

Role Ambiguity and Nonprofit Volunteer Board Member Performance

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This paper explores the relationship between multidimensional role ambiguity and individual board member performance within voluntary sport organizations. The paper specifically examines these relationships within the context of country race clubs in Victoria, Australia. It was found that role ambiguity accounted for 27% of the variance in perceived board member performance. Scope of responsibilities ambiguity was found to be the most significant predictor of perceived board member performance. These findings extend our understanding of the drivers of individual board member performance within voluntary sport organizations and the multidimensional nature of role ambiguity. The study supports previous arguments that knowing what to do is fundamental to one's performance, and more critical than knowing how to do it, and what difference it makes.

Keywords: governance, performance management, volunteers

The lack of clear understanding of one's work role is potentially detrimental to the individual and by extension, the workgroup and organization as a whole (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal 1964). Role ambiguity has been found to be associated with decreased effort and job performance, lower satisfaction and commitment, and increased job stress in a number of settings (e.g., Abramis 1994; Brown & Peterson 1993; Jackson & Schuler 1985; Ortqvist & Wincent 2006; Tubre & Collins 2000). The impact of role ambiguity may be particularly critical in nonprofit organizations, which are often faced with environmental uncertainty, limited resources, and human resource constraints (Lynn 2003). The detrimental effect of role ambiguity has been reported in such nonprofit settings as health care (Chang & Hancock 2003), education (Koustelios, Theodorakis & Goulimaris 2004; Thompson, McNamara & Hoyle 1997; Wolverton, Wolverton & Gmelch 1999), human service organizations (Pousette, Jacobsson, Thylefors & Hwang 2003), sport and recreation (Pavelka 1993; Sakires Doherty & Misener, 2009; Schulz & Auld 2006), and in nonprofit organizations in general (Wright & Milleesen 2008).

A limited body of research has focused specifically on the role ambiguity of volunteers in nonprofit organizations (Merrell 2000; Pierce 2005; Schulz & Auld 2006; Widmer 1993), and its impact on their attitudes and behaviour (Sakires et al. 2009; Wright & Milleesen 2008). This research has focused predominantly on volunteer board members, who face multiple and often conflicting expectations in regard to fulfilling their governance tasks that may increase the likelihood of role ambiguity (Carver 1997; Groudine & Miller 2002; Miller & Faerman 2003; Widmer 1993). Merrell also noted the ambiguity that may be inherent in volunteering as both a work and leisure pursuit.

While research indicates that low to moderate levels of role ambiguity are experienced by volunteer board members (Pierce 2005; Sakires et al. 2009; Schulz & Auld 2006; Widmer 1993; Wright & Millesen 2008), role ambiguity has been shown to be inversely associated with board engagement (Wright & Millesen 2008), as well as board member satisfaction, commitment, and effort (Sakires et al. 2009).

It is important to understand the impact of organizational phenomena like role ambiguity on the attitudes and behaviour of board members because of their critical role in governing nonprofit sport organizations that are responsible for the delivery of amateur sport in most developed countries (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld 2006). According to Wright and Millesen (2008: 322), ‘one of the most important challenges facing nonprofit organizations today is managing and engaging a volunteer board of directors.’ It is important because of the known relationship between nonprofit board performance and organizational effectiveness (Bayle & Robinson 2007; Bradshaw, Murray & Wolpin 1992; Green & Griesinger 1996; Herman & Renz 2000, 2008; Jackson & Holland 1998). It is a challenge because of the nonprofit board environment that is often characterized by vague organizational goals and objectives, combined with expectations of multiple stakeholders, overlap between non-executive and executive director’s roles and responsibilities, uncertainty regarding effective strategies to improve board performance, and simply the voluntary nature of board involvement (Carver 1997; Duca 1996; Herman 2005; Herman & Renz 2000; Holland 2002; Papadimitriou & Taylor 2000; Stone & Ostrower 2007; Wright & Millesen 2008).

