

The Director of Volunteers as CHANGE AGENT

by Donald L. Hadfield

Most Directors of Volunteers in human service agencies recognize the truth in Kurt Lewin's dictum - "If you want to understand something, try to change it". Faced with rapidly changing demands placed upon the agencies they serve, Directors are recognizing that organizations of the future will need to develop new structures and processes to meet those demands. These new systems will greatly increase the need for the creative and flexible use of the human resources of the organization. I suspect that more and more we will see the emergence of organizational concepts wherein persons will be seen as resources to be utilized at any time their capabilities are needed to solve organizational problems. For this, the Director of Volunteers must be equipped to function as an internal change-agent.

Some old concepts of autonomous departments, 'working through channels', and the usual line-staff delineation of responsibilities are no longer completely valid in modern human service agency management. Directors are developing project teams, task forces and other types of temporary systems as more appropriate ways for their agencies to optimize the different capabilities of their human resources. As predicted by

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Bennis¹

I suspect that we will see an increase in the number of planned-change programs...toward less bureaucratic and more participative, 'open system' and adaptive structures. Given the present pronounced rate of change...we can expect increasing demand for social inventions to revise traditional notions of organized effort.

To cope with the demands upon the agency, Directors of Volunteers will need to be able to be many things and to take various roles, to identify with the adaptive and change process, and to develop an ability to modify their commitments as needs arise. They will work with persons in organizations who will need to move in and out of various types of work group relations which may have a short or long range time dimension.

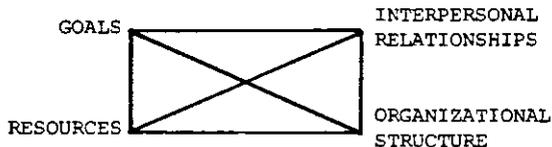
Four areas of change-agent competency need to be focused upon by the Director of Volunteers. They are: (1) *diagnosis of the organization*; (2) *developing levels of cooperation*; (3) *working with conflict*; and (4) *strengthening relationships*. The goals of all human service agency development efforts are improved effectiveness in its performance of service and improved organizational health. All such efforts should begin with accurate diagnosis.

DIAGNOSIS OF THE ORGANIZATION

My hip pocket model of organizational diagnosis consists of four areas:

- (1) GOALS: *What are we all about? What's the mission?*
- (2) INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: *How do people get along? Who influences the decision making process?*
- (3) ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: *Is it functional or is it dysfunctional?*
- (4) RESOURCES: *What is the availability of human, material and financial resources?*

All four areas are interrelated and all organizations have problems in one or more of these areas most of the time.



For the change-agent, correct identification of the problem within the organization constitutes a great portion of the work. Accurate description diminishes wasted effort in planning to reduce or eliminate causes that have little or no consequence in producing change. Others make the point of accurate diagnosis.² Diagnosis means the examination of the need for change and the state of the system to produce change. In working for diagnosis of the problem or area for change to produce the desired results, the Director of Volunteers must be aware of the inter-relatedness of the four areas.

GOALS are guides. The goal must be well stated and clear. Coordination of effort among staff and volunteers can never be optimal if goals are not clear, consensual or objectively recognizable. The change-agent needs to know the ideal states toward which the agency and its membership are striving. Any disparity between goals proclaimed and goals acted upon eats up a lot of energy in unproductive work and explanations. In almost all situations, I have found that there is more likelihood of resistance to change when there is confusion or disagreement to the goal(s) of the agency. A task of the Director of Volunteers as a change-

agent is to ferret out goal conflicts and stimulate discussion of them.

If sufficient agreement exists about one or more organizational goals, work can proceed to achieve those goals. Otherwise if goals are not accepted, staff and volunteers have three options: They can (1) confer until a goal for the organization is found that satisfies the personal needs of those involved; (2) find sources of satisfaction outside the organization for those needs that the organizational goals are not meeting; or the unsatisfied can (3) leave the organization. Ascertaining the goals held by a collection of persons requires skill. The change-agent must assess the members' perceptions of their goals. This almost always arouses in the group a desire for greater clarity about mission, beliefs and values. A number of processes that the Director may use have been developed for that purpose.³

The second step for the Director of Volunteers in his/her change-agent role would be to ascertain the 'level' of *INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS* within the human service agency. If a goal is accepted (owned) by a group and is clearly understood, the goal may not be reachable because persons are unable to work together. Staff and volunteers often have a disagreement about who will 'really' make decisions and how conflict is to be handled. Too often I have found that routine procedures often lead to dysfunctional efforts and cause agencies to fail even though all persons involved claim commitment to the goal(s).

In most agency approaches to making changes, competition and struggle for power and influence tend to be explained away or ignored. These approaches assume that persons in an agency will be collaborative and productive if they are taught how. Although the most productive and concise ways to work with issues of power or competitiveness in relationships are never quite clear to me, I do see role negotiation⁴ in a human service agency as producing positive change results. Mainly, role negotiation focuses upon work relationships, deals directly with problems of power and influence, is highly action oriented, and the procedures are clear. Approaches like role negotiation work well because the issues of power and influence are resolved to a reasonable level of satisfaction for those involved.

