

Leadership and Power in Fostering a Collaborative Community in a Non-profit Professional Organization

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Abstract

Organization development issues among small-scale local professional organizations have rarely been addressed in the adult education human resource development (HRD) literature. In this paper, I provide a first-hand account of an organization development effort in an all-volunteer chapter of an HRD professional organization. This effort grew into an attempt to foster a professional community of practitioners, while examining the power dynamics within the group, specifically the power exercised by myself, as a leader of the group. Due to space constraints, I primarily focus on the self-study aspects of the process of forming the committee and working through issues of leadership and power.

In September 2005, I was asked to become the director of a local area branch (LAB) of this chapter. The chapter covers a large geographic area and consists of four regions with separate (but affiliated) groups and activities. Each LAB has a director. This particular LAB had become inactive in the prior year, due to some leadership transitions and lack of member interest. After agreeing to take on the role, I planned to organize a few small activities, so that the local group would not fade away entirely. I was not interested in putting much work into this effort, due to other commitments. As I will explain later, my interest evolved and I became interested in seeing the group grow into an active professional development community for HRD practitioners. Action research was utilized as we sought these goals.

Approach to Action Research

Action research is difficult to define, due to the various approaches utilized in different settings. From my perspective, action research is a loose set of principles used in practice to (a) understand the situation, (b) plan for future actions, (c) implement those actions, and (d) reflect on those actions after they have occurred. A common way of conceptualizing these steps is through cycles or spirals. In this project, these steps overlapped and were not neat and tidy.

Balancing Problem-Solving with the Exploration of Values and Possibilities

Although this project had very practical implications and was undertaken for instrumental reasons (i.e., we wanted to reinvigorate the group), the project was heavily influenced by a critical and non-instrumentalist approach. In other words, the goal was not merely to improve our practice or performance, but also to envision more humane and inclusive ways of operating the group (Block, 2002). Specifically, I sought to explore the balancing of my role as the group's director (i.e., the leader) with the desire to develop a more collaborative approach. In that sense, this project was a self-study in which I experimented with a new leadership style. Throughout the exploration, I considered the complicated relationships that emerge through the exercise of power while attempting to foster collaboration.

A very explicit attempt was made to integrate action research into the actual work of the group, in order to avoid thinking of group members as an "other" or as a "researched" group. Additionally, I sought for the action research to be a natural component of our work in the group instead of creating a burdensome additional requirement for the LAB committee and others.

This balancing was sometimes difficult given the critical influences adopted in the project.

As mentioned earlier, we undertook this effort as an instrumental project. However, we attempted to balance those short-term concerns with a larger focus on working to create something new for our group rather than just organizing more events. In addition to being influenced by Block's ideas (2002), I emphasized the need to examine the power and control that I held over the group (as I will discuss later). Oftentimes, participatory approaches are used as a means of subtle control that help to obscure who is really in charge (Elliott & Turnbull, 2003; Foucault, 1978). Therefore, I attempted to be honest and forthcoming about issues of power and control as this project emerged.

Quality and Methodology

An important part of action research is straightforwardness and a forthcoming account of the research process and methods used, which contributes to the quality and trustworthiness of the study. Conventional ideas of validity are heavily contested within action research and action research specialists have developed alternative means of examining the trustworthiness, integrity, or quality of this type of research (e.g., Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Jacobson, 1998).

Throughout the report, I make a conscious attempt to reflect the ongoing responsiveness of the research to the events that occurred, which is one standard of quality (Jacobson, 1998). Another common criterion for quality is the extent that the research applies to practice or results in a change in outcome. The idea of critical responsiveness (Jacobson, 1998) or catalytic validity (Anderson et al., 1994) emphasizes the need to respond to the circumstances, adapt accordingly, and transform the reality. In addition to providing truthful accounts, action research seeks to avoid simplistic conclusions that fail to consider multiple perspectives (Anderson et al., 1994). The idea of triangulation or crystallization explains the process undertaken throughout the project. Through using multiple data sources and data types, the project continued to evolve without relying on one narrow data set.

