CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 2, Number 1, Oct 2001

A Partnership Paradigm: A Case Study in Research Assistant and Faculty Interaction*

by Meredith Miller and John B. Stephens, 1998

*Reprinted with permission from the Journal of Staff, Professional and Organization Development (http://www.newforums.com/) , Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 111-119

Student research assistants (RAs) often encounter a game of "Russian roulette" when working with faculty members. Sometimes professors ask students to undertake the brainless job of photocopying; others give substantive research projects to RAs that stretch their skills and understanding But almost always the RA can count on a subordinate working relationship with the faculty member. In this article, we offer a case study of our intentional effort to change the typical power relationship between most RAs and faculty members. We believe this approach, which we call the partnership paradigm, provides an opportunity for effective and mutually enriching experiences for both faculty and students serving as research assistants.

We will describe the partnership experiment we undertook as professor and student in a professional degree program at a state research university. We developed a partnership paradigm that includes aspects of mentoring and a power structure characterized by exchange rather than authority. After reflecting on our work relationship, we came to understand that this model exists on a continuum. TABLE 1 (http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportImages/table1.html) depicts four models of potential RA-faculty work arrangement. We classify our effort as "partnership light." We judge that structural factors prevented a working partnership evolved over the span of stronger partnership arrangement. Table 1 summarizes the issues that affected how we consciously restructured our relationship into more of a partnership.

In this article, we describe the challenges we faced, delineated limitations for creating a truly equal working relationship, and offer recommendations for others who want to apply all or part of this paradigm to their working relationships.

Background

In August 1996, we were assigned to work together through the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. John is a faculty member at UNC's Institute of Government, and Meredith was a graduate student in the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. MPA students regularly are placed as research assistants with faculty of the Institute of Government. The idea of a working partnership evolved over the span of Meredith's assistantship with John (August 1996- May 1997). During our first meeting we discussed working styles and determined that we were both interested in a more collaborative and less hierarchical work relationship. Over time, we realized that the structure of our working relationship was different from the traditional research assistantship.

John's desire for a more collaborative working relationship arose from two factors: the value he places on mutual learning and his discomfort with hierarchy. His interest in structuring mutual learning relationships was heightened by a workshop on facilitation and organizational development he took from Institute of Government colleagues shortly before meeting Meredith. He was exposed to Chris Argyris' research on executive decision-making and the distinction between unilateral control and a mutual learning model of management. Specifically, the workshop instructors challenged participants to apply mutual learning principles in their work and personal decision-making.

John realized that revising the relationship between him and a research assistant was risky, and could be time consuming. However, he pursued the project with Meredith for three reasons. First, the faculty-RA relationship was a good setting to apply a mutual learning, more equal decision-making model. The projects open for collaboration with Meredith were under John's control, and offered a way to test how he would work with future research assistants from the MPA program. Second, a partnership approach was consistent with John's values and expertise in cooperative forms of conflict resolution, i.e. seeking common interests and integrative solutions among people who have different needs and interests. Third, designing as equal and collegial a relationship as possible with Meredith would recognize her experience, knowledge and ability to make significant intellectual contributions to joint projects. A final benefit, recognized in hind sight, is that a partnership approach to RA faculty work is consistent with changes in the structure of workplace relationships to more team-based, cooperative models of decision making. Even if the effort took more time and effort, it posed a useful intellectual challenge and a learning opportunity that could be applied across John's academic career.

Meredith was interested in a partnership approach to her research assistantship be cause of her previous positive experiences with supervisors who worked collaboratively and allowed a high level of participation in decision-making. As a student in the MPA program, she also had an interest in applying aspects of her classroom learning to the assistantship. In a fall 1996 semester course, she read an article by Chris Argyris and was exposed too the theorists and researchers on more collaborative, less-hierarchical forms of group interaction and employee management. Her RA assignment with John (8 hours per week on average) became an ideal Situation to put such management and leadership theory into practice.

Mentoring

Mentoring is an important aspect of the Partnership paradigm. "Mentoring constitutes a unique and personal relationship between two people: one who has achieved a certain level of experience and one who is aspiring to a higher level. In what is defined as a classical mentoring relationship, the mentor provides opportunity for the protégé and is rewarded by his or her achievements. The type of mentoring we suggest for the partnership paradigm, however, is more personal, broad and informal. We use some elements of mentoring, but the initial assignment of students to professors in the MPA program (made by the Program Director based on needs and interests of faculty students) precluded us from seeking each other out based on mutual interests.

