

---

## VOLUNTEER AUTONOMY AS A MOVING FORCE

*Jan Kuiper*  
*Kuiper & de Kieft Consultants*

*Lucas Meijs*  
*Erasmus University,*  
*Rotterdam, The Netherlands*

---

### ABSTRACT

*Scouting, The Netherlands* is a volunteer organization with at national level 300 volunteers and 50 paid staff. To better service the 1350 chapters, be prepared for governmental cutbacks and be able to attract and keep volunteers a large development process was undertaken. Important lessons for organization development have to do with the special aspects of organizational behavior of volunteers which influence the usability of organization development instruments and the importance of giving the 'content' (mission) a visible place within the organization. Parts of the development process were set up as 'fun' and learning to stay close to the experience of scouting

---

### INTRODUCTION

There is some literature, mostly case studies, on organizational change in voluntary organizations. Powell and Friedkin (1987) based on analyzing nine case studies, state that most change deals with organizational growth and unplanned change where there is a need for goal renewal and to find new outside ways of support. Salipante and Golden-Biddle (1995) conclude that nonprofits are driven by advocacy-based missions and that these missions call for "greater continuity and less frequent and sweeping changes". Constancy of values and patterns of practice are important in nonprofit organizations, according to Salipante and Golden-Biddle. Nevertheless, the special

position of volunteers within nonprofit organizations and development processes is hardly researched at all,

In this article we try to fill in the gap by describing and analyzing a large development process at national level in a Dutch volunteer organization. In this process 300 volunteers and 50 paid staff had to be assigned to new jobs within an overall new organizational structure. Special aspect of this organization is that volunteers and paid staff are equal and do or can perform the same tasks. It is a mixed paid-staff volunteer organization. Lessons to be learned concern the importance of using the mission during the development process, the need to keep the mission visible in the organization and how to cope with the special

features of volunteers within an organized setting.

In the first part we describe the theoretical background of volunteers within organizations. In the second part we describe some aspects of the actual organization development. In part three some important features of the development are presented. Part four gives some concluding remarks.

---

*On the other hand, observations can be made that if volunteers really want something there are virtually no limits. Extra time at work is no problem for most volunteers. Job satisfaction is also almost always guaranteed with volunteers who tend to remain.*

### **Volunteers in Organizations and Organization Development**

The organizational behavior of volunteers certainly is not the same as that of paid staff (Pearce, 1993). Their relationship with the organization has more role uncertainties, both seen from the perspective of the organization (including paid staff) and the volunteer. The absence of a legal framework of industrial relations, including rewards and sanctions, seem to make volunteers a less reliable workforce. Volunteers are not as easy to 'control' as paid workers, because in the end there is no real 'hierarchy', sanction or differentiation in reward. Pearce (1993) makes clear that the organizational control of volunteers is largely based upon 1) personal relationships, 2) using volunteers for more rewarding and less demanding tasks and domains and 3) appeals on shared values. Personal relationships have to do with the important role of 'core-volunteers'. Core-volunteers usually spend more time in the organization, give more priority to their commitments to the organization and are highly visible for others in the organization. More peripheral volunteers mostly do what they are asked to do because of the

person who asks it, not because of the office the person keeps. The second point means that volunteers usually will be very reliable if they see a direct connection between what they are doing and the mission of the organization. The third point relates to the advocacy-mission of most voluntary organizations and the way this is put into practice. Appeals on shared values can be effective as control mechanisms under certain conditions. The problem in large organizations as a whole is that shared values sometimes are more espoused than real. At a local level the extent of shared values can be high, which mostly means that the volunteers have a similarity in social-economical background. The differences between the local groups can be rather big, as they are in *Scouting, The Netherlands*.

On the other hand, observations can be made that if volunteers really want something there are virtually no limits. Extra time at work is no problem for most volunteers. Job satisfaction is also almost always guaranteed with volunteers who tend to remain.

The traditional management model does not suit the kind of organizations where volunteers work (Meijs, 1996, forthcoming). Management of volunteers (or volunteer administration) makes sense if volunteers join to perform a limited and clear working task. In this case their work can be planned, coordinated and controlled, although one needs some special skills, methods and feeling. For instance, in recruiting volunteers the organization can offer the possibility of acquiring word processing skills, while for paid

staff knowledge of word processing would be obligatory (Fisher &, 1993; Wilson, 1990; Ellis, 1990; Brudney, 1990).

