Some Observations on the Widespread Existence of Role Ambiguity in Faculties of Business Administration : Sources, Costs and Solutions

Gerald D. Sentell

1. Introduction

It has come to be generally accepted that widespread role ambiguity* in an organization is potentially detrimental both to the organization as a whole and to the individuals belonging to it. Role ambiguity can be particularly troublesome in essentially non–hierarchical organizations such as universities.

Unfortunately, there are probably few organizations (qua positions) more ambigious than those typically assigned to members of professional–discipline faculties (e.g., business administration, public administration, law, medicine). This is especially true for the so–called administrative disciplines.

In this paper the major reasons for much of the pervasive ambiguity which surrounds such faculty roles are investigated by focusing on the example provided by faculties of business administration. The potentially far reaching negative effects of this ambiguity, for both individual faculty members and the university as a whole, are also considered. Finally, in an effort to overcome many of the individual frustrations, intrauniversity conflicts, and operational inefficiences associated with role ambiguity, some suggestions for its reduction are offered.

---

*In this context role ambiguity is defined to exist when position descriptions (i.e., role definitions) in an organization are ill defined and generally misunderstood. Ideally, individual filling a position in an organization (i.e., the role in which he has been cast) should be reasonably what is expected of him, both in terms of performance and behavior. All other members of the organization should share a similar set of perceptions and expectations for that role as well. When an individual is not sure of his role and/or when other members of the organization are unable to agree on the proper definition of that role, we say that the role is ambigious (i.e., poorly or variably defined).

2. Sources of Role Ambiguity in Faculties of Business Administration

Ideally individual roles within an organization should be defined in such a way that the successful performance of all the actors in those roles would, in combination with one another, permit the organization to attain its overall goals in an effective and efficient manner. This of course presumes that the organization has a clear set of measurable, attainable, and relevant objectives. Unfortunately, most faculties of business administration have not yet been able to develop and subsequently obtain and sustain general agreement with any such set of objectives. In fact, the inability to formulate consistent and generally accepted objectives is the primary source of most of the role ambiguity in faculties of business administration.

Therefore, the obstacles facing faculties of business administration efforts to set objectives are also the sources of much of their role ambiguity as well. Let us first identify four of the more important, universal, and pervasive sets of these basic obstacles and then consider how they have contributed to the development of ambigious faculty roles.

Major Sources of Role Ambiguity

Perhaps the most fundamental reason for the lack of generally accepted and widely applicable organizational objectives in faculties of business administration (and, hence, the existence of chronic role ambiguity) is the multiplicity of powerful publics competing for the services of those faculties. These groups include members of other faculties, university administrators, students, businessmen and professionals, the general public, and so on. Each of these separate publics has different expectations and perspectives. Unfortunately, to further complicate matters, meeting the demands of any one of these groups often reduces the organization's ability to meet the demands of the others as well.

Take for example the expectations of other faculties and university administrators. Their attitudes and expectations are firmly rooted in their often varying conceptions of the role and purpose of a university. One should recall that the modern university, in terms of organizational structure and purpose, is not too far removed from a form designed to accomodate an almost total devotion to what we would today refer to collectively as the "Arts." In fact, given the long history of the development of the modern university and its curricula, the addition of basic natural sciences to those curricula represents a relatively recent phenomenon. The much more recent addition of the social sciences, professional, and administrative studies is a process not yet completed. That is to say, while these curricula may have been fully injested by the university, they have yet to be fully digested.

In other words, the university as we know it has been trying – and is likely to continue trying for the forseeable future – to accomodate its traditional structures and objectives to demands accruing from a turbulent technological and sociological environment. Not the least disruptive of these demands are those flowing from the various professional faculties, their students and outside supporters. For, unlike the older "Arts" and "Sciences" disciplines where knowledge and/or personal skills (such as art, music, creative writing, etc.) could be transmitted and measured in esoteric terms generally acceptable to the university community as well as to the world at large, professional faculties must transmit skills which often defy measurement of any kind, especially esoteric measurement.

