ANATOMY OF AN R&R
(OR, REVIEWERS ARE AN AUTHOR'S BEST FRIENDS. . .)

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In a recent "From the Editors" column (Rynes et al., 2005), the editors at *AMJ* discussed publication standards, processes, and strategies authors might use to improve their chances of having manuscripts accepted at *AMJ*. The editors also referenced interesting discussions of the publication process in the organizational sciences (e.g., Cummings & Frost, 1995; Huff, 1998) that might help authors develop strategies to get published. However, a perusal of this literature reveals that relatively little attention has been explicitly devoted to the phase of the publication process that takes place after an author has received an invitation to revise and resubmit his or her manuscript: the famous R&R. This is an important oversight because, as Rynes and her colleagues (2005) pointed out, 50 percent of the papers that receive R&Rs at *AMJ* are subsequently rejected. Revise and resubmit is an important part of the publication process—the make-or-break point—and it should not be neglected or underemphasized.

My coauthors and I published a paper in *AMJ* titled "Taking Empowerment to the Next Level: A Multiple-Level Model of Empowerment, Performance, and Satisfaction (Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004). The manuscript went through two rounds of substantial revisions, but by the time the final paper emerged I think that all involved—authors, reviewers, and action editor—felt that the paper made a stronger, more important contribution to the literature. We were therefore quite gratified when the paper was chosen the Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior for 2004 by the OB Division of AOM. The editors at *AMJ* asked me to provide a few comments regarding the review process based on this experience. What was the review process like for this paper? How did it contribute to the quality of the final paper? What were the frustrations, and where were the breakthroughs? By sharing some examples from a constructive review process experience, I hope to provide authors with some insights, prescriptions, tips, and strategies that might help them to respond constructively to an R&R invitation from *AMJ*.

The first simple point one might take from my experience with the R&R process for "Taking Empowerment to the Next Level" is that responding to an R&R is a lot of work. In the case of this manuscript, the basic conceptual model and methodology were in place at the first submission. All the reviewers valued the cross-level approach of the work and saw our application of hierarchical linear modeling as an appropriate and useful analytical strategy. Nevertheless, the first set of editor-reviewer comments covered 13 pages of single-spaced text. The R&R was characterized by the action editor as "high-risk." Our reply consisted of 31 pages of single-spaced text. The second set of editor-reviewer comments covered 10 pages; our second reply was 13 pages. I can literally say that we invested as much work in the replies to reviewers as we did in writing the original manuscript. Perhaps some novice authors believe that most of their work has been done when they submit a manuscript for review. This belief could lead to a defensive or even dismissive attitude toward reviewer comments. This reaction is not likely to lead to a positive eventual outcome.

Schneider (1995) observed that publishing in refereed journals is not generally a path to positive feedback. Indeed, the first set of reviewer comments for the "Empowerment" paper raised a full range of conceptual and methodological issues (as one might expect from 13 pages). Because reviewers focus primarily on the problems in a manuscript, I think the R&R often feels more like a rebuke rather than a reward. To counteract this feeling, I try not to delve too deeply into the details of the reviewers' comments when I first receive the letter responding to a submission. Instead, I read quickly through the editor's comments and give myself some time—at least one weekend—before actually starting to struggle with the specific content of the reply. I let myself have a little celebration, administer whatever self-reinforcers seem appropriate, and build up that ever-precious supply of self-efficacy for the next part of the effort.

As a general practice, I attempt to make the reply as comprehensive and user-friendly for the reviewers as possible. I restate each comment succinctly, indicate the changes that have been made to the text as a result of the comment, and explain the logic behind the change. I also excerpt the paragraph(s) that make up the new or changed text as part of the reply. This procedure tends to make the

reply letter very long, and recently editors at a number of journals (including *AMJ*) have been asking for shorter replies. As a reviewer, I can empathize with this request. A reply that is as long as the original manuscript may feel like an attempt to wear down the reviewers rather than a succinct response to the points they have raised. The quickest way to accomplish a shorter reply is to simply refer the reviewer to the new material in the text rather than include it in the reply.

