Eliminating the Dark Side of Blind Peer Review

—A Change Management Perspective

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Abstract

Having peers review manuscripts submitted for publication helps ensure the quality of scholarly journal articles. Blind peer review (BPR), the process traditionally used for this purpose, has well documented advantages and disadvantages. However, few researchers have addressed the harm inflicted on reviewees directly, and on academia and the quality of peer-reviewed articles indirectly, by misguided blind peer reviewers. In this paper, the focus is on the dark side of blind peer review, what it is, why it happens, and what can be done about it. I describe a constructive blind peer review process (CBPR) that enhances the current BPR process by incorporating the nature of the feedback provided by the reviewer and its impact on the reviewee. I then discuss how to use the CBPR and a modified version of Lewin's classic three-step change model, the continuous change model (CCM), to identify ways to improve the BPR process and determine strategies for implementing them successfully.

Keywords

Dark Side of Blind Peer Review, Destructive Reviewers, Constructive Blind Peer Review, Change Management, Lewin's Change Model, Continuous Change Model

1. What Is Blind Peer Review?

Peer review is a control mechanism used to improve the quality of manuscripts submitted for purposes such as publication in scholarly journals, reception of grants, or selection for academic conferences (Ross-Hellauer, 2017). Peer reviewers are either known to each other, but not to the authors of the manuscript, which is known as single-blind review, or are not known to the other reviewers or the authors, which is known as double-blind review (Shema, 2014). Although peer review has important benefits (Ferguson, 2020) and is used widely, it is not without its

shortcomings.

2. What Are the Pros and Cons of Blind Peer Review?

Traditional peer review has some notable advantages (Ferguson, 2020: p. 287):

The anonymity of the review process is designed to allow reviewers to express critical views and objective criticism freely, without fear of retaliation from authors (Walker & Rocha da Silva, 2015; Clobridge, 2016). Lack of interaction among reviewers prevents high prestige or forceful reviewers from dominating the review process (Walker & Rocha da Silva, 2015). When all the reviewers are anonymous, no single reviewer's opinion can outweigh the opinion of any other reviewer.

Traditional peer review is, however, flawed in many ways (Hachani, 2015). Ross-Hellauer (2017) identified six categories of criticism of the process from a technical standpoint: unreliability and inconsistency; delay and expense; lack of accountability and risks of subversion; social and publication biases; lack of incentives; and wastefulness. Clobridge (2016, as cited in Ferguson, 2020) addressed the people side of the problem, arguing that "when reviewers are encouraged to be honest, they too often indulge in unnecessarily harsh criticism, much of which is petty and has nothing to do with the science, quality, or merit of a particular manuscript." Arguably, if reviewers were "aware that their identities would be known to the authors whose work they were reviewing, they would take more care to temper their comments and be less likely to offer overly severe criticism" (Ferguson, 2020: p. 287).

According to Einarsen et al. (2003), bullying is "harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks" (p. 15). Additionally, bullying requires that the behavior occur repeatedly over a period of time. Blind reviewers are not strictly speaking bullies, as they may not intend to harm the authors and their behavior does not occur over a period of time, but its detrimental effect on published authors in general and novice researchers in particular can be significant. To put this into perspective, note that the destructive behaviors described by Clobridge (2016) are similar to those of destructive leaders (Itzkovich et al., 2020). So, what can be done to minimize this dark side of BPR?

3. Alternatives for Change

Three ways to address the dark side of BPR are incremental, radical, and transformational. Incremental efforts would focus on the multiple, identified problems of BPR separately. Radical efforts would focus on dramatic changes to the traditional process, such as adoption of open approaches, which some (Hachani, 2015; Ross-Hellauer, 2017) have argued should be the approach of choice for solving many of the existing problems with traditional peer review. However, to address the dark side of BPR, which is a people problem rather than a technical one, a focused, systemic, transformational approach is recommended.

Such an approach would require the development of a more collaborative and

constructive process for improving BPR process outcomes (e.g., better articles for journals, better grant proposals, better conference papers) and people outcomes (i.e., enhanced author and reviewer development). Such a constructive blind peer review (CBPR) process is both necessary to enhance the quality of the traditional BPR process and ethically superior because reducing the destructive aspects of the BPR process is the right thing to do. We will examine the elements of such a constructive process in two ways, a traditional top-down perspective and a collaborative, transformational perspective.