The third area of diagnosis to be given attention by the change-agent is the

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURING of persons to complete the task and reach the agency goals. If a group has defined and accepted a goal, attained good decision-making processes that work for them, but now finds itself with an organizational structure that creates barriers for any attainment of the goal, what happens? The usual product of dysfunctional organizational structure is frustration and abandonment of the project, task or program.

Most organizations are structured in the sense of having positions and parts which are systematically related to other positions and parts. Most contemporary organizational theorists like Likert, McGregor, Argyris and others have advocated more process and open approaches as over against the 'classical' theorists with their discussions of chains of command, specialization of function, etc. Bennis summed it up well when he said that 'classical' theorists often talked about "organizations without people" while contemporary theorists talk about "people without organizations".⁵

One method of diagnosing organizational structure that seems productive is to determine the types of decisions made at various organizational levels. Who determines the actions of others in the decision-making process? Typically we think of persons at the 'top' of the human service agency as the chief wielders of power and those at the 'lower' levels possessing decreasing amounts of power.

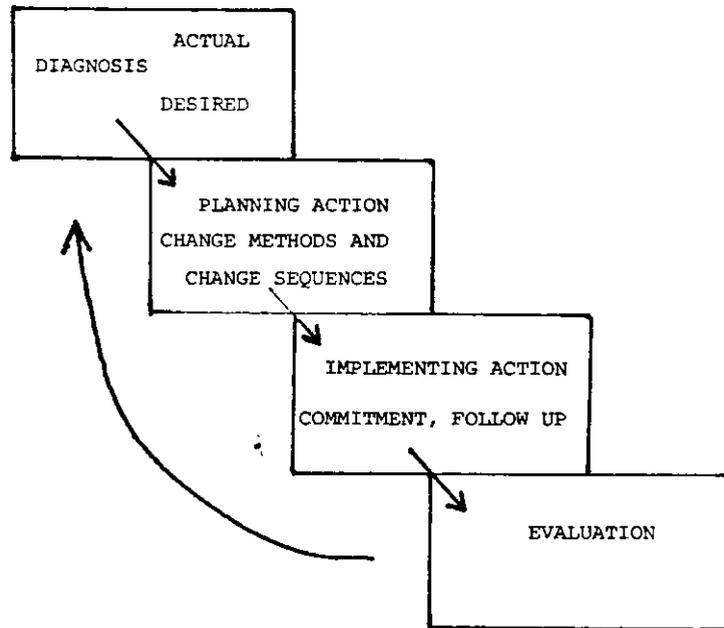
That picture is inaccurate in a fully functioning organization. In these organizations power and decision-making is actually shared with staff and volunteers. It is important to realize that increased influence of those in lower echelons of the organizations does not reduce the control of persons higher in the organizational structure. In fact what usually occurs in effectively functioning human service agencies is that staff and volunteers at all levels gain in power as the influence of their subordinates is relatively increased. March and Simon⁶ have made this explicit in their theory of organizations. Likert⁷ has described much the same view in his 'link-pin model' for organizations. According to Likert, as more influence is granted to subordinates by communicatively connecting each organizational level with every other, the total organization becomes more integrated. Information goes more directly from where it arises to where it is needed. All levels gain more actual operating power from the increased interaction.

It is important for the Director of Volunteers in the change-agent role to help persons understand that people develop purposes; organizations do not. Organizations carry out the purposes that people set. It is more accurate to say that an organization has adopted a planned strategy set by persons to make or achieve something. This planned strategy then attracts the various contributions of other persons who are, in fact, seeking to fulfill a variety of needs. These persons have made a common decision to work out their different needs in a coordinated manner around a particular strategy to reach a common goal.

One of the major concerns for the Director of Volunteers is the interface among groups or units within the organization. Since working units, once formed, will evolve their own distinctive task-related characteristics, they will have different points of view. This often generates serious intergroup problems whose symptoms are 'inappropriate' competition, secretiveness and hostility. The change-agent must deal with these issues to achieve unity of effort. In working with this, the Director focuses upon the quality of interaction between units within the agency and continues to build the concept of interdependence.

The fourth area of the change-agent to focus upon in diagnosis is the availability and control of *RESOURCES*. Resources directly affect the decision-making process and the attainment of goals in a human service agency. An effective and functional organizational structure in which the involvement of staff and volunteers is healthy and working on commonly developed goals may not be able to perform fully because of the unavailability, limit or control of resources. The role of the Director of Volunteers is to always clearly determine the identification of and the availability of human and material resources to reach the goal.

No matter what method is employed by the Director of Volunteers to generate a diagnosis of the organization, it is the most important phase of the role of the change-agent in the human service agency. The Director then involves the agency in planning action, implementing action and evaluating. When the final step of evaluation is carried out, the learning that has taken place is returned in the process to the diagnostic phase.



