

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

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## **Abstract**

This article provides an account of first-person action research used for organization development in an all-volunteer professional organization. During a 12-month period, members sought to build a collaborative community out of a formerly defunct group. As part of this project, the group's leader conducted a self-study by examining his role in exercising power while leading the group in building a collaborative community. Although the goals to collaborate and explore power relations originate in different philosophical perspectives, they were combined with moderate success in this project. An ongoing theoretical analysis of the challenges in using this approach illustrates the complications of combining collaborative approaches with the exploration of power.

**Keywords:** Leadership, power, collaboration, self-study, organization development

I provide a first-hand account of an organization development effort in an all-volunteer chapter of a human resource development (HRD) professional organization. Specifically, this effort grew into an attempt to foster a collaborative professional community of practitioners, while examining the power dynamics within the group, specifically the power exercised by myself, as a leader of the group. Although reports of self-study action research are common in some fields like teacher education and community development (e.g., Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001), they are less common in the organization development literature, where action research is more commonly viewed as a problem solving technique or a tool for improving organizational performance (Brooks & Watkins, 1994; Cummings & Worley, 2009).

Regarding the study's setting, organization development issues among small-scale local professional organizations have rarely been addressed in the literature. Small, all-volunteer professional organizations differ from larger non-profit organizations, community-based advocacy groups, and large-scale professional groups due to the differing goals, aims, and dynamics of these types of organizations. Regarding the field of HRD, it is undergoing increasing professionalization, with master's degree programs and other credentials spreading rapidly in the U.S. (e.g., Hatcher, 2006). One threat that can result from this professionalization is standardization and stagnation of the field (Hatcher & Guerdat, 2008; Lee, 2001). Local professional groups can provide opportunities for collaboration, professional socialization, and community among practitioners, which have the potential to encourage diversity of thought and perspectives. These professional development opportunities provide a setting for constructing new knowledge and creating new realities for the field (Wiessner, Hatcher, Chapman, & Storberg-Walker, 2008). This diversity can be achieved through open debate, dissent, and conflict, which can be fostered through collaboration and open explorations of power.

In September 2005, I was asked to become the director of a local branch of a chapter in an HRD professional organization located in the midwestern United States. The chapter covers a large geographic area and consists of four regions with separate (but affiliated) groups and activities. Each local area branch has a director. This particular branch had become inactive in the prior year, due to some leadership transitions and lack of member interest. I was reluctant to take on the responsibility, but eventually agreed to accept the role. My initial plan was to plan a few small activities, in order 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 explained 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. The process included a mix of conventional research tools (e.g., surveys) and approaches more common to action research (e.g., reflection journals, observations). Throughout the process, I also conducted an ongoing theoretical analysis to consider the relationship between fostering a collaborative community of practitioners and my leadership role within the group. I begin with a discussion of the approach to action research methods in this project, followed by an extended narrative and literature reflection that recounts how this process unfolded.

### **1. Approach to Action Research**

The common theme among approaches to action research is the emphasis on intimate involvement by the researcher in influencing change and understanding the issues in real-life contexts. However, various approaches have been used since action research has a long and diverse history. John Collier, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the U.S. government from 1933-1945 is widely seen as one of the early advocates for action research in the U.S. (Noffke, 1997). Collier believed that Native American communities should see tangible benefits from research, rather than being subjected to social research that merely sought to understand their culture. Similar approaches were advocated by Kurt Lewin and John Dewey, who sought to integrate research and practice and share those experiences with larger communities (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Brooks & Watkins, 1994; Noffke, 1997). In other words, they sought tangible benefits from their research, which would be reported to a wider audience outside of the local setting in which the research was conducted. Within organization studies in the U.S., action research is largely used as a problem solving technique centered around the role of consultants (Cummings & Worley, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Maurer, 2006). However, some action researchers are beginning to return to the earlier approaches in which action research is used for exploring larger social issues and the accounts of those efforts are shared with wider audiences outside of specific organizational contexts (Anderson, et al., 1994; Brooks & Watkins, 1994).

