The Underlying Dynamics of Staff-Volunteer Relationships

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WHY EXAMINE THE STAFF-VOLUNTEER RELATIONSHIP *AGAIN*?

Despite rumors to the contrary, volunteerism is on the rise. Although the traditional volunteer—an upper middle class woman working 15+ hours per week—is hard to find nowadays, others are actively filling volunteer positions.

According to the 1985 *Americans Volunteer* survey, "Volunteer activity remains a pervasive activity for nearly half of the American population."[1] Volunteerism is increasingly perceived by the profit, non-profit and public sectors as critical to maintaining the high standard of living we have come to expect in the United States. Indeed, Independent Sector is calling for a 50% increase in volunteering by the year 1991.[2] This is a major challenge to the voluntary sector, and will be met only if the *quality* of the volunteer experience meets ever-increasing standards set forth by the volunteers themselves. According to Ivan Scheier, however, the quality of this experience may not be adequate to ensure the level of volunteerism we will need as we move toward the 21st century. He has warned:

> The next decade ('80s) will either see a decisive improvement in . . . treatment of volunteers or it will see a parting of the ways after a half century of imperfect alliance.[3]

Marlene Wilson seems to concur with Scheier's belief that, in her words, "volunteers . . . will simply quit, or move on to neighborhood and self-help groups to 'do their thing'."[4]

As Scheier's disturbing predictions suggest, opportunities for volunteer activities abound today; no longer is the volunteer's choice limited to pre-defined, and perhaps narrowly focused positions in agencies or institutions. There are options for people with a wide range of interests, capabilities and schedules, in settings ranging from government agencies to neighborhood associations.

Motivations for volunteering are also more varied today than in the past. As the image of "lady bountiful" recedes, demands by volunteers for work which offers job-related experience, meaningful social interaction, or personal growth increase accordingly. Pure altruism is no longer sufficient to motivate the majority of volunteers.

In order to meet volunteers' motivational needs by offering gratifying positions in the myriad of settings available, volunteer managers will be challenged with the task of improving the quality of the volunteer experience across the board.

This paper is based on the premises that the quality of the volunteer experience is closely related to the volunteer-staff relationship. Efforts to enhance this relationship, making it both more productive and more gratifying, will go far toward improving the quality of the volunteer experience itself.

THE IDEAL PARTNERSHIP

The ideal staff-volunteer relationship can best be described as a "creative partnership" in which each partner complements and maximizes the productivity

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of the other.[5] This ideal applies equally well to a staff- or a volunteer-run organization.*

Volunteers in staff-run organizations enrich and extend staff by allowing them the time and resources to do what they do best. In voluntary organizations, staff free up volunteers by undertaking those tasks which volunteers have neither the time, interest nor expertise to accomplish. Furthermore, volunteers are supported by staff in their efforts to accomplish their chosen objectives. In either situation, there is a delicate balance or "dynamic tension"[6] as staff and volunteers attempt to complement one another.

This ideal relationship is embodied in the "teammate" model described by Schroder[7] in which volunteers and staff work as equals to fulfill the organization's mission.

Mutual trust and an equitable balance of power enable this relationship to evolve. In the "teammate" model, both volunteers and staff share involvement in and responsibility for program planning, implementation and evaluation. As a result, each partner on the team maintains a high level of commitment both to his/her participation and to the organization as a whole.[8]

Social exchange theory[9] helps to illuminate the teammate model of an ideal volunteer-staff relationship. This theory is based on the principle of reciprocity, whereby volunteers and staff benefit equally from a give-and-take relationship. When reciprocity exists, each participant receives the benefits and rewards s/he desires; is able to empathize with the needs of others in the relationship; understands and abides by agreed-upon rules; and is willing to share power.

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* In this article, staff-run organizations are defined as those having staff members from their inception, with volunteers recruited by a volunteer administrator after the organization has been established. Volunteer-run or voluntary organizations are defined as those conceived and initiated by volunteers, in which staff, who are responsible to the volunteers, have been hired after the organization's inception.

According to social exchange theory, the relationship between volunteers and staff is most productive when there is a "balanced partnership"[10] with complete reciprocity. Under these circumstances, volunteers and staff are committed to working as a team because they both expect to benefit from their cooperative efforts.

If the expectations of staff or volunteers are not met, i.e., the desired benefits are not forthcoming, the balance in the staff-volunteer relationship can falter. Similar problems arise when either party feels s/he is contributing or sacrificing more than the other. The resultant imbalance in the partnership, i.e., loss of reciprocity, may create an inability or unwillingness to empathize with partners, to abide by agreed-upon rules, or to share power. Above all, an imbalance in the volunteer-staff relationship will negatively impact the desire and ability of these individuals to work as a team.

KEY DYNAMIC ELEMENTS:
TRUST AND POWER

Trust is the key to developing and maintaining a balanced partnership between staff and volunteers. It is the underlying force which holds the volunteer-staff relationship together. The use of power by staff or volunteers, when power is defined as a combination of control and authority, is what enables them to accomplish concrete results.

Social exchange theory suggests that the ability and willingness to share power emanates from a foundation of trust. If volunteers and staff trust that they are working toward the same organizational goals, they will share power to meet those ends most effectively. Perhaps the ability to share power is the most critical factor which can facilitate effective teamwork.

For many reasons, establishing and maintaining trust between staff and volunteers can present a major challenge in either staff- or volunteer-run organizations.

It is crucial to recognize that trust is based on the premise that both parties are equally committed to achieving the same organizational goals. Lack of a clearly defined mission, therefore, can present one of the most significant obs-

tacles to building an effective staff-volunteer relationship. Without an agreed-upon mission, neither volunteers nor staff will be able to determine whether they share the same objectives with their "partners."

