

Performance-Based Certification in Volunteer Administration

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INTRODUCTION: A NEW STAGE FOR CERTIFICATION IN VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION

Certification in the profession of volunteer administration is on the threshold of a new stage in its development. When the Association for Volunteer Administration last year announced firm initiatives toward establishing a mechanism for credentialing based on an assessment of demonstrated performance against a set of prescribed competencies and standards, it was acknowledging that the testing time for this new mode of certification was over. The Association was saying that it was willing and ready to refine and then implement the new Performance-Based Certification Program as a full scale professional certification system.

Certainly, this process did not emerge full blown of an instant, even as a concept in the minds of those who first conceived it. But neither, as an evolving vocation, has the stature of volunteer administration yet fully been accepted by employers, clients, educators, and colleagues from related disciplines. That fact has brought doubt and a lack of self-confidence to many in the field. Undoubtedly, our collective publics will continue to need to be convinced of the validity and worth of the profession even as we endeavor to establish the validity of this new credential, "CVA."

It is significant that we, ourselves, as volunteer administrators, have for some time now been willing as a generic body to submit to evalu-

ation. We have asked to be tested. We have acknowledged the necessity for standards of professional excellence. We have accepted the reality that not all of our number will measure up, particularly as we move to this new set of high standards. Of course there is a duality of motive: there is an obligation to the clients, the agencies and the causes we serve; and there is the desire to be recognized as serious, skilled practitioners of an important profession.

In volunteer administration as in other professional fields, when implementing a new process for certification there must be pioneers to risk creativity at every level of the organization. There will be misunderstandings, resistance to change, and stumbles along the way. There will be raw edges to the process that need to be smoothed out. Nevertheless, the base from which this effort springs is sound and solid and the commitment of its activists is sincere and prepared to endure. The fledgling is hatching and gathering itself to break forth from the protective shell of self-congratulation and peer group, in-house insulation. But the hallmark of this process of certification shall be its aim of growing excellence and growing numbers of excellent administrators of volunteer programs. The new certification system must enable, operating so as to encourage and support success in the pursuit of excellence.

Over the past several months and continuing until the fall of this year, AVA has been field-testing its new

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Performance-Based Certification Program in preparation for a full implementation open to the entire field, after November 1, 1983. With the cooperation of The Journal of Volunteer Administration, the Certification Committee will present information on the Program. In this issue and at key points in the future, we will undertake to describe the meaning and the method of CVA for those vital to its success, The Journal readership.

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BEYOND COMPETENCE: PERFORMANCE-BASED CERTIFICATION

Historically, the way in which judgments have been made about the ability of professionals to practice their professions has come full circle. Before professional associations and states became enmeshed in mutually reinforcing relationships concerned with certifying and licensing professionals, those preparing to become part of an established profession apprenticed themselves to individual practitioners. Helping established practitioners and working alongside them in the field, it was easy for these apprentices to have their performance, that is, how well they actually worked in that field, evaluated.

But as professions became more technical and the knowledge needed for satisfactory performance increased, more time and effort with apprentices was required in order to provide them with the knowledge necessary for sound practice. As the number of people seeking such training also began to increase dramatically, the use of schools (learning factories) in addition to or instead of extended apprenticeships became the norm. Increasingly, certification was linked to degrees and tests that measure knowledge and skills abstracted from the "real world" of professional practice.

As a result, an honors graduate from a business school would often be automatically deemed competent as a manager by a prospective employer solely on the basis of academic accomplishment. Knowledge is an essential part of an individual's ability to perform; however, it is far from the whole picture. Knowing or knowledge can help in performance or doing, but it cannot be substituted for the action (the doing), itself.

The demand for relevance and client empowerment in the late sixties and early seventies, and an emphasis on accountability and productivity in the late seventies and early eighties, have combined to motivate a push toward competence. Many educational programs sponsored by schools, corporations, and professional groups are now competency-based programs. What this means is that programs created to facilitate new learning and the development of competence are designed and described in terms of outcomes for the learner (new abilities, knowledge, and understanding), rather than in terms of teaching activities or of curriculum to be transmitted.