Action research is difficult to define, due to the various approaches utilized in different settings. However, I provide a common explanation of action research, which broadly describes how action research was undertaken in this project. Action research is a loose set of principles used in practice to (a) understand what has happened in the past, (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.

## **1.1 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. 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 of both myself (in which I experimented with a new leadership style) and the organization (in which we sought new ways of envisioning the group) (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). The roles of "leader" and the goal of being "collaborative" were sometimes in opposition, but at other times the two roles complemented each other. Throughout the exploration, I considered the complicated relationships that emerge through the exercise of power while attempting to foster collaboration. When considering power relationships, it is important to avoid oversimplified accounts (Weiner, 2004). Instead, nuance and complicated accounts are necessary that take into account the contradictory social arrangements and posituality of all participants. I have attempted to reflect those complicated relationships in this article.

A very explicit attempt was made to integrate action research into the work of the group, in order to avoid thinking of group members as an "other" or as a "researched" group. Additionally, we 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 committee and other members of the group. This balancing was sometimes difficult given the criticality integrated into the project. In other words, we had some difficulty in "seamlessly integrating" critical reflections into the meetings of a pragmatically oriented professional group. This approach was successful for the most part, in that I avoided asking the committee or organization members to do anything that was not related to the practice of our group. This dedication to pragmatism sometimes created barriers that prevented us from focusing on deep group reflection and decision-making regarding the action research project. The committee members were already volunteering their time to help with the organization, so it was difficult to spend too much time discussing this action research project during our meetings since we needed to complete certain tasks. Additionally, we had planned that Jenny, one of the committee members, would be a full collaborator in this action research process. Although she was a significant help in sharing ideas and thoughts regarding this project, she was unable to serve in that role, due to time demands. Undoubtedly, the project would have been strengthened by having additional researchers who were working on the project (Anderson, et al., 1994; Watkins & Brooks, 1994).

My approach to this project and the way in which I lead the group were heavily influenced by Block's (2002) idea of reducing the instrumentality in communities and organizations. Instead of focusing on "how" to accomplish a desired goal, he stresses the need to focus on "what matters" by envisioning the future we wish for and working to enact that vision. Block advocates an avoidance of practical, easy-to-implement solutions that focus on measurement and short-term results. 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 events for the group. As part of that process, we investigated our values and assumptions about why we were undertaking the inquiry (Friedman, Rothman, & Withers, 2006). As part of the self-study of myself, I emphasized the need to examine the power and control that I exercised in the group. 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.

## 1.2 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, et al., 1994; Jacobson, 1998; Watkins & Brooks, 1994; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). In this section, I use those alternative approaches to reflect on the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the methods and approaches utilized in this project.

When this yearlong project started, there was no detailed methodology planned. In fact, when data collection began, this project had not yet been formally conceptualized. Additionally, the theoretical lenses through which I viewed the data emerged as the project progressed. In my account of the project, I seek to avoid a neat account of the data collection methods, which would be an inaccurate portrayal of how the project evolved. The separation of methodology, data collection, and action is difficult to achieve in action research (Anderson, et al., 1994; Feldman, 1994). The methods for this project were not selected before the project began. To reflect that reality, the descriptions of methods are dispersed throughout the account of the project. Throughout the article, I make a conscious attempt to reflect the *ongoing responsiveness* of the research to the events that occurred, which is one standard of quality in action research (Jacobson, 1998). In other words, there was a continuous reflection on and modification of the process that was occurring and the methods used, which were considered in relation to the theory and research literature I interacted with throughout this action research process.

Another common criterion for quality in action research includes consideration of the extent to which 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. The continual tension between problem solving, exploring values, and examining power relations caused me to reflect upon the usefulness of the research throughout the duration of the project. Throughout the project, I made an effort to adapt and transform, even if it was not always successful.