In the relationship between a national (paid staff) headquarters and local volunteer-chapters the traditional management is not appropriate. Management refers to some kind of hierarchy, which, in voluntary organizations, leads to misunderstanding the complex relationship between national headquarters and local chapters. Instead of management a more interaction based model is needed which accepts the autonomous powers within the organization. In this model governance (or steering) is done in, by and with three types of interaction; interferences, interplays and interventions (Kooiman, 1993; Meijs, 1995). This model also seems to be more appropriate in organization development in (large) volunteer organizations.

Concentrating on organization development one can say that the part-time character of most volunteering, the geographical distance in national organizations and the other (paid job) obligations people have, make it easier for volunteers to stay away from the difficult sessions and questions (Meijs, in print). There is always an acceptable excuse. It can be impossible to get everyone to a training event. The willingness to change the organization is an important factor in every organization development process but in volunteer organizations it seems even to be more important. People can not be forced to join in all kinds of

'change' or development activities. And one has to deal with the negative, conservative side of the positive tradition that Salipante and Golden-Biddle describe.

As stated, core-volunteers and paid staff give priority to the organization and spend a lot of time in it. As a consequence, if they accept the need for change, they want to see fast results. They travel the organization on the highway. Other volunteers, especially if they are functioning on local or regional level too, just take the slow scenic road where they meet their friends and enjoy their day. They have a different relationship with the organization.

A major point in organization development in large volunteer organizations is that simple interventions based on hierarchy (naive management models) are not effective. Letters from 'headquarters' to unwilling volunteers or chapters simply are not opened or thrown away immediately. For organization development to succeed in volunteer organizations the following principles, based upon an interaction governance model, are critical:

a) let the volunteers do what they see as related to the mission of the organization to reduce the need for interventions and control;

b) accept and use the interferences from the autonomous behavior of volunteers. Volunteers decide on the relationship with the organization, not the 'organization'.

c) try to find footholds for the development in the primary processes or the mission of the organization to

---

*Other volunteers, especially if they are functioning on local or regional level too, just take the slow scenic road where they meet their friends and enjoy their day. They have a different relationship with the organization.*

use the interferences and 'good motivations';

d) provide support and materials which are concretely useful (interplays), especially if the organization asks volunteers to do things that they do not see as directly related to the mission. (For example, if the organization wants all the local groups to use the same financial statement format because that is useful in fundraising, the national organization has to provide very concrete assistance in how to draw up these statements.)

---

*The organization of Dutch scouting differs from scouting in most other countries. The main point is that the Dutch scouting organization allows local chapters to be very autonomous in the way that they organize activities.*

### **The Organization Development of Scouting, The Netherlands**

*Scouting, the Netherlands* is the largest youth and juvenile organization in the Netherlands. Started in 1910 it now has about 1350 local chapters, 150 districts and regions and of course a national office with volunteers and some 50 paid staff. In total 25.000 volunteers make it possible every week for 100,000 boys and girls, from the ages of eight to seventeen, to enjoy the activity of Scouting. The program of Scouting aims at combining having a good time with building a positive personality. A major point in the program is the principle of developing self reliance and empowerment of the members.

The organization of Dutch scouting differs from scouting in most other countries. The main point is that the Dutch scouting organization allows local chapters to be very autonomous in the way that they organize activities. Almost 15.000 volunteers, somewhere between seventeen and twenty-five

years of age, direct activities at local level. 10.000 volunteers are members of boards (local, district and region) or are involved in servicing groups or training direct programming volunteers. At national level some 300 volunteers are involved in making policies, delivering services and organizing national activities.

The total structure has four organizational levels; local chapters, districts, regions and national. At the local level the activities are organized. Districts and regions are the intermediate bodies for the internal democracy and the delivering of services to groups. The 'customers' of the national level are mostly the districts and regions. This article describes an organization development at the national level.

The organization development grew out of a certain felt need for change. This felt need for change was based on internal and external factors. An external driving force for change was the expected decline of government subsidies from almost 60% of annual national budget to 25% in about 5 years. The internal factor was the experience of the Scouting 2000 project. This project aimed at redefining the content of all the different Scouting programs. Everybody worked at developing new programs.

Servicing 'customers' (local chapters, districts and regions) had almost stopped completely. Volunteers felt a crisis in trying doing both development and rendering services at the same time. The Scouting 2000 project made it clear that the existing organization was unfit

for real development projects. Turn-over of volunteers and paid staff occurred. The Scouting 2000 experience showed that volunteers at national level were not pleased with the way the organization functioned - too many meetings, too much red tape, no room for the wanted changing roles of volunteers to more professionalism and paid staff to more coaching volunteers. At the same time a major project (1995 World Jamboree) was started up which would put the organization under a lot of pressure.