The movement toward competence has certainly been a step in the right direction. With this trend has come increased emphasis on using skill and knowledge in concert, and an acknowledgment that smaller proportions of theory to practice than traditionally have been required do not diminish and may well enhance professional practice.

The dictionary defines "competence" as being capable, sufficient and able; having the requisite skills, abilities, or qualities. The competence of a professional is judged by his or her ability to perform the functions and tasks of the job. If the person can meet or surpass the performance standards of a particular position, the person generally is considered to be competent (Klemp, 1979).

The problem is that while the nature and phrasing of learning ob-

jectives and methods used in the classroom have been changing, most formal educational programs are still abstracted from the real world of professional practice. At best, an individual's ability to perform the functions and tasks of the job is evaluated in the classroom in a simulation of some kind. Yet we all know that actually performing functions and tasks in a real work setting is quite another situation. It is while discharging professional responsibilities that an individual's ability to use an area of competence appropriately may display itself or break down.

What all of this points to is the need to continue the circular trend in certification methodology back to the place it all started, with people developing or at least demonstrating professional competencies in the role of an apprentice or of a practicing professional. In the field of volunteer administration, most people develop their competencies outside of the formal classroom. This is true because peer coaching and collaborative learning are more common in our field than in most working environments and because formal programs of preparation have been slow to develop. Also, open access to all is part of how the field defines itself. These very characteristics actually make volunteer administration an ideal profession in which to introduce the use of the demonstration of satisfactory performance as a working professional to prove one is qualified to be certified, rather than simulated demonstrations of competence or the completion of paper and pencil tests.

WHAT MAKES A COMPETENT PROFESSIONAL?

In an analysis of several occupational groups to determine what makes a competent professional, Klemp (1979) identified some interesting findings. Being willing and able to learn, Klemp found, was more important to competent professional performance than the actual amount

of knowledge held by the professional:

It is not the acquisition of knowledge or even the use of knowledge that distinguishes the outstanding performer, but rather the cognitive skills that are exercised and developed in the process of knowledge acquisition and use that constitute occupational competence. In other words, the information processing skills related to learning, recall, and forgetting are not so important to success as the conceptual skills that enable one to bring order to the information chaos that characterizes one's everyday environment. (p. 2)

Klemp went on to identify three main cognitive skills related to competent performance in a wide array of occupations:

1. The ability to see broad thematic consistencies in diverse information and the ability to organize and communicate both those consistencies and differences.
2. The ability to conceptualize the many sides of a controversial issue: the ability to understand the underlying issues and the many perspectives on it, and to resolve the conflict for him/herself and other people.
3. The ability to learn from experience.

Klemp's findings are critical to all professionals, not only to volunteer administrators. He has experimentally verified what has long seemed intuitively apparent to the astute observer: the competent professional is one who can make sense out of information, conceptualize, and learn from experience. But the progression from the identification of the "true" marks of a competent professional, to means and methods of assessing an individual's relative ability in these cognitive areas has only just begun.

Paper and pencil tests have long been criticized for inadequately measuring the richness of thinking and behaving. Assessment by direct observation is difficult to implement due to expense and control factors. The subjective qualities of "common sense," ability to "relate well to people," to "conceptualize," and to "learn from experience" are commonly outside of the range of currently available testing devices.

Yet, just because our technology of ability measurement is not yet refined enough to get at these larger, more consequential characteristics of people functioning well in their professional environment, it does not mean we must abandon all attempts to evaluate performance. Until more refined techniques are available, the compilation of a portfolio for documenting professional skills is one alternative currently available.

Assembling a portfolio requires that the applicant provide evidence of skill through self-critical descriptions (narratives) of projects he or she has administered. In such narratives, the applicant describes the aspects of the role of a volunteer administrator which he or she has played, what he or she did, why, and what results were generated by the effort. Actual products demonstrating these results that could be supplied, if requested, are identified, as are letters or statements of independent evaluation and verification which could be supplied, if requested.

