

An examination of conflict within volunteer sport executive committees

Alison Doherty and Michael Van Bussel

The University of Western Ontario

Introduction

Conflict occurs when two or more people disagree, and try to block each other's efforts. Although a variety of definitions of conflict exist, there is consensus that conflict is inevitable in all organizations, and that it has a potentially constructive or destructive effect, in terms of whether some good can come from the dispute. Perhaps this is why conflict resolution is considered by sport managers to be one of their most important activities (Danylchuk & Chelladurai, 1999). Yet, despite the potential impact of conflict, there is a dearth of research in the sport setting to help us understand this phenomenon, how its constructive/destructive impact may be manipulated, and what managerial skills are required to optimize the positive and minimize the negative effects. Amis, Berrett and Slack (1995) and Verhoeven, Lapporte, De Knop, Bollaert, Taks, and Vincke (1999) examined the sources and antecedents of conflict in voluntary sport organizations, while Burke and Collins (2000) identified skills to deal with conflict in the sport setting. We need to build on these studies and expand our understanding of the dynamics of the conflict process within sport organizations.

To that end, the purpose of this study was to examine conflict within voluntary sport organizations, and specifically within the executive committees or boards charged with overseeing the activities of those organizations. The sub-purposes were to determine to what extent conflict exists, what causes conflict, how conflict is handled, and what impact conflict has within the committees. The framework for this study was the conflict process model described by Robbins (1997). It outlines several stages in the conflict process that can be used to identify and describe the nature of conflict within sport executive committees. The model addresses the pre-existing conditions for conflict, the manifestation of conflict as it is perceived then felt by both parties, conflict-handling behaviours that may be used to manage the situation, and the outcome of conflict. We adapted the model slightly to include a preliminary stage that considers the source of conflict. The specific focus of this study was interpersonal conflict among members of the committee, rather than conflict between the committee and some other group(s) in its environment.

Method

A multiple case study was conducted using a qualitative research method, in order to explore in depth the nature and dynamics of conflict within volunteer sport committees. The focal organizations were four community-based amateur soccer clubs within a mid-sized city (population 350,000). Semi-structured, taped interviews were conducted with the president, treasurer and two to three other executive members of each club (n=14). Data were transcribed in full and analyzed with respect to the stages of the conflict process model, as well as any themes that emerged from the interviews. A profile of conflict within the executive committee of each club was developed, and then compared across the clubs to identify any commonalities or unique characteristics with regard to conflict in these units.

Results

The committees ranged in size from 11 to 25 members. The clubs they managed serviced between 600 and over 1,400 players. Three of the clubs were self-described as "house league" clubs, while the fourth was described as a "competitive" club. Each committee described generally low levels of internal conflict. A common and very prevalent source of conflict across all committees was the workload demand. Another source of conflict for two of the committees was the fact that their respective clubs were coming to a crossroads in their growth and they had to re-examine their philosophy or direction. Much of the committee conflict was ascribed to two antecedent conditions: poor communication, and a lack of human resources to do the work. Difficulty keeping members informed and too few volunteers for a given amount of committee work were described in particular as setting the stage for conflict. The individual stress that resulted from too few people doing all the work was described as a further condition for

conflict. Another condition that tended to lead to conflict was an inadequate recognition or reward system for volunteers, and (increasing) task specialization within an interdependent group.

The committees reportedly used collaboration or compromise strategies to deal with conflict. Both strategies require communication among members, which was described as a critical first step in handling conflict situations. A competition strategy, wherein one party to the conflict promotes his or her "side" at the expense of the other "side", was avoided if at all possible. There was unanimous support that conflict had the potential for a very positive impact within the executive committee. It was noted that conflict led to improved communication and airing of differences; a means of getting different views on the table. However, the potential for negative conflict was also noted, in that people's feelings could get hurt. This appeared to be a very important consideration in the volunteer setting, where people were giving their time for free, and they expected to be heard.

Discussion

A low, yet perhaps optimal, level of conflict was experienced in each committee. It is notable that communication was both a condition for conflict and a means of dealing with that conflict. This may have implications for continuing to reap the benefits of conflict as committees presumably work to improve communication among members. It is notable that constrained financial resources was never indicated as a condition of conflict, as may have been expected; rather it appeared to be a somewhat accepted circumstance in this nonprofit setting. Instead, scarce human resources was the more meaningful antecedent condition for conflict. The importance of human resources in this setting was further highlighted by the sense that conflict is dealt with much differently (i.e., more efficiently) in the "business world", particularly with the use of competitive conflict resolution strategies (cf. Likert & Likert, 1976). Yet, it was further indicated, the use of more competitive strategies to resolve conflict would never be acceptable in voluntary organizations because scarce and valued volunteers are only there to be able to make a difference, and have their say; an organization cannot risk alienating them through such means of conflict resolution. Perhaps industry may take a page from the conflict process dynamics in the voluntary setting where there is such high regard for human resources.

The findings corroborate those of Amis et al. (1995), Burke and Collins (2000), and Verhoeven et al. (1999), and extend our understanding of conflict in volunteer sport executive committees. The implications for volunteer training, group development, and committee management will be discussed.

References

- Amis, J., Slack, T., & Berrett, T. (1995): "The structural antecedents of conflict in voluntary sport organizations". In: *Leisure Studies*, 14: 1-16.
- Burke, V., & Collins, D. (2000): "Dealing with work conflict: issues, approaches and implications for sport managers". In: *European Journal for Sport Management*, 7: 44-63.
- Danylchuk, K., & Chelladurai, P. (1999): "The nature of managerial work in Canadian intercollegiate athletics". In *Journal of Sport Management*, 13: 148-166.
- Likert, R. & Likert, J. G. (1976). "New ways of managing conflict." New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Robbins, S. P. (1997): "Organizational theory: structure, design, and applications, 3rd ed." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Verhoeven, M., Lapoprt, W., De Knop, P., Bollaert, L., Taks, M., & Vincke, J. (1999): "In search of macro-, meso-, and micro-sociological antecedents of conflict in voluntary sports federations and clubs with the Flemish situation as case study". In: *European Journal of Sport Management*, Special Issue: 62-77.

Contact co-ordinates author

Alison Doherty, e-mail: adoherty@uwo.ca