

The role of leadership in interpersonal dysfunctional conflict within Australian Football League (AFL) club boards

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Abstract

Purpose – Using descriptions from participants of ten Australian Football League (AFL) Club boards, the authors offer a rare, in-depth account of board member perceptions of interpersonal relationships between board members and the relational conflict evident. These findings suggest that interpersonal behaviours related to egos, social awareness, transparency and trust, ultimately leads to dysfunctional conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper examined the leadership influence on board dysfunctional conflict using the concept of authentic leadership (AL). The authors dismantled board member interpersonal dynamics to explore whether AL may alleviate the issues associated with dysfunctional relational conflict.

Findings – In addition, we highlighted the President has a key leadership role, whereby if they are characterised by AL attributes, they can facilitate higher levels of trust amongst board members and ultimately minimise board fragmentation.

Originality/value – Practically, our findings assist boards to identify some of the behavioural antecedents to dysfunctional relationships, therefore assisting leaders to attenuate their influence on board fragmentation and improve board functioning.

Keywords Authentic leadership, Conflict, Leadership, Governance, Trust, Interpersonal behaviours

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The board of directors within a nonprofit sport organisation are the group of individuals situated at the apex of the organisation and expected to collaborate effectively in order to make decisions that best serve the organisation's stakeholders (Schoenberg, 2019). As such, the intragroup dynamics, which refer to the behaviours of board members toward each other and the underlying relationships, have the potential to influence the way such a group functions (Robbins, 2011). Robbins (2005) informed that intragroup conflict is inevitable; however, we do not clearly understand the ways that leaders may, either beneficially, or detrimentally, influence such conflict (Zhao *et al.*, 2019). De Dreu and Weingart (2003) posit that conflict is generally considered to have a negative influence on group performance. However, Forbes and Milliken (1999) state this is usually the case with relational (interpersonal) conflict, whereas task conflict may have a positive influence on board functioning.

Whilst there has been substantial interest and research into group dynamics (e.g. Friedkin and Johnsen, 2011; Mathieu *et al.*, 2017), there is a relative scarcity of research into the interactions of board members within the sport governance context, and how they affect board member interactions (Schoenberg, 2019). Accordingly, there has been increasing interest by researchers to better understand these leadership-centred mechanisms relating to the interpersonal interactions of directors, including those which influence relational conflict

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amongst board group members (e.g. [Van Puyvelde et al., 2018](#); [Kerwin et al., 2011](#)). The empirical setting for this current study is the Australian Football League (AFL); the wealthiest and most popular sporting competition in Australia, which captures the greatest share of audiences and commercial revenue ([Hoye et al., 2015](#)), and therefore holds a significant role within the Australian community.

The authors of this current study were interested in the notion often associated with groups that “one (or more) bad apples can spoil the bunch”. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to build on prior research by exploring board member interpersonal (and relationship) conflict. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature by developing our understanding of interpersonal dysfunctional conflict in the sport setting.

Understanding the antecedents and nature of conflict is especially salient for nonprofit sport boards as they carry the hopes and expectations of a wide range of stakeholders, who often invest significant amounts of money (and often disproportionately), emotion and time to support the sport organisation. Therefore, “as we still know very little about what transpires behind the doors of the boardroom” ([Heemskerk et al., 2017](#), p. 233), the specific purpose of this study is to explore relational dysfunctional conflict amongst board members, and how the leadership behaviours demonstrated by the President, CEO (note: a board member in the sport context of this study) and other board members, may exacerbate or mitigate such conflicts in sport boards. This current paper argues that understanding the source(s) of dysfunctional interpersonal conflict may improve a board’s leadership potential.

Drawing on intragroup conflict theory, which posits that relational conflicts have an intervening role between individual differences and collaboration ([Lee et al., 2015](#)), we aim to identify those factors related to leadership behaviours, in the board context. The broader leadership literature offers some guidance regarding leaders’ direct influence on group conflict, both a dyadic perspective ([Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995](#)), as well as a group perspective (e.g. [Bai et al., 2016](#)). However, there is a dearth of research that explores leadership relational styles and behaviours that directly impact dysfunctional conflict in boards.

We contend that authentic leadership (AL), may play a vital role in mitigating these negative behavioural actions, hence assist the board – and the President (who leads the board) – to facilitate more positive interpersonal interactions and attenuate dysfunctional conflict. Regarding board functioning, as this study pertains to the areas of leadership and associated behaviours, board functioning is based on board member perception of how their board is functioning from an interpersonal perspective, and outcomes they perceive that relate directly to this area.

Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to answer the following questions.

- (1) What interpersonal behaviours of board members (and CEO) contribute to dysfunctional relational conflict between them, and how do they perceive its impact on the interpersonal mechanics of board function?
- (2) Are AL behaviours evident amongst board participants, and if so, which are most relevant in minimising dysfunctional relational conflict and impacting levels of trust, and does it vary between the President, CEO and other board members?

Theoretical background

Sport governance, leadership and interpersonal dynamics

Whilst there has been substantial interest and research into the (leadership related) group dynamics through sociological and psychological disciplines (e.g. [Friedkin and Johnsen, 2011](#); [Mathieu et al., 2017](#)), there is a relative scarcity of research into the interactions of board members within the sport governance context, and how they affect board functioning ([Schoenberg, 2019](#)). We can gain insight from the corporate governance literature; however, this research has primarily focused on the more structural components of governance, rather than the humanistic aspect of board member interpersonal interactions.

Additionally, the sport setting is unique in terms of remuneration for board members. In most cases, including the context of this current study, board members are volunteers with no financial remuneration. Whilst there are benefits such as networking, corporate function opportunities, flights and accommodation associated with games and so on, for many it is their passion for the sport that drives their commitment to a board position.

Erakovic and Jackson (2012) highlight that leadership within nonprofit sport is not greatly understood, yet is highly relevant when considering board interpersonal dynamics. An explanation for the scarce research of the behavioural happenings within boards is the constraints that exist in accessing and extracting in-depth data from board members, such as gaining access to board members, restrictions imposed by confidentiality requirements and privacy concerns (Leblanc and Schwartz, 2007). However, despite the scant research, there is emerging interest from sport governance scholars into this intersection between leadership and board member interactions (e.g. Schoenberg *et al.*, 2021; Takos *et al.*, 2018).

When considering leadership, and more specifically leaders' behaviours and their impact on harmony within groups, a long-held presumption is that conflict is inevitable (Robbins, 2005); therefore, it is reasonable to assume such a threat exists for nonprofit sport boards.

Intragroup conflict

Conflict can be defined as the “the process resulting from the tension between team members because of real or perceived differences” (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003, p. 741). Shah *et al.* (2021) caution that it only takes one “bad apple” (p. 430) to generate conflict that may disrupt a group negatively; disruptive conflict can easily evolve from one individual and impair group function (Felps *et al.*, 2006). Without being addressed, such conflicts may expand across multiple persons, dyads or perhaps subgroups where disputes occur between opposing factions (Shah *et al.*, 2021).

Relational conflicts are not simply disagreements, which are of less concern when considering interpersonal dynamics. Instead, conflict is more a pattern of behaviour over a lengthy period of time (Shah *et al.*, 2021). Relational conflicts may be deeply personal and tend to involve high degrees of emotion, tension and friction amongst group members (Shah *et al.*, 2021). Sherry and Shilbury (2007) acknowledged the extreme scrutiny placed on AFL club boards, both in terms of media and supporters, and the tension this creates amongst board members who are equally as passionate and emotionally invested in the club, as their loyal fans.

To better understand the antecedents and elements to these relational conflicts in such a pressured environment, a number of contextual leadership factors are likely to play a role. For example, Heemskerk *et al.* (2017) indicated that leadership behaviours of the President and the CEO (and between them), and of other board members, may be a conduit for destructive debate, and they called for more studies that investigate leadership behaviours—and the associated interpersonal dynamics—that exist within the board context. Therefore, this current study focused on the interpersonal interactions between board members, specifically of (1) the President and CEO, (2) the CEO and board members and (3) the President and board members.

It was Jehn and Bendersky (2003, p. 189) who declared that “conflict is ubiquitous in life whenever people interact”. This may be true particularly in the sport board context, where (1) it is a high profile and high-pressure environment and (2) there often are competing needs of the multiple stakeholders for whom the board serves, with often disproportionate influence relative to their level of “salience”. Fahrner (2024) also highlighted the notion of conflict arising within boards, and within his sport governance study he noted that the volunteer nature of board member positions, along with other related factors, “makes trust particularly relevant” when exploring board member interactions and board function. Trust

Inevitably, in the discussion of interpersonal dynamics, leadership and conflict, the topic of trust is raised (Müller *et al.*, 2013). Trust amongst groups of people can be viewed in terms of

trust between individuals, and trust in the group (Sydow, 2006). Together with conflict, trust is seen to be an important mechanism in order for a group of board members to function effectively in a stable manner (Müller *et al.*, 2013). Mayer *et al.* (1995) propose that trust is,

the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party (p. 712).