The following data sources were utilized to answer the research question of "What can the committee do to foster a collaborative community in our LAB?" and to inquire into the role of power exercised by the leader of the group: (1) member needs assessment survey, (2) analysis of committee meeting notes, (3) formal and informal interviews with committee members, (4) two post-event attendee surveys, (5) analysis/synthesis of my journal entries (entries were made throughout the year—after each event or committee meeting and as I reflected on the inquiry literature), (6) observations by committee members at membership events, and (7) analysis of end-of-the-year LAB committee follow-up survey (i.e., anonymous online questionnaire). I implemented and designed some of these data collection strategies myself, while group members collaborated on the design of other parts of the data collection process. Again, due to space constraints, I primarily report on the power and leadership aspect of this project.

Evolution of the Action Research Project

In reporting the "results" of this project, I combine a narrative chronological approach and a thematic approach in exploring the issues of the research. Since the project occurred over a 12-month span, it is helpful to explain how the project was conceived and evolved.

My initial aim for the group was to organize a few workshops and do the minimum possible to keep the group mildly active. I refer to "my initial aim" because I had no desire or intention to involve others in the planning, due to the time commitment required. However, after I attended a national workshop for chapter leaders, I became more motivated to try to revitalize

the chapter. I was beginning to recognize that our group had lacked a collective professional identity over the last several years.

In subsequent sections, I outline the chronological stages of the project and explore the thematic issues that arose. In these sections, I interact with the literature in attempt to reflect the conceptual and theoretical inquiry process that was undertaken throughout the project.

The First Event and Formation of a Steering Committee

The first event, in January of 2006, was moderately successful. The event did not allow for as much interaction as I had hoped (and requested of the facilitator), so there was little opportunity for facilitating the building of a professional community.

I concluded that one way to help the group become viable in the long term was to form a committee that would help plan events and bring more diverse ideas and perspectives. Initially, I thought this committee would serve as more of an “advisory committee” than an actual working group. I thought it would be easier if they shared their ideas and then decided which ideas I would execute. I knew this was not a good leadership strategy. Instead, I was seeking an easy way to get people involved without having to deal with the time constraints of delegating responsibilities and facilitating a group. Five people volunteered to serve on the committee.

Leadership and Power on the Committee

By the time our committee first met in February 2006, I had become more interested in attempting to foster a professional community and active working committee. I was also interested in exploring the power dynamics in a committee that attempted to be collaborative. I planned to use action research to help us achieve those goals. Our meeting started off with us discussing “what we wanted to create for our group.” In other words, what did we see ourselves becoming? I had hoped that we could spend more time envisioning our future than talking about specific ideas for events. However, the meeting evolved into discussion of specific activities that we could do. Since we were pressed for time, it was hard for people to spend much time talking about more philosophical and abstract ideas. I did not want to force the group to deal with philosophical issues if they did not want to do so.

During the meeting, I struggled a great deal as I wanted to be an open-minded facilitator and avoid dominating the meeting. My initial vision of a collaborative community was one in which the facilitator or leader avoided asserting power over group members. Also in the first committee meeting, we had some communication problems. Jenny continually insisted on gearing activities toward students. Mark, another committee member who was in attendance, was very open to her ideas of centering activities around students. I awkwardly resisted the idea, while maintaining some openness to it. At the time, I thought she knew we were a professional group that embraced students, not a student group that invited professionals to join us. I later discovered that she thought we were a registered student organization. I could have saved a great deal of time by explaining this fact. Instead, I assumed she knew the aim of our group and I struggled with my desire to encourage a collaborative atmosphere, while at the same time trying to make it clear that her ideas were out of line with the aim of the group.

