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Multiple Bosses: Challenges and suggestions to improve organizational environments in academic settings

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ABSTRACT

Practice faculty members are often supervised by more than one individual, creating a reporting structure that mirrors a matrix organization. They are tasked with balancing administrative and teaching responsibilities established by the school with expectations of maintaining a pharmacy practice site. A matrix reporting structure offers opportunities for enhanced development, but risks of additional stress from the organizational complexity must be mitigated to reduce job dissatisfaction. Frequent and consistent communication, mutual agreement and alignment of expectations and priorities, and the ability to manage conflict and adapt to change will aid pharmacy practice faculty in managing the relationship between their primary employer (the school) and the contracted entity.

INTRODUCTION

Schools of pharmacy frequently partner with health-systems, community pharmacies, state agencies, or physician practices to provide pharmacy services via an established agreement or contract. Pharmacy practice faculty are expected to deliver the agreed upon clinical service as well as to participate in teaching, service, and other scholarly activities. While these partnerships foster research, innovation, and practice based experiences, they also add a layer of complexity and require constant attention and maintenance. Practice faculty are challenged to balance administrative and teaching responsibilities established by the school with expectations of the practice site.

Practice faculty members are often supervised by more than one individual, creating a reporting structure that mirrors a matrix organization. A matrix structure is defined as an organizational environment in which employees report to multiple managers.¹ While matrix reporting structures allow organizations to address multiple business initiatives, they violate the management principle of unity of command, creating opportunities for misunderstandings and conflicts.^{2,3} Practice faculty may have solid line reporting to the Chair of the Department of Pharmacy Practice and a dotted line to a manager of the contracted institution. This type of reporting structure often leads to challenges, including misaligned goals, unclear roles, ambiguous authority, and silo-focused employees.² This review summarizes published research and peer-reviewed perspectives that address the use of matrix organization structures.

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LITERATURE SEARCH

A comprehensive search of Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, and Regional Business News databases was conducted on January 20, 2015. The search terms included a combination of “matrix organization OR multiple bosses OR multiple managers.” Only peer-reviewed publications in English were included. Abstracts from the initial search were manually screened by the authors for relevance to the review. A full text review of articles included was conducted by each author and consensus on article inclusion into final analysis was reached (Figure 1). Data extraction focused on a general review of themes addressed in each article. Authors independently reviewed and summarized findings from the publications and met to compare results of the analysis.

FINDINGS

The literature search generated 228 abstracts for initial screening, of which 142 articles were excluded based on relevance. Of the 86 full text articles relevant to the review, eligibility was assessed independently by each author and consensus was reached to include 26 articles in the analysis. Descriptions of the themes addressed in each article as assessed by both authors are summarized in Table 1.¹⁻²⁶

COMMUNICATION

Communication is crucial to successfully managing a single boss but even more essential when managing multiple bosses. Practice faculty should meet with their managers and establish a plan for communication and information sharing.² Monthly updates via e-mail and quarterly face-to face meetings may suffice. The point is to agree on the communication strategy and frequency.²⁷ Cancelling meetings should be avoided. If conflicts arise, commit to rescheduling the meeting for another time rather than skipping it all together. Summarize meetings in writing to ensure a common understanding.

No bosses like surprises, and informed managers result in happy managers.²⁸ Unfortunately, the tendency is to under

communicate.² If in doubt as to whether to tell a boss something or not, tell him or her. Let the boss make the decision as to what to do with the information; i.e. ignore it, store it, or act on it. If deviation from the typical schedule is needed, inform both the practice site manager and the school manager. If opportunities exist, speak up. If changes need to be made, speak with both managers, preferably at the same time in order to ensure a consistent message.

Communication needs to be multidirectional. In other words, not only must employees communicate with their bosses, but bosses must communicate with employees and with each other. Successful relationships are dependent on the giving and receiving of ongoing feedback. A pitfall to avoid is being the proverbial middleman, i.e. delivering messages from the practice site to the school and vice versa. If critical issues need discussion and consensus, insist that all parties meet face-to-face.