DEVELOPING LEVELS OF COOPERATION

The task before the human service agency is how to more fully mobilize the energy of the organization's human resources toward achievement of the organizational goals. The change-agent needs to organize his/her work, open the communications system, establish interdependent relationship between administration, staff and volunteers. To accomplish this, teams of people must spend real time improving their methods of working, decision-making and communicating. Most importantly, individual needs for self worth, growth and satisfaction should be met through such time together.

One of the major obstacles to effective organizations is the amount of dysfunctional energy spent in 'inappropriate' competition - energy that is not available for the accomplishment of tasks important to the agency. Beckhard⁸ maintains that this area of competition must be a central operational focus of the change-agent. Johnson⁹ clearly pursues the effects and benefits of cooperation in problem-solving groups.

It is quite evident to me that my role as a change-agent places high priority on processes, procedures and methods that develop collaborative, cooperative efforts. A Director of Volunteers may help cooperation within a group by (1) facilitating the understanding of all group members to the problem or task; (2) interpret to individuals how he/she can help solve the problem;

(3) bring an understanding of other members problems and contributions; and, (4) help members to be aware of the group's cooperative goal structure.

Cooperation within a human service agency does take place in varying degrees. It will depend on the amount of actualized interdependence that exists. For instance, the unit responsible for staff development may not always interact with the unit responsible for plant management and neither one may always have contact with the office for volunteer services. Yet they are interdependent in the sense that unless each performs adequately, the total organization is jeopardized. Failure of any one unit can threaten the whole. This has been described as "pooled interdependence".¹⁰ The change-agent must assist the agency in realizing the validity of the interdependence between working units and appreciate the fact of that condition.

WORKING WITH CONFLICT

One of the primary demands on any organization is that it link together its various parts to achieve overall objectives. To achieve common tasks and reach goals, persons and groups must collaborate. The necessity for the degree of collaboration will depend on the nature of the task. In most tasks the need is great.

However, collaboration unavoidably brings conflicts. Conflicts arise over who is willing to do what. Group members compete for influence and control. Differing reactions to pressures from without lead to disagreements. So conflict is normal and unavoidable in organizations that are moving toward multifaceted goals. It is important that the Director of Volunteers view conflict as natural. Conflict should be brought out into the open and managed without expecting it to disappear of its own accord. A conflict is sometimes best managed by providing channels or occasions through which the parties can introduce their conflicting claims. If conflicts are not uncovered and managed, then informal groups and networks arise to cope with the conflict. Destructive tension and rising personal hostility between conflicting parties can result.

One method that has been rewarding for me in consultation is to use an expectations survey to discover where there is role conflict. In this role negotiation process the participants are asked to make three lists as follows:

- (1) *the things the other person should increase in quantity and or quality;*
- (2) *the things the other should decrease in quantity;*
- (3) *the things the other does to facilitate the situation and should not be changed.*

The data is then collected and collated. In the process I allow the parties to question those who have provided messages, but no one is allowed to argue against the information that she/he has received. That type of communication is controlled in order to prevent escalation of actual or potential conflicts.

When the messages are clearly understood, then it is time for the two parties to choose an issue to negotiate. A list is compiled of the most negotiable issues and ranked from most to least important. This process gives me what indications I need of the good faith of the negotiators. The negotiations of the conflict proceed in the form of an exchange or exchanges until the parties are satisfied. The agreement is recorded and the next issue is negotiated. Both the presence of the change-agent and active participation influence the process. When the third-party does not have a high investment in the issues at stake, the two conflicting parties are more likely to respond to the direction or advice given.

Within an agency, Kahk and French¹¹ have pointed out that the major determinants of conflict include three kinds of role requirements: (1) *the requirement for crossing organizational boundaries;* (2) *the requirement for producing innovative solutions to non-routine problems;* and (3) *the requirement for being responsible for the work of others.* I have found that those roles in an organization which demand creative problem solving are closely associated with active role conflict. Those in such roles appear to become engaged in conflict primarily with older and often more powerful individuals in the organization who want to maintain the status quo.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

The role of the Director of Volunteers in the agency is strengthened by developing trust relationships and tailoring developmental recommendations. As Johnson¹² maintains, little happens in a relationship until the individuals learn to trust each other. Within the context of a trusting relationship, the change-agent has greater freedom and capability to move with developmental aspects of her/his work. Being able to express acceptance and support for the openness and sharing of others while at the same time expressing ideas and opposing points of view is made possible only within 'trust formations'.

The strengthening of relationships will be built upon commitment to the goals, commitment to the group, and respect for the members of the group. This sense of belonging is not just a blind loyalty, but a sense of wanting to work with other members of the group in accomplishing goals which are meaningful to the individual member. Strengthening relationships is not predicated on everyone's liking each other. It is a more mature level of respect and openness which emerges out of common commitment to working together to accomplish the goals. The change-agent can assist the staff and volunteers to build and maintain cohesion built on trust as a norm.

Organizational problems are no longer the province of just one group. They cut across the multiple human, structural and technological resources of an agency. The Director of Volunteers as a change-agent in the human service agency usually will find their day-by-day administrative responsibility in the developmental context of that organizational norm.

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