Almost all research strives for the “truth” through honest and accurate reports and accounts of research. In addition to providing truthful accounts, action research seeks to avoid simplistic conclusions that fail to consider multiple perspectives (Anderson, et al., 1994; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). 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. Like a crystal, the data “depend[ed] on how we view[ed] it, how we [held] it up to the light or not” (Janesick, 2000, p. 392). The project continued to crystallize and grow more complex throughout its 12-month duration.

It is important to consider the quality issues pertaining to the self-study aspect of this first-person action research project. Such approaches run the risk of becoming self-indulgent confessionals that interfere with understanding the essence of the research (Fine, Weis, Weseen,

& Wong, 2000; Marshall, 2004). I have attempted manage this risk by seeking feedback from others and being mindful of the risks involved in self-study. One of the biggest limitations in this study is the overemphasis on providing my voice, at the expense of other voices.

Since the accounts of methodology and data collection are dispersed throughout the article, I will provide a list of the data sources used in the study to answer the research question of “*What can the committee do to foster a collaborative community in our organization?*” and to inquire into the role of power exercised by the leader of the group. Data sources included both conventional research tools and approaches more common to action research. The following data sources were utilized: (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 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.

## **2. 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 12-month span, it is helpful to explain how the project was conceived and evolved throughout the year.

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 attending a national workshop for chapter leaders, I became more motivated to try to revitalize the chapter. In fact, I felt some indebtedness to the chapter since the chapter paid for my travel expenses to attend the workshop. At this point, my goal changed and I aimed to organize some nice chapter workshops and try to find a successor to take the position after my term had expired. Additionally, I was beginning to recognize that our group had lacked a collective professional identity over the last several years. In other words, this group merely provided workshops, instead of serving as a professional community for its members.

Subsequent sections provide details of the project’s chronological stages and thematic issues. In these sections, I interact with the inquiry literature in attempt to reflect the conceptual and theoretical reflection process undertaken while progressing through the project.

## **3. Needs Assessment Survey**

In December 2005, prior to forming the committee, I administered an online needs assessment survey to current and past members, as well as other HRD contacts in the area. The goal of the survey was to understand the backgrounds of our current/potential members, what topics interested them, what types of events they would like to attend, challenges they face in their job, and days/times that they could attend meetings. The response rate was only 27% (41 completed surveys). The response rate was hindered since many of the email recipients were merely contacts or prospective members and did not have a previous affiliation with the chapter. The survey included close-ended questions, Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions. Close-ended questions and Likert-scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The majority of the respondents (61%) indicated employment by a college or university. I had expanded our contact list to include over 50 HRD professionals from the large local university who were not on the previous chapter contact list. In the initial analysis, I took that large response to mean that college/university employees were more interested than others in being a part of the chapter. However, it later became apparent that while some university employees attended events, they never constituted a majority of attendees at events. Only 7% of the respondents in the initial survey were from business organizations. This finding was consistent with the contact list and the makeup of the community. Therefore, we made a very explicit attempt to not gear events to business audiences since most HRD discourse is centered around for-profit corporations (Galagan, 2003; Githens, Dirani, Gitonga, & Teng, 2008). The survey also revealed other details that were relevant for our planning purposes, but not applicable to this article.

#### **4. The First Event and Formation of a Steering Committee**

The first event, in January, was moderately successful. It had already been planned, due to being cosponsored with a university group in which I was involved. Of the 35 people in attendance, 30% were invited by the chapter and the other 70% were affiliated with the university group, as students or faculty. The event did not allow for as much interaction as requested of the facilitator, so there was little opportunity help facilitate the building of professional community that I was beginning to recognize as essential.

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. In other words, I thought it would be easier if they shared their ideas and then decided which ideas I would execute. While knowing this was not a good leadership strategy, I was seeking an easy way to get people involved without dealing with the time constraints of delegating responsibilities and facilitating a group.

