

## The Nature and Impact of Role Ambiguity in Voluntary Sport Organizations

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**Session 4: Management/Leadership  
Presentation (25-minute)**

**Thursday, May 31, 2007**

**11:00 AM - 11:25 AM**

Understanding the perceived role ambiguity of paid staff and volunteer board members is critical to the effective management of voluntary sport organizations. Role ambiguity refers to a lack of clear understanding about the actions required to perform one's role (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). There may be ambiguity with regard to (1) what one is expected to do, (2) how to perform one's role, (3) whose expectations are given priority, (4) how one's performance is evaluated, and (5) the consequences of completion or non-completion of one's responsibilities (Kahn et al., 1964). The negative impact of role ambiguity has been documented in the business, industry, education, and recreation settings, where lack of clear understanding has been associated with decreased job performance, satisfaction, and commitment, as well as stress, and propensity to leave the organization (e.g., Abramis, 1994; Athanasios, Nicholas, & Dimitris, 2004; Beard, 1996; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Pavelka, 1993; Singh, 1998; Wolverton, Wolverton, & Gmelch, 1999).

It has been suggested that voluntary organizations are likely candidates for the presence of role ambiguity (Merrell, 2000; Pearce, 1993; Pierce, 2005; Swetnam, 2004), where volunteers often assume multiple roles and may be both consumers and providers of a particular service (Pearce, 1993; Widmer, 1993). This is consistent with the context of voluntary sport organizations (e.g., Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Doherty, 2005). Any uncertainty may be intensified with the introduction of paid staff (e.g., Swetnam, 2004), where changes in the structure and nature of voluntary organizations subsequent to hiring may lead to a blurring of the roles and responsibilities of both paid staff and volunteer board members (Kikulis, 2000). Notably, increased professionalism associated with hiring in voluntary sport organizations has been of particular interest to researchers over the past decade (e.g., Auld & Godbey, 1998; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003; Kikulis, 2000). Yet, despite the fact that role ambiguity seems likely to be manifested in this setting, and the potential negative consequences of role ambiguity, research investigating this phenomenon has been limited. The purpose of this study was to examine the nature and impact of role ambiguity in voluntary sport organizations.

Most research on role ambiguity extends from Kahn et al.'s (1964) multidimensional framework, which distinguishes five dimensions of ambiguity: scope of responsibilities, means-ends knowledge, priority of expectations, evaluation of performance, and consequences of role performance. Research, however, has tended to rely on global measures of role ambiguity (e.g., Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), or consider only a few dimensions of the Kahn et al. model (e.g., Breugh & Colihan, 1994; Sawyer, 1992). The full breadth of role ambiguity conceptualized by Kahn et al. has not been addressed. Thus, the first objective of the study was to develop a multidimensional measure of role ambiguity in the voluntary organization setting, based on Kahn et al.'s framework. The second objective was to examine volunteer and staff perceptions of role ambiguity in voluntary sport organizations, and determine whether role ambiguity is predictive of their job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and effort.

The focus of the study was paid staff and volunteer board members of provincial sport organizations in two Canadian provinces. A convenience sample was used whereby individuals were identified from organizations that had current names and e-mail addresses available in the public domain. Data were collected through an on-line survey that was developed for the current study. Multiple items to measure the five dimensions of role ambiguity were developed by the investigators, and further validated by a panel of experts. Participants were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) the extent to which "I clearly understand" each of 32 role items. Lower scores reflect role ambiguity, and higher scores reflect role clarity. Participants were also asked to complete the Abridged Job In General (AJIG) instrument (Russell et al., 2004), an 8-item scale of overall job satisfaction, the 9-item short form of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982), and a 5-item scale of effort developed for the current study. A letter of information was e-mailed to 657 individuals, inviting them to participate and directing them to the survey website. A total of 222 participants completed the survey for a response rate of 34%.

Results of a confirmatory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation (AMOS 6.0) indicated an inadequate fit of the 5-factor model; Chi-square(454,N=222)=1441.03,  $p < .001$ ; ratio of Chi-square to degrees of freedom=3.17; CFI=.87; TLI=.84; RMSEA=.10. Subsequently, principal axis factoring with oblique (Promax) rotation was used to re-specify the factor structure

## 2007 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2007)

of the role ambiguity measure (Ford, MacCallum, & Tait, 1986). Three factors with eigenvalues equal to or greater than 1.0 (Stevens, 2002) and item loadings greater than .55 on one factor and less than .35 on any other factor (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) were identified and retained. The three factors were labeled performance outcome ambiguity (12 items, Cronbach alpha=.97), scope of responsibilities ambiguity (8 items, Cronbach alpha=.95), and means-ends knowledge ambiguity (4 items, Cronbach alpha=.90). Cronbach alpha reliability estimates for the AJIG (alpha=.78), 9-item short form OCQ (alpha=.91), and the effort scale (alpha=.95) verified the internal consistency of these measures.

Results of a 2X3 MANOVA revealed that volunteer and staff administrators did not significantly differ in their perceptions of role ambiguity,  $F(2,197)=1.76, p>.01$ . They reported fairly low levels of all three dimensions of role ambiguity ( $M=5.75-5.88, SD=1.04-1.16$ ). Separate standard multiple regression analyses revealed that scope of responsibilities ambiguity was a significant predictor of job satisfaction ( $\beta=.43, p<.001; R\text{-squared}=.15, p<.001$ ) and organizational commitment ( $\beta=.42, p<.001; R\text{-squared}=.30, p<.001$ ). Performance outcome ambiguity ( $\beta=.35, p<.01$ ) and means-end knowledge ambiguity ( $\beta=.26, p<.05$ ) were significant predictors of individual effort on the job ( $R\text{-squared}=.20, p<.001$ ).

The findings suggest that volunteers and staff in provincial sport organizations are fairly clear about their respective role expectations, how to carry out those tasks, and knowledge of performance outcomes. This is encouraging, as the findings also revealed that higher levels of ambiguity were negatively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and individual effort in the workplace. The results highlight the multidimensionality of role ambiguity, in terms of the varying impact of the different dimensions. The findings suggest that provincial sport administrators who understand what they are expected to do in their role (scope of responsibilities) will experience more enjoyment and satisfaction in that role, and are more likely to feel a greater sense of attachment to the organization. Furthermore, having a clear understanding of the consequences of role performance (performance outcomes), and how to carry out role responsibilities (means-ends knowledge), are meaningful determinants of how much effort those sport administrators will exert on the job. The findings have important implications for managing role ambiguity in voluntary sport organizations, and strategies that address the different dimensions of ambiguity will be discussed. Future research is recommended to verify the multidimensional model identified in this study, and to build on this examination of role ambiguity in voluntary sport organizations.