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Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt

Western Kentucky University, [betsy.shoenfelt@wku.edu](mailto:betsy.shoenfelt@wku.edu)

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## Novice vs. Experienced Coaches: Differences in Assigning Player Role Responsibilities

Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt  
Western Kentucky University

A structured communication process developed for increasing role clarity for members of NCAA Division I basketball and volleyball teams was implemented for eight teams. The intervention included the completion of an instrument by both the head coach and each player, which enabled a quantified assessment of role agreement on a comprehensive list of required individual roles. The coach then met with each player individually to discuss the player's roles on the team and where coach and player perceptions differed. As a result of the roles process and across coach experience level, role agreement between coach and players improved similarly from an initial pre-meeting average of 66.9% (SD = 7.03) to an average post-meeting agreement of 89.5% (SD = 6.43). However, less experienced coaches used the initial feedback to alter player's role assignment ( $M = 9.67$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ) significantly more often than did experienced coaches ( $M = .80$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ). Results suggest the role clarity process is a useful tool for less experienced coaches to examine and refine their strategies for assigning player roles as well as for increasing player role clarity.

The contribution of the individual athlete is central to the success of any team. Each athlete must have a thorough understanding of his/her responsibilities on the team and the behavior needed to fulfill those responsibilities. A team member's misunderstanding of his/her roles within the team is a likely hindrance to effectiveness and to the accomplishment of team objectives. When team member roles are critical, interdependent, highly differentiated, and non-redundant, the failure to perform role assignments by a single team member may result in ineffectiveness for the entire team (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002). Role clarity is an important prerequisite to team effectiveness, as the actions of a single team member may have a dramatic impact on total team performance (Kozlowski & Salas, 1997). Role ambiguity refers to uncertainty and a lack of role clarity regarding one's role in the competitive setting. Meta-analyses (Abramis, 1994; Fischer & Gitelson, 1983; Tubre & Collins, 2000) have found significant negative relationships between role ambiguity and performance and between role ambiguity and other performance-related variables.

Effective communication between the coach and each player regarding his/her role responsibilities is critical to role clarity and, subsequently, to the success of the team. A number of applied sport psychologists have emphasized the importance of effective coach-athlete communication (e.g., Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Yukelson, 2001). Roles within a team setting must develop and change over time to meet the changing demands of the competitive situation. Failure to recognize and communicate the need for role change can result in stagnation and failure for both the individual athlete and the team. Yukelson (2001) indicated that the

stress of a long season can inhibit a coach's effectiveness in communicating with his/her athletes. Chao (1997) suggested that in addition to the unstructured role communication that typically occurs in team situations, formal programs can be effective in influencing individuals to change their roles on a team.

This article reports differences moderated by the experience level of the coach in the implementation of a structured process for improving coach-athlete role communication and for increasing role clarity for individual players on eight National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I intercollegiate women's basketball and volleyball teams (Shoenfelt, 2003, 1999, 1998). It is a proactive approach that allows flexibility and preparedness in meeting the role demands placed on members of a team. It is likely that with minor adaptations the process could be used for increasing role clarity in a number of sports.

### Role Clarity

The primary objective of the role process is to increase role clarity and to concomitantly reduce role ambiguity (Berger-Gross & Kraut, 1984). Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) identified two major types of role ambiguity: task ambiguity and ambiguity concerning the consequences of one's role behavior. This role process intervention focused on task ambiguity. Task ambiguity can assume three specific forms: ambiguity concerning the scope of responsibilities (i.e., what is required), ambiguity concerning the behaviors required to accomplish those responsibilities, and ambiguity concerning whose expectations are to be met. In the present study, the scope of responsibilities was clearly defined by objectively identifying the specific roles a player was to fill and the relative effort she should devote to each role. The specific behaviors required to accomplish each role were delineated in the definition of the role, in a meeting with the coach, and on the practice floor. Finally, these teams, like many at

this level of play (Chelladurai & Arnott, 1985; Chelladurai, Haggerty, & Baxter, 1989), were run in a fairly autocratic manner; that is, the head coach determined which player(s) should assume each role responsibility.

### Method

**Overview of the Roles Intervention.** This overview provides the context for the subsequent detailed discussion of the development of instruments and the implementation of the roles process. The critical individual roles for team success were identified and listed on an instrument referred to as the "Roles List." The Roles List was completed independently by each player and by the coach, who identified specific roles for each player. The Roles List data were analyzed to determine areas of role agreement and disagreement between the coach and each player. Individual feedback sheets were provided to the players and the coach was provided a summary feedback sheet. The coach then met with each player to discuss her role responsibilities. Subsequent to these meetings, each player and the coach again completed the roles list. This provided the data for a quantitative evaluation of the improvement in role understanding for each player. This process was completed at the beginning of conference play, far enough into the season for the coach to feel comfortable s/he was certain of role assignments for the team.

**Participants.** Participants were the coaches and student-athlete members of eight NCAA Division I women's basketball and volleyball teams.

