

ROLE CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS

Connie Papanicolas

A.T.E.I. Thessalonikis, Instructor

papakons@mkt.teithe.gr

K. Boga Karteri

A.T.E.I. Thessalonikis, Assistant Professor

kboga@mkt.teithe.gr

Aikaterini Kalamara

A.T.E.I. Thessalonikis, Bachelor Graduate

kalamarakaterina@yahoo.gr

Abstract

This paper presents a study of a specific communication problem in organizations. The problem is "Role Conflict", also known as "Role Ambiguity". A person experiences Role Conflict when two or more role expectations occur at the same time, and compliance with the one make compliance with the other difficult. There are several types of role conflict and various ways to deal with each type. The five types of Role Conflict will be described for a better insight to this communication problem. Consequences of Role Conflict will then be analyzed, which indicate that high levels of Role Conflict have negative impacts on the organization. Role Conflict for the Paralegal position in a law firm setting in the USA will be examined. The author describes five positions which characterize an average-sized law firm. In order of authority, the positions are: Manager, Administrator, Attorney, Paralegal and Secretary. In the final part of the paper the author will propose several strategies for the reduction of role conflict in organizations. Although these strategies are designed for the law firm environment, they may be applied in other types of organizations as well.

Keywords: role conflict; paralegal; attorney; communication problem; conflicting expectations; strategies

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The intent of this paper is to bring to light a communication phenomenon, known as Role Conflict, which frequently exists in organizations so that the consequences can be minimized through adherence to proposed strategies. Although Role Conflict is examined for the Paralegal position in a law firm setting in the USA, it can be applied to any position in any organization worldwide.

TYPES OF ROLE CONFLICT

Generally, role conflict is defined as the incompatibility of expectations or demands in an organizational setting (Kahn, et al, 1964). A person experiences role conflict when two or more role expectations occur at the same time, and compliance with the one make compliance with the other difficult. There are several types of role conflict. A discussion of the types of role conflict, supplemented with examples, will help clarify the concept of role conflict.

Five types of role conflict are described by Sell, et al. (1981): (1) intra-sender, (2) inter-sender, (3) person-role, (4) inter-role, and (5) role overload. These types of role conflict will be used as the basis for the discussion.

Intra-sender role conflict exists when the same person (source) sends incompatible messages to the role-taker (receiver). For example, in the relationship between supervisor (attorney) and subordinate (paralegal), conflict is created when the subordinate continuously receives conflicting expectations in relation to assignments communicated from his/her superior. In this case, role conflict is created when there is one message sender, who communicates or transmits incongruent messages to the role taker or receiver.

Inter-sender role conflict occurs when incompatible messages are being sent from more than one person. The paralegal may receive conflicting expectations from two message sources - the attorney and the administrator. The focus of this paper will be on inter-sender role conflict which the paralegal experiences in a law firm from two message sources.

Person-role conflict is a third type of role conflict which may exist in organizations. This occurs when there is incompatibility between the role and the person. An example of this would be when a person's values or internal standards are being violated as a result of fulfilling the expected job duties. For example, it may be expected to lie or not reveal the whole truth in carrying out one's role in an organization, and this may create conflict for the individual whose inner beliefs are different.

A fourth type of role conflict is inter-role conflict, which occurs when there is incompatibility between two roles a person holds in the same position. In a law firm, the manager may experience inter-role conflict in trying to fulfill the roles of boss and friend. In the one role he is expected to behave as the authority figure and is seen distant from other members, and in the other role he is expected to come down to everyone's level.

Finally, there is role overload, where one person is expected to engage in several role behaviors within a short time period. Role overload may occur to a secretary in a law firm when another secretary is out sick and the sick secretary's attorney needs work to be completed that day. The secretary in this case is considered to be overloaded with additional duties and expectations outside his/her role. This situation involves more than one message sender (the attorney from the role-set and the attorney outside the role-set), each communicating different expectations to the message receiver, and thus creating role conflict.

CONSEQUENCES OF ROLE CONFLICT

Role conflict is a very important concept in the study of organizational communication. The existence of role conflict leads to many negative consequences for both the individual experiencing role conflict and the organization. Some consequences for the individual which have been empirically linked to role conflict are job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance, and job involvement (Fry, et al, 1986; Lavan and Banner, 1985; Zahra, 1985; Stevens, et al, 1978). This section will focus on two of these consequences: satisfaction and commitment.

