

Volunteers as Essential Members of Community Collaborations

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THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIONS

Meeting the complex needs of today's communities, in a time where there are fewer resources to address the growing demands on services, requires the multiple sectors of the community to come together. Community organizations are facing the daunting task of addressing complex issues such as family violence, poverty, poor educational systems, and others. Given the complexity of these issues, communities recognize that many social problems are influenced at multiple levels requiring a comprehensive examination of the issue through a community-wide effort, such as a collaboration (Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Donnermeyer, Plested, Edwards, Oetting & Littlethunder, 1997; Perkins, Borden & Knox, 1999; Silverman & Williamson, 1997; Wandersman & Nation, 1998). Thus, the effective prevention, intervention, and treatment of social issues involve multiple systems, ranging from the individual and the family, to social service agencies, law enforcement, employers, courts, schools, and health care providers. Often, however, these systems work independently of each other and consequently are ineffective in fully addressing the social issues (Dryfoos, 1990; 1998).

Many individuals and groups recommend working together to form strong collaborative relationships to improve the present status and future well-being of children, youth, families, and the communities in which they live (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992, 1995; Dryfoos, 1994; Ellison & Barbour, 1992; Perkins, Borden, & Hogue, 1998). Moreover, many local, state,

and federal initiatives that focus on children, youth, and families now require collaboration among multiple sectors (Borden, 1999). Non-profit organizations, governmental agencies, faith-based organizations, schools, and community members are often asked to be a part of a community-wide efforts.

THE PURPOSE

This paper has two objectives pertaining to the work of volunteers on behalf of organizations in community-wide efforts. First, it provides a detailed description of the multiple levels of linkages among community groups (Hogue, 1993) and delineates the roles of volunteers within each of the levels of linkage. Second, the roles and responsibilities of the organization are briefly described for the volunteer to successfully represent the organization.

LEVELS OF LINKAGES AND THE ROLES OF VOLUNTEERS

There are five levels of community linkage: networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration. Within each level there is a *purpose*, a *structure*, and a *process*. Using volunteers to support an organization with a particular linkage first requires the identification of the "role" of the volunteer in each level of linkage. The volunteer's role and responsibilities change dramatically as the level of linkages become more complex. The levels of linkages are described in Table 1.

Networking, the first level of linkage, is defined as the sharing of information among organizations. For example, a networking group would meet to share relevant informa-

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TABLE 1

Community Linkages – Choices and Decisions

Levels	Purpose	Structure	Process	Volunteers
Networking	Dialogue and common understanding Clearinghouse for information Create base of support	Non-hierarchical Loose/flexible link Roles loosely defined Community action is primary link among members	Low-key leadership Minimal decision making Little conflict Informal communication	Good communication skills
Cooperation or Alliance	Match needs and provide coordination Limit duplication of services Ensure tasks are done	Central body of people as communication hub Semi-formal links Roles somewhat defined Links are advisory Group leverages/raises money	Facilitative leaders Complex decision making Some conflict Formal communications within the central group	Excellent communication skills Function as a member of the central body Able and willing to take on and complete tasks
Coordination or Partnership	Share resources to address common issues Merge resource base to create something new	Central body of people consists of decision makers Roles defined Links formalized Group develops new resources and joint budget	Autonomous leadership but focus in on issue Group decision making in central and subgroups Communication is frequent and clear	Excellent communication skills Excellent decision making skills Take on a role in the group Must be able to complete tasks
Coalition	Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems Develop commitment for a minimum of three years	All members involved in decision making Roles and time defined Links formal with written agreement Group develops new resources and joint budget	Shared leadership Decision making formal with all members Communication is common and prioritized	Excellent communication skills Excellent decision making skills High degree of trust between volunteer and organization Excellent knowledge of the home organization Excellent interpersonal skills
Collaboration	Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities	Consensus used in shared decision making Roles, time, and evaluation formalized Links are formal and written in work assignments	Leadership high, trust level high, productivity high Ideas and decisions equally shared Highly developed communication	Represent director of home organization Excellent communication skills — oral and written Good negotiation skills

(Modified chart from Houge (1994) Community Based Collaborations-Wellness Multiplied)

tion on a specific topic (e.g., disaster relief, employment opportunities, and child care referrals). Networking's *purpose* is to provide an opportunity for dialogue and common understanding, to be a clearinghouse for information, and to create a base of support for a specific issue. The *structure* needed for a Network to function effectively is flexible, not hierarchal, and has loosely defined roles with the focus of providing a link among organizations. The *process* within a Network includes: low-level leadership, minimal decision-making, low conflict, and informal communication procedures. A volunteer's role in a Network requires the volunteer to regularly attend meetings, to be knowledgeable about the organization, be able to provide information about the current work and resources of the organizations and to report back to the home organization. Given the limited structure and processes within a Network, this level is ideal for volunteer involvement.