Bruce Berger, in his article, Mentoring Graduate Students, describes some ways to create what he calls a "dynamic reciprocal relationship. "First, expectations must be discussed, and the student must be treated as a valued colleague. Then both must work together to create a context or environment for growth. In order to create this context for growth, the mentor and protÈgÈ must develop a collegial relationship in which there is shared responsibility. The dynamic reciprocal relationship involves a balance between personal and professional issues. Discussing non-work related issues and spending time together on a social basis helps to develop a more personal relationship. Our social interaction outside the office included having lunch and dinner together occasionally, introducing each other to our friends and colleagues, and participating in an MPA-sponsored team building exercise on a ropes course. We found that expanding the relationship beyond the professional realm helped us to create mutual trust, another important component of the dynamic reciprocal relationship. By creating trust, Berger suggests that" people can be confronted about problems they are avoiding or not attempting to solve.' Confronting problems and engaging in self-examination are difficult in general, but are almost impossible to do effectively without a commitment to build mutual trust.

Shared interest in a specialized area of study in another component of mentoring. In typical mentoring relationships the professor has an expertise in a particular area and the student desires to specialize in that subfield. At UNC, the MPA Program Director matches students and professors according to interests, but very few pairs can be perfectly matched. Meredith had some interest in John's field (public dispute resolution), but it was not her primary interest in public administration. The shared interest was high enough, however, to be compatible with the tasks of the assistantship. The absence of initial choice in our relationship and level of interest are two key differences between what the literature describes as mentoring and our working relationship.

Another aspect of the mentoring relationship we examined was a concern about gender factors in mentor-mentee relations. The very characteristics that make the mentoring relationship effective involve a degree of vulnerability and informality. Some people may avoid a mentoring relationship with someone of the opposite sex in order to avoid potential misunderstandings or problems, ranging from unfounded rumors of romantic interest to sexual harassment. We argue that if the relationship has open communication and mutual respect, issues can be raised and handled in a professional manner. For instance, we both receive humorous e-mail messages from friends and wanted to pass them on to each other. Since some of the humor could be considered unprofessional, we discussed whether either of us would feel uncomfortable receiving "racy" e-mail messages. By being conscious of the appropriateness of how we interacted, we have been successful in creating a working relationship that was comfortable for both of us.

Creating a Partnership

In creating our partnership, we addressed issues of power, expectations, decision-making, evaluations, and other aspects of working relationships. Although there are some aspects of mentoring in our relationship, the research assistantship's predetermined structure, including a focus on money and required hours of work, is a clear distinction from traditional mentoring. We found this structure both challenging and freeing for our work to conceive, develop and evaluate a partnership paradigm. Whereas mentoring is focused on the development of the junior person (student or faculty), our model is focused on mutual development.

Most research assistantships have a clearly hierarchical structure. If any evaluation occurs, it is an evaluation of the student's work by the professor. John- was interested in changing this power structure, believing that mutual feedback would be more effective. Our partnership might not have happened without John initiating the idea of creating a structure different than that of a typical faculty-directed relationship. This effort was not difficult for John because he was a new faculty member with many potential projects for Meredith, and many possible projects were not governed by short-term deadlines.

In order to create a partnership, John had to empower Meredith with the right to contribute to decision-making, raise problems or issues, state her interests, and question John's judgment. To shift away from a hierarchical structure, we attempted to create an environment where communication and coordination were more reciprocal and more equal. This resulted in a structure with an exchange of power. An exchange can only happen when both parties are getting things that they need. In our case, John was getting help with research and writing work and gaining experience that was both collaborative and social in nature. Meredith was learning about mediation, improving her writing skills, and experimenting with a partnership management situation while being paid.

Initial Discussion of Expectations

Having an initial discussion of each person's expectations of the working relation ship decreases misunderstanding and is an important element of the partnership paradigm. In our first few meetings, we discussed goals, interests, modes of communication, priorities of the job, and our level of flexibility in the hours and the locations for carrying out the work. These initial discussions to set mutual expectations were important in establishing an open working environment and setting the tone for shared decision-making. We should also note that the MPA Program Director told us about the strong accomplishments of one another before we met. Therefore, we had high expectations for the relationship from the outset.

In addition to discussing expectations, it is also important for both the faculty member and the RA to understand each other's expertise and capabilities. At the first meeting, as part of John's interest in providing background reading to Meredith on public dispute resolution, he asked Meredith to summarize an article. John wanted some way to gauge Meredith's analytic and comprehension skills, and her level of writing. It was important for John to determine the level of Meredith's ability for appropriate projects and responsibilities. In retrospect, neither of us could recall if John shared all his reasons for this Assignment. In a partnership/mutual learning model, John would have shared all of his interests, and said that the request was not a make-or-break test, but one way of learning more about Meredith's knowledge, skills and abilities.