The Problem with False Consensus. In our first committee meeting, I strived to foster open dialogue and be a “neutral” facilitator that guided the group toward consensus. I quickly realized that this perspective would not work and explored the literature on the topic. As Burrell and Morgan (1979) explain, consensus is often associated with the status quo. Although consensus can be a worthwhile goal, it often comes at the expense of maintenance of individual

values (also see Elliott & Turnbull, 2003; Whyte, 1956). During the meeting, I wondered why Jenny was overemphasizing the need for the group to center its programs around the needs of university students. We talked at length about whether the topics should be geared toward students and whether the events should be held on campus. In my reflections, I wrote, “When you’re trying to have a democratic conversation and people have great ideas but seem to be missing the mission of the organization, how much should a facilitator/leader try to influence the direction of the group?” I later realized that I could not allow the group to be completely centered around the needs of students, but I failed to adequately convey that during the meeting, for fear of “ruining the collaboration.” During a later one-on-one meeting with Jenny, I realized that she thought we were a student group and I explained what type of organization it was. We both shared a laugh about the misunderstanding. Afterwards, I reflected, “How much time could have been saved if I had dealt with it right then and there. Instead, I didn’t want to be ‘too dominating.’ But, in reality, I was overemphasizing the group process (not wanting to ‘shut someone down’ for fear that they wouldn’t contribute more later).” My emphasis on group cohesiveness and resistance to asserting my own opinion resulted in wasting time. I knew that I would not allow the group to focus totally on students, but I failed to convey that idea until later, because I hesitated to over-exercise my power.

Repression of power often puts it out of view; however, power is exercised continuously. Elliott and Turnbull (2003) explain the complexity in reconciling the needs for autonomy and community. When confronting these two needs, the result is oftentimes a skewed view of community that obscures power and leans toward conformity. English (2006) reveals the complexity of power relationships in feminist non-profit organizations, in an attempt to counteract the predominant thinking of these organizations as purely humanistic, inclusive, and collaborative in nature. By examining power relations (i.e., through a Foucauldian analysis), she explains that many of these organizations adapt to dominant norms (e.g., instituting formal boards of directors), due to pragmatic reasons. As one of her participants explained, “real-life demands” (p. 96) require decisions to be made. Her research shows that even in organizations with deeply held values of collaboration, a truly egalitarian system is difficult. Given the historical lack of egalitarianism in the HRD field, it is even more difficult to have an HRD professional organization that is truly collaborative. English’s article highlights that although it can be helpful to strive for collaboration and cooperation, we need to be critical in our analysis of what is happening in our organizations. Again, striving for collaboration and egalitarianism is a worthwhile goal. However, without critical self-examination, our true agendas are merely hidden from public view. Whyte (1956), in his classic defense of individualism, argues that the use of groups can disguise the true intentions of leaders by focusing on false consensus. In my journal on 3/14/06, I wrote that we oftentimes pretend to have group consensus and group decision-making, when in reality, it can be an illusion. “I know that my reaction to outlandish ideas has often been to give them lip service and then move on.”

Directly Addressing Power Relations. Discussions of power and conflict are avoided typically; however, open discussion of these issues can help keep groups together (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Suppression of conflict and avoidance of discussions about power can lead to a false uniformity that can threaten the sustainability of organizations. I applied Flyvbjerg’s notions of power and conflict to the context of my role on the committee. In the 3/8/06 journal entry, I provided other specific examples of my giving “lip service” to ideas (and quietly insuring that those ideas were not implemented) rather than openly discussing why I thought the ideas were not viable. In an attempt to foster the collaborative process, I was hoping that the suppression of

my true intentions would somehow help me share power with group members.

In actuality, I could probably not share power with others, as the leader of the group. Foucault (1978) contends that power cannot be acquired or shared, instead it is exercised from innumerable points by individuals at various levels. In other words, power permeated everything that occurred in our group and was both overtly and covertly exercised by all members of the committee. After a conversation with Jenny about power relations on our committee, I came to understand the awkwardness that accompanies discussions of power in professional settings. I wrote, “I feel like I become nervous and avoid directly addressing [this] touchy issue.” Since non-profit professional organizations exist within a larger societal context, it is helpful to consider how these issues relate to larger trends within workplaces and other organizations.

