Case Studies in Management Style and Leadership Roles of Faculty Advisors to Student Organizations

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Abstract

Most student organizations are required to have a faculty advisor. However, unlike established organizational offices such as President and Secretary, the duties of the faculty advisor are not well defined and often fluctuate based on the personality of the officers for the academic year. This can be frustrating for faculty advisors, be they new or experienced faculty members, as the role they must play changes from year to year. The situation is complicated further when the most appropriate role conflicts with the leadership style of the faculty advisor.

In the Fall of 2001, there was a faculty advisor change for the Mercer University chapter of the Society of Women Engineers (SWE). The outgoing faculty advisor had filled this role since the chapter received its charter in October 1992 and had been on faculty at Mercer for 10 years. The incoming faculty advisor was starting her second year at Mercer and felt that getting involved with SWE would be a good way to get to know the students and see how organizations at Mercer worked. This paper serves as a case study of management styles and leadership roles in a voluntary organization and explores reasons for some of our successes and failures.

Introduction

Student organizations are an important part of college life. Involvement in student organizations gives students a chance to become involved in community service [1,2], meet people and become part of a community [2,3], develop leadership skills [2,4,5], improve teamwork skills [5], develop project management skills [5] and of course, give students an excellent entry for their resume [3]. Students who are members of student organizations are likely to express greater satisfaction with college [1,3]. Furthermore, both members and officers may find that taking an active role in student organizations results in increased self-confidence [2]. In their survey of women engineers and computer scientists, Robinson and Reilly [6] found that self-confidence was listed as the most important factor influencing professional success and advancement. Thus membership in student organizations provides both short-term and long-term benefits.

The role of faculty advisor to a student organization is not clearly defined. It may vary from year-to-year as a function of the needs of the organization. A survey of 258 faculty advisors conducted by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) indicated that about 40% found the job to be fulfilling and rewarding, while 30% indicated that they "did not mind the job" [7]. Close to 40% of the respondents indicated that their organizations were very active, including a significant commitment to community service. One-fourth reported that the organization was quite active, but did not have a strong commitment to community service. One-fourth felt that the organization's activity level was

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highly erratic, mainly due to the fact that students had a tendency to quickly cycle through the organization [7].

There is some indication that students welcome active involvement of the faculty advisor. In an article written by three engineers who had previously served as student chapter presidents, Evans, Evans and Sherman [5] offer their list of seven keys to success: motivated students, proactive faculty advisor, institutional support, alumni support, good ties to local professional chapter, good ties to local engineers, receptive community. While the article lists seven keys, the authors proposed that the two most crucial keys to a successful student chapter are motivated students and a proactive faculty advisor. In the same article, Evans et al report on a survey of 114 student leaders from 23 schools, sponsored by the American Society of Civil Engineers. The survey results indicated that the student leaders believed a proactive advisor was the most important of the seven keys.

The combination of motivated student leaders with highly active faculty advisors can result in a very active organization. But what is likely to happen when either the faculty advisor or student officers are less influential? Is there an ideal combination? The two authors combined have more than fifteen years experience as faculty advisors to the Society of Women Engineers (SWE). In this paper, we explore the effect of the advisor's management style and the officer's leadership style on the activity level of a voluntary student organization.

Case Studies

We present the following brief case studies to exemplify typical interactions between faculty advisors, student officers, and organization members. Although the scenarios are primarily based on our own experiences during the eleven years that the Mercer University student chapter of SWE has been in existence, we have made slight changes in some of the details to protect the identities of the individuals involved.

Case Study 1: Who Will Lead?

The SWE chapter had been in existence for several years. Membership was large, and the monthly meetings were well attended The primary advisor was a woman faculty member who took a very active role in the leadership of the organization. She requested that the officers have meetings twice a month in the faculty member's office. She accompanied a group of students to the regional SWE meetings within driving distance of the school.

Traditionally, the chapter held officer elections during the last meeting of the academic year. Although the chapter did not meet during the summer months, the advisor believed that having officers in place before the start of the academic year helped get organization's activities off to a good start. The four officers (all seniors) started out the year enthusiastically. Meetings were held as scheduled, and the tee shirt committee had chosen a new design for the SWE shirt that was sold each year as the organization's primary fund raising activity. Several students volunteered to organize the tee shirt sale in December, and some of the proceeds were used to buy food for the spring term meetings. The advisor suggested that the club give some of the proceeds to the School of Engineering Faculty and Staff Scholarship Fund, and the membership agreed. During the second semester, however, the officers became less involved with plans for future activities. The time demands of their Senior Design Course, as well as the prospect of looking for a job, was getting in the way of their officer duties. Attendance at meetings was dwindling; even some of the officers missed meetings. When it came time to elect officers for the following year, we found out that there were no juniors who were willing to make a commitment. In fact, no one was interested in running for office. The advisor asked two very active freshmen members to consider serving as president and treasurer.