Job satisfaction is "the overall attitude (favorable or unfavorable) an individual has towards his/her job" (Dubinsky et al, 1988, p.135). If one has a favorable attitude about the job, he/she will be satisfied. On the other hand, if one has an unfavorable attitude about the job, he/she will not be satisfied. Locke (1976) defined job satisfaction as "**the positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences**" (p. 1300).

Many studies have shown a negative correlation between role conflict and satisfaction (Fry et al, 1986; Hampton et al, 1986; Jackson and Schuler, 1985). For example, the study conducted by Jackson and Schuler (1985) found a correlation of $-.48$ ($p < .10$) between role conflict and general satisfaction. One explanation for this finding is the presence of role conflict would create negative or unfavorable attitudes, which in turn would decrease the level of satisfaction with work.

As with satisfaction, a person's commitment to an organization has been frequently studied in relation to role conflict. Organizational commitment has been defined as "**a strong belief in the organization's goals and values, willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization and a strong desire to remain a member of the organization**" (Mowday et al, 1982, p.27). This situation could only be possible if one has a favorable attitude about the organization. Research indicates that commitment may be multidimensional, having both attitudinal and behavioral components (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; McGee and Ford, 1987). Thus, if one develops unfavorable attitudes about work, he/she will tend to become less committed.

Many studies have shown that role conflict leads to decreased commitment (Glisson and Durick, 1988; Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Lavan and Banner, 1985). For example, Glisson and Durick (1988) found a correlation of $-.43$ ($p < .001$) between role conflict and commitment. One explanation for this finding is that role conflict creates negative attitudes, and since commitment is influenced by attitudes, it will tend to decrease as role conflict increases.

Research confirms that individual consequences such as decreased satisfaction and commitment inevitably lead to negative consequences for the organization. Some of these consequences are decreased effectiveness, decreased productivity, and increased turnover rate (Kemery, et al, 1985; Baroudi, 1985; Lee and Mowday, 1987; Good, et al, 1988). The organizational consequence which will be discussed to demonstrate the importance of role conflict is turnover rate.

It was previously described how unfavorable attitudes created from role conflict result in decreased satisfaction and commitment for the member. If other job opportunities are available to the member, he/she will make the decision to leave or stay with the organization. During the decision process the member may consult with other members in the organization and information will be exchanged. Information obtained by the member experiencing role conflict may assist him/her in making the decision to leave or stay in the organization.

A study conducted by Addae & Parboteeah (2008) demonstrates that public sector employees in St Lucia are less likely to develop affective or normative commitment to the service if they experience role conflict and ambiguity. Furthermore, those employees with continuance commitment will stay regardless of any role stressors if they perceive few job alternatives available to them. However, employees with greater

probabilities of finding alternative employment, employees with continuance commitment are more likely to leave if they experience role stressors.

The decision to leave affects the organization's turnover rate. Turnover is considered to be the frequency of change in personnel. High turnover rate implies that people are constantly entering and leaving the organization, and very few individuals remain for a long period of time. It is usually desirable for an organization to keep the turnover rate as low as possible so that the members will grow with the organization and thus feel a part of it. There are cases where high turnover rate is preferred, such as when the organization needs change, or when there's receptiveness to new ideas. For the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that an increase in the organization's turnover rate is not a desirable outcome of role conflict.

Steers and Mowday's Model of Turnover includes many antecedents of organizational turnover, including satisfaction and commitment. Lee and Mowday (1987) tested this model and these two factors were linked on the one end to role conflict and on the other to turnover. In other words, it was confirmed that role conflict leads to decreased satisfaction and commitment (among other factors), which ultimately increases organizational turnover.

Three research hypotheses were tested in a study conducted by Acker, 2004:

1. Social workers experiencing higher levels of role conflict and ambiguity are more likely to have a reduced job satisfaction.
2. Social workers experiencing higher levels of social support at their job are more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction.
3. Social workers experiencing higher levels of role conflict and ambiguity are more likely to intend to leave their job.

The results are consistent with other studies that demonstrate that organizational conditions play an important role in predicting job satisfaction and intention to leave (Mor-Barak, Nissly & Levin, 2001). It is important that agencies offer a supportive environment that mediates the stress contributed by factors such as Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, and insufficient resources.