Although we avoid discussing power, the taboo of talking about power may actually make it more likely that we would talk about it, in a Foucauldian sense. For example, in the early industrial years, management practice accepted that leaders or managers would direct subordinates to do a job (Ciulla, 2000). Consultation or collaboration with individual workers was not expected and everyone knew management made most decisions (although labor unions successfully changed the power dynamics through collective action). On the other hand, today we expect that workers, committee members, and others will participate in the decision-making, usually through unofficial non-union mechanisms. One could argue that under this new arrangement, the true decision-making is merely hidden under the illusion of egalitarianism and shared management. With this belief in egalitarianism, it is taboo to talk about power. However, the taboo may make it *more* likely that people do talk and think about it. In a case study by Brooks (1994), team members in a corporation gave considerable thought to the power differences among their team members, although the teams were instituted as a way of helping all employees to feel involved and equal to each other. The team members knew their place in the hierarchy and discussed it with others at their level. These unofficial discussions of power can add another dynamic which help to subvert the illusion of egalitarianism. However, it might also be viable for discussions about power to be moved into the open, with entire workgroups or committees, rather than only addressing the issue in private spaces (e.g., see Flyvbjerg, 2001).

In our committee, I concluded that we never got beyond the awkwardness and glossing-over of power relations. Among our committee members and in our meetings, our explicit conversations focused on trying to build a collaborative community and share responsibilities among committee members. Reconciling the goal of working toward shared values with the goal of examining power relations was difficult at times. Although these goals (i.e., consensus, exploration of power relations) originate in different philosophical perspectives, there is value in striving toward the goals of consensus, community, and exploration of shared values, while understanding that power and conflict are at the center of any successful attempts to work toward those goals (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Dynamic societies and organizations encourage open and continuous conflict, while closed societies and organizations (with their goal toward uniformity) aim to suppress such conflict. We could have done more to openly explore these issues. Instead, power and conflict were primarily addressed individually and through the self-examination aspect of this action research project. Attempts at open group exploration were not fruitful.

Crystallization and Conclusion

In order to allow for triangulation and crystallization, I asked committee members to complete an end-of-the-year online anonymous survey about whether progress was made in the group, my balancing of the “leadership” and “facilitator” roles, and power dynamics—whether

leadership was really shared in the group. The committee members' perspectives were very similar to the conclusions made from other data sources. However, as expected, they were not critical of my leadership role. Additionally, they saw no problems with my balancing of *leader* and *facilitator* roles. However, in responding to the question about balancing "leadership" with "facilitation," one committee member commented that it would have been helpful to "explicitly describe the LAB director's role...so we know exactly what that entails." This comment supports the earlier conclusion of needing additional explicit conversations about power and leadership roles. Overall, it is difficult to know whether committee members were being kind or completely honest in their assessment of the year's proceedings.

As I have attempted to reflect in this report, the balancing of a leadership role with the goal of collaboration is a complicated endeavor, especially when dealing with tight timeframes. This project presents a first person account of one leader's attempt to grapple with those roles in a non-profit professional organization. The explicit mindfulness of power dynamics was primarily a background issue in the full action research project, but continually presented itself as an issue to be addressed. The relationship between autonomy, shared values/community, and power was an ongoing concern that crept into many aspects of our practice. One lesson learned is that in my future practice, I plan to strive for a more open exploration of power issues and conflict in order to encourage a wider range of perspectives and to openly explore alternative ways of structuring groups. This open exploration of power dynamics can help to prevent the obscuring of true power (under the illusion of egalitarianism) when collaboration is used.

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Presented at the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, September 25-27, 2007.