In the sport governance context, there are scholars who advocate the importance of trust, developed through relational accords and which contribute to positive board function (e.g. Fahrner and Harris, 2021; Hoyer and Cuskelly, 2003b). More recently, Fahrner (2024) highlights that most groups, in order to work together effectively, rely on trusting relationships, stating “enabling trusting relationships seems to be an important aspect of governance” (p. 130), emphasising this should be the case in both corporate and sport governing bodies.

However, there is a notable dearth of research which explores trust and the associated interpersonal interactions (O’Boyle and Shilbury, 2016), and an even greater absence of scholarly insight into the notions of “lack of trust” and “conflict”, amongst board members. Given the focus of this study on leadership and interpersonal dynamics, we advocate the merits of examining leadership through the lens of AL theory. Scholars Takos *et al.* (2018) and Fahrner (2024) both found that board members of a sport governing body perceived authenticity as a relevant descriptor of leadership behaviours that relate to interpersonal interactions and reciprocal levels of trust.

Authentic leadership

Authenticity has long been an important topic in the domain of leadership, where leaders are expected to behave consistently in values-based ways that simultaneously benefit both the people and organisations they lead. Wang *et al.* (2014) summarised AL as a leader’s conduct being characterised by self-awareness, transparency, relational awareness and the capacity to consume information in an unbiased manner before making a decision. However, the connection between AL, interpersonal dynamics and conflict is a topic that has not been extensively researched, and therefore warrants further empirical examination (Fotohabadi and Kelly, 2018).

We argue AL may be a constructive frame to explore the intersection between leadership and relational conflict. The concept of AL enables leadership scholars to examine board member behaviours from both an individual perspective and a social or relational viewpoint. Further, as posited by Fotohabadi and Kelly (2018), AL theory is predicated on the notion that conflict is inevitable and unavoidable when considering situations leaders are involved in, and there are key elements within the AL concept that help scholars understand the relational dimensions required of leaders to have a positive influence on those they lead. AL posits leaders not only disclose their honest stance when handling conflict with others, but they are willing to listen to the other person’s perspective.

Prior research from Gardner *et al.* (2011) highlights that AL is linked to the quality of relationships leaders have with their followers, and therefore we argue that authentic leaders may assist in mitigating or limiting the formation of dysfunctional conflict. Little has been written in the leadership research that explicitly links the dimensions of AL and conflict management (Fotohabadi and Kelly, 2018), and therefore the current study aims to explore links between specific behaviours of leaders in sport governance roles and their impact on relational conflict amongst board members. Whilst conflict has been considered between the President, CEO and board members in previous corporate governance research (e.g. Veltrop *et al.*, 2021), we draw upon AL theory to address the gap in the nonprofit sport governance literature of the specific interpersonal dynamics related to dyadic and intergroup conflict, its antecedents and consequences on board function.

Given the limited available research in this space, and the important need to address these issues in practice, this current study seeks to explore the interpersonal dynamics of sport boards, and those leadership behaviours that are perceived by board members to foster conflict

and negatively impact trust in the boardroom. Further, we aim to investigate the components of AL that may be relevant in minimising conflict between board members, enhancing levels of trust and attenuating the likelihood of board fragmentation occurring.

Design and method

A qualitative design was chosen for this study as it requires a detailed description from board members of how they relate to others. The interpretivist research paradigm was selected as it is based on the belief that gathering data is best performed through the researcher interacting with the subjects of the study (Cousins, 2002) which will ultimately reveal the truth. The interpretive approach assumes that participants assign their own unique meaning to the phenomena being explored (Lapan *et al.*, 2011) and therefore the most effective research methodology is one that teases this out using qualitative methods.