Even while their needs and purposes are not very well understood by more "traditional" faculties and university administrators, business administration faculties are also under constant and heavy pressure to produce a stream of well-qualified students willing and able to function professionally almost immediately upon graduation. The students themselves seek professional positions providing a clean shot at the "good life." Their families and supporters want a "good return on their investment." That is, upon completion of a business administration degree they expect their son or daughter to be prepared for – and to therefrom obtain – a "good" job. The business and professional publics expect business administration faculties not only to prepare students so well that they can begin almost immediately to contribute to the profitability of their new employer, but also to "weed out" marginal students so that the businesses themselves make few hiring mistakes. And, finally, the general public expects – indeed, demands – faculties of business administration to develop the kinds of professional and administrative talent required by increasingly complex and sophisticated societies. This is especially true in developing countries where managerial expertise is in such short supply.

A second and generally related reason for the difficulty in setting objectives for faculties of business administration is the historical inability of universities to distinguish clearly between education and training. Implicit in this dichotomy is the fundamental – and generally uncontested – belief that a university should be engaged in educational activities, not training. However, disputes arise almost immediately whenever efforts are made to specifically define training and education so as to be able to distinguish between them. This dilemma is much less critical in the traditional arts and sciences faculties. However, given the nature of business administration it has proven to be a major source of disagreement both within faculties of business administration and between those faculties and the more traditional sectors of the university. For example, few would argue with the inclusion of theoretically rigorous courses in managerial economics or management science in a business curriculum. Similarly, few would argue against the exclusion of such

simple mechanical courses as typing. But what about courses in auditing, salesmanship, or short hand? It is these subject matter areas (i.e., those in which it is difficult to distinguish between training and education) that create the problems, not the more obvious areas mentioned earlier.

A third reason for the lack of an effective set of objectives in faculties of business administration is the general absence of specific and precise organizational objectives at the university level. Universities, especially publically supported institutions, usually state their objectives in the form of a mix of three basic elements. These include teaching (i.e., educating traditional student groups), generating and dissimenating new knowledge (i.e., research and publication) and serving the community (i.e., educating non—traditional student groups, consultancy, etc.). However, once stated in very general terms these multiple objectives seem to make little real collective impact. Universities, for multiple reasons, tend instead to pay lip service to the importance of the need for a careful balance among all three, and in practice to emphasize only one or two at a time. Even worse, the selection of the elements to be emphasized is subject to substantial and often unpredictable variation over relatively short periods of time.

The final reason to be considered in this paper is the continuing identity problem confronting many individual members of faculties of business administration, to wit : is he a professional (in terms of his discipline, say for example marketing or business economics) or is he an educator? It is easy to say that he is—and should be—both. However, it is much more difficult, indeed nearly impossible, for him to satisfactorily meet all the major expectations inherent in fulfilling both of those roles at the same time. The distinction is not unlike that which exists between the roles of teacher on the one hand and professor on the other, but it is more subtle. Take for example the differences between the professional standings of a professor of English literature and a professor of marketing. Scholars devoting their careers to the study of literature find that membership in their profession is nearly synonomous with belonging to an applicable university faculty while a professor of marketing finds himself considered only a tangential member of his disciplinary profession. In fact, the American Marketing Association has been forced to hold separate national meetings for its professorial members because the interests of educators and practictioners seem to coincide so little.