Mutual Evaluations

One major way we attempted to change the power structure towards a partnership model was to have mutual evaluations rather than just the required formal evaluation of the student by the professor at the end of each semester. This process allowed us to express our opinions about our own work, each other's work, and our joint work. We decided on several elements for the evaluations: (1) we would each determine the criteria by which we would be evaluated; (2) specific times would be set aside for evaluations; (3) evaluations would occur several times throughout the semester; and (4) the evaluations would be conducted through a dialogue rather than a written document.

Rather than evaluating each other using the same criteria, we decided to each draft our own lists of skills and competencies by which we wanted to be evaluated. We each had different things that we wanted to work on that were specific to our role in the partnership. Together, we created the criteria for judging our joint work.

We scheduled distinct sessions for our mutual evaluations. When we encountered special difficulties or successes, we noted them at the time they occurred. Even though we had a comfortable relationship and provided informal feedback regularly, a planned meeting with specific preparation was an important guide to our work. It was also a deliberate part of enacting the partnership paradigm. A designated occasion for feedback encourages reflection on overall progress o' projects and the working relationship. Perhaps most importantly, a scheduled feedback session sets a point for both the student and the faculty member to inform each other how they could alter their expectations or behavior to make the relationship more effective. Ongoing informal feedback tends to focus on short-term, content-specific information, whereas a specific time for mutual feedback is more conducive to analyzing patterns and processes of work for long-term improvements in effectiveness.

Rather than having just one formal evaluation at the end of the assistantship period, we scheduled several informal evaluations each semester. For August-December 1996, we set three dates for evaluation sessions. We found the first one, approximately six weeks after the start of our work together, was very helpful. The subsequent two were less helpful. We attributed the difference to less contact and fewer observations of behavior and work products on which to alter our first assessment. The second and third evaluations explicitly addressed how to mutually evaluate our joint work. As a result of our learning, we scheduled only two feedback sessions during January-April, 1997, both of which were useful.

We determined that feedback from outside our working relationship-faculty colleagues reviewing drafts of case studies, for example would be helpful. Unfortunately, we had few opportunities to pursue outside perspectives on our joint work. We did have positive informal feedback from both students and professors after a seminar we presented on the partnership paradigm. Most seemed intrigued by our ideas and by the steps we had taken to achieve a partnership.

Finally, our mutual evaluations were conducted through discussions rather than formal written documentation. We have found that a discussion allows us to be more thorough while at the same time remaining informal. A brief written evaluation was, however, completed by John at the end of the first and second semester as required by the MPA program.

Structure

Some other specific ways that we achieved a more equal power structure included: dividing up leadership responsibilities for work tasks (such as conducting research for a case study); rotating the responsibility of forming our meeting agendas and maintaining our project task list; occasionally meeting outside John’s office in a more neutral setting (such as the library, a lounge, or outside); and assigning each other background reading material for a monthly discussion about public disputes, conflict resolution and mediation. On the lighter side, we occasionally switched chairs in John's office so that Meredith was behind the desk. The reaction of surprise and curiosity from people walking by John's office was illuminating.

Challenges of the Partnership Paradigm

Power Imbalance

Inherent in any faculty-research assistant working relationship is the difference in each person’s expertise and in the long-term stake in the faculty member's work. For these reasons, it is often appropriate for the faculty member to be more directive. This structural difference can easily result in a power imbalance. It is a challenge for a student to take the initiative with a professor, due to strategic reasons grounded in acculturation to be deferential in a student-faculty relationship. If a research assistant comes across as pushy or unbending, such an impression could have negative consequences if he/she takes a course from the faculty member or if the negative impression is shared with other teachers. It is important for the faculty member to understand that a student may have limits on his/her time and other professional development priorities. In a partnership, these limitations must be both recognized and respected. Mutual respect is an important way to create a balance in power.

We deliberately worked on this power issue. John's faculty position allowed him to learn of and begin developing new projects in public dispute resolution before talking with Meredith. These new efforts necessitated joint discussion on whether to shift resources (research time and writing) from one project to another, or to work outside of the RA-faculty arrangement (i.e., by John alone or by John and other colleagues). Although we mate these changes openly, the imbalance of John's greater background information and his responsibility for the long-term development of research, teaching ant writing limited the mutuality of our partnership work. This left John feeling at several points that he was being more directive in the relationship and undercutting partnership paradigm values. While Meredith felt this was not a barrier, it is important to be aware of the structural limits of a partnership approach to RA-faculty work.