Therefore, we employed a case study research strategy, to explore a phenomenon that is relatively unknown, which typically is the situation regarding conflict within the interpersonal and private real-world context (Yin, 2009). A descriptive and multiple case study approach was used in order to “describe a phenomenon in detail in its real-world context”, and to enable exploration of differences within and between cases (Priya, 2021, p. 96). The focus is to answer the “how” and “why” leadership and interpersonal behaviours affect board functioning, and insight to those boards perceived as being negatively affected by interpersonal conflict. As stated by Baxter and Jack (2008), “once you have determined the research question[s] are best answered using a qualitative case study, and the boundaries have been determined, then you consider what type of case study will be conducted” (p. 547). The case in this study is the interpersonal behaviours of board members within the defined context of an Australian Football League Club. The case is bounded by both the board member interactions (inside and outside board meetings of each Club) and a time period of three years (2011–2013). Interviews were conducted with board members who served throughout this period, which varied for each one. Some interviews were conducted after 2013, however questioning related to their time served during this period.

The study is based upon the perceptions provided by board members, as explained in the qualitative data collection section. It was not deemed necessary for the researchers to observe board members during board meetings.

Participants

The study involved exploring relational behaviours within the boardroom of 10 Australian Football League clubs. The AFL was chosen because it is a context in which many key resources are equalised (e.g. athlete salaries, talent recruitment, football expenditure etc), which minimises variables that may have the potential for competitive advantage, and therefore to some extent isolates the influence of the board. It is not simply a matter of “buy the best talent, and who cares how well the board functions!”.

The selection of these Clubs was undertaken using a convenience sampling approach, where a selection of clubs was chosen based, firstly, on the researcher’s connections to the industry and/or clubs, and secondly, the willingness of a key representative (the President) to commit the Club/Board to participate in the research. Convenience sampling can be considered a limitation of the study, however, as 10 of the possible 18 Clubs were included, it was anticipated the samples will provide a sound representation of the phenomena under investigation, and of the population of AFL Clubs. Of the 10 Clubs who committed, each club was typically represented by 4–5 board members, which included the CEO for all 10 clubs and the President for 9 out of the 10 clubs. A total of 52 participants were interviewed.

Each participant was verbally informed the study was approved by the University ethics committee, and they were required to sign a consent form which explained confidentiality and anonymity is guaranteed at all times by the researchers and university.

Data collection and analysis

A total of 52 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, averaging between 30 and 60 min in length. All interviews were conducted by the lead researcher, with the majority undertaken face-to-face and the remainder by phone usually due to geographic reasons. Interviews were completed over a 6-month period and were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher, resulting in 250 pages (single spaced) of data.

Initial questioning consisted of a rapport building nature to develop a level of confidence and trust in the researcher. The ensuing questions followed a thematic interview guide, where questions were structured to tease out participants perceptions of the interpersonal dynamics that may be influencing intragroup relational conflict, and their views on how such conflict impacted board functioning. [Takos et al. \(2018\)](#) proposed that AL is a suitable lens to examine leadership and interpersonal behaviours of board members, therefore probing questions were used, relating to the elements of AL theory, to assist interviewees in considering and articulating their perceptions of behaviours they perceived as enhancing or minimising dysfunctional relational conflict and trust between board members.

The initial questions were more open ended, and then depending on responses, further questions were asked which aligned more closely with the purpose and aims of the research. Examples of the types of questions asked include: "How would you describe your relationship with the CEO/President?" and "How would you describe their behaviour?" and "Does their relationship with you impact your ability to be a productive board member, if so, how?" and "What specific behaviours do you think enhance or minimise relational dysfunctional conflict?" The researcher aimed to establish each board member's perception of the leadership style and behaviours of the board the President and CEO, and to reveal their perception on whether it was a relevant and influential contributor to relational disharmony and conflict amongst board members. In addition, board members were questioned regarding the way they interact with other board members, aiming to identify interpersonal behaviours that negatively impact their interpersonal relationships with other board members, and more pointedly, those behaviours of leaders which give rise to dysfunctional conflict amongst board members.

Data analysis used an interpretive process without the use of digital applications. As a well-established and credentialled method for research in the domain of human behaviour, the close involvement of the researcher enhances the potential for an in-depth collection of qualitative data and a high-quality analysis of such data ([Walsham, 2006](#)).

The three researchers met regularly throughout the data collection period to discuss the emerging data and to identify developing overarching categories of themes. Guided by [Bygstad and Munkvold \(2007\)](#), throughout the data collection period, the interviewer considered cross-participant validation by:

- (1) Asking open-ended follow-up questions based on information obtained from prior interviews with other participants of the same club board,
- (2) Ensuring questions derive responses from participants that are exact and specific, and
- (3) Verifying consistent themes exists by discussing the data with fellow researchers.