They agreed. At the beginning of the fall term, an entering freshman was enlisted to fill the office of secretary. The office of vice president remained vacant for the entire year.

Case Study 2: Good Intentions

The year began well. Monthly meetings had been scheduled and attendance was moderate. The four officers had been elected at the last meeting of the spring term. The president, treasurer, and vice-president were rising juniors; the secretary was a rising sophomore. The secretary and the vice-president returned for the fall term a little early so that they could attend the school's Activities Fair during Orientation Week. They generated a good bit of interest in SWE, and encouraged students to attend the first meeting to see what SWE was all about. As a result, the turnout for the first meeting was quite good. The new president was quite enthusiastic and very optimistic. She began the meeting with an extensive list of projects she planned to initiate during her reign. Her enthusiasm was contagious. A volunteer list was distributed and many of those present signed up to work. As the year went on, however, enthusiasm on the part of the membership began to wane. Although the president had taken responsibility at the beginning of the fall term for setting up two service projects, she had not finalized arrangements before Christmas. In a meeting with the faculty advisor, the president explained that the fall term courses were too demanding, and as the term progressed she became more involved in her studies. The president assured the advisor that things would be different next term.

The first meeting of the second semester came and went, but there were still no specific dates for the service projects. At the February officer's meeting, the vice-president offered to make arrangements for one of the service projects (helping to build a Habitat House), but the president insisted that it was her responsibility and she could handle it. By the end of February, the vice-president, secretary, and treasurer scheduled a private meeting with the faculty advisor. Their complaint was that the president would not let anyone help her, and it seemed that the president continually made commitments she could not keep. The advisor met with the president who still felt that she was in control of the situation. The advisor briefly discussed leadership roles and the effectiveness of delegating some tasks to other responsible members. In general, however, the president was unwilling to give up control. The vice-president was able to organize two SWE Habitat Saturdays, but that was the only successful project of the year. Even the annual tee shirt sale was a failure. By March, the members had not agreed on a tee shirt design and the shirt sale was cancelled. The members voted to use some of the proceeds from the previous year's sale to support the school's Faculty and Staff Scholarship Fund.

Case Study 3: The Active President

During the previous year, membership was at an all time low, and attendance at meetings was small. This was partly due to the fact that notices about meetings were posted one or two days before the meeting. Due to a lack of communication, even some of the officers did not attend. It appeared that the organization was in jeopardy of dissolving. The annual fund-raising project (tee shirt sales) was not held. No one signed up for the mentoring project (Big Sister/Little Sister) that had been successful for the past two years. Meetings were held monthly, but only a small group of people attended.

However, at the April meeting, a junior who had previously served as president of her sorority ran for president of the SWE chapter. There was no opposition. She immediately organized a publicity committee and a fund raising committee. She encouraged them to begin work at the end of the spring term. Just before the beginning of the fall term, one member of the publicity committee attended the Activities Fair and promised a free gift to all who attended the first SWE meeting of the year. As a

result, the first meeting was well attended. Members' email addresses were collected and used to notify members of subsequent meetings. As the year went on, enthusiasm for the group's activities increased. Tee shirt sales were successful. The primary advisor, the president, and five other members attended the regional conference. Although the Big Sister campaign was not brought back, the chapter did get involved in two service projects (a food drive at Thanksgiving and SWE Saturdays in which members helped build the Habitat House in the spring). The president and secretary kept thorough records of the SWE activities, including member involvement. At the president's suggestion, the primary advisor sent information about the chapter's activities to the University's Student Government Association (SGA). The following year we were notified that we had received the SGA's Most Improved Student Organization Award.

Case Study 4: The New Advisor

The new SWE faculty advisor was also new to the university and had no experience in advising a student group. The former advisor had stepped down from her role of SWE advisor believing that her proactive style of advising did not match the needs of the students who were willing to serve as SWE officers. The new faculty advisor took a less active role in advising than the previous advisor, thinking this would give her an opportunity to see how organizations worked at Mercer and in the engineering school. She discussed her role as advisor with the officers, making it clear that she was available whenever they needed her guidance.

