include volunteers

After collecting information about the indicators thought to be useful for the current study, the following degree of reporting volunteer activity was found within the surveyed sports structures: 53% for systematic reporting and 33% for a non-reporting attitude. As regards the non-reporting aspects, a percentage of 15% was represented by those stating that they did not have events with volunteers in their sports organisations. The other 18% either provided information that justified the situation or presented measures to mitigate the impact of volunteer involvement.

Reporting activities with volunteers is shown in Figure 7.

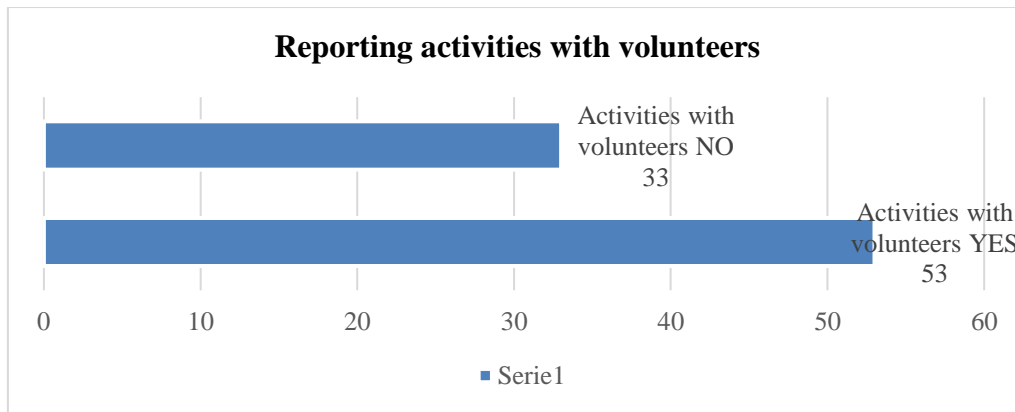


Figure 7. Reporting activities with volunteers

Conclusion

It has been found that leader-member exchanges are associated with perceived performance of the management boards to which volunteers belong: high-quality exchange relationships, especially between chairpersons and executives, have been perceived to lead to higher levels of board performance. This supports the results achieved in the first stage of our research, according to which certain elements of the volunteer-board relationship are associated with performance levels of the sports organisation.

An interesting aspect is that the leadership provided by chairpersons in high-performing boards is less obvious. It is possible that, in the absence of strong leadership provided by the chair, the entire board relies on volunteer executives, who are able to create an environment of great commitment to both the boards to which they belong and their roles as individual board members. This might increase the chance for the representative structure to be functional and therefore to achieve better performance in its activity.

While Hoye (2004) claims that higher levels of board performance are associated with high-quality leadership exchanges for all three possible pairs of directors as board members, the outcomes of this study highlight the importance of the exchange relationship between the board, volunteer members and directors. This finding helps to a certain extent to confirm the speculation that the management board is perceived to be divided between chairpersons and directors, followed by the majority of board members. This opinion also seems to be supported by the statements made by respondents, according to which volunteer chairs and executives act as sources of the management board.

The three main findings of the current study, which expand our knowledge about leader-member exchanges in voluntary sports organisations, refer to the way in which these exchange relationships are developed.

First of all, the existence of mutual respect and trust was perceived as a prerequisite for establishing mature relationships between those associated with the boards of voluntary sports organisations. Strauss and Corbin (1990) also found that volunteer trust was a key factor in executive board relationships. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) state that, in addition to respect and trust, the feeling that a form of mutual obligation will develop is a criterion that individuals use to assess whether they offer or accept an offer to create a relationship of

reliable, stable and mature work. The above authors (1995) also claim that, in addition to respect and trust, the feeling that a form of mutual obligation will develop is a criterion that individuals use in order to decide whether they offer or accept an offer to create a reliable, stable and mature working relationship. In our study, although none of the respondents explicitly mentioned the notion of mutual obligation, this one emerged from their statements regarding the close relationship established between the chairs and the directors of high-performing boards, for which a number of respondents noted the unique role of the executive in supporting the organisation's activity. The very nature of the work of volunteer sports organisers, chairpersons and directors, who often communicate with each other on a daily basis, would tend to create a more favourable environment for the achievement of the organisation's goals and strategic development.

Second, other people's respect for the volunteer seems to rely on their perceptions of the personal attributes of each member, such as skills, knowledge and experience. This appears to support the claim that people are much more inclined to social exchanges with those who have the most to offer, but first and foremost, seriousness, respect and stability. The way in which individuals perceive that someone has something to offer was not explicitly explored in this study but would probably be related to an assessment of the volunteer's abilities, availability and willingness to contribute to the work of the board or to support the work of either the board members or the paid executive. As mentioned before, the potential group of people who might be attracted to volunteer in the management boards of smaller sports organisations may be quite large and therefore may increase the number of people in the governing board who are sufficiently respected by others. Speculatively, this could have an impact on the perception of others that a mutual sense of obligation can develop with an individual who has something to offer of their own free will and enjoys respect. In agreement with Hoyer (2004), we argue that the initial interaction between people is a decisive factor for future relationships, specifically with regard to the level at which a leader selects and appreciates their subordinates in general but particularly their subordinates' ability to volunteer. This also seems to be supported by the outcomes of our study, in the sense that respondents have noted that people with common interests would be more likely to develop leader-member exchange relationships.

Third, the creation and development of mature working relationships takes a significant period of time and are achieved by means of a process of negotiation or decision-making and role-taking (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The offer to create such a relationship is more likely to be made by board chairs, board members or executives for newcomers than vice versa. However, board chairpersons tend to focus on developing their relationships with volunteer executives, probably because their potential for a greater sense of mutual obligation does exist in this specific relationship, and therefore support the development of relationships with these individuals, which is confirmed by most studies.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that the source of leadership within the boards of voluntary sports organisations may come from either board chairs or executives and that, when people who fulfil these roles are able to develop mature working relationships, the performance ability of a board is improved, these conclusions being reinforced by the studies conducted by numerous national and international authors (Văcar & Miricescu, 2013). These relationships are based on the existence of mutual respect and trust as well as on the

perception that the development of a mature working relationship will be beneficial to the parties. In the context of voluntary sports organisations, these findings expand our understanding of both the importance of leadership roles held by volunteers and the relationship with professionals paid to achieve the strategically established outcomes of a voluntary organisation.

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