Implications of Role Ambiguity

Without the kinds of identifiable and relevant targets which can be produced only after a clear set of organizational objectives is in hand, individual and group performance in universities is often evaluated on the basis of unsuitable, irrelevant, or at best only partially relevant performance correlates. For example, faculty performance is frequently measured in terms of the number of hours and/or

the number of students passing through, the number of publications recorded, or the number of services performed rather than in terms of the amount and "value" of new knowledge transferred to those students, the value or quality of the "new" knowledge and information flowing from various research and publications activities, the quality of services rendered the community, etc.*

The absence of clear performance measurements and objectives contributes to the creation of an organizational climate in which role ambiguity thrives. Consider the outcome of a faculty of business administration's efforts to meet the demands placed upon it by the many publics clamoring for its services when it is not clearly and consistently guided by generally accepted organizational objectives. On the one hand the other more traditonal faculties in the university are often unhappy with the professional–discipline faculty's methods of operation. They resent the acceptance of the general practice of externally compensated individual consulting activities both for reasons of principal and, unfortunately, for reasons of envy. Their concept of what constitutes academic research often does not include the applications–oriented undertakings of professional faculties. And, they are often suspicious of the influence that external constituencies seem to hold with the professional faculties (e.g., the business community, government agencies, etc.) and suspect the professional faculties of stressing "training" to the detriment of "education." On the other hand the outside business community accuses the faculty of business administration of being too "impractical" and stressing "esoterica" unneeded by students and unwanted by their potential employers rather than stressing immediately useful skills.

Thus, faculty as a whole is in a sense held for ransom by both of these groups of constitutents. It is caught between their mutually exclusive demands and without the benefit of clear objectives it attempts unsuccessfully to satisfy both. But, if it becomes more like the traditional faculties its ability to place its students, its standing in the community at large, and its reputation among outside professional groups are all severely threatened. Or, if it attempts to fall more in line with the expectations of the business community, its standings in the university (and, hence, its budgets and rewards) are subject to erosion. Therefore, it can satisfy neither group. And, in its inevitable vacillations between the two opposite poles, suboptimal allocations of organizational resources and misdirections of efforts become the rule rather than the exception.

---

*In fact, it seems as if universities often, though unsuspectingly, embrace the labor theory of value. That is, they tend to measure performance and distribute rewards and resources on the basis of the quantity of effort put into the process rather than on the "real" value of the outputs flowing from it.

In such an erratic organizational environment individual faculty members are usually left pretty much to their own devices. To the extent that precise direction is provided it is generally along the lines of stressing one or another of the suboptimal performance measures discussed above (i.e., unsuitable, irrelevant, or at best only partially relevant performance correlates) and even then it is subject to frequent and unpredictable changes. Therefore, each member of the faculty must generate his own professional objectives, albeit this is most often done implicitly.

Some seize this opportunity to expand their horizons and continue their professional development. Others take the same opportunity to rest on their laurels. Whatever their objectives or lack of objectives for that matter, each also develops an impression of his own role and how it should be played. To the extent that objectives differ role definitions also differ. This is to say that congruent objectives tend to produce similar role definitions while divergent objectives tend to produce dissimilar role definitions. Thus, it often happens that an individual's concept of his own role and appropriate performance in that role varies considerably from others' conceptions of his role. Hence, role ambiguity and attendent incidents of intrapersonal and intraorganizational conflict are the likely-if not the inevitable-outcomes.

3. Costs of Role Ambiguity

The costs associated with role ambiguity are generally easy to isolate and identify. However, they are by their very nature difficult to measure with any degree of precision. For our purposes it is sufficient to realize that they are collectively "high" for both the organization as a whole and its individual members. But, our purposes should be well served by the brief review of the nature of those costs which follows.

Because of the myriad competing demands placed upon individual faculty members (e.g., by each of the publics served by faculties of business, by the lack of precise and stable organizational goals, etc.) they often find themselves trapped in difficult and extremely dissonant states. For example, the typical member of a faculty of business administration generally perceives himself to be both a university professor (in the generic rather than titular sense of the word) and a professional (i.e., a highly trained applier of a bundle of technologies and/or practices involved in a specific "administrative" discipline). But, for reasons outlined earlier, other professors from the more traditional faculties do not believe that the role he is performing is that of a true academician while at the same time practitioners of his discipline do not believe that his role is truly "professional" either. When the previously discussed implications of the lack of appropriate organizational goals are added to this mix the result is personal and professional frustration and

psychological dissonance. It is the degree of dissonance, the individual's ability to abide dissonance, the nature and effects of his efforts to reduce this dissonance, and the subsequent and related responses of others which combine to determine the costs that his ambiguous role extracts from him.