Something I am more reluctant to drop is my paraphrase of the reviewers' comments. I think it helps reviewers get back up to speed on a paper without having to find their original comments; shows them that you, the authors, have understood their comments (or perhaps indicates where you have not fully understood), and requires authors to think issues through from the perspective of the reviewers. In a sense, these paraphrases create a two-way communication channel between author and reviewer. Further, I think an author is less likely to distort or overlook parts of a reviewer's comment if he/she is presenting this understanding back to the reviewer. I often formulate and reformulate a paraphrase until I have rendered the reviewer's comment clearly and succinctly, perhaps drawing out implications the reviewer did not think about. This process is the starting point for my detailed reply, and I would carry out this practice even if instructed not to include my paraphrases in the reply itself.

Much of the discussion on publishing has focused on the stultifying effects of the review process. Reviewers are often seen as the keepers of the status quo, as squelchers of innovation and enforcers of reigning paradigms (e.g., Perrow, 1995). Certainly many of the issues raised by reviewers for "Taking Empowerment to the Next Level" were focused on aspects of our manuscript that were relatively novel or at least not standard in the literature. However, rather than seeing these comments as attempts to squelch an innovative approach, I saw them as legitimate questions that, if answered successfully, could help to establish some consensus or at least precedent that could be generalized for future research. I've never forgotten a reviewer comment received by a colleague: "Opportunities to make a contribution were avoided." One should not avoid taking a novel or interesting approach out of fear that reviewers will be critical. Novelty is a challenge and will draw the attention of reviewers, but it also draws their interest and active participation in a paper. This is where constructive interaction between authors and reviewers can lead to a more substantial contribution.

In the next few paragraphs, I provide several examples that I hope will show how a constructive interaction between reviewer and author can sharpen and generalize the contribution of a manuscript. These examples come from actual letters exchanged during the R&R process for the Seibert, Silver, and Randolph (2004) article on empowerment. Some background on the paper itself may help clarify the discussion that follows. The primary task my colleagues and I set ourselves in this paper was to show both conceptually and empirically that empowerment should be viewed as an inherently *multiple-level phenomenon*. Empowerment is an intrinsic motivational state that an individual employee feels (psychological empowerment), but it is also a management strategy—a set of policies and programs that management can put into place to affect employee motivation (an empowerment climate). To examine this conceptual model, we collected data from individuals in one organization regarding both their own levels of empowerment and their perceptions of certain properties of their work units related to empowering management practices (e.g., the extent of information sharing). We also collected ratings of individual job performance from work-unit managers and data on work-unit performance from second-level managers. We sought to demonstrate that work-unit empowerment climate had direct effects on work-unit performance and also cross-level effects on individual employee empowerment, which would in turn affect individual performance and satisfaction. We used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) as our main analytic strategy.

One key contribution the reviewers made to this paper was to force us to be clearer and more explicit regarding our conceptual logic. Although we spent considerable time in the original version of the manuscript on conceptual issues, a number of points where our position was not fully developed remained. I have found that many research projects, including my own, are driven by a single basic insight into a problem, a process, or even a data set. That insight can function as a working assumption that lends coherence to a manuscript. In the case of this paper, the main insight concerned the two levels at which empowerment operates. In retrospect, I believe that the most valuable contribution the reviewers made to this manuscript was to push us to develop more explicit logic to support our central insight, with queries such as these: At what level is empowerment climate specified, and why? Through what processes does the construct emerge? How does it differ in substance from psychological empowerment? Why isn't psychological empowerment specified at the work-unit level? What produces variance in each of

these constructs? Much of the content in two sub-sections of the paper, "Climate" and "Issues of Level," was writtten in response to reviewers' questions and suggestions. I consider these sections some of the best in the paper because each draws from the existing multiple-level literature, applies to a specific substantive area, and can serve as an exemplar for multiple-level research in other substantive areas.