Five people volunteered to serve on the committee. Two members were full-time university graduate students (one was employed in an HRD-related unit at the university), one member was an education specialist for a large medical center, and the last member was a training specialist in a large department of the university (she later resigned from the committee, due to being laid off from her job). I had hoped that within a couple weeks of our initial meeting that all events for the year could be planned. This goal became unrealistic, as this action research project evolved. In order to fully integrate the action research project into our committee’s work, it became apparent we needed to gradually plan events as our action research progressed.

#### **5. Leadership and Power in the Committee**

By the time our committee first met in February, I more fully recognized the importance of fostering a professional community. I later became interested in exploring the power dynamics in a committee that attempted to be collaborative. Action research could 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. It became challenging for us to discuss the core of our group's existence and imagine something different since we were pressed for time. Additionally, this abstract approach was new to me since I tend to be quite pragmatic.

During the meeting, I struggled a great deal as I wanted to be an open-minded facilitator and avoided 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 centering activities around students. Another committee member, Mark, was very open to her ideas to center activities around students. I awkwardly resisted the idea, while maintaining some openness to it. At the time, I was under the impression that 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 group's aim 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 group's purpose.

### **5.1 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 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?" (Journal entry, 2/17). 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, we both realized Jenny misunderstood the organization's mission and 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)" (Journal entry, 3/14). 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 confronted with 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 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 and the requirements of funding agencies. 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. Unlike the groups examined in English’s study, HRD is not a field with such a history of egalitarian aims, although HRD practitioners and scholars often invoke a mild form of humanism (McGuire, Cross, & O’Donnell, 2005). Given this lack of egalitarianism, 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, 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 lipservice and then move on” (Journal entry, 3/14). On 3/8, I reflected, “I think in a field like HRD, we’re expected to ‘get along’ and be ‘team players’ because we’re facilitators of learning and development. Traditionally, we’ve been more passive in our jobs and want to show that we have the ability to get along. At least for me, I want to model the types of skills that we help others to master in organizations (e.g., being good at ‘teamwork’).”

True collaboration and democratic decision-making can result in a conflict-filled process where power issues and individual agendas complicate the process (Reynolds, 1994). As Reynolds describes, this complication of the process can be beneficial, but it results in a longer decision-making process. Therefore, it is important to allow for an airing of differing opinions and conflicts. Without this “airing of differences,” collaboration is a meaningless façade. However, Reynolds illustrates that conflict and differences slow down the decision-making process, which can result in frustrated members. In our situation, we needed to balance the needs of collaboration, true and open sharing, and discussion of differences with the pressing need to act and plan events (Journal entry, 3/3). Since we all made a one-year commitment to being in our leadership positions, we had only one year to help revitalize the group and it is difficult for this type of organization to be revitalized if no member events or workshops are planned.

## **5.2 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 (Journal entry, 3/8). In the 3/8 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. Political circumstances sometimes call for more covert action; however, more direct approaches can help to foster healthy dialogue. In this situation as leader of the group, I was hoping that the

suppression of my true intentions would somehow help me to share power with group members in an attempt to foster the collaborative process.

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 become nervous and avoid directly addressing [this] touchy issue" (Journal entry, 3/9). 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, to a certain degree, 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 think about it and quietly talk 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; Trehan & Rigg, 2003).

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 much more 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. These two goals represent different philosophical positions regarding the fragmentary nature of organizations (Fisher, 2005). Working toward shared values and collaboration represents a "neo-traditionalist" aim to "return to the importance of values and community" in order to *restore unity* within groups and organizations (Fisher, 2005, p. 242). On the other hand, the examination of complicated and contradictory power relations represents a postmodern position, which sees organizations as inevitably *confused and ambiguous* (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Fisher, 2005). 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. In our group, we could have done more to openly explore these issues. Instead, power and conflict were primarily addressed individually and through my self-examination in this action research project. Attempts at open group exploration were not fruitful.