Coding of data is an important step, where the researcher organises data into key categories, making it meaningful in terms of the research aims and questions ([Lofland et al., 2022](#)). Open coding, where data are divided into discrete parts and codes are created to label them ([Glaser, 2016](#)), began with identification of broad codes that related to grouping interpersonal behaviours which were associated with relational conflict, perceived and described by participants. For example, relational issues between CEO/President, between Board members and President, and between board members. During a second stage of coding, further subthemes were grouped according to components of AL, and other leadership related areas (i.e. relational awareness, self-awareness, trust, communication), to assist in further analysing the data. The final stage of coding enabled the development of the major themes that related most directly to the two key research questions.

The process consisted of the lead researcher presenting relevant data, that is data which was congruent with the research aims and conceptual categories, and then meeting to discuss, before transforming this data into those coded themes mentioned previously; a process recommended by [Miles and Huberman \(1994\)](#).

Results

Interpersonal behaviours

The data unveiled a range of key interpersonal areas that participants perceived as being detrimental to how the board functioned. Responses varied from those behaviours relating to the President and CEO to those of the other board members. Certain behaviours were perceived as contributing to relational dysfunctional conflict.

The thought of conflict conjures up images of abuse, anger and severe opposition. However, our data demonstrated conflict in boards can be much more subtle. Responses ranged from the notion that some board members simply listen more to certain board members than others, to a more clandestine – yet still subtle – perception that the CEO, President or both, scheme to construct situations where the board collectively is restricted from genuinely discussing key issues, and where input from all members is not sought. From a leadership perspective, the behaviour of some leaders results in some board members being ostracised, and thus interpersonal conflict emerging. The situation is exemplified by the following statement: “typically the inner circle would make the decisions and I don’t think that is what good leadership is about” [4C].

Analysis of the data revealed areas perceived by participants as stifling positive interaction, for example, some board members felt ostracised by egotistical board members. [Nevicka et al. \(2016\)](#) described egotistical individuals as narcissistic, who have highly positive self-views and overestimating their own capabilities. These individuals are usually sensitive to any threats that may be ‘harmful’ to their ego and often exhibit “dominant interpersonal defence strategies” ([Nevicka et al., 2016](#), p. 1467) to maintain their authority, and eliminate any potential threats to their status, position or ideas ([Baumeister et al., 1996](#)).

Some board members believed there were small groups of such people (usually successful) businessmen, who formed a collective view, and were accustomed to getting their way, typified by the following statement:

Some board members were disrespectful. When you have wealthy people who get what they want when they want, they can be disruptive to a board. [4A]

There were three cases where boards were perceived as struggling interpersonally functioning poorly, and where board members complained of self-serving arrogant board members who did not care about how they affected other board member’s capacity to contribute meaningfully during board meetings. Some board members felt they were not being genuinely listened to. This belief, developed over a relatively long period of time, was perceived as resulting in tensions between board members, and some board members losing faith in the way the board functions, and therefore less likely to contribute their views, opinions and questions during board meetings. For example, one board in which multiple board members conveyed these concerns illustrated this tension and conflict by stating “we had a lot of disgruntled people who didn’t feel valued” [1C].

In contrast, there was clear evidence from one board where members perceived their board functioned effectively because there was an absence of arrogant and egotistical “businessmen”. These board members recommended boards should have a strategy to keep such people away from holding a board position. During the line of questioning one board member stated “[One club] have billionaires with self-interest and don’t talk to anyone else, however, we have some significant financial contributors but will not have them on our board” [1D]. Indicating they try to avoid recruiting such people to the board.

This current research informs our understanding of the specific nature of ego and the impact on interpersonal relationships that may lead to dysfunctional conflict within boards. [Hatch and](#)

Cunliffe (2006) warned that these types of people can limit information sharing, control decision-making and develop alliances (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). An example at one Club was indicative of those clubs where “wealthy, ego driven” board members were present, and where conflict emerged, evidenced by the following statement “If these people [egotistical and narcissistic board members] don’t get their own way . . . they go and do it anyway” [3A]. Board members at this club, who were not viewed as part of the “clique”, were frustrated that the wealthy cartel often ignored what they said, and that they worked together (with members of their faction) to dominant board meetings, sometimes “going away” and coming back to the next board meeting after having convinced the President (of their views) via conversations outside the board meeting. The result was two conflicting groups, lack of trust in the process and a fragmented board.