A colleague noted that a difference of perception could complicate a power imbalance. For instance, if a RA-faculty pair commits to work more in partnership, and the faculty member believes it is being accomplished but the RA does not share that impression, the RA is in a doubly difficult position. Thus, one of our recommendations relates to how RAs have opportunities to share their impressions of their work arrangements.

Another fruitful question from a RA colleague was "What's in it for faculty?" Her observation was that it seemed while there was great benefit to the student RA (increased power, learning and challenge), the benefit to the professor would be moderate at best. Indeed, if a faculty person is concerned about sharing/giving up power and is more interested in gaining limited assistance on particular projects, a partnership paradigm is not worthwhile. For John, his interest was to express principles of work relationships in general, to try a new arrangement in a low risk setting, and to educate himself.

Time Investment

The creation of the partnership took significant time. Once the faculty-driven model is abandoned, many large and small decisions are open for discussion. True joint decision making is time consuming We kept an openness to revise priorities, handle new information, and decide who took the lead on a particular task or project. While some of the time for joint decision-making could have been telescoped (e.g., making larger decisions earlier on so that fewer procedural questions needed to be decided later), we did not consider making hard definitions of roles early on.

We found that our flexibility made us more productive, but we both sometimes felt pressed to set clear deadlines for specific tasks and work products for each other's review. The central challenge for John was how best to balance the exploration of and learning about a partnership paradigm with the specific short-term demands for teaching, research, writing and program development required by his department. Meredith initially had to spend more time learning about John's area of expertise so she could feel confident writing and making decisions in a new subject area.

One benefit we think we can offer is our experience (above) and recommendations (below) to reduce the planning time needed for other faculty-RA pairs. For instance, in a seminar at UNC-CH before our colleagues, they confirmed our sense of being "trailblazers" and we sensed that offering some guidelines from our experience would make it easier for others to apply and adapt our model.

Limitations

As much as we think we have made our RA-faculty relationship more equal, there were several structural factors which limited a truly equal partnership. Some have been mentioned above: the faculty member having greater expertise; faculty having more time and more responsibility in the long run; and the RA's needs for academic development. John's larger array of interests and needs were not all brought into the partnership. For instance, while John informed Meredith of his teaching schedule, and encouraged her to observe and give feedback, there were no teaching elements brought into the partnership.

Similar Social Backgrounds

Heterogeneity of personal backgrounds and attributes could be a challenge for enacting a partnership approach to RA-faculty work. We believe our relatively similar backgrounds and personal characteristics made our experiment easier. We share the same racial and socioeconomic class background, and both of us had experience working in government positions in Washington, DC. We are very culturally similar, which may be an important factor in the ease of initiating a partnership paradigm for RA-faculty work. While Meredith did not see public dispute resolution as being of special interest for her degree and career development, she saw it as complementary to her substantive interests in education and youth. Specifically, she already had a positive regard for John's substantive area through a friend who worked in the dispute resolution field.

Recommendations

Our experiment in a partnership paradigm was formally completed in April, 1997 when Meredith's research assistantship ended. However, we agreed to continue to prepare this article, and have conducted presentations on this topic both to the MPA program, and to a University-wide audience. Despite our modest experience, we will boldly offer recommendations for other RA-faculty pairs interested in a partnership working relationship. We offer our recommendations in a general form to make them applicable across a range of academic disciplines and professional studies. Specific steps are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Steps in Making a RA-Faculty Partnership Work

1) Determine if a more equal working relationship is important for academic and professional development.

2) Establish a policy of voluntary RA-faculty assignments.

3) Hold an orientation/ exploration session on effective RA-faculty working relationships with an option of working in a partnership arrangement.

4) Individual RA-faculty pairs determine their procedural and content goals for a working relationship.

5) In a partnership relationship, each RA-faculty pair should hold periodic feedback sessions on the effectiveness of their working relationship separate from the content of their work. We recommend such sessions twice a semester.

6) At least once a year, assess the experiences of all RA-faculty pairs working in a partnership arrangement and share the assessment with all faculty and students.

Determining Whether to Create a Partnership: Will it Achieve Pedagogical and Professional Goals?

The potential benefit of a partnership paradigm fits neatly with many professional graduate programs in general and changes in the workplace in particular. Because the UNC-CH MPA program combines classroom teaching, formal and informal seminars with practitioners, internships and a major research project, a partnership paradigm enhances the student's educational and professional development. Since more workplaces are less hierarchical and more team oriented, experience in a partnership paradigm enacts collaborative values and offers experience relevant to career-long needs. Similarly, a more collegial working relationship is realistic for MPA careers involving cross-function coordination; problem-solving involving public servants, citizens and private interests; and multi-agency cooperation to address interrelated needs or problems. The paradigm also challenges faculty to embody the values of cooperation or CO-management that are now dominant in management and organizational development today.