As we have seen, analyzing one's skills and citing documentation to verify the application of these abilities is a key ingredient in learning from experience. The Performance-Based Certification Program offers the applicant a structured format for demonstrating these basic skills of professional competence. For it is the process of compiling a portfolio around key competencies in volunteer administration that is the crux of this new certification program.

COMPONENTS OF THE NEW CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The Association for Volunteer Administration's performance-based model for professional credentialing allows the prospective candidate to engage in a number of exciting and professionally rewarding experiences. Here are a few.

Self-Assessment

Reviewing and assessing one's professional skills and abilities provides the cornerstone for the Certification program. Utilizing the competencies and performance criteria established by AVA as necessary for satisfactory volunteer administration, the administrator interested in certification rates him or herself according to an established scale. In order to progress with the Certification program, a specified score suggesting moderate breadth of experience must be achieved. This ensures the prospective candidate with a reasonable chance of success--an important "hedge" before one undertakes this process.

Not achieving the necessary score, however, does NOT constitute failure in any way. Rather, the AVA competency checklists can become the administrator's guide for continuing development. Sorting through workshop and course offerings, books, and conference experiences available in the field can be nothing short of confusing. With the checklist as a guide, it is easy to identify areas where additional development is needed, either to enhance existing strengths or to respond to felt deficiencies. The developing administrator can utilize this initial self-assessment experience to commence a series of more thoughtful continuing professional development planning efforts.

It is likely that an increasing number of offerings treating these topics will be available as colleges and universities begin using the AVA competencies and performance criteria as a significant input to the

curriculum development work for those preparing for this and related fields. It is likely, as well, that the AVA listing will be used in support of efforts to assess experientially-derived college level learning for new entrants.

Application and Workshop

Those interested in pursuing certification prepare an application which they submit to AVA for review. Potential applicants attend a workshop where they are introduced to the Program and where, if interested, they are helped to assess whether or not they are ready to apply to become a candidate for certification. Following the workshop, they complete the application, which includes a sample performance narrative along with a preliminary statement of philosophy. They submit it, enclosing the appropriate fee, to AVA.

Performance Narratives

To verify that the certification candidate has the skills and abilities claimed on the competency checklists, those accepted as candidates for certification are asked to put together a portfolio, the main component of which is a series of managerial and behavioral performance narratives. Each narrative requires that the candidate recount an actual work situation where various competencies were displayed. The narrative explains what the administrator did to handle the situation and why, and the outcomes or results of her or his work. To verify the authenticity of the narrative, the candidate identifies persons who could attest to the job done and/or products that were developed in the course of the experience, such as reports, training manuals, and brochures. Reviewing these narratives, experienced professionals are able to make a reasonable judgment concerning the quality of a candidate's performance.

Based on the combined experiences of pilot and field test candi-

dates, this writing exercise has proved to be an enormously profitable learning experience in itself, and a guide for improved practice. Experiences of success as well as more limited results were shared with equal profit.

Advisement

The opportunity to work with more experienced administrators in a mentoring relationship is an additional benefit of the process. Each candidate has at least one advisor who helps to guide the work of the candidate and critically evaluate the narratives in mid-point and end-point reviews.

The conversation is expanded in one-to-one and small group meetings with other candidates, sometimes attended by one or more advisors. In fact, through this series of conversations between candidates and their advisors and among candidates, a dialogue centered around professional standards evolves. It is in just such conversations that some of the most serious, new-knowledge-creating debates concerning professional standards and ethics for our field can emerge.

Such local dialogues can and should become local platforms where we share and reflect on our individual professional experiences and through which we are all able to continually work to improve our field. Many new ideas should be born here. This will not be the only platform for such things, of course, but it will be a significant one, with a particular flavor of its own. And choosing to relate to these local certification conversations in this way should make the process of supporting candidates through certification much more rewarding for each of us and more productive for our profession.