Pervasive and apparently continuous states of dissonance generally lead to low morale, and personal dissatisfaction. These are collectively responsible for poor performance, low productivity, insufficient motivation and inadequate professional development which in turn can—and usually do—exacerbate some of the original causes of role ambiguity.

To continue the example of the individual member of a business administration faculty we find that low productivity and inadequate professional development reinforce the outsiders belief that the subject individual is not performing his role (as they define that role). By their responsive actions they often purposely or otherwise increase his dissonance and frustration. If the individual faculty member's self-confidence and self-esteem can be serious by shaken he is especially vulnerable to these external influences.

The combined costs of role ambiguity for the individual can often be high indeed, especially when the faculty as a whole is not able to provide him with the kinds of organizational support and sense-of-purpose that can help him control and ultimately overcome his dissonance. He is likely to be unhappy and dissatisfied with the organization to which he belongs as well as with the role to which he has been assigned. One normal response to such frustration and external "threats" is aggressive behavior. When a large number of the individual members of an organization are caught-up in role—ambiguity—related—dissonance, and thereby perceive themselves to be threatened by one another, the resulting aggressive responses can cause high and intense levels of interpersonal conflicts within the organization. The psychological costs of such conflicts for the individuals involved can be both substantial and long-lasting.

Organizations, especially labor intensive organizations engaged in creative and/or intellectual undertakings, such as university faculties, are especially vulnerable to the kinds of problems produced when large numbers of its highly educated and independent—minded members reflect high levels of personal dissonance and interpersonal disagreements or even conflict. Such organizations find themselves plagued by inefficiency, ineffectiveness, interdepartmental feuding, high personnel turnover rates (often losing the best and retaining the worst), other staffing difficulties, and widespread waste. These are the organizational costs imposed by role ambiguity and they are being paid with unfortunate regularity by many faculties of business administration.

One final caveat before we leave the costs of role ambiguity to take up some suggested solutions. It is important that we recognize that role ambiguity in measured amounts is not always detrimental. Manageable levels of dissonance can often encourage self-confident and self-motivated individuals to reduce their dissonance via expanded output and self-development. In these cases both the organization and the individual member would benefit. Unfortunately, however, these individuals are the exception rather than the rule and even in their case the levels of dissonance should be relatively low and the individual encouraged to perceive that he can most effectively resolve dissonance through his own positive efforts.

4. Some Suggested Solutions

From all of the foregoing discussions it should be clear that the ideal solution to the set of problems associated with role ambiguity calls first for the development of appropriate, complete, internally integrated, and widely accepted sets of organizational objectives, both at the university and faculty of business administration levels. Unfortunately, it should be equally clear that the development of such objectives is likely to occur neither spontaneously nor smoothly. A legitimate question, then, is how can these problems be attacked in the difficult environments we have already described? The following proposals represent an effort to provide an answer for that question rather than an attempt to develop a set of "ideal" but unworkable solutions.

First, it is probably safe to assume that for a long time to come most universities are not likely to develop a set of overall objectives of sufficient scope and precision to be of much benefit. Neither is it likely that a consensus upon which such objectives can be based will spontaneously develop among all the publics served by faculties of business administration. Furthermore, even though we might ordinarily expect some positive efforts in this direction to originate from among the individual members of the effected organization itself, in this case such an event is not likely for several reasons. Chief among these is the fundamental lack of consensus among the individual faculty members themselves. Various factions within the faculty organization support the aims of one or more of the outside publics in opposition to other internal factions, or find themselves in opposition to other factions for policy or strategic matters. Unfortunately, such factions often oppose one another for less selfless reasons as well. Thus, it would appear as if the initiation of efforts necessary to break out of the "vicious circle" in which faculties of business administration find themselves trapped must come from within the organization itself, more specifically, the leadership of the faculty.