According to Cornforth (2001), clear board roles and responsibilities, a common vision for the organization, and periodic review of board and board member performance are critical to an effective board. While improving the performance of nonprofit sport boards has been the focus of governance guidelines produced by many of the world’s leading government sport funding agencies (e.g., ASC 2005; SPARC 2004, 2006; UK Sport 2004) and a number of research efforts (e.g., Doherty & Carron 2003; Hoye & Auld 2001; Hoye & Cuskelly 2003a; Papadimitriou 1999), the assessment of individual board member performance has received little attention.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of role ambiguity on nonprofit board member performance. The context of the study was nonprofit sport organizations, and specifically board members' perceptions of role ambiguity and its impact on their role performance. Sport and recreation organizations comprise the largest proportion of nonprofit organizations in many Western countries (Doherty & Misener 2008). Voluntary governing boards are central to the ability of these organizations to manage volunteers, deliver programs and services, and engage in long-range planning. The study contributes to our understanding of board member performance and the impact of role ambiguity in the nonprofit organizational setting in general, and in the sport board setting in particular.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hoye (2007) noted that there have been substantial efforts devoted to measuring and investigating the antecedents of board performance in nonprofit organizations in general and cited a number of examples of such work (Bradshaw, Murray & Wolpin, 1992; Fletcher 1992; Herman & Renz 1997, 1998, 2000, 2004; Holland & Jackson 1998; Kearns 1995; Taylor, Chait & Holland 1991; Wood 1992). Investigations of the correlates of board performance in the context of voluntary sport organizations have also been the subject of recent research efforts (Doherty & Carron 2003; Hoye 2004, 2006; Hoye & Auld 2001; Hoye & Cuskelly 2003a, 2003b, 2004). As noted earlier, investigations of individual board member performance are rare. One recent study by Hoye (2007) focused on the performance of individual board members in voluntary sport organizations. He noted that measures of board member involvement (such as number of hours donated) have typically been used as a proxy measure for performance in nonprofit board studies (e.g., Preston & Brown 2004). In the current study our intent was to identify volunteer board member performance independent of any measure of involvement as the latter focuses exclusively on quantity of performance with little indication of quality. Rather, our focus was on board member performance in terms of the quality of individual contributions to the board. There are inherent difficulties in evaluating the performance of individuals who are acting in a voluntary capacity (e.g., Carver 1997; Pearce 1993; Sawhill & Williamson 2001). It is difficult to know what to evaluate, who should do the evaluation, how and to

whom the results of individual evaluations should be reported, and what action should result from the evaluation (Hoye 2007). Having the board chair undertake evaluations of other board members is also problematic as they rarely have time for board development, let alone board evaluation (Drucker 1990). Further, in the nonprofit sport context, the opportunity for subjective assessments of individual board member performance by a chief executive officer or similar third party is limited, as there is often no such position in these organisations (Hoye & Cuskelly 2007). As a result, we developed a scale to measure self-reported perceptions of volunteer sport board member performance for this study.

The link between role ambiguity and individual performance has cognitive (how can I perform my role if I'm not sure know what to do?) and motivational foundations (why would I perform my role if I'm not sure of the consequences of that performance?) (Jackson & Schuler 1985). The results of several meta-analyses indicate consistent support for the association between role ambiguity and job performance in a variety of profit, public, and nonprofit settings (Abramis 1994; Brown & Peterson 1993; Jackson & Schuler 1985; Ortqvist & Wincent 2006; Tubre & Collins 2000). In general, modest negative correlations are reported for perceived role ambiguity and self-ratings of job performance (ranging from $r = -.18$ to $-.37$), while weaker relationships are reported for job performance measured by a supervisor or coworker (ranging from $r = -.08$ to $-.20$). In the nonprofit board setting in particular, Wright and Millesen (2008) found a modest negative correlation ($r = -.29$) between perceived role ambiguity and the executive director's assessment of the board's engagement (a composite measure of group effort, involvement, participation, and attendance). Sakires et al. (2009) reported modest correlations between three dimensions of role ambiguity and a self-report measure of effort in one's board role ($r = .34$ to $.42$; higher scores on the ambiguity scales reflected greater clarity). Based on the extant literature we put forth the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Perceived role ambiguity will be significantly associated with self-reported nonprofit sport board member performance.