**Roles List Development.** A review of the published literature failed to identify an expedient, objective approach to measuring role clarity. Researchers (e.g., King & King, 1990; Smith & Tisak, 1993) indicated that much of the role ambiguity literature rested on self-reported ratings and called for other measures of this construct to be developed. Consequently, the Roles List was developed as an instrument to be used in the role clarification process.

For the role process to work effectively, the coach had to identify the individual player roles that were needed for the team to be successful. Those roles were then listed on an instrument, the Roles List. Although certain roles are essential for a given sport, the particular roles that belong on this list may differ from coach to coach within a sport depending upon a coach's game strategy. Furthermore, in using this process across a number of seasons with the same coach, the particular roles may also vary depending on what the coach is emphasizing in his/her system in a particular season.

For each team, the head coach served as the initial subject matter expert to generate a comprehensive list of the roles required for effective team performance. The initial list of roles was reviewed individually by others on the coaching staff and in a team session by the players to ensure that the list of critical roles was exhaustive and that the terminology used to describe the roles was clearly understood by the

players. During the team session, the players were encouraged to identify any role that was not clearly understood. Modifications were made to the list of roles based on the comments of the staff and players. The resulting instruments contained 13 - 15 different roles. An example may be found in the Appendix. Each of the terms used on the roles list was also included in the glossary section of the team play book studied by each player.

**Initial Meeting with the Players.** Prior to the first administration of the Roles List, the sport psychologist met with the players to explain the underlying rationale of the role clarification process and the procedure that would be followed. That is, each player and the coach would complete a Roles List to indicate the roles for that player; the sport psychologist would analyze these data to determine areas of role agreement and disagreement and would prepare individual and summary feedback sheets; the player would then meet with the coach to discuss role responsibilities. During the initial meeting, players were encouraged to ask questions and to identify any role that was not clearly understood. Several roles were identified and discussed to ensure that each role on the list was clearly differentiated from the others. The instructions for completing the Roles List were explained. Each player was directed to allocate 100 points among the roles to represent how she should, according to what she understood to be the coach's assignments, allocate 100% of her effort. Players were further instructed to use increments of five points, to assign points to no more than five roles, and to check to ensure that the points allocated among the roles summed to 100. Concomitantly, the coach independently completed a Roles List for each player.

**Scoring Role Agreement.** The difference between the coach's effort allocations and each player's allocation was computed for each role. The absolute differences were summed across roles for each player and divided by 2 (note: the difference score could range from 0 to 200, as the coach and player each allocated 100 points) to reflect the percent agreement between the coach and the player. A SPSS computer program was written to analyze the data and produce a printout that indicated for each player: (a) the points allocated to each role by the coach; (b) the points allocated to each role by that player; (c) the differences between the two, that is, which roles the player was on-target in her effort allocation and which roles she was either under- or over-emphasizing; (d) the percent of role agreement between the coach and the player; and (e) the overall average percent agreement between the coach and all players.

**Coach Meetings with Each Player.** The Roles List data analyses were completed within 24 hours of the players' completing the Roles List to ensure that feedback was given in a timely fashion. After the data were analyzed the sport psychologist met with the coach to discuss the results. Over the next two to three days, the coach met with each player individually to discuss her roles on the team and

where the coach's and the player's perceptions differed. The objective of these individual meetings was to increase the player's role clarity in terms of defining her roles on the team and how she should meet these role expectations. Athletes were able to express their opinions and concerns. In some cases, the coach reassessed the player's roles on the team in accordance with the player's opinion. Other individual issues were sometimes discussed (e.g., motivation, confidence, realistic expectations, etc.), depending on the player's needs. The meetings typically lasted from 30 to 45 minutes for each player. Schaubroeck, Ganster, Sime, and Ditman (1993) found a role clarification discussion to be effective in reducing role ambiguity. In some cases, the discussions in these meetings were followed up with individual work by the player and the sport psychologist to address issues that were amenable to mental skills training.

**Post-Meeting Data Collection.** After the meetings, the Roles List (i.e., allocation of effort points to roles) was again completed independently by both the head coach and each player. The post-meeting data were analyzed and a second print-out was prepared for the coach and each player that indicated: (a) the points allocated to each role by the coach; (b) the points allocated to each role by the player; (c) the differences between the two, that is which roles the player was on-target in her effort allocation and which roles she was either under- or over-emphasizing; (d) the percent of role agreement between the coach and the player; (e) the overall average percent agreement between the coach and players; (f) the change in percent agreement pre- to post-meeting for that player; (g) the average pre- to post-meeting change in agreement for the team; and (h) a narrative explanation of the results of the role process.