### **5.3 “Letting Go” and Avoiding False Consensus**

In volunteer organizations, the central leader is oftentimes the force that keeps the group moving (e.g., see Hinsdale, Lewis, & Waller, 1995). However, empowerment of members is critical in order for organizations to continue after the central leader has stepped down. In our case, I was the person responsible for reactivating the local group and only planned to be in the position for one year. Empowerment of others was essential for the continued success of the group. However, as explained by Hinsdale et al., a classic leadership problem (i.e., not allowing for empowerment of others) often results when leaders are perfectionist or have a strong personal identification with the group. I dealt with both of these challenges with mixed success. My biggest challenge was to let some of my “high standards” go and realize that others could make contributions that were of a “higher standard” than what I could do on my own.

One example was the idea of a mentoring program that would pair local HRD professionals with graduate students. Mark mentioned this idea in our first committee meeting. I was reluctant to support the idea because I felt that we did not have time to undertake such a program. In our May committee meeting, Mark brought it up again and the other committee members seemed very interested. Since everyone else seemed interested in the idea, I asked Mark if he would be willing to lead the effort of recruiting mentors. He agreed to organize the program along with Nikki. The two of them organized this program and it was valued by both the HRD professionals who enjoyed “giving back” and by the students who benefited from the mentoring by experienced professionals. During this same meeting, Jenny had ideas for our September event, agreed to organize it, and followed through with that commitment. These simple examples illustrate the transformation made by the committee, when considering my initial conceptualization of the committee as an advisory group to their later form as a working group. Most significantly, during this May committee meeting, I made a conscious effort to avoid false forms of collaboration while being quite open in sharing my own thoughts and perspectives. In other words, I consciously set out to avoid the role of “neutral facilitator.” Interestingly, Mark convened our next committee meeting (in June), because he wanted to talk about the mentoring program and the September event. His convening of the group provided further evidence of the progress toward making this a working group and provided evidence that we were making progress toward having legitimate collaboration. In my journal reflection from 6/22 (about the June meeting that Mark convened), I reflected that, “Due to being frazzled over being late, I found myself starting to take over the meeting, almost as a way of getting a grasp of what they had talked about. When we were brainstorming, I knocked down a couple of ideas, but Mark correctly pointed out to me that we should just throw out ideas during this phase.” Mark’s comment showed that he was comfortable with his role in organizing the meeting and openly exercised his power in facilitating the meeting.

In the online anonymous survey administered in December (at the end of my term), committee members were asked to consider the attempt at sharing leadership in the committee. One question asked committee members to explain who had the “real leadership role” in our group (in contrast to my spoken desire to share the leadership). All committee members reported that although I was leading the effort, “the decisions made were a group effort” and that “Rod

allowed each individual to take the lead on specific projects and to take ownership of decisions.” It is interesting to note the use of the word “allowed”. Although I stressed that the survey was not an evaluation of me and that I hoped for honest opinions, it is difficult to determine whether committee members were completely honest in this anonymous survey.

## **6. Formation of a Professional Community**

The group made significant progress in one year in beginning to form a professional community of practitioners. In this section, I detail the progress made in holding events that allowed for the facilitation of that community building.

