CONFLICT WITHIN VOLUNTARY SPORTING ORGANISATIONS. A PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION

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INTRODUCTION

A number of recent articles have suggested that dealing with conflict within an organisation is one of the most important and time-consuming tasks of management. Conflict disrupts the normal operations of an organisation and can lead to breakdown in relationships between workers. This breakdown can lead to lower performance, commitment, satisfaction, and turnover, which can ultimately influence organisational effectiveness and profits. However, conflict if managed well can also result in creativity, innovation, and an enhanced operating environment, as individuals strive to work together.

Robbins (2006) suggests that there are there three types of conflict namely, interpersonal conflict, which arises from personality and value differences; task conflict, that is the result of conflicting task demands or scant resources; and, communication conflict which is the result of poor communication processes. Each type of conflict has the potential to affect an organisation in a variety of ways and therefore require different management strategies.

Voluntary sporting organisations (VSO) are not exempt from the prevalence of conflict. Auld (1994), for example, remarked that as sporting organisations become more professionalised volunteers become unable to distinguish their role, where they have expertise and are uncertain about the division of responsibilities. Schulz (2006) explored these ideas in more detail. His research revealed that volunteers and paid staff within VSOs often have different views on the function and management of the organisation. Similarly, Amis, Slack, and Berrett (1995) suggested that VSOs, "…exhibit characteristics that render them significantly more susceptible to conflict than other organisations (p.1)". They argued that the low level of formalisation and lack of resources directly contribute to conflict. Verhoeven et al (1999) had similar findings in their study of Flemish VSOs.

The aim of the present study was to provide a preliminary exploration of conflict within VSOs in the United Kingdom and in particular examine the relationship between the various types of conflict and key organisational behavioural variables such as commitment and satisfaction.

METHODS

As a preliminary investigation, this study focused on one particular sport and region in England – basketball in the South East. Basketball was chosen as it was currently undergoing significant changes in the management structure as the sport attempted to establish a professional competition. This changing operating environment made the sport more susceptible to conflict. The collection of data involved two stages. Stage 1 used a questionnaire to measure the level of conflict perceived by a member of the organising committee of each of the clubs, as well as measures of commitment and satisfaction. A total of 49 people (out of a potential 70) responded to the questionnaire. The data was analysed to examine the relationships between the types of conflict, commitment, and satisfaction. The results of the analysis were incorporated into Stage 2, which involved semi-structured interviews with members of the organising committees. These people where chosen as they had offered themselves as possible candidates in Stage 1 and were known by the researchers to be in organisations that were experiencing significant conflict. This purposive method of selection was to ensure a rich source of data. The first part of the interviews was largely unstructured and encouraged the interviewee to talk about sources and types of conflict in their clubs. The second part asked the participant to comment specifically on the findings from first stage of the research. The interviews were then analysed using a thematic coding process.

RESULTS

Correlation analyses between the major variables revealed a negative relationship between organisational commitment and interpersonal conflict ($r = -0.326$; $p < 0.033$); and a positive relationship between organisational commitment and communication conflict ($r = 0.609$; $p < 0.001$), however organisational commitment was not related to task conflict. In addition there were negative relationships between satisfaction and (a) task conflict (($r = -0.455$; $p = 0.002$) and (b) interpersonal conflict ($r = -0.471$; $p = 0.002$), but no relationship with communication conflict. The interviews provided a variety of examples and explanations (some contradictory) concerning the findings of these analyses. For instance, one participant talked about personal arguments that he had shared with another member of the committee and how it had put him off taking a role in the future, ultimately his commitment to the club. However, another participant talked about her 'clashing' relationship with the club president and agreed, "we differ on opinion, but we deal with it."

The analysis of the interviews also offered several new insights into conflict within sporting and basketball organisations. Firstly, differences in the ways people undertook their roles was an issue, for instance one participant commented that, "… some people a job needs doing, they'll do it straight away and other people will leave it to the last minute." Secondly, conflict was often the result of 'power plays' between members of the club. This was frequently the result of the difference in the agenda of playing and non-playing committee members. Thirdly, as a result of the professionalisation of the competition, some clubs had been recently bought out, and the subsequent change in culture led to conflict. One participant stated that, "the emphasis was never ever on the players, it was always on filling the stands, selling half time shows, soaking money out the spectators and that basically meant that there was no consistency year to year."

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings of the research suggest that the effect of conflict in sporting organisations is not a simple relationship but actually, a complex mixture of the task demands, communication processes, and the interpersonal relations of members of the organisation. For example, interpersonal conflict is usually associated with low levels of commitment however, interpersonal conflict can increase commitment as individuals strive to work out collaborative solutions, however this may also occur in spite of others, and occurs as an attempt to prove others wrong. The conference paper will focus on exploring the nature of this relationship and others issues that emerged from the study.

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