Role ambiguity research in general, and that focused on job performance in particular, has relied predominantly on unidimensional measures (Abramis 1994; Brown & Peterson 1993; Jackson & Schuler 1985; Tubre & Collins 2000). Yet, critics have expressed concern that a global measure of

role ambiguity does not adequately capture the breadth and impact of this organizational phenomenon (Breugh & Colihan 1994; King & King 1990). In their seminal framework, Kahn et al. (1964) conceptualized two types of role ambiguity, each with several dimensions: *Task ambiguity* is a lack of understanding about what one is expected to do (scope of responsibilities), how to perform one's role (means-ends knowledge), and whose expectations are given priority (priority of expectations). *Socioemotional ambiguity* is a lack of understanding about how one's performance is evaluated (evaluation of performance), and the consequences of completing (or not completing) one's responsibilities (consequences of role performance). Although most role ambiguity research stems from the Kahn et al. framework, it has tended to focus on a single measure of the phenomenon (e.g., Rizzo, House & Lirtzman 1970). It is surprising that there have been few efforts to elaborate on the measure of role ambiguity, given that the research stems from Kahn et al.'s (1964) original multidimensional framework of task and socioemotional ambiguity, and the notion that role ambiguity has both cognitive and motivational foundations. Critics have argued that these scales ignore the multidimensionality of the underlying role ambiguity construct and thus fail to represent the breadth of role ambiguity (Breugh & Colihan 1994; King & King 1990). Sakires et al. (2009) developed the Multidimensional Measure of Role Ambiguity (MMORA) in response to those concerns.

The work by Sakires et al. (2009) appears to be the first to attempt to operationalize the five dimensions within task and socioemotional ambiguity outlined by Kahn et al. (1964). Sakires et al. found support for a three-dimensional model of role ambiguity in the nonprofit sport setting, consisting of scope of responsibilities ambiguity, means-ends knowledge ambiguity, and performance outcomes ambiguity. They suggested that priority of expectations ambiguity, which was not supported, may in fact be indistinct from knowing what to do (scope of responsibilities) and how to do it (means-ends knowledge). Sakires et al. further noted that the combination of ambiguity with regard to evaluation of performance and consequences of role performance into a single dimension of performance outcomes ambiguity may be particular to nonprofit voluntary organizations, where evaluation is rare (Carver 1997; Kaplan 2001; Sawhill & Williamson 2001) and may be based on knowing the consequences of one's performance. They further found that scope of responsibilities was the best predictor of nonprofit sport board member satisfaction and commitment, while

performance outcomes ambiguity and means-ends knowledge ambiguity significantly predicted board member effort. The findings highlight the multidimensional nature and impact of role ambiguity (Sakires et al. 2009). Further, the MMORA demonstrates considerable potential for examining and understanding the breadth and impact of role ambiguity, including its association with board volunteer performance. Nonetheless, given the novel examination of the impact of multiple dimensions of role ambiguity on board member performance in the current study, it is not possible to advance a hypothesis regarding the relative impact of the various dimensions.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 159 volunteer committee (board) members of country thoroughbred horse racing clubs in the State of Victoria, Australia that were affiliated with the state governing body, Country Racing Victoria (CRV). The median age range for participants was 50-59 years, with 76.6% of board members aged over 50. Eighty-eight percent of participants were male, and the majority (39.2%) had completed secondary school and were employed full time (65.2%). The mean size of race club boards was 11.0 ($SD = 3.4$) and they held a median of 6 to 10 meetings per year. Participants had been with their club a mean of 13.7 years ($SD = 12.5$).