### **6.1 Is This Thing Viable?**

For our second membership event, a lunchtime workshop in April, we collected data in two ways. First, we conducted a short survey at the end of the program. The questionnaire’s purpose was not to evaluate the workshop. Instead, we asked questions about whether attendees sought more interaction and networking with each other. We also used open-ended questions that asked participants for their vision of a professional community (e.g., “When you think of a professional community that you would like to be involved with, what do you envision?”). This question was purposely used in order to move beyond “how” questions, which can limit the discussion by asking respondents for immediate solutions rather than visionary ideas (Block, 2002). Additionally, the committee members were participant observers during the meeting, taking notes about the progression of events. After the meeting, we wrote up our reflections about salient events in the meeting while keeping in mind the guiding question of “What can the committee do to foster a more collaborative community in our organization?” I encouraged the committee members *not* to focus on how things could have been done better. Instead, we used a protocol that guided the participant observers to focus on making sense of what happened—the way in which the meeting was lead and progressed. In reality, only Jenny and I took this approach. The other committee members focused on suggestions for improvement. In analyzing the observations, I synthesized the notes from each committee member and compared the synthesis with the research question and to the theoretical perspectives used in the project. Everyone agreed that this event was a step in the right direction, since it was much more interactive than the previous one. However, all committee members said the presentation should have been shorter and that we must incorporate more time for networking and interaction among members. During the lunch (which overlapped with the workshop activities), the committee observed that most people seemed to spend more time talking with others at their tables rather than engaging in the activity requested by the workshop facilitator. This observation was noteworthy and provided us with some hope that group members were seeking professional socialization. This professional socialization was a key idea in our conception of a collaborative community.

However, in our survey of attendees, they were generally split on whether we needed to offer more opportunities for collaboration. In this very small sample (13 returned surveys), the university students were more interested in additional collaboration and networking than those who were employed full-time. Additionally, the full-time students provided all but one of the open-ended comments on the survey forms. The committee’s conclusion was that we need to continue “hooking” people in with interesting topics in order to provide opportunities for collaboration and networking since most of the professionals did not seem interested in being part of a community. In my journal entry on 4/19, I wondered whether pushing the idea of

collaboration is good for the members or whether it was just an agenda of mine that the committee members had bought into. However, my managerial nature led me to return to the stance that this group needed to become a professional community in order to be sustainable. It seemed that we somehow needed to convince members of this need.

After the April event, our committee met in May to discuss how to move forward after the mixed success of our previous event. The successful committee meeting resulted in committee members taking responsibility for projects. As a group, we were beginning to make decisions and implement ideas that were important to all of us. As for my role, I concluded that I was successful sharing my own opinions, while still fostering dialogue and openly giving others room to share their opinions (Journal entry, 5/16). During this committee meeting, we discussed whether the idea of fostering a professional community was viable for our group. Mark thought many people did not want to participate in professional collaboration with those outside their workplace, especially those working in one specific large organization. We decided to continue trying to facilitate this community building and find a way to overcome this isolationist attitude by some members (5/16 meeting notes).

During our brainstorming of ideas for our summer event, we decided to approach a local HRD professional about facilitating a July workshop on the topic of change/organization development. However, the committee stressed that we should emphasize to the facilitator that we wanted him to lead a discussion rather than lecture to the group, which was a complaint from previous events. After emailing him to explain that we would like to do a “non-traditional” workshop, he became excited about the possibilities of trying something different. We met to brainstorm for ideas on designing the workshop. During our meeting, I realized that he was something of a radical for our field and could present a very different perspective of HRD for our attendees. In fact, he utilizes Peter Block’s (e.g., 2002) ideas in his own practice, which heavily influenced the conceptualization of this action research project. We promoted the event as a “Radical Approach to ‘Change Management.’”

## **6.2 Turning the Tide**

One event can make a powerful impact on the scope of the possibilities within a group. The facilitator of the July workshop believed strongly that change takes place through individuals working together in groups and communities, rather than through change mandated from top leaders. These values were evident in the way in which he encouraged discussion among participants and in his solicitation of feedback for guiding the session. During and after the session, enthusiasm among participants was higher than in either of the previous events. Committee members even received emails and comments after the workshop about how much the attendees enjoyed the session. As with the April meeting, we administered the same short questionnaire to gauge participants’ interest in building a more collaborative group. In contrast to the prior meeting, most attendees reported (on the Likert-scale item) that they wanted more opportunities for networking and collaboration. Additionally, on the open-ended questions (e.g., “When you think of a professional community that you would like to be involved with, what do you envision?”), participants reported that they wanted an opportunity to share ideas and learn from other professionals. For example, “I’d like a group where members are open, engaging, supportive—willing to share ideas, thoughts, experiences, strengths.” Only one full-time student completed the survey, so there was desire for networking and collaboration among professionals, as opposed to the last session, where the university students were the only ones interested in networking and collaboration.

