

The Impact of Role States on Team Effectiveness

SCOTT W JUNIPER Psimax Performance Solutions, California, USA

STEPHEN D MELLALIEU University of Wales Swansea, Swansea, UK

Although the importance of sport psychology and specifically individual mental skills training is now widely acknowledged in football, little attention has been given to the psychology of the team and the group dynamics that surround the interaction of the players within the coaching environment. One important aspect of this environment is the role, task, or 'job' that the player perceives they have within the team. Players' "roles" or role states are constructs that comprise an important area of psychology known as role theory. Although these concepts have been important features of group dynamics for decades, predominantly within organisations in industry seeking to improve the performance of business teams, very little investigation has taken place in sport. Drawing upon the existing literature and the findings of our recent studies, this article will introduce role states, outline what we know about their influence on performance, illustrate how they affect players in a football context, and suggest how this understanding can be used to enhance the effectiveness of teams in a practical coaching environment.

Role States in Sport

Role states in sport are suggested to comprise three areas, role clarity, role acceptance and role performance. Role clarity refers to the degree to which players understand the role assigned to them, role acceptance is the extent to which players are satisfied with their role in the team and role performance refers to the behavior exhibited by individuals that is consistent with their role expectations (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998, p 163). An additional related construct is role ambiguity, which refers to a lack of clear information associated with a particular role or task (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002). Our recent programme of research into the impact of role states on the function and effectiveness of football teams was based on samples from F.A. Academies here in the U.K., and college football programmes in the United States. Our investigations produced a number of interesting findings concerning the development and influence of role states in football. Specifically, we looked at the sources of role clarity and acceptance and the subsequent effects upon the psychology of the team and the individual.

Sources of Role Clarity

In our research we found that the development of role clarity in players was influenced by four main categories, explicit and implicit learning environments, ambiguity concerning role performance and potential conflict over a role. Primarily, role clarity was found to develop in explicit learning environments, which were characterised by regular, highly structured, technical or tactical team sessions directed by a member of the coaching staff. Second, we found that players can learn their specific roles implicitly through unstructured playing experiences, or by modeling the behaviour of role models they watch live or in televised games. For example, a young player may learn how, when and where to dribble by trial and error with friends and by watching and learning (modeling) the technique and application of the skill by one of their favourite players on television. Third, we found that ambiguity concerning how a role is to be performed affects the clarity of understanding of an individual. Specifically, ambiguity may arise with an individual as to when different facets of the role should be performed and against what criteria the performance will be evaluated. The final category found to affect role clarity was the presence of a conflict of roles due to incongruent demands made of the player. Various sources of conflict were identified including, inter-role, intra-sender, and inter-sender conflict. 'Inter-role' refers to the conflicts a player may experience between their roles in the team or other aspects of life such as player, team-mate, friend or husband. 'Intra-sender' conflict may occur if the player is receiving conflicting demands from the same coach. For example, a player might be asked to play very aggressively by the coach but also to try and avoid giving away any free kicks. 'Inter-sender' conflict may arise if there is a clash between the behaviour expected of an individual by two or more coaches or teammates. An example here might be if a goalkeeper has been told by the coach to be patient when releasing the ball, but a teammate is demanding a quick, but risky pass in order to launch a possible counterattack.

Sources of Role Acceptance

Role acceptance was found to be influenced by a combination of three sources, the player's perceptions of the coach, the perceptions of the role itself and a fundamental belief by the player in the team philosophy. For a player to clearly accept their role in a team a fundamental factor was the need to have a respect for the ability of the coaching staff and an appreciation of their coaching style. Role acceptance was also found to be affected by the degree to which the role is perceived as important by the individual to the success of the team, whether it uses the player's best attributes and whether they are successful within that role. If a player feels that in some way the role does not suit them they can suffer what is termed 'person-role' conflict. Coaches will not always be able to maximize each of these factors to reduce such conflict but an understanding of them may enable us to strike a balance. For example, a very quick player that enjoyed getting forward to deliver crosses as a winger will have experienced a degree of conflict if selected as a full-back. This conflict will have developed because the player perceives that they are not being allowed to use their best attributes, which could ultimately lead to a lack of role acceptance. In order to maintain the player's role acceptance, and avoid person-role conflict, it should subsequently be emphasised to the player that their new role is extremely important to the success of the team. A final factor in the development of role acceptance is an individual's belief in the team philosophy, which leads players to simply 'buy-into' whatever role is presented to them. An example here would be feverous team ethic displayed by the Korean and Japanese teams in the World Cup, indicative of the highly collective nature of those societies. This mentality is a very desirable team characteristic in many competitive situations, but in a society where more independent thinking is encouraged, coaches may be required to more actively promote its development.