The data suggest that board members considered the President’s willingness to facilitate transparency was critical in ensuring all board members remained enthusiastic that their contribution was being taken seriously. More specifically, the President was expected to manage the flow of information not only during board meetings, but to be aware of what is happening outside board meetings, and that transparency flows from outside to inside the board room. This finding raises questions regarding the President’s awareness of the notion that “board [members] perform better when they cooperate with each other and share a sense of responsibility towards a common objective” (Francoeur *et al.*, 2018, p. 255).

The data revealed that such interpersonal behaviours identified above was stifling board interactions, having a detrimental impact on levels of trust and leading to division in the group.

Trust

Stevenson and Radin (2009) suggested that when divisive interactions are existent, cliques (or factions) form within boards and they are often in conflict with each other, and whilst they may develop trust within a clique, they usually diminish trust within the overall board. For a board to function effectively as a whole Lencioni (2012) suggested trust is vital and is an indicator of open and respectful debate, and ultimately a more unified commitment to each other and the organisation they represent. From the data, the lack of trust at fragmented boards is reflected in the following examples:

At our Club the trust [between board members] gradually waned. [CEO A]

That did become a trust issue with some of the other members of the board. As soon as one member loses trust in another, you have a dysfunctional board. [President C]

This leads to the exploration of why some board members decided not to be transparent of their discussions, and why did the President not intervene to facilitate a more transparent process. Some board members indicated they did not trust some of their fellow board members, and therefore decidedly held discussions outside the board room, which were not shared with the wider board. An example of this was:

It comes back to trust, we had some leaks, [our President] didn’t trust a couple of board members. [5C]

This was particularly evident in one club where the CEO was the person on the board who was kept in the dark, where board members indicated they did not trust the CEO, and therefore they held discussions outside the boardroom, and didn’t include the CEO, nor share their content of their conversations. Their lack of trust of the CEO was evidenced by comments such as “they would hide things from the board” [2A], and (more jovially) as “our CEO is borderline and lucky they are not in jail [laugh]” [3A].

Authentic leadership (AL)

The findings indicate leadership elements which predicate the notion that AL has an important role in minimising dysfunctional conflict at the board level. For example, self-awareness, a key

component of AL, emerged as a major theme. There was clear evidence in the data which suggested CEOs, Presidents or both, within boards that were experiencing difficulties, were reticent to receive feedback, and clearly lacking in self-awareness. For example, when one board member was asked by the researcher “do you think the CEO is aware of their weaknesses”, the response was “it’s a bit like an alcoholic, until you admit you have a problem with the drink, you can’t fix it” [4A]. This board member was frustrated that their CEO had zero interest in utilising feedback from other board members in order to address their weaknesses. Another example is exemplified by the following:

Their big weakness was they didn’t like criticism. You could see them sit back and build this wall. [They] thought they could fix all problems and that things were manageable. [3C]

Concerningly, this lack of self-awareness was also evident in some of the Presidents. [Hoye and Cuskelly \(2003a\)](#) noted that whilst boards rely on the CEO for information, “the individual perceived to be most responsible for the performance of the board was the board President” (p. 69). [Hoye and Cuskelly \(2003b\)](#) added that whilst the influence of the President is important, a dominant President, who does not share some of the board leadership responsibilities, may be detrimental to board function. This “lack of self-awareness” in relation to a President was exemplified by one board member who explained how the President had manipulated the board recruitment process to ensure they had some “mates” on the board, and that these were the only individuals the President would accept advice from.

This provides some context to the discussion earlier in this paper regarding cliques forming, and the nature of people within those cliques (i.e. egotistical) and the resultant conflicts. Within this same club, board members alluded to the President being concerned about his own image, rather than accepting feedback from those wanting to improve his/her “Chairmanship” to positively influence board interpersonal dynamics and function.

Another key component of AL is a leader’s awareness of how their behaviours impacts those around them. In their description of authenticity, [Kernis and Goldman \(2006\)](#) refer to the social awareness aspect; the ability to be aware of one’s social surroundings, and simultaneously be willing to modify one’s behaviours to impact more positively those around them.

A notable subtheme that emerged in relation to this social awareness was the elements which characterised the CEO–President dyadic relationship. [Hoye and Cuskelly \(2003a, b\)](#) have considered the interpersonal dynamics that exist between a President and the CEO within the non-profit context. They concluded the strength of this relationship is influential for board functioning, and that elements creating diminished levels of trust between the two could result in dysfunctional conflict and negatively affect board function.