MUTUAL AGREEMENT AND ALIGNMENT OF GOALS

Mutual agreement is a foundational necessity to building a strong relationship between the school, faculty member, and practice site. "Meeting of the minds" is a common term in contract law used to describe mutual assent and the basis for multiple parties entering into an agreement.²⁹ The relationships between a school of pharmacy and a practice site often involve a "Memorandum of Understanding" or other formal written contract reviewed by legal representation for each organization involved. Typically, the scope of service in formal contracts is intentionally vague to allow flexibility for the practitioner and the practice site. Therefore, additional conversations must take place to define more explicit expectations. During these discussions all parties should be sensitive to the manner in which expectations are communicated. Effective communication will promote cooperation and mutual understanding while a poorly conveyed message will inhibit true agreement.

Even in relationships with effective and routine communication, conflict arises when expectations are poorly defined and/or not agreed upon.¹² Roles and responsibilities must be clear, and accountability must be assigned.³⁰ Definition is especially important because job stress develops when the employee has a different understanding of the role than the employer.³¹ Additionally, clarity increases the likelihood that expectations are met.³² Once responsibilities are determined, a point of contact for each area of responsibility should be designated to facilitate appropriate communication. These expectations should be summarized in writing and revisited frequently.

Aligning goals is particularly helpful. For example, completion of a medication use evaluation may be an expectation of the practice site. Presenting the findings or publishing the results of

the evaluation may help fulfill the school's requirement for scholarly activity. In this example, strategic alignment of goals benefits the practice site, school, and the faculty member.

Role delineations and percent effort agreements serve as a guide for time commitments between scholarship, teaching, and practice. For example, the practice faculty member may be expected to spend 20% of time on scholarship, 40% on teaching, and 40% on practice. These agreements should be routinely re-evaluated to ensure that the initial "budgeted" effort reflects the "actual" effort exerted by the faculty member. If misalignments are identified, then either the agreement needs to adjust to reflect the true effort or the practitioner needs to adjust to reflect the intended effort. Businesses review profit and loss statements on a monthly or quarterly basis to assess financial performance compared to budget. When a business fails to meet budget projections in one quarter, managers often make operational adjustments to ensure the business compensates in the following quarter to balance out the performance for the fiscal year. New faculty effort agreements should be evaluated with the same frequency and importance as a new business to ensure that the faculty member's practice site is established on a solid foundation that is sustainable for the site and the employee.

MANAGING CONFLICT

Conflict is inevitable in every organization. Many organizational factors evolve over time including, the mission, goals, objectives, resources, market forces, and people. When disagreement arises within an organization, the way colleagues respond, change, or adapt determines how successful the organization will be moving forward.^{25,26} Although change in an organization is expected, many people within an organization are more comfortable with preserving the status quo. The ability to adapt to changes in response to conflict or ambiguity is a skillset necessary for employees to be successful in a matrix structure.⁸ Practice faculty should expect changes in their practices and should remain flexible. Supervisors and other stakeholders in the practice site should also be sensitive to the evolving needs of school and accommodate as necessary. When one or more parties involved become rigid and refuse to adapt, conflict develops. For the employee, the response is either to voice concern, remain silent and unhappy or to ultimately exit the organization.³³ For the practice site, the response may be to terminate the practice agreement. Faculty members must also recognize that priorities at the practice site and school will shift. With effective communication and clarity on the new priority rankings, no issues should result from the change in importance.

After conflicts or disagreements are settled, the organization should learn from the experience and work to develop processes that might prevent similar conflicts from arising.

Schools of pharmacy should proactively identify areas of role ambiguity or misalignment to reduce tension from the lack of clarity.¹² Doing so may also address any inconsistency with resource allocation. Evaluating current incentives for faculty to achieve the desired goals may explained why certain employees become silo-focused.¹⁷

MAXIMIZING THE MATRIX

Managing multiple bosses adds complexity to the practice faculty member's professional life. The challenge is to harness the benefits of this type of organizational structure while managing the risks. Having two or more managers promotes faculty development in different areas and provides a rich learning environment. For example, the school manager may have more expertise in research and teaching while the practice site manager may have more experience in pharmacy operations and management. Recognizing and taking advantage of each manager's strengths will allow the faculty member to develop an even wider set of skills.