A second key reviewer contribution relates to some technical aspects of the methods we used. One important set of questions revolved around the proper way to demonstrate the empirical justification for aggregation. Although use of the interrater agreement measure r_{wg} has become popular, this approach raises several practical issues. For example, what is an acceptable r_{wg} value? Given that the rectangular null distribution seems unlikely, what is the appropriate distribution against which to calculate this statistic? Is the mean r_{wg} all that is necessary, or should one report the full range of values? What does one do with individual units that demonstrate "unacceptably low" r_{wg} values? The reviewer and I worked our way through the strengths and weaknesses of r_{wg} versus ICC (the intraclass correlation statistic) as appropriate indexes of agreement and essentially reached a deeper understanding of the issues and trade-offs involved. Ultimately we decided to rely on ICC as the more elegant indicator of within-group agreement and between-group variability because it addressed issues of aggregation as well as between-unit variance.

These two examples illustrate the constructive role reviewers can take during the review process. As Meyer (1995) pointed out, authors can shift reviewers from the role of critic to a more constructive and developmental role. I recommend taking a look at Meyer's original points, which pertain primarily to initial manuscripts, and extending these points to the process of constructing your response to an R&R invitation. A reviewer is, first, a gatekeeper who makes sure that a manuscript has certain basic required features, such as those discussed in the Rynes et al. (2005) editorial: an appropriate research design and analysis; construct-valid measures; and theoretical and applied contributions. Reviewers are most likely to move beyond the gatekeeper role if they have confidence that an author is competent, objective, open, and trustworthy about methods, data, and findings. Authors should therefore approach their replies to R&Rs as a matter of their own ongoing education and discovery process—not as an effort to justify their own particular approach or to gloss over weaknesses of their methods or data. An honest and thorough attempt on the part of authors to acknowledge and grapple with the problems of their research encourages reviewers to adopt a similar approach to their manuscript. A specific practical problem in a manuscript may be a cause for both reviewer and author to think more deeply about an issue than they have before. But it is the authors' responsibility to go "back to school" on the issue and provide a thoroughly researched and reasoned answer. Even now I am too embarrassed to say how much time we took to formulate each of our replies (a long time frame for a response is certainly a risk in itself), but in response to our second reply, one reviewer commented, "It is evident that much effort, attention, and scholarship were invested in improving the paper. Thanks." I provide this quote to assure authors that reviewers will respect their efforts to truly improve a paper, and it's this kind of goodwill among the reviewers that leads them to want to help you through the rough spots.

However, regardless of your efforts, some reviewer comments can fundamentally challenge the goals and value of a manuscript. The hardest and most frustrating critique to answer may be the question, "So what?" This is, of course, the question often raised by the prototypical reviewer 3—the informed reader with expertise in the general area but no personal investment in the specific topic or methods of the manuscript being reviewed. We did indeed receive some fairly devastating comments for this paper, which I can quickly paraphrase: You've done nothing new here; you should have gotten better data; and here are some suggestions for a study that might actually have been interesting and worthwhile. (Obviously, these convey the emotion-laden way that I read the comments and are *not* examples of how I would paraphrase a reviewer comment for inclusion in my reply!) As has been said many times, "The reviewer is never wrong," but there are some comments that you simply must disagree with if you value your work or hope to have it survive the review process. How do you deal with this question and, more generally, with reviewers with whom you basically disagree?

It's all too easy to become frustrated because you, as author, assume that the reviewer is simply missing the point. After all, he or she probably spent two hours considering a project you labored over for two years. Reviewer comments that you disagree with can also seem unfair because of the unequal power relationship and the limited opportunities for representing your point of view. These frustrations can get in the way of an effective and constructive reply. For this type of situation, I often find it important to get an objective outside person

to read the "offending" reviewer comment. This person could be a coauthor who was not primarily responsible for the part of the manuscript in question or a knowledgeable colleague who has not even read the full manuscript. Calling in such a reader is helpful, I think, for a number of reasons.