The session succeeded in two important ways. First, it made clear that our members were open to more innovative ideas beyond conventional HRD topics, which was a risk we took with this facilitator (Journal entry, 7/13). It has been quite rare for chapter events to address unconventional approaches to HRD. Most workshops have addressed traditional approaches to training or have used production-oriented and profit-oriented approaches to organization change. Second, the event showed us that members were open to collaboration and being a part of a professional community, if the group seemed compelling. In other words, meetings about conventional HRD topics may not be enough to cause most people to desire to be an integral part of the group. Based on two separate informal interviews with two second-time attendees, they both reported that the group was becoming more dynamic and moving in the right direction based on their experience from this workshop.

It is interesting to consider the dynamics here. Most of these individuals did not initially want to be part of a professional community. They merely wanted a venue in which to attend interesting workshops. However, we continued pressing toward our goal of fostering a particular type of atmosphere to enable the formation of community, which would allow the group to be sustained. This is a very difficult tightrope to walk—the “forcing” of individuals is rarely a good idea. However, the status quo would have likely resulted in the continued floundering of the group. We were somewhat successful in fostering something that the members did not initially want. During the April event there was not as much of an explicit attempt made to create an atmosphere in which a community could begin to flourish. The contrast between the two events speaks to the potential of one event to reshape a group.

### **6.3 Solidifying the Group: Two Final Events**

Our September event was an outreach event primarily targeting university graduate students and those new to the HRD field. A distinguished panel discussed future trends in the field. This was the only membership event held in the evening, which resulted in a low turnout of 15 people. Five attendees were full-time professionals and the others were students. The intimate size allowed for networking and discussions among the participants. During this fourth meeting of the year, it became apparent that a core group of members was beginning to attend the events.

The last event of the year, which addressed action learning, was held in November. The event attracted 20 attendees and involved the greatest amount of sharing and collaboration among the attendees. Fifteen of the 20 attendees were full-time professionals, with five students in attendance. After the event, I reflected that “During this last meeting, it was nice to see the transition to a new leader and to see that the group is beginning to take on a life of its own, with its own group of core attendees. I see the group as a sort of ‘child’ that I helped to raise. Now it’s ready to go on and do greater things without me guiding it...at least I hope” (Journal entry, 11/10).

In reality, these final two events received little attention from me. In addition to working toward my doctoral degree, I had returned to full-time employment by starting a position within my academic department at the university. Therefore, Jenny almost completely organized our September event. In November, another volunteer, who was not part of our committee, facilitated and organized most of the details for that event after we held a brainstorming meeting to discuss how the event could be structured. Additionally, Nikki and Mark completely administered the mentoring program and provided me with periodic updates when I checked in with them.

## 6.4 Failed Leadership Succession

Beginning in July, we began to actively seek my replacement for the following year after finding that none of the committee members were interested in taking on the role. During our networking time at the July meeting, an attendee (Debbie) asked if we would consider allowing new members to serve in the role of director. As a 30-year veteran in this field (who recently completed her master's degree), she was enthusiastic about HRD and confirmed in August that she would submit her name for nomination to my position on the chapter-wide board of directors. In some ways, this allowed me to relax and feel confident that the group would continue into the next year.

I had some misgivings about my lack of engagement in the group during those last few months. On 12/14 (Journal Entry), I reflected, "I need to do everything I can to help Debbie out here in the next couple of weeks. In retrospect, I should have been working with her for the last month before she takes on this new role." Before the New Year, we had two meetings about the group moving forward as she began organizing the next year's committee. However, the transition was a failure. After this action research project ended, it became apparent that Debbie was overcommitted and could not fulfill her role. Volunteers stepped forward to join the committee, but no meetings were scheduled. After she missed several of the monthly board of directors meetings, I was asked mid-year to resume my former position. I declined due to being in the midst of dissertation work. After I graduated and left the area, the group restarted with a new, energetic leader.