Before proceeding further into the discussion, an important caveat should be inserted. That is, authoritarian management styles are incompatible with the development of an effective and well-respected faculty of business administration. A faculty is not like a business organization or a government bureaucracy. The process of managing a faculty of business administration must permit–indeed require–the participation of its individual members. The highly trained and usually competent professionals which belong to faculties of business administration have chosen their occupations for many reasons, but monetary compensation is certainly not among them. In almost every country of the world, business administration faculty members could make much more money in other occupations. Consequently, ordinary methods of motivation and control might not be effective. When carried to the extreme they would probably be counterproductive.

Therefore, it is important that the term leadership as it is used here not be narrowly interpreted to include only those assigned to official administrative positions in the organizational hierarchy. While such leaders could arbitrarily establish objectives, they are not likely to thereby obtain the degree of faculty agreement and active cooperation required for the attainment of those objectives. Instead, leadership in this context includes those accepted for that capacity by individual faculty members. These "leaders" come from both the formal and informal organization structures.

The first step in overcoming role ambiguity and its attendent problems and costs should be the attainment of a sense of commitment on the part of the faculty leadership to work toward that goal. The next step is for the leadership to develop a program for involving all of the members of the faculty in the process of establishing acceptable, relevant, and meaningful objectives for the faculty as a whole. The nature of this process should be conditioned to accomodate the peculiar requirements of a given faculty (e.g., the cultural characteristics of the societies involved, the strength of the leadership, internal divisions, the structure of the university, etc.), and should be time bound at the outset. In other words, a sufficient period of time should be allowed for the accomplishment of the task, but the process should be designed to insure the project's timely fruition.

Once a complete and competent set of objectives have been accepted by a sufficient number of the individual members of the faculty, the next step is to communicate those objectives to the various interested publics, especially the university administration, in an effort to gain acquiescence with, if not support for, their adoption. This is a particularly critical step in the process. At the outset the faculty of business administration need not expect–nor does it require–university support for its new objectives. However, it cannot afford the active opposition of the university administration either.

After a suitable set of objectives is in hand, the faculty leadership, along with the individual members of the faculty, must develop compatable operating strategies. A major part of strategy formulation should include task assignments and role definitions. The individual roles and the definitions of each would necessarily be communicated to the individuals to be placed in those roles as well as to all with whom they must interact. If properly designed staffed, communicated and managed, such a system of roles would systematically direct the tasks of their holders' so that the organization's objectives would be met on a regular and ongoing basis.

The final step in this process is a never ending one. It involves the constant measurement and evaluation of the organization's performance for the purpose of adjusting strategies or altering objectives as necessary. Adjustments to objectives and/or strategies generally involve alterations of one or more role definitions as well. If individual roles were clearly defined and communicated at the outset and if subsequent definitional changes and modifications are made and communicated equally clearly, many of the problems caused by role ambiguity can be resolved.

Unfortunately it is far easier to recognize the symptoms of role ambiguity, dianose the "illness" and prescribe the necessary medication than it is to administer that medicine. The cure is neither easy nor painless. Individuals will be discomforted and the organization will be subject to especially intense internal disruptions as the process forges ahead threatening various special interest groups and internal coalitions. But the alternative to the pain of the cure is an organizational malise satisfying to no one.

For the faculties which decide to move ahead regardless of the short—run disruptions, three final caveats are offered. First, recognize that the process will take time, lots of it. A year to merely set and obtain agreement with objectives, two years to implement the new strategies, and so on. Thus, patience in large amounts will be required. Second, there will be a desire upon occasion to steamroller rearguard opponents to the program. Again, patience will be required. Convince rather than cajole, encourage rather than demand. Finally, once the process is underway the organization should avoid the temptation of making role descriptions too precise and invariant. The basic professional autonomy of the individual faculty member should be left intact. He should still have as much say in how and what he teaches, when and what he researches, and what mix of community services he provides as possible.