First, the reviewer may well have a point that you, as author, are not completely prepared to acknowledge. After deep immersion in the project, you are probably heavily invested in your approach and point of view. Or you may simply be more concerned with the subtle aspects of your argument and feel that the basic contributions of the paper are obvious. Ironically, although your main concern may be that the reviewer is missing your subtle points, you yourself may not fully understand the specific points he or she has made. I have often found a casual conversation with a more objective person can clarify my thinking, because it requires me to both hear the reviewer's specific points and explain my own thinking. Sometimes what the reviewer is asking can be answered much more simply than you had thought possible. Often, a concise logical argument supported by relevant empirical findings will be your best reply. Limiting your reply to the specific issue raised by the reviewer may also be best, as it avoids raising additional problems and issues. Long digressions are unlikely to yield an appropriate response to a basic question of contribution. Remember also that the audience for this reply is not just the specific reviewer, but the other reviewers and the editor as well.

In the case of our paper on empowerment, we decided not to disagree with one reviewer about his or her assessment of our contribution. Rather, we simply emphasized the main points of our contribution in the clearest way possible: (1) no other research had tried to capture empowerment as a set of work-unit-level practices, (2) the existing empowerment climate instrument that we used was conceptually underspecified and empirically untested, and (3) the full set of relationships examined in our study drew together elements from disparate research literatures that had not previously been integrated in one model. In the end, I think the reviewer accepted only the third point, but that acceptance and a strong action editor were enough. It should be obvious from this summary that the reviewer's comments led us to crystallize our thinking about the limitations of the previous research and the aspects of our study that constituted our key contributions. This process made the contribution more specific and may have helped persuade other reviewers, even if it was not entirely successful with the original reviewer.

Every reply to reviewers poses a different set of specific challenges, and you must use your knowledge, judgment, and creativity to respond to your reviewers' legitimate concerns. Most of what you have to work with comes from the original intent and design of the research project. No amount of craftsmanship in constructing a reply can make up for a lack of basic theory, limited contribution, or poor research design. The art of the reply is critical for a diamond in the rough but won't transmogrify a lump of coal. The *best* reason to send your paper to a top journal such as *AMJ* is the knowledge, expertise, and craftsmanship embodied by the publication's editors and reviewers. As an author, your basic strategy is to shift reviewers' frame from, "What can I catch to ding this paper?" to, "What can I do to improve the quality of this paper?" This shift is unlikely to happen if your own attitude to an R&R invitation is, "What do I need to do to get this manuscript accepted?" rather than, "How can I best use the review process to make my manuscript the best that it possibly can be?"

In conclusion, I'd like to provide a few summary comments for authors facing R&R requests:

1. Submit your best effort in your original manuscript—don't count on reviewers to do your work for you.
2. When you receive an R&R, allow yourself some time to enjoy the positive feedback that it represents.
3. Be responsive in your resubmission. Respond to every point the reviewers raised. Always try to make some constructive change in the manuscript and, at the very least, assume that you failed to make yourself clear the first time.
4. Be concise. Often a response to a specific issue should be a clarification or elaboration of your original thinking—not a new argument that is again lacking in clarity, depth, development, or relevance.
5. Don't debate the reviewers. Back up your responses with additional literature, data, or logic, but look for the right solution, not the most convenient one. The reviewers will appreciate your efforts.
6. Perhaps the reviewer is *not* always right, but he or she almost always has a perspective worth considering. Addressing each reviewer's issues can strengthen your manuscript, even if it doesn't actually win over the reviewer. You don't have to convince every reviewer about every point. Sometimes you just have to trust that you have a strong action editor (another good reason to send your best work to a top journal such as *AMJ*). But you must provide the action editor with logic and evidence that he or she can

use to stand up for your position, even over the objections of one (or more) reviewers.

And finally, consider this: If writing is the highest form of thinking, then the review process may be one of the most challenging but rewarding experiences of your academic life. The best review processes have the important potential to contribute to individuals' intellectual growth as well as to organizational science.
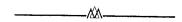
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