In another study conducted by Shen, 2005 the following hypothesis were analyzed:

Hypothesis 1: RA and job satisfaction will be negatively correlated among IS professionals.

Hypothesis 2: RC and job satisfaction will be negatively correlated among IS professionals.

Hypothesis 3: The correlation between RA and job satisfaction will differ from the correlation between RC and job satisfaction among IS professionals.

Hypothesis 4a: The strength of the relationship between RA and job satisfaction will be similar among IS professionals and other job types.

Hypothesis 4b: The strength of the relationship between RC and job satisfaction will be similar among IS professionals and other job types.

The analysis of the results indicates that Hypothesis 1 and 2 are supported, Hypothesis 3 is not supported, and Hypothesis 4 was supported.

POSITIONS IN A LAW FIRM

To illustrate the importance of communication in organizations, the positions in a law firm will be described. The number of positions in a firm depends on its size, which in turn is determined by the number of employees. For example, the smallest law firm may consist of two members who occupy two positions, namely an attorney and a secretary. A larger firm includes additional positions since there are more employees. The following chart outlines five positions which characterize an average-sized law firm. In order of authority, the positions are: Manager, Administrator, Attorney, Paralegal, and Secretary. Each position involves certain duties, as well as one or more roles, which are listed below.

The duty of the paralegal position is to assist the lawyer in case preparation, specifically in legal and factual research. In order to be effective, the assignments must be clearly communicated and understood. The paralegal plays the role of a para-professional because his/her legal education is not as extensive as the attorney's, but more extensive than the secretary's. This situation creates a wide variety of tasks for the paralegal, which is a mixture of both the attorney's and secretary's. Another role of the paralegal is that of a subordinate, who receives instructions from the supervisor (attorney). The focus of this paper will be the communication processes related to the paralegal position in the context of role conflict.

ROLE CONFLICT FOR THE PARALEGAL

The relationship between paralegal and attorney in a role set is classified as a supervisor/subordinate relationship. Since the communication between them occurs frequently on a daily basis, it is considered to be informal. In other words, the paralegal does not have to make an appointment to consult with his/her supervisor and vice-versa.

The attorney has certain expectations for the paralegal's role behavior. These expectations are usually verbally communicated or sent during their informal contacts.

Expectations of the attorney

1. To carry out assignments completely and correctly.
2. To stay overtime when needed to meet a deadline.
3. Work independently and responsibly.
4. Work as a team member of the role-set and share its goals.
5. Be willing to take on additional responsibilities when a member of the role-set is out.

The paralegal's relationship to the administrator is not as familiar as it is with the attorney. Communication between the paralegal and the administrator occurs very rarely throughout the year. There are usually two formal meetings a year between these two members. During this time, the administrator informs the paralegal of his/her performance in the organization, and goals are set for the next six months. Besides these two contacts, other communication between the administrator and paralegal is very sporadic.

Just as the attorney has expectations for the paralegal, so does the administrator. These expectations are usually communicated in written form, i.e. employee handbook. The following list includes some expectations held by the administrator for the paralegal:

Expectations of the administrator

1. To report to work on time, take the scheduled lunch hour, and leave work at the scheduled time.
2. Complete daily time records which show how the 8-hr. day was spent, so that the time spent on a particular file can be billed to the appropriate client.
3. If need to take any time off, must notify at least two days in advance, and must make up compensation time within one week
4. Must share goals of organization.
5. Aid in evaluation of attorney/supervisor.

Conflicting expectations

Now that the expectations of both the attorney and administrator have been listed, problem areas can be detected which lead to role conflict for the paralegal. The first is that expectations are not clearly communicated and/or understood. The second is the goals of the role set are different from the organizational goals. The third is inconsistent feedback from the supervisor and administrator. And, the fourth is the subordinate's reluctance to evaluate his/her supervisor.

One of the reasons conflicting expectations occur is that they are poorly communicated to the paralegal. In other words, the message received is different than the message sent. For example, the paralegal might perceive a message sent from the supervisor as contradictory to what was contained in the employee handbook, when instead the problem is mis-communication. Thus, when expectations of the attorney and administrator are not clearly communicated, role conflict is created for the paralegal.