## Results

Coaches were categorized as either experienced (> 10 years as a head coach; 5 coaches) or inexperienced (< 10 years as a head coach; 3 coaches). One-way ANOVAs indicated that coach experience was not significantly related to the amount of pre-meeting role agreement ( $M = 66.87\%$ ,  $SD = 7.03$ ;  $F_{1,6} = .59$ , n.s.), post-meeting role agreement ( $M = 89.5\%$ ,  $SD = 6.43$ ;  $F_{1,6} = .29$ , n.s.), or improvement in role clarity ( $M = 22.63\%$ ,  $SD = 3.73$ ;  $F_{1,6} = .24$ , n.s.). One-way ANOVAs indicated that coach experience was significantly related to the number of role assignments changed from pre to post meeting ( $F_{1,6} = 65.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .90$ ;  $M_{\text{Experienced}} = .80$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ , < 1% of roles;  $\text{Mean}_{\text{LessExperience}} = 9.67$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ , 5.7% of roles) and to the changes in effort allocation to roles from pre to post meeting ( $F_{1,6} = 27.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .79$ ;  $M_{\text{Experienced}} = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ , 1.4% of effort allocations to roles;  $\text{Mean}_{\text{LessExperience}} = 15.0$ ,  $SD = 5.3$ , 15% of effort allocations to roles).

## Discussion

The quantitative data clearly indicated that through the process of allocating percentage of effort to specific roles and then meeting to discuss discrepancies between the coach's and player's role perceptions, the players significantly increased their understanding of their roles. The role process was successful in increasing role understanding and role clarity. There are several likely underlying reasons for the success of the process. The roles process provides a structured format to assist the coach in communicating role information to the players. While a coach should (and the coaches in the present study certainly do) communicate role information on and off the court, the dynamic environment of intercollegiate athletics often makes it difficult for the coach to communicate fully and effectively with his/her players regarding their role responsibilities. Applied sport psychologists have recognized the difficulty and challenge of effective coach-athlete communication (e.g., Dale & Wisberg, 1996; Yukelson, 2001). The roles process is a technique that can assist a coach in meeting this challenge by structuring an opportunity for one-on-one communication between the coach and the player. The sport psychologist can facilitate the communication process. This improved communication increases the player's understanding of her roles. She has the opportunity to ask for clarification in a climate that is more conducive to this sort of inquiry than a team practice might be. Players commented that they particularly liked this designated individual time with the coach. The increased role understanding helps the player focus appropriate attention on what the coach wants done on the court. The key to effective team performance is that each team member effectively performs differentiated, albeit interdependent, roles. Role understanding and acceptance are essential prerequisites to effective role performance. It is unlikely an athlete will perform well in a role he/she does not understand and accept as his/her own. Players commented that the roles process helped them understand what roles they should assume as their responsibility and what roles they should emphasize in practice and in games. At the same time, each athlete on the team realized there are times in competition a player will have to step up and just do what needs to be done. For example, a volleyball hitter may have to set the ball if the setter is taken out of the play.

The present study contributes an interesting insight to the effectiveness of the roles process. Seasoned coaches with a decade or more of experience had a more solidified plan for role assignments for the players on their teams. The more experienced coaches changed very few role assignments during the roles process. Despite the fact that the roles process took place at essentially the same point in the season for all teams, less experienced coaches utilized the feedback from the first round of completing the Roles List to re-evaluate their role assignments. The summary feedback sheet clearly identified how the players' effort should be allocated across roles and, in effect, summarized the coach's strategy for the team. Less experienced coaches commented that this consolidated feedback enabled them to

determine where they needed to re-allocate roles and/or re-allocate the amount of effort assigned to roles. Accordingly, less experienced coaches made significantly more changes to role assignments than did the more experienced coaches. Thus, the roles process has an additional benefit to novice coaches. The process proved to be a useful tool for less experienced coaches to refine their strategy for assigning player roles.

The roles process requires a substantial amount of time from the head coach and the sport psychologist. Given this, one might be inclined to limit athlete participation in the roles process to only those players likely to get substantial playing time. A coach who values player development and maintaining commitment should implement the roles process for all athletes on the team. Anecdotal evidence suggests the role process was useful in helping red-shirted players recognize that they are still an important part of the team and still have responsibilities on the team despite the fact that they would not be playing in games/matches.

In sum, the roles process requires a large investment of time from the head coach and the sport psychologist. However, role clarity is an essential ingredient for the virtually all team sports. This study suggests that the roles process is effective in increasing role understanding and role acceptance in NCAA Division I basketball and volleyball teams. Furthermore, the data indicate that the roles process is a useful tool for less experienced coaches to examine and refine their strategy for assigning player role responsibilities. It is likely that with sport-specific modifications to the Roles List, the same process could be used successfully to increase role clarity in other sports as well.

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## APPENDIX: EXAMPLE OF A ROLES LIST

**Player:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Below are listed a number of different roles members of the volleyball team might have. Clearly, a player could **not** have all of the roles listed. From the list of roles, please indicate which roles you should fulfill. Carefully think in terms of 100% of the things you do for volleyball. Divide these 100 points among the roles to describe how you should divide the time, energy, and effort that you put into Lady Topper Volleyball. Your total points should add to 100. Read the entire list of roles before you assign points. You may identify up to 5 roles.

### ROLES

_____	setter
_____	hitter
_____	defensive player
_____	serve receiver
_____	blocker
_____	server
_____	floor communicator
_____	emotional floor leader
_____	practice player
_____	locker room leader
_____	competitive leader
_____	spark off the bench
_____	positive influence
TOTAL	100