A matrix reporting structure also lowers the risk of a negative experience resulting from a bad boss. At some point in a career, an employee will likely encounter a manager who lacks the necessary skills or leadership qualities that most typically think of when envisioning a good boss. Having multiple managers spreads the risk so that a poor relationship with one manager could be countered by a great relationship with the other manager.

CONCLUSION

Practice faculty must balance administrative and teaching responsibilities established by the school with expectations of the pharmacy practice site.

Frequent and consistent communication, mutual agreement and alignment of expectations and priorities, and the ability to manage conflict and adapt to a changing environment will aid in managing this relationship. Maximizing the benefits of matrix reporting will improve success and promote collaboration between the school and the practice site.

Matrix reporting structures exists in multiple business sectors as well as within other professional schools where faculty share joint practice and academic appointments. Further research is needed to identify the relationship between different outcomes of interest (i.e.: job satisfaction, turnover, employee productivity, leader-member exchange) and the quantity and quality of reporting structures within academic institutions. School administrations may benefit from understanding these relationships and creating a better environment for employees.

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Table 1: Summary table of articles included in review

Authors	Year	Article Type	Themes Addressed in Article	Reference #
Hall K	2013	Commentary	Need for clarity and alignment, communication	3
Galbrath J	2013	Commentary	Alignment of roles and responsibilities, communication patterns, conflict escalation and resolution processes	4
Kates A, Kesler G	2013	Commentary	Structure/Clarity, Cohesiveness among matrixed employees managers, assignment of an ultimate decision maker	5
Campbell A	2013	Commentary	Decision grids, policy	6
Clement S	2013	Commentary	Clearly define the working relationships and agreement on accountability by all parties	7
Neisheim T	2011	Case Study	Alignment of processes (goals), communication is essential, the line has primacy, standardization + flexibility, resource allocation	8
Harris C	2010	Case Study	Communication, transparency, decision making, resource allocation	9
North M, Coors C	2010	Commentary	Defined roles and responsibilities and roles are aligned with the mission. Know the boss for each situation and project, shared accountability, and alignment.	10
Strikwerda J, Stoelhorst J	2009	Research	Executives associate matrix organizations with unclear responsibilities, a lack of accountability, and political battles over resources	11
Arvidsson, N	2009	Survey	Tension results from unclear roles and responsibilities	12
Appelbaum S, Nadeau P, Cyr M	2009	Case Study	Concludes that a multi-rater system is best	13
Appelbaum S, Nadeau P, Cyr M	2008	Case Study	Reviews evaluation types using a case study	14
Appelbaum S, Nadeau P, Cyr M	2008	Review	Defines a matrix organization and differentiates between functional, project, and balanced management	15
Welleman, J	2007	Research	Communication, empowering employees, decision making, flexibility.	16
Sy T	2005	Survey	Challenges are misaligned goals, unclear roles and responsibilities, ambiguous authority, lack of a matrix guardian, silo-focused employees, Strategies- define expectations, provide training	2
Sy T, Cote S	2004	Commentary	Challenges are misaligned goals, unclear roles and responsibilities, ambiguous authority, decisions are untimely and less quality, silo-focused employees	1
Atkinson P	2003	Panel	Silo-focused employees, incentives, trust	17
Goold M, Campbell A	2003	Research	Set clear roles & responsibilities, mutual learning, accountability	18
Kuprenas J	2003	Case Study	Set clear roles & responsibilities, processes & reporting systems, prioritize resources, training	19
Dunn S	2001	Research	Identifies conflict over roles and responsibilities and interpersonal (communication) as challenges	20
Anderson R	1994	Commentary	Empowerment and development	21

Authors	Year	Article Type	Themes Addressed in Article	Reference #
Joyce W	1986	Research	Role ambiguity, job satisfaction, role conflict	22
Brown JL , Agnew N	1982	Case Study	Clear goals, processes, resource allocation	23
Teasley C, Ready R	1981	Case Study	Multiple bosses, conflict, trust	24
Knight K	1976	Review	Conflict, balance, stress, communication costs, clear roles & responsibilities	25
Wilemon D	1973	Case Study	Conflict arises from role ambiguity, poor understanding of project objectives, low power of project manager, diversity of expertise, and lack of agreement on goals	26