The university is, after all, not a factory and the satisfaction and well—being of its faculty members should be among its foremost concerns. A large part of the university's responsibilities involves creativity, and creativity prospers

in a free atmosphere while it withers under the heavy hand of too much control or under the anarchous conditions of no controls. Therefore, excessive control can be just as bad for a faculty of business administration as too little control, and the wrong kind of control could be even worse.

5. Summary and Conclusions

In summary we can say that because of the ongoing changes in the structures, missions, self and public images of–and expectations for–universities in general, the universities themselves are left without adequate and generally accepted overall organizational objectives. The lack of university–wide objectives is further compounded at the level of the faculty of business administration by the varying demands placed upon it by the many publics it is expected to serve. Thus, the faculty of business administration is not usually provided with a clear and internally acceptable set of organizational objectives from above, nor has it yet been able to develop such objectives by itself because of its own inability to reconcile the many and often inconsistent demands placed upon it by external groups. In a sense, therefore, faculties of business administration usually find themselves trapped in something akin to a "directional vacuum."

The lack of direction leads to many strategic vacillations and organizational weakness which ultimately allow–indeed require–individual members of the faculty to develop their own objectives and operational strategies independent of well–planned and consistent organizational parameters. In the absence of clear, consistent, and internally acceptable organizational controls the many competing interests, attitudes, and personal expectations of individual faculty members cannot be reconciled. This lack of reconciliations in combination with traditions of faculty independence and general (and probably proper and necessary) resistence to the imposition of outside controls (whether from the university administration or beyond), leads to poorly defined roles for individual members of the faculty. Hence, chronic and costly role ambiguity abounds unchecked.

Role ambiguity involves costs for both the organization as a whole and the individual faculty member. For the organization these costs include inefficiency, ineffectiveness, interdepartmental feuding, high personnel turnover rates, staffing difficulties, and general waste. For the individual they can involve low morale, poor personal performance, widespread interpersonal conflicts, personal dissatisfaction, low productivity, and inadequate professional development.

A multistage program for resolving many of the problems attributable to severe cases of role ambiguity in faculties of business administration calls for the leadership in such a faculty to commit itself to the establishment of meaningful relevant, measureable and generally acceptable organizational objectives, a set of

integrated and consistent strategies, and relevant role definitions and position descriptions. It further calls for constant monitoring, evaluation, and control as well as for regular modifications of the program and its elements as required.

A final and important warning which should attend any effort to enforce a more rigorous organizational framework onto individual faculty members is to avoiding overcontrolling. Proper and sufficient managerial controls are called for, excessive or inappropriate controls can sometimes be more disruptive than constructive. Clear objectives, precise but not inflexible role definitions, regular and meaningful participation by individual faculty members, moderation and patience are all necessary ingredients for a successful program. And a successful program should pay substantial dividends to all concerned.

REFERENCES

Drucker, Peter F, *The Effective Executive*, Harper and Row Publishers, 1967.

Drucker, Peter F, *Management, Tasks – Responsibilities – Practices*, Harper and Row Publishers, 1974.

Drucker, Peter F, *People and Performance : The Best of Peter Drucker on Management*, Harper and Row Publishers, 1977.

Hancy, William V., *Communication and Interpersonal Relations : Text ond Cases*, Richard D. Irwin, Inc., Fourth Edition, 1979.

Mager and Pipe, *Analyzing Performance Problems*, Fearon Publishers, 1970.

Massie, Joseph L. *Essentials of Management*, Prentice–Hall, Inc., Third Edition, 1979.

Webber, Ross A., *Management : Basic Elements of Managing Organizations*, Richard D. Irwin, Inc., Revised Edition, 1979.