One of the expectations of the attorney for the paralegal is to share the goals of the role-set. At the same time, the administrator expects the paralegal to share the organizational goals. Role conflict is created when these goals are not the same. For example, a goal of the role-set might be to work faster than another role set, while an organizational goal might be to avoid such competition. When such a situation exists, role conflict is created for the paralegal.

A third way role conflict is created from conflicting expectations is when the paralegal receives inconsistent feedback from the supervisor and the administrator. Since feedback given from the supervisor is informal and occurs verbally, the administrator is unaware of the subordinate's progress. Thus, when it comes time for the six-month evaluation, the administrator may give feedback to the paralegal which conflicts with the supervisor's current feedback.

A final way role conflict is created is when the administrator expects the subordinate to evaluate the supervisor and the supervisor does not expect this. The paralegal is put in an uncomfortable situation. On the one hand, he/she does not want to harm the relationship with the supervisor, and on the other hand, he/she wants to be in good standing with the firm. As a result, the paralegal experiences role conflict.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ROLE CONFLICT

This paper has shown how role conflict is a communication problem. This section will propose communication strategies to help reduce this problem. The first strategy is to train employees to communicate effectively. This can be done by weekly seminars explaining the different communication methods available, and suggesting which method is most effective for different situations. For example, when a problem is encountered during the pursuance of a task, a written memo to the supervisor is the most appropriate way to make him aware of the problem in order to receive the correct guidelines (in written form) to correct the problem. The second strategy is to set common goals for the supervisor and the administrator. If both supervisor and administrator share the same goals, there will be less role conflict for the employee. The third strategy is to train the supervisor to conduct formal monthly performance evaluations of the employee in order to avoid inconsistencies with the six-month evaluation conducted by the administrator. The last strategy is to train the subordinate to evaluate the supervisor so that he/she feels comfortable about this expectation. The employee must realize that evaluating his supervisor is just as important as being evaluated by him.

Specifically, in the effort to reduce role conflict for the paralegal, a monthly meeting between the administrator, supervisor and paralegal can be considered a "problem solving" meeting. The problem to be solved is conflicting expectations in an effort to create common goals. Jones (1981) sets forth some guidelines for conducting a problem solving meeting. They are: (1) state the problem and reason why it must be solved, (2) analyze the causes of the problem, (3) brainstorm possible solutions, (4) determine the best solution, (5) select the best solution, and (6) implement the solution. After the first few weeks it may be essential to meet monthly to reinforce the common goals. Then, after six months, the entire process of creating common goals should be repeated to minimize inter-sender role conflict experienced by paralegals.

Strategies for managing ambiguity were suggested by Merrell, 2000, in her study in well woman clinics. Organizations need to make explicit their motives and purpose of involving volunteers in service provision. Almond (1990) found in her study that the role and function of the volunteers was implicit within the hospice's organizational structure and that the volunteers, who numbered over 200, were unacknowledged within the charity's formal policy documents. **The formulation of written guidelines out-lining the role and scope of the volunteer's role may lessen the potential for role ambiguity and foster positive relationships between volunteer and paid workers.** The provision of a training program enables volunteer and paid workers to have a clearer understanding of the core components of each other roles and the opportunity for volunteers to demonstrate their talents. **Training is particularly important when volunteers work directly with clients, so that volunteers feel content in their role and issues such as the importance of confidentiality are clearly understood.** Additionally, the opportunity for regular up-dating or opportunities for volunteers to discuss issues or seek clarification with paid workers lessens misunderstanding and improves relationships between them. Appointing an individual, usually a volunteer coordinator, who links together the bureaucracy of the NHS with the associational world of the volunteer, can play a key role in managing ambiguity and enabling volunteer and paid workers to work together effectively. The coordinator is faced with the task of ensuring that the expectations of the Health Trust are achieved, namely that an efficient, quality well woman service is delivered, while at the same time ensuring that the expectations and needs of the volunteers are also met. As the changing nature of the workforce within the clinics increases the potential for ambiguity, misunderstanding and misinterpretation, the coordinator provides continuity, acts as a point of contact and a source of information for all workers.

CONCLUSION

The author of this paper has attempted to analytically present the communication problem of Role Conflict which occurs in organizations. The negative outcomes of this problem have been described for increased awareness to this problem. Finally, strategies to reduce Role Conflict have been suggested in order to minimize this communication problem in organizations. Although the example used to demonstrate the problem was in a law firm environment, the strategies can be applied in any organizational setting.