Other graduate and professional programs may have different goals and more traditional postgraduate work environments. Thus the relevance of a partnership paradigm for RA-faculty work depends on the goals and values of the graduate or professional degree program.

Setting the Stage for a Partnership: Assuring Free, Informed Choice

The core of the partnership paradigm for RA-faculty work is joint decision-making. Greater equity in decision-making extends to whether a partnership approach is appropriate for a particular faculty member and research assistant. In short, it should be easy for the RA, in a traditionally less powerful position, to say "no" to a faculty invitation of a partnership working relationship without negative repercussions.

The first step for setting the stage rests in how RAs and faculty members are assigned. Following our presentation of the partnership motel to fellow MPA faculty and students, the assignment process for 1997-98 was revised. Faculty projects and interests were posted, and RAs contacted the faculty members with whom they wanted to work. The MPA Director made the formal arrangements, but followed the negotiated interests of RAs and faculty almost without exception. RAs and faculty are now more actively involved in the selection process, and therefore can more consciously choose to work with one another based on their interests and working styles.

Second, both as part of the potential assignments, and definitely once an RA-faculty pairing is set, there must be a discussion about the overall working relationship, separated as much as possible from the content of the work. Communication styles, RA background and skills, and kinds of tasks on work projects envisioned by the faculty member, need to be explored to clarify interests and capabilities by the RA and faculty member to enact a partnership work relationship. There should also be a clear discussion of alternative working relationships, i.e., traditional hierarchical vs. more of a partnership (see Table 1) It is important to understand at this early stage that a partnership paradigm depends on the interest and ability of a RA to take more responsibility in conjunction with faculty flexibility and commitment to alter a traditional faculty-RA power relationship.

There is a conundrum from the beginning: who raises the idea of working in a partnership arrangement? If the faculty member does so, the whole effort could begin with the RA deferring to him/her in order not to raise the skepticism or discomfort of the faculty member at the very beginning of the work relationship. For instance, even if the faculty member is open to a partnership, the RA may not be interested (due to different interest in substantive areas of the field, a heavy course schedule, or limited compatibility with the faculty member) and may prefer a more traditional work relationship. However, it is counter-cultural for a RA to come in and suggest a particular way of working, especially when the whole structure is for the student to assist the faculty member. Therefore, the culture of the department or professional program must be safe and positive for a RA and his/her faculty member to discuss their desired working styles and then to make an informed choice about how they will work together.

Conduct Mutual Feedback Sessions on the Work Relationship

What we found most valuable in our experiment in a partnership work relationship was to set aside specific occasions to assess our working relationship. We conducted these sessions separate from our regular meetings on projects. It was important to us to have a designated session devoted to work process, instead of content. We heartily recommend the same for others enacting a partnership model. Finally, we believe as more RA-faculty pairs intentionally work in a partnership manner, that sharing their struggles and successes will enhance learning.

Conclusion

We offer our experience and reflection about working in a partnership paradigm because it was exciting, challenging and sometimes frustrating. Moreover, our thinking points to areas of research on mentoring which need to expand to RA-faculty relationships. As noted above, most mentoring literature looks at junior faculty-senior faculty relations, or faculty-student relationships where there is not a pre-structured exchange relationship. Our experience indicates ways mentoring can be included in a RA-faculty relationship, but also how the structure of the exchange-relationship limits "pure mentoring." We call for mentoring advocates and evaluators to test their theories by examining RA-faculty relationships.

Finally, we believe our experience is transferable. First, it is transferable within the university, to other professional and graduates degree programs utilizing research assistants. Second, we judge our experience is transferable outside the university, where most students completing their professional or graduate degrees apply their knowledge. In this way, we hope this case study inspired others to reexamine and reform how the working relationships within academia prepare or hinder people in their professional development.

Note

We wish to thank the Journal's two anonymous reviewers and our colleagues who reviewed an earlier version of this article: Peg Carlson, Kimberly Cartron, Anne Davidson, Ed Neal, Gordon Whitaker, and Michelle Woster. We appreciated the discussion with the 15 participants from the UNCCH MPA program at a February 25, 1997 seminar on the Partnership Paradigm.

Meredith Miller received her Master's of Public Administration degree from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May, 1998. Her specialty is education policy and program implementation. John B. Stephens is an Assistant Professor of Public Management and Government at the Institute of Government, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His specialty is public dispute resolution.