The president also started the semester with good intentions, but soon found herself overextended due to her involvement in other activities. The combination of a less involved faculty advisor and a struggling president resulted in diminished activity of the SWE organization. The annual tee shirt sale, which had been successful in previous years, was a failure due to a lack of communication between the tee shirt committee, the president, and the faculty advisor. Other problems identified that year included: poor meeting attendance, a lack of community service projects (despite interest voiced by active members), lack of nominees for leadership roles, and lack of attendance at the SWE conference. Each of these difficulties can be attributed, at least in some part, to leadership problems. Officer meetings were held sporadically and often without the faculty advisor's attendance. Meetings were not announced or advertised with an appropriate amount of notice; service project and fundraising committees were left to their own devices.

The faculty advisor gained valuable experience during this first year as SWE advisor. She decided that she would begin her second year as SWE advisor by becoming a more proactive advisor.

Discussion

We concur with Evans, Evans, and Sherman [5] who have observed that various leadership styles may be effective – the most important factor appears to be access to the advisor. The organization advisor who is both available and interested can offer students the greatest opportunity for success. However, in practicality, if students see themselves as too busy to consult with the organization's advisor, as demonstrated in Case Study 4, the availability is a moot point. Technology, such as e-mail or an organizational web site, may help improve access to the advisor as well as the entire membership of the organization. During years in which the chapter secretary has maintained an up-to-date e-mail listing of current members, and has sent meeting announcements well in advance, attendance has been relatively high. However, as in Case Study 2, the secretary sometimes does not conduct her duties in a timely manner. The proactive advisor may choose to send the e-mails that announce the meetings.

Maintaining an active membership can prove to be very difficult. In a survey of 813 Georgia students, McCannon and Bennett [3] found that students were most likely to join an organization to meet other students, but that job related commitments and too little time available were strong deterrents to participation. Furthermore, sophomores and juniors often dominate chapter activity. Evans, Evans, and Sherman [5] observe that, without effective student leaders, the students who volunteer to participate would be likely to walk away. We found this to be true during the year of Case Study 2. The chapter's service activities would likely have been better attended if the president had been able to follow through on her somewhat ambitious set of goals. Even when there is strong leadership on the part of student officers, it is difficult to attract and maintain student interest in voluntary projects. Lueptow's article [8] about an engineering student design competition indicates that our experiences are not unique. In this study, advisors reported an average of 15 students "involved" in the design projects, but estimated that only one-third did most of the work.

As mentioned earlier, the McCannon and Bennett survey results indicate that students are reluctant to participate because they know they have too little time available, especially job related commitments. The survey results further show that students who join student organizations do not list leadership as a prime reason for joining. Although faculty advisors believe that improved leadership skills may be a corollary to student organization membership, especially for those who take an active role in the organization, most students are not joining in order to increase their leadership skills. Leadership is, however, an essential component of project management. Students who join an organization to meet people, but subsequently become officers and/or active participants in the organization's service projects may find that increased project management skills are a corollary of membership.

It is our observation that the vast majority of presidents began their term enthusiastically and highly motivated, but most lost much of their enthusiasm after one term. The most notable exception was the president who served in Case Study 3. Many student chapter officers observed over the past eleven years seriously underestimated the time required to develop projects and enlist the aid of reliable volunteers.

Faculty advisors may also seriously underestimate the time required to adequately guide the development of the students' leadership skills. It is important to identify the expectations that the officers have for the advisor, but likewise the advisor must let the officers know what is expected of them. To have a successful organization, the advisor may need to step in and provide some guidance. Most of our officers are inexperienced as leaders and a faculty advisor can help them become better in a leadership role. The difficult part of this for the advisor is identifying how much 'guidance' each officer will require. To be effective, an advisor must alter his or her leadership style to complement that of the current president and to help the organization grow.

Conclusion

The two most crucial keys to a successful student chapter are motivated students and a proactive faculty advisor. Our experience indicates that proactive faculty advisors are necessary, but not sufficient, for an active membership. The combination of strong student leadership with highly active faculty advisors results in a very productive year. However, other combinations, such as strong student leadership and a moderately active faculty advisor, can also be successful. The faculty advisor's management style needs to be adapted to the leadership style of the current year's officers. The use of accepted principles of project management, however, is recommended regardless of the makeup of the student leadership. The success of projects is highly dependent on the interaction of faculty advisor and organization leaders. Since few officers find the time to serve more than one year, the faculty advisors provide the continuity necessary for smooth functioning of student organizations from year to year.

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