An important point to highlight at this stage is that while the different forms of role conflict are potential obstacles to developing desirable states of role clarity and role acceptance, which we associate with enhanced performance, conflict can be used positively by the coaching

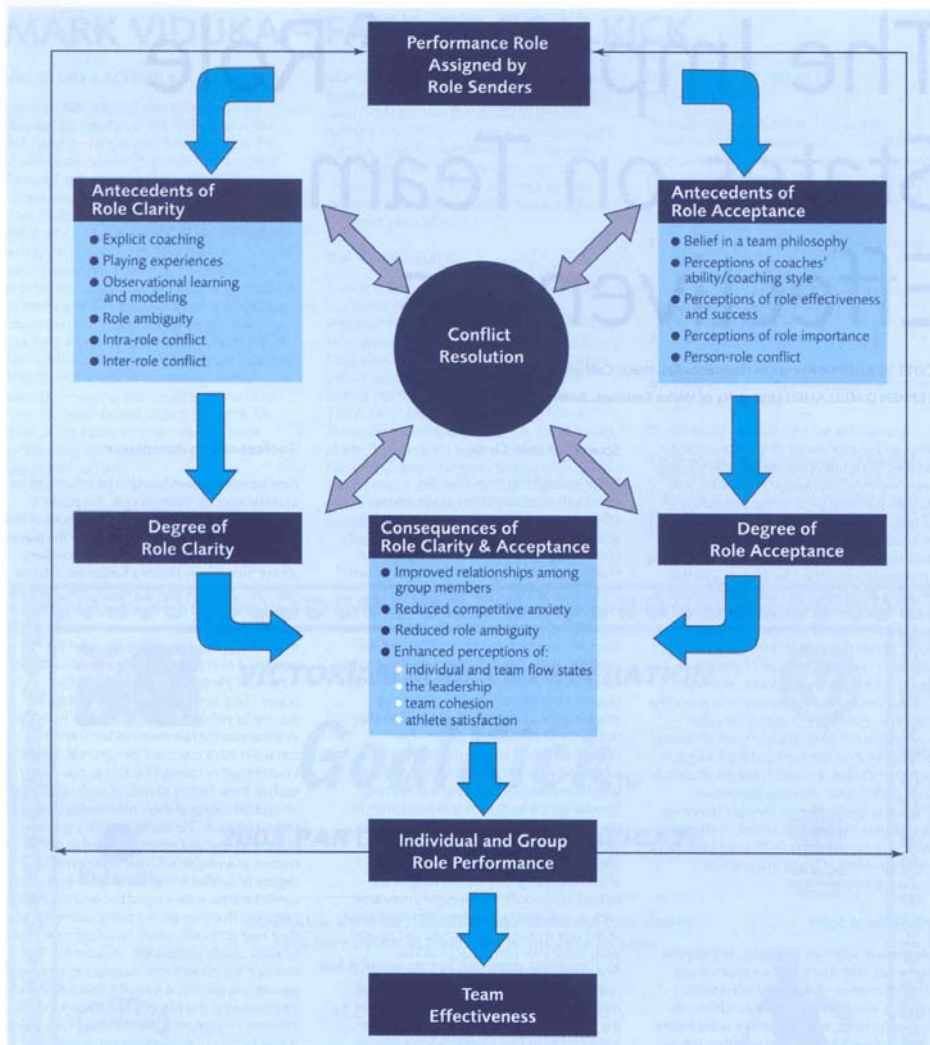


Figure 1. The role episode cycle

staff. Conflict is in fact highly desirable in effective teams and often simply reflects an innovative and creative team with a healthy flow of new ideas. However, to use conflict in a positive way we must ensure that we have effective conflict resolution processes allowing the good ideas to be implemented and the bad ones to be left behind. For example, it could be argued that if the Republic of Ireland had more effective conflict resolution processes during last summer's World Cup finals, the well documented Roy Keane incident could have had the positive effect of driving the team further forward as a complete and united squad rather than as a divided one without its most effective player.

Benefits of Positive Role States

Positive role states in sport offer a broad range of beneficial consequences that can influence player performances. In our studies we found that role clarity was associated with enhanced player perceptions of the coach, increased confidence in a player's ability to successfully complete a role or task, and reduced anxieties and concerns regarding performance. Enhanced perceptions of both role clarity and role acceptance were also found to contribute to an increase in effective communications and general relationships not only among players, but also between players and coaches. Finally, increases in both role states were observed to

be associated with benefits to the overall 'health' of the team, including enhanced perceptions of team cohesiveness, team confidence and player satisfaction with their role in the team. These 'consequences' of enhanced roles states were found to lead to further enhanced individual and group role performance and ultimately influence overall team effectiveness.

The Role Episode: Implications for Enhancing Team Effectiveness

The following section provides a summary framework of our investigation into role states and the role episode cycle (figure 1) together

with some practical implications for the coach. The framework begins at the top of the figure with the performance roles assigned to the players by the coaches (role senders). The degree of clarity and acceptance of these roles by the individual is then determined by the sources contributing to the development of role states. Here any potential role conflicts and ambiguities may arise and an outcome (negative or positive) is achieved through various conflict resolution processes. As a result of the conflict resolution process the individual will achieve a certain degree of clarity and acceptance with their assigned role. The consequences of each role state are then listed in the lower half of the framework, which are suggested to enhance individual and team performance and ultimately team effectiveness. At this point it is important to be aware that the entire episode is a cyclical one (as indicated by the arrows). The nature of the competitive environment across a season is highly dynamic with teams evolving over time, new players replacing injured and suspended players, or improving squad players replacing those experiencing a lack of form. In addition, coaches may further decide to employ new tactics and strategies within an existing formation or review the formation altogether. These and others all contribute to create a dynamic process within the team.