This current study revealed that within clubs perceived by board members as having a dysfunctional conflict, they had a CEO–President dynamic whereby one or both lacked awareness of how their actions impact negatively on the other. For example, at one board, the CEO was considered as “running the President, and telling him/her what to do” [2A]. A more socially aware CEO would be more willing to help the President, provide feedback, with the intention to helping improve the CEO–President dyad’s effectiveness. An example of a statement from a board member at this club, in relation to either the CEO or President (or both) lacking in social awareness, was:

The board didn’t work well under [our President and CEO]. The [personal] relationship is irrelevant, it’s the competencies and capabilities, their willingness to help each other. They were in it for themselves. They should have been challenging each other to get better, helping each other to get better, and better, and better. [2A]

In contrast to these types of leaders, authentic leaders are not only transparent of their own values, opinions and views, but they also strive to be authentic in their relations with others, seeking to genuinely understand the concerns of followers, attempting to bridge any relational gaps between parties ([Gill et al., 2018](#)). This type of leader, through their AL style, act as a

“good agent” (p. 311) of the organisation, as opposed to self-interest, and a level of aloofness toward their peers (Gill *et al.*, 2018).

In many instances, the board members commented on how the personal nature of the relationship was fine, that is, “they got on well” [2A], but professionally, they simply did not care about the other’s capacity to perform their respective role, or more importantly, how they (professionally) affected each other. They alluded to a degree of “acting” and playing a duplicitous role. As indicated in the AL literature, relational awareness centres on being transparent, and displaying one’s true thoughts and emotions to another, as opposed to being fake and manipulative (Bandura and Kavussanu, 2018).

Another sub-theme which emerged was the lack of relational awareness between the President and other board members. For example, in Club C the President was described as ensuring some board members were well informed and engaged in decision-making, but completely disregarded the needs of other board members. An example statement was:

[Our President] had a style where they would run out of time in board meetings before all the important things were discussed so that we couldn’t actually debate them. [They] actually didn’t want all of us to discuss them. They would ring people and say others had a certain view, and then you thought you were the only one with a [your] view. It was ridiculous. [4C]

The findings of this current research demonstrate that board members should be aware of how they impact others, which does not mean you cannot have differing opinions or are unable to voice an opposing view. This was exemplified by the following statement from one President:

Respect everyone’s opinions, and opinions need to be balanced, everybody has to get a say. [President, E]

This Club was described by board members as having a high functioning board, where board members may challenge each other, where conflicts emerge, however it was not about having to like each other, but more about respecting each other’s right to contribute their views, and facilitating an environment within the board that encourages such interpersonal dynamics.

Discussion

As previously noted, the nonprofit sport board literature regarding interpersonal dynamics is scarce; however, we can be guided by the corporate governance and other nonprofit literature. For example, Van Puyvelde *et al.* (2018) provided direction in relation to such board member interactions, recommending.

- (1) They should listen attentively and genuinely to each other,
- (2) Provide the opportunity for other board members to take the lead at board meetings, and
- (3) Encourage discovery of each board member’s unique perspectives.

In contending with the research question “what interpersonal behaviours of board members contribute to dysfunctional conflict between them, and how does it impact their influence on board function?”, the findings demonstrated that boards—considered by their own members to be functioning poorly—were ineffective at discussing key issues openly and transparently. In addition, the resultant relational conflicts were characterised as damaging to board function, which culminated in a fragmented board. Furthermore, of key importance was the role of the President, and their influence on board function. The President’s relationship with the CEO was found to impact the CEO’s level of transparency with the President, and by association, the information provided to other board members. Ultimately, these types of behaviours lowered trust between board members, and amplified the divisive impact on the board group, resulting in a fragmented board.

Although the President can be apportioned a significant amount of the responsibility for dysfunctional conflict, and such dysfunction is a major influencer for a fragmented board, we

acknowledge the finding that other board members are also accountable. Our findings indicated that it is the egos of board members that have a contributory influence on such internal conflict, and a negative impact on the relationships developed, corresponding to a detrimental impact on levels of trust. This affects the quality of interactions and the decision-making process.

In the context of elite sport, where often the people attracted to board positions are people who have accumulated their own wealth, achieved high levels of success, or have a prominent public profile, they “are accustomed to getting their own way” [2A]. Our findings suggest this may explain why some board members lack qualities such as self and relational awareness. We argue that boards function poorly if there is the existence of multiple board members who are egotistical, that is, they are self-focused and limited in their capacity to consider their affect on others. Our findings suggest these people are more common on the boards that have become fragmented, and those boards are perceived by their own board members as having reduced levels of trust and functioning poorly.