4. How to Change from BPR to CBPR: A Traditional Perspective

As suggested, to effect this transformational change will require a new, more constructive model of BPR. This CBPR process model could take the form of a feedback loop from the author(s) of an article to the reviewer(s) in which they complete a survey that allows them to rate the quality of the reviewer's feedback and make suggestions for improvement. Integral to this would be the development of survey that captures the essence of effective constructive feedback for use in the CBPR process. Such a process addition would not change the blind aspect of the process. Instead, it would add a mechanism for improving 1) the quality of articles submitted for review based on the receipt of better reviewer feedback, 2) the long-term development of authors, 3) the long-term development of reviewers, and 4) the overall quality of the journal and its reputation in a positive, constructive manner.

5. How to Change from BPR to CBPR: A Change Management Perspective

Kurt Lewin's (1958) three-stage change model is a planned process for organizational change by engaging employees actively in the change effort, as explained in detail in Hussain et al. (2018). Lewin's model, also known as the UMR model, involves unfreezing the current state (U), moving to the desired new state (M), and refreezing to optimize the new state (R). Following these stages enables leaders to make transformational changes by overcoming, in a collaborative, constructive manner, people's natural resistance to embrace change. Instead of forcing people to change, Lewin's model, correctly applied, enables transformational leaders to engage, inspire, and motivate them to want to participate in the process of change to achieve a common goal or vision of the future (Levasseur, 2001). The key to applying this approach to planned change effectively in the modern era of rapid, often unpredictable change is to envision Lewin's model not as just three stages ($U => M => R$), but as a continuous, iterative process consisting of multiple recurring UMR change processes separated by unique time intervals determined by the next need to make a substantive change:

$$[U_1 => M_1 => R_1] ==> [U_2 => M_2 => R_2] ==> \bullet \bullet \bullet [U_i => M_i => R_i] ==> \bullet \bullet \bullet$$

Each of the separate change processes embedded in this continuous change model (CCM), or UMC model, has a three-stage structure similar to Lewin's UMR change model, except for the final stage that explicitly addresses the continuous

nature of change in modern organizations:

- Collaborative Vision of the Desired State [U];
- Collaborative Movement toward the Desired State [M];
- Collaborative, Continuous Change to Maintain the Desired State [C].

The final stage in the continuous change model requires the type of continuous organizational learning advocated by Senge (1990), which many organizations have embraced.

To apply the CCM correctly to effect transformational change, it is necessary to engage members of the system affected by the change process in the change effort from its inception (Levasseur, 2019). In this case, the system affected consists primarily of authors, reviewers, and journal editors. So, they must work together to develop the desired state, craft the steps necessary to move to that desired state, and monitor the progress of implementation to ensure the achievement of the desired state in each UMR cycle of the CCM. Naturally, the membership of the team may change from time to time, but the three core groups of stakeholders (authors, reviewers, and journal editors) must constitute the membership of the team. It is also necessary to adopt the egalitarian principles of organization development, rather than the often management-driven (i.e., top down/hierarchical) approaches of typical change management efforts, to ensure that all participants have an equal voice in the change process, and that management's role is to support, not direct the day-to-day activities of the team. To work most effectively, the CCM process typically requires professional facilitation by an internal or external organization development/change management expert. However, if guided by the principles of planned change described above, any team of motivated stakeholders can improve the quality of their BPR process.

6. Conclusion

The BPR process works, but it has serious flaws. One that is largely overlooked is the deleterious effect of destructive reviewers on the process. The main contribution of this research could be to influence journal editors to address the dark side of BPR by taking a developmental view of the BPR process that engages system stakeholders (authors, reviewers, and editors) in a collaborative process based on well-established organization development/change management principles to transform it into a more engaging, ethical, and constructive process for improving 1) the quality of articles submitted for review based on the receipt of better reviewer feedback, 2) the long-term development of authors, 3) the long-term development of reviewers, and 4) the overall quality of journals and their reputation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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