The second level of linkage, **Cooperation**, is defined as the matching and organizing of existing programs and services to meet identified needs. An example of Cooperation is a volunteer association comprised of multiple organizations that meet to coordinate their services to better facilitate volunteer efforts within the community. Cooperation's *purpose* is to match needs, limit duplication of services, and ensure that tasks are completed. The *structure* required for Cooperation includes a central communication hub and semi-formal links between organizations. Roles within the group are somewhat defined, and the group works together to leverage and raise money. The *process* needed for Cooperation requires facilitative leaders, complex decision-making, and formal communication among the central body of participating organizations. Within this level of linkage there will be some, albeit minimal, conflict. This level of linkage requires the volunteer to have a sound knowledge of the home organization. The volunteer must begin to make decisions on behalf of the organization as tasks are identified, roles become more defined, and the group begins to work to leverage resources. Volunteers must have excellent communication skills, be able to function as a

member of the central body, and must be able and willing to take on and complete tasks as a representative of the organization.

The third level of linkage, **Coordination**, is defined as the integration of resources to allow for the development or creation of a new project/program that addresses a common issue. For example, partnering youth organizations in a particular community create a joint budget to support the annual communication booth at the local community festival where a common brochure is distributed listing the activities available within each organization. Coordination's *purpose* is to share resources to address common issues and merge the resources available from individual organizations to address common issues. The *structure* of Coordination requires: a central body of organizations willing to make decisions, clearly defined roles and expectations, clearly defined linkages within the group, collective efforts to develop new resources, and a joint budget. The *process* of Coordination involves leadership that is autonomous and focused on one issue. Decision-making occurs both within the central group and subgroups, and communication is frequent and clear. Moreover, conflict within this level increases as part of the process. Having a volunteer represent the organization becomes more multifaceted as the volunteer is now in a position to make decisions about the organization's commitment of resources for the coordinated effort. The volunteer must be able to make the time commitment needed to act as the representative of the organization as this level requires formal linkages and budgetary commitments.

The fourth level of linkage, **Coalition**, is defined as multiple organizations coming together and pooling their resources, from existing systems to work together on a prescribed issue for a minimum of three years. For example, a group forms a Coalition to increase the availability of after-school programs for youth by pooling their resources to sponsor AmeriCorps members who will provide much needed support to local youth programs. Coalition's *purpose* is to share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems to create a way to address a common

issue. The *structure* of a Coalition demands that all the members be involved in the decision making process. There are clear expectations of the roles and the time commitment required, written agreements to establish formal links, and the procurement of new resources for a joint budget. The Coalition *process* requires shared leadership and formal decision making among all organizations. Communication is formal and prioritized. The level of commitment both in terms of time and resources increases the potential for conflict. The major distinction between coordination and coalition is the commitment of time and resources. With a coalition there is a very high level of commitment on the part of a volunteer and a high degree of trust and commitment to the volunteer on the part of the organization. The organization must be comfortable empowering the volunteer to make commitments on behalf of the organization, both in terms of work and finances. The volunteer will need to be able to assume leadership and must have excellent communication and negotiation skills.

The fifth and final level, **Collaboration**, is defined as multiple organizations coming together to act as a new entity with shared vision and the power to impact the participating organizations. An example is a Collaboration formed to address family violence that included such groups as social services, law enforcement, hospitals, schools, judicial system, and others. The Collaboration determined that in order to better serve and assist victims of family violence, the system for local law enforcement reporting needed to change, with new reporting procedures developed and sent to local law enforcement to be implemented. The Collaboration's *purpose* is to accomplish shared goals, impact benchmarks, and to build an interdependent system to address issues and opportunities. The *structure* of the Collaborative effort involves shared decision-making through consensus; formalized roles, time commitment, and evaluation; and, written agreements that formalize the relationships among organizations and their work assignments. The Collaboration's *process* requires high levels of leadership, trust, and productivity; equally shared ideas and

decisions; structured formal and informal communication within the collaboration and between the partnering organizations that occurs on a frequent basis.

The Collaborative process offers organizations the opportunity to be engaged in comprehensive efforts that often have long-term implications for the work of the organization, often requiring a redefining and/or a refocusing of the organization. Thus, collaborative efforts cannot be successful if those involved do not have the power to make the necessary decisions to move the effort forward. Therefore, organizations must carefully consider the role of volunteers within this level of linkage. Given this level of power, the use of volunteers is not, in our opinion feasible nor recommended.

ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Community linkages offer organizations the opportunity to work with other organizations to better meet their own goals and objectives. The long-term goal when participating in a community group is the ability to effect sustainable change. The use of volunteers in roles within these groups offers the organization yet another way to maximize their efforts within the community. Participation in a community group on the behalf of an organization is like other volunteer roles and tasks within the home organization; thus, "volunteers must be recruited; they must be screened and given orientation to the agency; they must be assigned to positions and afforded training as necessary; they must be supervised, motivated, and accorded appropriate recognition; they should be evaluated to assess the efficacy of their placement for themselves as well as for the organization" (Brudney, 1994, p. 279). Moreover, it is essential that the volunteers have clear job description of their roles and responsibilities within this community group. The degree of volunteer management required by the organization increases as the level of linkage increases from network to collaboration. Volunteers within a community organization can strengthen and expand existing work by representing the organization and becoming

essential members of community groups at their various levels (networking, coordination, cooperation, coalition, and collaboration).

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ENDNOTE

*Support for the work on this article has come from multiple sources at two land grant universities: University of Arizona and Pennsylvania State University. We wish to acknowledge the two universities' Agricultural Experiment Stations and Extension Services related to Children, Youth, and Families for their support.