The framework presented here is intended to offer a means to help coaches and sport scientists identify potential sources of problems and design useful strategies to facilitate the development of effective teams with a specific emphasis upon the role states of the individual. The following suggestions provide some examples of how the framework may be used to influence the coaching environment and improve the effectiveness of teams. The list is not intended as an exhaustive one! Coaches are encouraged to look at each of the relationships in the framework and explore how they might use this understanding to enhance the effectiveness of their players and teams.

Adopt an appropriate coaching style

Players respond best when coaching is delivered in a style that they can relate to. If they do not like the coaching style they are likely to accept the role to a lesser extent and their performance might be negatively affected. For example, an autocratic style of coaching will be an obstacle to the development of role acceptance in a group of players who may prefer a more democratic style of coaching that allows for discussion and empowerment in the development of their roles.

Be ready to actively resolve conflict and embrace change

Consider how conflicting ideas among the players, coaches, and between players and coaches, might be used to the advantage of the team. Conflict management is a key skill in coaching and management that takes practice. However, by maintaining good lines of communication and remaining open to new ideas we can help teams to evolve. The best ideas are taken on board and the bad ones are discussed and left behind. Remember, without being able to deal with new ideas, we would all believe that the Earth is flat!

Direct players to maximize all learning opportunities

There are a number of ways in which players can learn about their performance roles in sport. While your players are likely to be involved in scheduled practical coaching sessions, do they learn effectively when they watch live or televised matches? Can we direct players (particularly young players) to watch football more specifically? And can players make use of the array of appropriate role models that exist in the World game today?

Ensure that players understand the importance of their role

Players report that they are far more likely to accept their role or 'job' if they can see how it is important to the team. The negative impact of asking a player to play in a position they do not like might be avoided by assuring them that their new role is highly important to the success of the team and explain how undertaking this role will facilitate team performance.

Give players well-defined roles

A player's confidence in his ability to perform will improve if they have a clear and well-defined performance role. Asking a player to get as many crosses in as possible during a game may not be as effective as requesting them to deliver as many crosses to the near post as early as possible. This does not mean that intuitive, innovative and creative play is stifled, as this can also be an element of a well-defined role too. For example, a player may be asked to be creative and innovative in a one-on-one situation in the final third but in the defensive third of the pitch be requested to play safe! A player going through a slump or a lack of confidence may also benefit from a simplified role with fewer elements expected of their performance so that they can focus on positive aspects or styles of their play.

Maintain continuity among coaches' instructions

With a team of coaches be sure that you are all on the same page in terms of a consistent strategy and tactics delivered to the players. This will avoid players experiencing psychological conflict and subsequent possible detrimental effects on their performance. Similarly, conflicting demands between the messages given by coaches and those shouted out by parents during a game may have negative effects on performance at the youth level.

Strive for effective feedback

Effective feedback requires the coach and the player to understand precisely what was expected from the performance (eg well-defined roles). If this can be achieved, players will experience greater feelings of success, which contribute to building confidence (both team and individual). Further, constructive criticism is likely to be well received and relationships between coaches and players enhanced.

Remember it's a constantly changing dynamic process

This cannot be emphasised enough. Football is an interactive sport with many different performance components and subsequent relationships among the coaching and playing staff. Coaches need to be continually vigilant of these dynamics processes in order to maximize their effectiveness.

Summary

There are many ways in which role states, and the role episode cycle within which they operate, can affect the performance of football teams at both an individual and team level. Understanding these processes can enhance positive individual mental attributes such as satisfaction and confidence together with team attributes such as effective communication and group cohesion. The knowledge illustrated in the role episode cycle can be applied in many ways to manage our coaching environments, selections of which are described above. It is hoped that this introduction will lead to not only to an increased understanding of the area of role theory, but an increase of creative interventions in the coaching environment.

Further Reading

Carron, A.V. & Hausenblas, H.A. (1998) *Group Dynamics in Sport*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology

Beauchamp, M.R., Bray, S.R., Eys, M., & Carron, A.V. (2002) *Role ambiguity, role efficacy, and role performance: Multidimensional and mediational relationships within interdependent sport teams*. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 6, 229-242

Tubre, T.C., & Collins, J.M. (2000) Jackson and Schuler (1985) revisited: *A meta-analysis of the relationship between role ambiguity, role conflict, and job performance*. *Journal of Management*, 26, 155-169

Scott Juniper has recently completed his Master of Philosophy on the topic of the influence of role theory in football at the Department of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Bath. You can get more information from www.psimax.net or contact him at Scott@psimax.net

Dr Stephen Mellalieu is a lecturer in Applied Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Wales Swansea. You can contact him at S.D.Mellalieu@swansea.ac.uk