In addressing the research question “are authentic leadership behaviours evident amongst board members, and if so, which are most relevant in minimising dysfunctional conflict, and does it vary between President, CEO, and board members?”, the findings revealed explicit leadership behaviours of the President and CEO (i.e. self-awareness, seeking feedback, social/relational awareness, having honest conversations) that, if absent, can have impactful negative effects on board functioning. Together, these behavioural characteristics strongly align to the components of authenticity, such as where individuals present their “true self” in interactions with others, in an open and transparent way through words (relational transparency), and are willing to remain open to other’s feelings, suggestions and input (balanced processing) (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). AL theorists, Avolio and Gardner (2005), inform that fundamental to the concept of AL is the notion of self-awareness, where in the context of organisational leadership a person is striving to increase their self-knowledge, and to better understand their talents, deficiencies, values and beliefs. In order for a person to be perceived as high in self-awareness, there should be evidence of their desire to receive feedback from their peers, in order to satisfy such thirst for improvement. The absence of these AL components was evident in those boards where board members described issues with interpersonal interactions, low levels of trust and dysfunctional conflict.

This connection between AL and conflict is a topic that has not been adequately researched by sport governance scholars (Fotohabadi and Kelly, 2018), and our findings provide insight to those specific AL behaviours that can minimise dysfunctional conflict, and the associated resultant fragmentation of a board.

This study reinforces the highly important nature of trust within sport board settings, which has been articulated by previous sport governance scholars (e.g. Hoye and Cuskelly, 2003a), and reveals that leadership behaviours such as self-awareness, relational awareness and willingness to openly discuss relational conflicts, fosters a more trusting and united board environment.

These emergent themes, regarding relational awareness, arouse questions about the diminished input of some board members and what leadership behaviours are relevant in order for a board to facilitate and maximise board member contribution. Such negative behaviours and attitudes, underpinned by board member lack of relational awareness, may result in (dysfunctional) interpersonal conflict and diminished trust. Previously, limited work has explored this connection, particularly in the sport governance domain.

Conclusion and implications

This current study explored leadership within nonprofit sport boards of AFL clubs, exploring behaviours which attenuate or accentuate dysfunctional conflict and trust, and perceived by board members as impacting board function.

Theoretical implications

This paper complements recent literature regarding not-for-profit boards (i.e. [Fahrner and Harris, 2021](#)) regarding the critical nature of trust, and the preconditions for high levels of trust. For example, interpersonal elements such as transparency and openness in discussions, amongst board members, have been proposed as being trust enhancing behaviours of leaders.

In addition, our research builds on research of [Avolio et al. \(2004\)](#) and their theory of AL, particularly the links between leader authenticity and the impact on follower engagement. Through the lens of AL, which has rarely been explored through qualitative means in the board setting, we build on the research of [Takos et al. \(2018\)](#) who identified authentic processes and behaviours (especially relating to the president and the President/CEO dyad) as being relevant in the board setting. This current study contributes to the knowledge of leadership within nonprofit sport boards, specifically highlighting those leadership attributes and behaviours that influence dysfunctional conflict and trust, and which may ultimately lead to board factions and disunity.

Practical implications

A key implication of this research is that we advise boards should be very careful of who they appoint as the President. A President who is obtuse of their own weaknesses and strengths, and also on how their behaviour may negatively impact other board members, is likely to facilitate an environment for dysfunctional conflict to emerge and consequently severely impede board functioning.

We conclude the President/CEO dyad is critical due to its influence on board member relationships and pursuant levels of conflict. Whilst the President is deemed to be the most influential, there is a high level of importance also placed on the CEO and their leadership behaviours, in terms of self and relational awareness. A mechanism to monitor the President/CEO dyad is highly recommended.

Our research highlights the importance of taking time to recruit the President and CEO. We propose aiming to recruit an authentic person for these key roles, those who focus on board interpersonal dynamics, thereby minimising the risk of recruiting someone who has a high level of self-importance and who may lack self-awareness (whom are often are attracted to the high-profile nonprofit sport boards).

Future research direction

We recommend that future studies should explore the specific characteristics (i.e. traits/attributes, demographics) of board members to explore patterns that may exist with interpersonal relationships, relational conflict and trust. For example, age, gender, professional background, tenure on the board, level of board experience, degree of governance/leadership education or training.

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