## 7. Crystallization and Reflections on the Research Process

In order to allow for triangulation and crystallization, committee members were asked 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. As expected, they were not critical of my role in the group, as I was throughout the self-study aspect of this project. 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 branch director's role...so we know exactly what that entails." This comment supports the earlier conclusion about needing additional explicit conversations about power and leadership roles. This suggestion might also be indicative of the tension between my taking a managerial leadership role and attempting to foster a collaborative community. Overall, it is difficult to know whether committee members were being kind or honest in their assessment of the year's proceedings.

At various times throughout the year, I wondered whether I underestimated the committee members' commitment to the group (e.g., Journal entry, 6/27). During June, Mark and Jenny both mentioned that they wanted to have more committee meetings. In the year-end follow-up survey, a committee member mentioned that "it would be better if the committee met once a month to plan future activities and reflect on previous ones" and that "given [Rod's] new job, that might be the reason why he couldn't be more proactive in setting up more meetings." It appears that I should have been more ambitious in scheduling more frequent committee meetings. Aside from my personal dislike of having too many committee meetings, I may have underestimated the committee members' dedication to the group. Originally, I assumed they

would not want frequent committee meetings due to other commitments. Given the committee members' desire to have more meetings, I may have been able to ask for more involvement from others in the action research aspect of our work. In particular, committee members likely would have been more open to spending additional time on action research and reflecting about the purposes of our group after our successful July meeting. However, at that point, I was transitioning to a new job and beginning my dissertation research and had much less time to engage in this process. In many ways, that resulted in a lost opportunity. But, in the end, the action research and reflection that we conducted during the year set the stage for forming the early stages of a community that can hopefully be tapped in the future.

## **8. Conclusions**

Throughout the year, the primary aim was to facilitate the formation of a professional HRD community within this group. We made significant steps toward this goal. As I have attempted to reflect throughout the article, balancing a leadership role with the goal of fostering collaboration can be 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 to combining a collaborative leadership approach and examining power dynamics was primarily relegated to the self-study aspect of this action research project, but continuously presented itself as an issue to be dealt with throughout the year. 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 future practice it may be helpful to engage in a more open exploration of power issues and conflict. This process could encourage both a wider range of perspectives and 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. Another implication of this study is that despite the importance of succession planning, its need was underestimated. More deliberate succession planning could have smoothed the leadership change by transitioning my role to an existing committee member. Perhaps more assertive encouragement on my part could have resulted in a committee member accepting that role.

Despite some failures, a great deal was accomplished during the year. I experimented with combining a collaborative leadership style while purposefully exploring the exercise of power. This process resulted in continuous adjustments to my leadership style, which helped avoid false forms of consensus. This modification in leadership style empowered members to take the lead on chapter activities and resulted in more of a membership-driven organization. Additionally, a professional community began to form as we modified our activities throughout the action research process. The formal data collection efforts provided evidence that we were making strides toward the goal of fostering an environment which prioritized the formation of a professional community. Our less formal action research processes lead to planning innovative and stimulating activities that created a stimulating environment in which members wanted to become more involved.

All groups, whether they are small informal groups, organizations, governments, or societies, must deal with the multifaceted demands of collaboration, autonomy, leadership, and power in order to successfully work toward the development of rich ideas and perspectives that are necessary for both fairness and success. This article provides practitioners and researchers with an account of one effort to examine power while working toward collaboration and shared values. Seeking both goals can result in complications since they arise from contradictory

philosophical perspectives. As illustrated here, this tension can be productive and can produce positive outcomes. These lessons can also be applied to other professional fields and to organization development that occurs within other types of organizations.

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