Instrument

A self-administered questionnaire was developed to collect data regarding perceptions of role ambiguity and individual board member performance. The MMORA (Sakires et al. 2009) was used to measure ambiguity with regard to scope of responsibilities (e.g., the goals and objectives for my position, what I am expected to do in my position, how my work relates to the overall objectives of my board), means-ends (e.g., how to get my work done, what adjustments I need to make to carry out my work), and performance outcomes (e.g., the effect of failing to carry out my responsibilities, what different my performance will make, when I am doing a good job). The questionnaire required respondents to rate on a seven point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that 'I clearly understand...' each of 24 role ambiguity statements. Higher scores reflect greater clarity and lower scores reflect greater ambiguity.

Perceptions of board member performance were measured using a multi-item instrument developed for this study. Based on the work of Preston and Brown (2004), five items representing individual board member performance were developed by the researchers and submitted to a panel of four experts in the areas of volunteer and human resource management. Based on the panel's recommendations, one item was reworded for conceptual clarity. Participants were asked to consider, 'In regard to my own performance as a race club committee member...' the following items: (1) 'The quality of my contributions to the committee have been very high,' (2) 'I believe I am a strong contributor to the work of the race club committee,' (3) 'I feel I have adequately fulfilled my role as a committee member,' (4) 'I have made a meaningful contribution to this race club as a committee member,' and (5) 'Relative to other committee members, I am a strong contributor to the work of the committee.' Respondents were asked to rate on a seven-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement.

Procedures

A package including cover letters, self-administered questionnaires, and reply paid envelopes was sent to the Secretary, General Manager, Chairperson or President of each of the 53 race clubs in Victoria for them to distribute to their respective committee members ($N = 656$). The questionnaires were administered during August and September 2006. Completed questionnaires were returned by post directly to one of the investigators. As CRV did not release the names and addresses of individual committee members to the researchers, follow up procedures were limited to sending an email request to club representatives asking them to encourage their respective committee members to complete the questionnaire. A total of 159 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 24.2%.

Data Treatment

Descriptive, reliability, correlation and standard multiple regression analyses were undertaken. Cronbach alpha coefficients and scale intercorrelations were computed to verify the underlying structure of the MMORA in this study. Cronbach alpha values above .70 are typically considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994), while bivariate scale intercorrelations in excess of .90 would suggest a problem with multicollinearity (Tabachnick & Fidell 2007). A Cronbach alpha coefficient was also computed for the board member performance scale. Descriptive statistics were

computed for all variables. Correlation analyses were performed to determine whether role ambiguity was associated with board member performance. To test whether and to what extent role ambiguity predicts the performance of board members, a standard multiple regression analysis was conducted. The dependent variable was the performance of individual board members (mean score) and the independent variables were the role ambiguity constructs (mean scores). Before interpreting the results of the multiple regression analysis, potential multicollinearity between the independent variables was further assessed by examining the tolerance and the variance inflation factor (VIF) (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black 1998). Typically, tolerance values less than .10 and VIF scores greater than 10 denote a problem with collinearity (Hair et al. 1998; Kline 1998).

RESULTS

Mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach alpha reliability values for each of the role ambiguity constructs and individual board member performance are displayed in Table 1. The board member performance scale and all the role ambiguity subscales indicated good internal consistency with Cronbach alphas ranging from 0.84 to 0.94 (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994). Board members reported a high degree of role clarity, with means for each role ambiguity subscale ranging from 6.01 for Means-end knowledge to 6.27 for Scope of responsibilities. Board members also reported a high level of perceived performance, with a mean rating of 6.12 on the board member performance scale.

