# Board Conflict in Voluntary Sport Organizations

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## Abstract

Disagreement among members of a workgroup is inevitable and, in some instances, valued.  When intragroup disagreements extend to blocking the efforts of members, it becomes conflict and must be managed.

Conflict may be linked to tasks, processes and relationships of the group: Task conflict refers to disagreement about what the group is doing, or should be doing, process conflict is disagreement about how tasks should be accomplished, and relationship conflict refers to personal incompatibility among group members [9].

There is consistent evidence in a variety of settings that task, process, and relationship conflict impact individual and group outcomes, including job satisfaction, commitment, and decision quality [e.g., 1, 4, 5, 11, 13, 14].

Our understanding of individual and group attributes that contribute to that conflict is less well-developed.  To date, evidence that conflict is associated with such factors as group member age, gender, position, and tenure, as well as group meeting frequency, turnover, and decision type is inconsistent and merits further investigation [e.g., 1, 7, 10, 15].

The effectiveness of voluntary sport organizations is directly dependent on the efforts and performance of volunteer boards [8, 12].  Thus, it is important to understand the nature of board dynamics such as conflict in this context, and to identify factors that may be associated with its presence.

The purpose of this study was to examine individual and group factors that may be associated with task, process, and relationship conflict in voluntary sport organization boards.  Several hypotheses were derived from the literature:

H1 – Task, process, and relationship conflict will be perceived to be present in voluntary sport organization boards.

H2 – Female board members will perceive higher levels of conflict than male board members.

H3 – Conflict will not be associated with board member age, position (central, peripheral), or tenure.

H4 – Conflict will be directly associated with board meeting frequency, turnover, and non-routine decisions.

Participants comprised 74 board members of provincial sport organizations in one Canadian province (M=49 years of age, 36% female, 64% male, 36.5% central, 63.5%

peripheral positions, M=4.5 years on the board, 43% frequent/monthly meetings, 57% infrequent meetings, M=2 new members per year).

Board members completed a survey measuring perceived levels of task, process, and relationship conflict within their board according to an adapted version of Jehn's (1995) and Jehn and Chatman's (2000) scales of intragroup conflict.

The survey also measured the individual and group variables of interest in this study. Notably, board turnover was indicated by how many new members were on the participants' board in the past year and decision type was measured using a modified version of Gladstein's (1984)[6] scale.

The three conflict scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha values between .87 and .94 [16]

The results supported Hypothesis 1, as task, process, and relationship conflict were perceived to be present in the voluntary sport organization boards in this study, although at fairly low levels (M = 2.70-3.32 on a scale from 1 to 7).

Correlation analyses were used to test the remaining hypothesized relationships between the three types of conflict and the individual and group variables, with dummy coding of discrete variables where required [2].

Gender was not significantly associated with any of the conflict types, and thus Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 was supported, as conflict was not significantly associated with board member age, position, or tenure, as expected.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 was also supported, and task ($r = .62$, $p < .01$), process ($r = .52$, $p < .01$), and relationship conflict ($r = .60$, $p < .01$) were significantly associated with non-routine decisions.

The findings indicate that all three types of conflict are evident in the voluntary sport organization boards examined, although at fairly low levels. This may be a function of board member similarity in this context, as these individuals tend to have a common background in sport, sharing similar values and interests [3, 8].

This argument parallels the observation that individual differences explained no variation in conflict.

Board decision type appears to explain conflict levels, as participants perceived their boards to have slightly more routine than non-routine decisions, thus limiting the level of conflict experienced there. In addition, the content of the decisions themselves may be fairly low risk, and therefore generate relatively little conflict.

These arguments merit further investigation.

Implications for managing conflict in voluntary sport organization boards are discussed.


**References**

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