Another point was that customers of the national level (districts and regions) were positive about the output of the national organization but were not content with the organization itself; If you knew someone, you could get what you wanted. But, local groups made clear that in general they did not know what the national level could and would deliver. Important other remarks concerned the very long and unclear lines of communication. Things had to change. There was a felt need for change and a lot of free going energy that could be used.

The national Board decided to use the energy within the organization after the Scouting 2000 project to start a process to get the organization 'customer oriented'.

#### **Principles and practices used in the organization development**

The board decided to form a steering group. Their first step was to attract external consultants to analyze and focus the energy. The external consultants performed an investigation

with clients of the organization, paid staff and volunteers. They found enough ground to propose a complete turn-around of the structure of the organization. This had to lead to better performances in service to customers and a more manageable way of developing policy. Also this had to lead to a more client-based orientation of all involved at the national level. The authority and expertise of the external consultants in this first step of moving the organization was very useful. The consultants enabled people to look into the mirror of their behavior and opinions. This was mostly better accepted from outsiders. The solution was to split up development of the program and delivering services to customers.

The steering group consisted of paid staff (both management and 'workers') and volunteers with credibility for change within the organization. This certainly was not a group of representatives of vested interests. The steering group wanted to really change the 'organizing' but also to keep and develop the existing group of volunteers and decided to do the development process in a volunteer 'friendly' way. This meant the process should be participative, motivating and dependent on interactions instead of hierarchical interventions (Beer, 1989). This was operationalized by three principles:

- 1 organization development basis by legitimacy and participation;
- 2 not going against the stream;
- 3 learning by doing.

Next to that, the development process should use aspects of the mission and practices of *Scouting*.

---

*If you knew someone, you could get what you wanted.*

To stay close to the mission, important landmarks in the process were set up as games with the unique scouting combination of fun and learning at the same time. What works for the members, works also for the volunteers. The 'games' were used to mix the fun of Scouting and volunteerism with the seriousness of reorganization. The games also proved to be a very effective way of communicating. An example is 'the coffee can dumpling game'.

#### *The 'Coffee can dumpling game'*

In a special weekend session with national volunteers, the Saturday was designed to discuss the new organization. The aim was to have volunteers to find out themselves what they liked to do in the new organization. To create an ending of the old organization and introducing the possibilities of the new one the "coffee can dumpling game" was developed.

The feet of members of the existing groups within the organization were tied together. These people (the old organization) went 'hobbling' into the reorganization process. At this point the ropes were removed and every member of a group was sent individually into the process. First they were instructed to run around a tree, twice clock-wise, three-times counter clock-wise. This symbolized the iterations with the process. The next stage was a 'survival track', because organization development is a process with hurdles. Next the aspect of 'luck' was introduced by dice and the instruction to throw to sixes before being allowed to move on in the

'reorganization'.

The last step was to burn a very bad feature of the old organization and write down a good thing they expected of the new organization. At the last stage they entered the coffee room. At this room tables for six were prepared standing connected to each other. If a table with six people was filled (the game made certain that the groups were not the same as at the start), they wrote their name on the coffee-can on the table and could get some coffee. Now the coffee-cans with names of people who had nothing to do with each other are still being used at the national office to symbolize that all the national volunteers would be working together in the new organization.

#### *The Normal Split*

To keep the commitment growing during the organization development process, the steering group kept an eye on 'the normal split' (Gauss-curve). That meant taking decisions and going forward if a large majority of involved people seemed to agree on a plan. It also meant that people had a real opportunity to change the plans, and that, though the steering group tried to argue their ideas, they could be convinced of amendments. If the organization pulled through on plans, the steering group met with people that were still unwilling to go along. In these so-called 'resistance talks' the steering group again argued for the decision taken and searched, with the opponents, for an acceptable place in the new organization for them. This way there were less losers than the normal split predicts theoretically. As an effect of

---

*It also meant that people had a real opportunity to change the plans, and that, though the steering group tried to argue their ideas, they could be convinced of amendments.*

the organization development Scouting lost one of its paid staff (of 50) and two core-volunteers (of 300). The rest kept 'with the stream'.