[Insert Table 1 here]

A correlation matrix for board member performance and the role ambiguity constructs is shown in Table 2. Inspection of this matrix revealed that the intercorrelations between the three role ambiguity constructs were below the value of .90 (Tabachnick & Fidell 2007). These results indicated that the constructs are related, as may be expected given their common foundation in the concept of role ambiguity, yet are below the threshold for multicollinearity (Tabachnick & Fidell 2007). The results also illustrated that individual board member performance was strongly related to each of the role ambiguity constructs ($r = 0.47$ to 0.52 , $p < .01$) (cf. Cohen 1992), with greater role clarity associated directly with higher performance.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Prior to interpreting the results of the standard multiple regression analysis it was determined that tolerance values ranged from 0.23 to 0.24, and VIF scores did not exceed 4.4, indicating no problems with collinearity among the role ambiguity constructs (Hair et al. 1998; Kline 1998). Results of the regression of board member performance on role ambiguity revealed that the full regression model accounted for 27% of the total variance in perceived board member performance and was statistically significant ($p < .01$) (see Table 3). In other words, a lower level of perceived role ambiguity (or higher clarity) was predictive of higher individual board member performance. Scope of responsibilities ambiguity was the only significant predictor of perceived board member performance ($\beta = .35, p < .05$), demonstrating unique variance over and above the contribution of the other factors.

[Insert Table 3 here]

To summarize, board members in this study reported a high degree of role clarity and a high level of perceived performance. All three dimensions of role ambiguity were significantly correlated with performance, and together they explained 27% of the variance in performance. Scope of responsibilities ambiguity was the most meaningful predictor of perceived board member performance.

DISCUSSION

Given their critical role in the governance of nonprofit organizations (e.g., Carver 1997; Cuskelly et al. 2006; Herman 2005), it is important to understand what factors impact the performance of board members in this context. The current study adds to the limited research on one such factor - role ambiguity - in the nonprofit board setting, and in sport boards in particular. The findings also enhance our understanding of individual board member performance in nonprofit sport organizations. The study provided additional support for the MMORA (Sakires et al. 2009) in the nonprofit sport organization context, and demonstrates its value in assessing multidimensional role ambiguity.

All three dimensions of role ambiguity were significantly associated with board member performance, providing support for Hypothesis 1. The strength of those associations is consistent with and even slightly higher than previous research summarized in meta-analyses of role ambiguity and self-reports of job performance (Abramis 1994; Brown & Peterson 1993; Jackson & Schuler 1985;

Ortqvist & Wincent 2006; Tubre & Collins 2000). Thus, the findings suggest that role ambiguity is particularly critical in the nonprofit sport boards examined here. It appears that greater role clarity is directly associated with board members' perceptions of the meaningfulness and quality of their contribution to the board. The stronger connection in this nonprofit board setting than in other research settings may be a function of the relatively limited extent to which the board members meet (monthly or less), in comparison to corporate work groups. Ambiguity with regard to what one is supposed to do, how, and what difference it makes, may be perceived as particularly problematic when individuals work predominantly on their own. Consequently, any ambiguity in this type of environment is going to reduce one's perception of the quality of their contribution.

The results of a regression analysis highlighted the impact of scope of responsibilities ambiguity in particular on board member performance. Knowing what one is expected to do in his or her position as a board member and how one's work relates to the overall objectives of the board explained unique variance in the perceived quality of one's contribution, over and above the impact of means-ends ambiguity and performance outcomes ambiguity. This is not surprising as studies of multidimensional role ambiguity, albeit limited, have consistently found scope of responsibilities to be the strongest predictor of individual attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Beard 1996; Eys, Carron, Bray & Beauchamp 2003; Sawyer 1992). The findings here further support that knowing what to do is fundamental to one's performance, and more critical than knowing how to do it, and what difference it makes. The findings contrast Sakires et al.'s (2009) observation that performance outcomes ambiguity, followed by means-ends knowledge ambiguity, significantly predicted nonprofit sport board member effort (operationalized as intensity and direction of task behaviour). Sakires et al. were surprised by their finding but suggested that, since volunteers are involved primarily to make a contribution (e.g., Cuskelly et al. 2006), volunteer board members will exert greater effort if they are clear that their behaviour will make a difference. Further, Sakires et al. suggested that if board members are unclear about how to carry out a task, their ability to exert effort towards that task may be compromised. Given the soundness of their arguments, it seems likely that the contrast with the findings here (specifically, the unique impact of scope of responsibilities ambiguity on performance) is a function of the performance-based measure used in the respective studies (quality of performance

vs. intensity of effort). Together, the studies suggest that role ambiguity has varying impact on different outcomes, thus highlighting both the multidimensionality of ambiguity and implications for understanding its impact in the workplace.