External Assessment

To provide internal standardization and verification for the certification process itself, several review points are built into the Program.

The first assessment, of course, is the candidate's own. But this is added to in the feedback, which is to say the external assessment, that comes from advisors, mentioned above, informally all along the way and more formally, in writing, at the mid and end points (typically 4-6 months and then 9-12 months after application).

In the final stage of the process, the candidate is asked to do a case analysis and response. The candidate receives an account of a situation confronting an administrator and is asked to bring his or her skills to bear in analyzing the case and suggesting possible courses of action, including the recommendation of a preferred course of action and a rationale for that recommendation. This case analysis and response and the candidate's completed portfolio, together with any verifying evidence requested, are then evaluated by the AVA Board of Assessment. It is on this basis that a determination of whether or not to certify the candidate is made.

All the portfolios are assessed against the same set of standards, those established by AVA and published in its literature. This should assure a uniformity of standards and that some meaningful, consistent status is attached to the award of CVA: Certified Volunteer Administrator.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CERTIFICATION

Under AVA's Professional Development Committee, presently chaired by Mary DeCarlo, there are a number of committees, including the Certification Committee, currently chaired by Joanne Patton. But at the local level, questions about certification should be directed to your local Certification Liaison, as published this spring in AVA Update. If you have difficulty contacting your Regional Certification Liaison, the AVA Office in Boulder should be able to help you out. Ultimately, the conduct of certification in each region is

the responsibility of your Regional Chair, and that individual is another key area person who should be able to help you answer questions or respond to concerns about certification.

One of the important challenges for the Certification Program is to work in harmony with the AVA regional structure. By decentralizing the delivery system, the program gains strength and the regions are given appropriate responsibilities.

SPONSORSHIP AND COOPERATION

A local certification effort may be initiated by a local group of volunteer administrators, by an AVA affiliate, or by an AVA regional organization, if it is strong enough to shoulder the burden of supporting candidates throughout the year. While a local college or university can act as a cooperating partner, the initiative and the ultimate responsibility for local certification efforts must always rest with one or more of these professional groups.

There are two ways of pursuing certification: either as part of a sponsored group; or through a self-initiated version, where the candidate is to a significant extent on his or her own. The first and recommended way of pursuing certification is to be part of a sponsored group effort. The advantage here is that there is an organized structure to provide support. When operating properly, the local support structure should be able to set up candidate support groups which meet periodically to trade feedback and consultation and to mediate difficulties in advisor/advisee relationships. Candidates can generally expect to receive more help in finding advisors in this version.

The second version, the self-initiated option, is reserved for those who do not have a well-organized group of professional volunteer administrators in their locale. Observing the kind of support and dialogue that are helpful to highly motivated and competent candidates and advisors, we are in-

creasingly convinced that going it alone can be a risky business.

We strongly encourage you to consider organizing a local group of professionals in volunteer administration to sponsor a certification effort, if one does not already exist in your locale, before choosing to travel to the one or two workshops at some point far distant from your home, returning to find your own advisors, and putting your portfolio together without the benefit of peer support for either you or your advisors. At the very least, you are encouraged to find someone else in your community with whom you can team up, enroll in the distant workshop(s) together, and go on to help each other through the demanding process of assembling a portfolio.

THE VALUE OF PERFORMANCE-BASED CERTIFICATION

We have already begun to detect signs of the kind of impact this program can have on the field and for the individual practitioner. Several practitioners of volunteer administration in hospitals have indicated that this should bolster their requests for salaries more appropriate to their level of competence. Larger organizations, such as the Red Cross, have already begun to write "CVA preferred" into the job descriptions of Directors of Volunteers. Experienced professionals are already beginning to take less experienced members of the profession on in a mentoring role to help them prepare for application for certification under this new program. And from the process itself, if Pittsburgh's experience is any indication, we can expect a whole new quality of dialogue and a whole new level of participation in the local conversation about: (1) the nature of this profession; (2) what constitutes sound professional practice; and (3) what we want to establish as appropriate professional standards in our field.

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