### *Participation in Restructuring*

The steering group organized a 'go' on the structure of the whole of the organization (as a first level viable system). The steering group decided that the other sub-systems (second and third levels of recursion within the viable system model) should again be structured by paid-staff and volunteers from within the sub-system. Therefore the steering group assigned so-called 'quartermakers' to develop functions and tasks in their own (future) sub-systems, called 'sectors'. Every quartermaker formed a team of volunteers and paid staff and went on designing a sector, using at their level of recursion the same principles that the steering group used.

The role of the steering group shifted from designing structures to coaching designers. The steering group examined the drafts. As long as plans didn't conflict with the basic outlines everything was okay. The steering group facilitated debates on sector boundaries and units within these sectors and coached the quartermakers. In the end some major differences with the original outlines of the structure were agreed upon to give the new organization enough commitment from the people involved. Though the steering group was of the opinion that 'content', implied by knowing your clients, was the main perspective of every unit, the board and quartermaker-teams decided on

wanting a team of content-oriented volunteers to keep an eye on quality and consistency of programs for the clients/end-users: the Dutch scouts. Then quartermakers were installed as heads of sectors and members of the quartermakers-team were appointed heads of units. These heads of units started a 'unit-designing' process, with future unit members, supervised by the sector manager (third level of recursion).

### **Looking Back: Findings and Discussion**

In looking back, several key learning themes emerge. An organization development process in a volunteer organization should be based on accepting the autonomy of volunteers, not focus on hierarchy and be clearly connected to the mission (or 'content') of the organization.

It was important to accept and make use of the autonomy feelings of volunteers. If you can get them moving there are no limits. A lot of volunteers have a kind of passive attitude to all new plans. They seem to avoid 'office positions' and just wait to see what happens. Quick fixes have the risk that they seem to be accepted because nobody disagrees, but how do volunteers really feel and act!

Management is the wrong term for organization development in (large national) volunteer organizations. Management in the end is built upon clear relations between people or organizational parts. Management of volunteers can be used if the task is a limited and clear 'working' job.

---

*An organization development process in a volunteer organization should be based on accepting the autonomy of volunteers, not focus on hierarchy and be clearly connected to the mission (or 'content') of the organization.*

Organization development certainly is not a clearly defined process or job. Organization development theories based on clear relations or top-down/bottom-up approaches don't work. An effective approach seems to be based on using different types of interactions with accepting equality between the different players, the possibility of members to not participate and the limited role of formal interventions. Steering organization development in volunteer organizations demands a good sense for timing and use of different interactions. Pulling and pushing is not very effective, relying on self-organization is.

A visible place on the organizational chart of the 'content' of *Scouting* proved to be a major important point in reducing oppositional forces in the process. The names of the different 'play groups' had to be on the organizational chart. Legitimacy and the mission are more important in voluntary organizations and must be visible, also on the organizational chart.

Placing the responsibility in a steering group with credibility within the organization based both on expertise as on carrying "the smell of a new woodfire" proved to be a necessary feature. Expertise from outside the steering group was used for solving specific limited problems concerning the content or the process. The quartermakers were effective in speeding the process and building commitment. They also ensured contact with the grassroots of their part of the organization.

---

***Legitimacy and the mission are more important in voluntary organizations and must be visible, also on the organizational chart.***

## REFERENCES

- Beer, S., (1989) *Brain of the firm*. 2nd edition. New York: Wesley.
- Brudney, J.L., (1990) *Fostering volunteer programs in the public sector: Planning, initiating, and managing voluntary activities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ellis, S.J., (1990) *From the top down; the executive role in volunteer program success*. 2nd edition, Philadelphia: Energize.
- Fisher, J.C., & Cole, K.M., (1993) *Leadership and management of volunteer programs, a guide for volunteer administrators*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kooiman, J. (1993). *Modern governance: new government - society interactions* London: Sage.
- Meijs, L.C., (1995) Governability, professionalizing the management of volunteers. *Proceedings 1995 International Conference Volunteer Administration*. Boston..
- Meijs, L.C., (forthcoming) Management is not always the correct word. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*.
- Meijs, L.C., (1996) *Het management van vrijwilligersorganisaties*. Doctorate Dissertation Erasmus University, Rotterdam.
- Salipante, P. F., & Golden-Biddle, K., (1995) Managing traditionality and strategic change in nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*. 6, (1)p. 3-20.2
- Powell, W., & Friedkin, R., (1987) Organizational change in nonprofit organizations. In W. Powell, (ed.). *The nonprofit sector; a research handbook* New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pearce, J.L., (1993) *Volunteers, the organizational behavior of unpaid workers*. New York: Routledge.
- Wilson, M., (1990) *The effective management of volunteer programs*. Boulder, CO: Johnson.