References

- Acker, G. M. (2004). The Effect of Organizational Conditions (Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, Opportunities for Professional Development, and Social Support) on Job Satisfaction and Intention to Leave Among Social Workers in Mental Health Care. *Community Mental Health Journal*, v. 40 no. 1 (February), pp. 65-73.
- Addae, Helena M. & Parboteeah, K. Praveen (2008). Role Stressors and Organizational Commitment: Public Sector Employment in St. Lucia. *International Journal of Manpower*, v.29, n.6, pp.567-582.
- Baroudi, J. J. (1985). The impact of role variables on information systems personnel work attitudes and intentions. *MIS Quarterly*, 9, pp. 341-356.
- Dubinsky, A. J., Childers, T. L., Skinner, S. J. and Gencturk, E. (1988). Impact of sales supervisor leadership behavior on insurance agent attitudes and performance. *Journal of Risk and Insurance*, 55, pp. 132-144.
- Fry, L. W., Futrell, C. M., Parasuraman, A., Chmielewski, M. A. (1986). An analysis of alternative causal models of salesperson role perceptions and work-related attitudes. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23, pp. 153-163.
- Glisson, C. and Durick, M. (1988). Predictors of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in human service organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 33, pp. 61-81.
- Good, L. K., Sisler, G. F., Gentry, J. w. (1988). Antecedents of turnover intentions among retail management personnel. *Journal of Retailing*. 64, pp. 295-314.
- Hampton, R., Dubinsky, A. J., Skinner, S. J. (1986). A model of sales supervisory leadership behavior and retail salespeople's job-related outcomes. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 14, pp. 33-43.
- Jackson, S. E., and Schuler, R. S. (1985). A meta-analysis and conceptual critique of research on role ambiguity and role conflict in work settings. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 36, pp. 16-78.
- Jones, Martin (1981). How to Organize Meetings. New York: Beaufort Book, Inc.
- Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., and Rosenthal, R. A. (1964). Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity. New York: Wiley.
- Kemery, E. R., Bedeian, A. G., Mossholder, K. W. and Touliatos, J. (1985). Outcomes of role stress: A multisample constructive replication. *Academy of Management Journal*, 28, pp. 3 63-375.
- Lavan, H. and Banner, D. K. (1985). The perception of role conflict, role ambiguity, and organizational commitment: Differences between sexes. *International Journal of Manpower*, 6, pp. 32-35.
- Lee, T. W. and Mowday, R. T. (1987). Voluntarily leaving an organization: An empirical investigation of Steers and Mowday's Model of Turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 3 0, pp. 721-743.
- Locke, E. A. (1976). The nature and causes of job satisfaction. In M. D. Dunnette (ed.). *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McGee, G. W. and Ford, R. C. (1987). Two (or more?) dimensions of organizational commitment: Re-examination of the affective and continuance commitment scales. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 72, pp. 638-642.
- Merrell, Joy (2000). Ambiguity: Exploring the Complexity of Roles and Boundaries When Working with Volunteers in Well Woman Clinics. *Social Science & Medicine*, v.51, pp.93-102.
- Mowday, R., Porter, L., and Steers, R. (1982). Organizational Linkages: The Psychology of Commitment, Absenteeism and Turnover. New York: Academic Press.
- O'Reilly, C. A., III, and Chatman, J. (1986). Organizational commitment and psychological attachment: The effects of compliance, identification, and internalization on prosocial behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71, pp. 492-499.
- Sell, M. V., Brief, A. P., and Schuler, R. S. (1981). Role conflict and role ambiguity: Integration of the literature and directions for future research. *Human Relations*, 34, pp.43-71.
- Shen, Yide (2005). A Meta-Analysis of Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict on IS Professional Job Satisfaction. *Proceedings of the 38th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*.
- Stevens, J. M., Beyer, J. M. and Trice, H. M. (1978). Assessing personal, role and organizational predictors of managerial commitment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 21, pp. 380-396.
- Zahra, Shaker A. (1985). A comparative study of the effect of role ambiguity and conflict on employee attitudes and performance. *Akron Business and Economic Review*, 16, pp. 3 7-42.