The current study indicates that role ambiguity has the potential to be problematic for nonprofit sport board members. Thus, sport organizations are encouraged to consider initiatives to reduce ambiguity with regard to means-ends knowledge, performance outcomes, and particularly scope of responsibilities. Training and development, communication, participation in decision making, formalization, involved leadership, and performance feedback have been shown to be associated with role clarity in a variety of contexts (Jackson & Schuler 1985; Schulz & Auld 2006; Wright & Millesen 2000). Perceived board member performance may be expected to be positively influenced by efforts to reduce individuals' ambiguity with regard to what they are supposed to do and how their work fits in with the overall goals of the organization. However, this may be compromised by the typically vague goals and multiple and often competing expectations of stakeholders involved with nonprofit organizations (cf. Carver 1997; Groudine & Miller 2002; Kaplan 2001; Miller & Faerman 2003). While role ambiguity was not particularly problematic for board members in the current study, with high levels of perceived role clarity reported, the significant association between role ambiguity and board member performance warrants attention to individuals' degree of understanding of their responsibilities in the nonprofit sport organization context.

The findings of the study should be considered in the context of several limitations. First, the sample for the study was drawn from one type of sport organization, namely country race clubs; thus, generalizing from the results should be done with caution. Second, the study also relied exclusively on self-reported measures for both independent and dependent variables. Efforts to control for common method bias were undertaken through appropriate questionnaire design and guaranteeing response anonymity as recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003). Third, the lack of opportunity to issue follow up reminders directly to board members contributed to a relatively low return rate of less than 25%. Future research should ensure a mechanism is in place to be able to follow up with prospective participants (Dillman, 2007).

Jackson and Schuler (1985), Tubre and Collins (2000), and Ortqvist and Wincent (2006) noted that the relationship between role ambiguity and individual performance is likely moderated by a number of individual and contextual variables. To enhance our understanding of board member performance in nonprofit sport organizations, and the impact of role ambiguity in particular, future research may build on the current study by examining the moderating effect of individual competencies, organizational support and group processes on the relationship between role ambiguity and board member performance. Independent measures of individual board member performance, beyond self-reported perceptions of performance, should also be explored. Finally, using qualitative research techniques may yield richer data, allowing for more insightful exploration of the relationships between the complex phenomena of role ambiguity and performance.

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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach Alpha Coefficients for the Role Ambiguity Subscales and Board Member Performance Scale

Measures	<i>M</i> ^a	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Individual board member performance	6.12	.84	.89
Means-end knowledge ambiguity	6.01	.89	.84
Scope of responsibilities ambiguity	6.27	.81	.91
Performance outcomes ambiguity	6.17	.79	.94

^a Lower values on the 1-7 scale represent greater role ambiguity; higher values represent greater role clarity.

Table 2: Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Between Board Member Performance and Role Ambiguity

Measures	1	2	3	4
1 Board member performance	1.00			
	<i>n</i> = 159			
2 Means-end knowledge ambiguity	.49**	1.00		
	<i>n</i> = 158	<i>n</i> = 158		
3 Scope of responsibilities ambiguity	.52**	.84**	1.00	
	<i>n</i> = 154	<i>n</i> = 153	<i>n</i> = 154	
4 Performance outcomes ambiguity	.47**	.84**	.83**	1.00
	<i>n</i> = 149	<i>n</i> = 149	<i>n</i> = 147	<i>n</i> = 149

** $p < .01$

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis of Board Member Performance on Role Ambiguity

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	Sig. <i>p</i>	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²
Means-end knowledge ambiguity	.15	.49	.16	.285		
Scope of responsibilities ambiguity	.37	.15	.35	.017*		
Performance outcomes ambiguity	.050	.16	.05	.751		
					.27**	18.85**

(*N* = 146), * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01