

The nature and impact of conflict in provincial sport organization boards

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Abstract 238**

Provincial sport organizations (PSOs) play a fundamental role in the Canadian sport system. As champions for sport programming and participation, these organizations are responsible for overseeing player and coach development, providing sanctioning for provincial and regional events, and being a resource for community sport. They are non-profit organizations that rely on the performance and cooperation of volunteers, and particularly a volunteer board of directors. According to Nicholson and Kiel (2004), "board member performance can have a direct linear impact on organizational effectiveness" (p. 12). As such, the factors and group processes that contribute to board performance need to be examined and understood (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Preston & Brown, 2004).

Conflict is a group process that is purported to impact on both individual and group outcomes (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1994; 1995). The ability of a group to understand and manage conflict is critical to maintaining success (Mannix, 2003). Conflict is defined as a process whereby one person attempts to block the intentions of another (Robbins, 1997). As a group process, conflict is often overlooked because of its negative connotation (Gladstein, 1984); however, there are both positive and negative consequences of conflict within a group (Robbins, 1997). Three types of intragroup conflict - task, relationship, and process conflict - have been validated in research in a number of different contexts (Jehn, 1995; 1997; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Kulik, 2004; Pearson, Ensley, & Amason, 2002; Pelled, 1996; Shah & Jehn, 1993). Task conflict is the perception of disagreements among team members about the content of their work decisions, while relationship conflict describes a perception of interpersonal incompatibility among group members (Jehn, 1994). Process conflict refers to disagreements regarding how tasks should be accomplished by the team, including the distribution of responsibilities and the delegation of tasks among their members (Jehn, 1997).

The connection of intragroup conflict to a number of outcomes demonstrates its influential nature. In general, task conflict has been shown to have a positive relationship with functional group outcomes such as decision quality (Amason, 1996; Dooley & Fryxell, 1999; Passos & Caetano, 2005) and negative relationships with individual affective outcomes such as job satisfaction (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and group commitment (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; De Dreu & De Vries, 2001). In contrast, relationship conflict has been shown to be negatively associated with both functional and affective outcomes (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Process conflict has only recently received attention within intragroup conflict literature, and has been shown to have a negative relationship with decision outcomes (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Passos & Caetano, 2005; Shah & Jehn, 1993) as well as affective outcomes such as satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Passos & Caetano, 2005). A better understanding of the types and levels of conflict in PSO boards, and its impact on important group and individual outcomes, can help these organizations to harness the potential positive impact of this group process.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the nature of conflict within boards of directors of PSOs, and the relationships between group conflict and decision quality, as well as group conflict and affective outcomes. Decision quality is a function of using the best available information, basing decisions on valid assumptions, taking into account the organization's current financial situation and strategy, and implementing the decision as planned (Dooley & Fryxell, 1999). Decision making is fundamental to the work of sport organization boards (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007), and decision quality is an indicator of board performance (Brown, 2005). Additionally, the affective outcomes of board member commitment and satisfaction are considered to be important correlates of collective board performance (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007) and were examined in this study. Based on the existing literature, several hypotheses were advanced:

H1 - Task, relationship, and process conflict will be perceived to be present in PSO boards.

H2a - Task conflict will be positively related to decision quality, while relationship and process conflict will be negatively related to decision quality.

H2b - Task conflict will be the strongest predictor of decision quality.

H3a - Task, relationship, and process conflict will be negatively related to board member role satisfaction and board commitment.

H3b - Relationship conflict will be the strongest predictor of role satisfaction and board commitment.

The board members of provincial sport organizations within one Canadian province were surveyed regarding their perceived

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level of conflict and decision quality within their board group, as well as their satisfaction with and commitment to their board. A list of all of the PSOs within the province was obtained via publicly accessed information on the worldwide web. Surveys were distributed to each board member of those PSOs that gave consent to participate in the study. The survey consisted of a combination of Jehn's (1995) and Jehn and Chatman's (2000) scales of intragroup conflict, which include task, relationship, and process conflict measures. The survey also comprised Dooley and Fryxell's (1999) scale of decision quality, Mowday, Steers, and Porter's (1979) 9-item short-form Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) adapted to measure board commitment (Cuskelly, McIntyre, & Boag, 1998), and the Adjusted Job In General scale (AJIG; Russell, Spitzmuller, Lin, Stanton, Smith, & Ironson, 2004) to measure board member role satisfaction.

At the completion of data collection, reliability analyses will be conducted to verify the internal consistency of the scale measures. Descriptive and multivariate analysis of variance statistics will be used to describe the nature of conflict in PSO boards and determine whether there is any variation in the level of the different types of conflict reported. Correlation and regression analyses will be used to test the hypotheses regarding the relationships between task, relationship, and process conflict, and decision quality and board member satisfaction and commitment. The findings are expected to provide insight into the level and relative influence of the different types of intragroup conflict on correlates of board performance; namely decision quality, and board member satisfaction and commitment. The current study will enhance our understanding of the nature and quality of the PSO work environment and particularly our knowledge regarding the role that conflict plays within PSO boards. Given the importance of board decisions, and board member satisfaction and commitment within sport organizations, understanding the impact of processes within these groups can be used to promote the implementation of policy and strategies that support the positive aspects and minimize any negative ramifications of conflict.