Even if the mission is clearly stated, volunteers and staff may adhere to different interpretations. Oftentimes, volunteers and staff perceive the mission differently because of differences in their world view, formed by disparate socio-economic, racial and/or cultural backgrounds.

Trust can also be impaired by misunderstandings about volunteer or staff motivations. When volunteers assume that salary is the primary motivator for paid workers, they are inclined to distrust staff commitment to the cause. Their distrust of staff motivation may cause volunteers to demand and/or expect staff to contribute "free" time as proof of their commitment to the organization.

This distrust and the resultant demands on staff time and availability can cause a serious imbalance in the partnership. If staff members insist on maintainng a 40+-hour work week, volunteers may feel that they are contributing an uneven share of time and energy; but if volunteer requests for additional work hours are met, staff may conclude that they are making more sacrifices than are their counterparts. In either situation, the reciprocity in the relationship will eventually erode, as will the ability to work together as equal partners.

Problems also arise when staff undervalue volunteer work, simply because it is unpaid. As a result of this attitude, they are likely to distrust the seriousness of volunteer commitment to the cause. These staff members might react by allowing volunteers to do only menial tasks, or by being generally unappreciative of volunteer efforts. Since volunteers in these situations would probably feel frustrated, productivity would diminish and the volunteer-staff relationship would stagnate or dissolve.

Once trust is firmly established between staff and volunteers, there is the opportunity and, hopefully, the willingness to share power. Shared power implies agreement by both parties as to who

is in charge and what is the chain of command. Well-established and mutually acceptable lines of authority provide the framework for productive teamwork.

Those with authority must delegate control in a consistent, fair manner. Delegation of power must be based on the needs inherent in specific situations, as well as on the ultimate goal of achieving the organization's mission. In other words, the power structure should adapt to the needs of each project and should not be determined by the desire to protect and preserve power for a select few.

Power struggles can ensue when the lines of authority are not mutually acceptable and control is reserved for a select few, regardless of the needs of a given situation. Eventually, participants will maneuver to correct these power imbalances.[11]

During the struggle to shift the balance of power, staff and volunteers will probably be unable to accomplish even the easiest organizational objective. MacNair (see footnote 11) describes several scenarios which clearly demonstrate how organizations can suffer under these circumstances.

In one scenario, volunteers remain in their positions but refuse to cooperate with staff, staging a quasi-strike. Their source of power lies in their inactivity. On the flip-side, staff might adopt a more reactive approach to accomplishing their responsibilities as they wait for dissenting volunteers to resign or complete their terms.

Another scenario involves the resignation of volunteers or staff. For better or worse, volunteers are more likely to resign; staff more often remain on the job, but become "burned out." Perhaps volunteers and staff might limit their interactions or attempt to work around the rules which had been agreed upon initially.

The impact of trust and power in a staff-volunteer relationship becomes even more evident when examined within the context of the "parent/child" and "child/child" models described by Schroder (see footnote 7). Through these models, it becomes clear that lack of a balanced partnership inhibits effective teamwork.

In the "parent/child" model, the parent makes all of the decisions, talks down to

the child, and regards him/herself as the sole expert. The child has limited input regarding his/her activities, the program itself, or the organization as a whole. Since the child isn't held accountable for his/her performance due to the parent's low expectations, s/he doesn't feel much responsibility for achieving results (see footnote 7).

This model seems to reflect attitudes in many staff-run organizations in which staff create and perpetuate the self-fulfilling prophesy of volunteer unreliability and incompetence. Staff have low expectations for volunteer achievement and distrust volunteer commitment to the job and/or organization. Therefore, they refuse to share power with the volunteers, causing a serious imbalance in the partnership. Volunteer commitment and sense of responsibility diminishes in direct proportion to the low level of staff expectations. In the "parent/child" model, it is impossible for the child or, in this case, the volunteer to function at his/her fullest potential.

The "child/child" model refers to relationships in which all of the participants fight for complete control of decision-making and program implementation. The "children" struggle not only for sole ownership of what they perceive to be the organization's mission but also for recognition for any accomplishments which match their interpretation of the mission (see footnote 7).

For the volunteer- or staff-run organization, this model represents total lack of trust between staff and volunteers. As a result of their mutual distrust neither volunteers nor staff are willing to share power and a full-blown power struggle ensues.

A "child/child" form of interaction is probably most common when the organizational mission is unclear. This situation would encourage both staff and volunteers to fight to obtain credit for accomplishments in an attempt to bolster their own interpretation of the organization's goals.

Lack of clear distinction between volunteer and staff responsibilities might also encourage "child/child" interactions in which both parties struggle for sole power and recognition. In many staff-run organizations, for instance, there is resis-

tance to involving volunteers because of role confusion. "Child/child" interactions may result when recalcitrant staff members are forced to work with volunteers. Staff who fear that volunteers may replace them as a cost-saving measure, or that skilled volunteers will outshine them, will probably fight for full control and responsibility over their programs and resist any meaningful participation by volunteers.

In a voluntary organization, the "child/child" tug-of-war might occur if volunteers shift too much responsibility to staff in their desire to achieve the highest possible standards. When voluntary organizations become "overprofessionalized"[12] in this way, volunteers find themselves inadvertently excluded from activity. When they realize what has happened, volunteers will probably struggle to regain their lost power.

In any of these scenarios, little progress would be made toward fulfilling the organization's mission. Thus, the success of volunteer involvement—either in volunteer-run or staff-run organizations—is highly dependent on the ability of volunteers and staff to achieve both mutual trust and the concomitant willingness to share power.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There remains much to learn about the underlying dynamics of staff-volunteer relationships. By applying learning from related fields such as organizational and applied psychology, business and personnel management, community development and social work, we may achieve a better understanding of the relevant issues.

Specifically, further application of social exchange theory may help explain the dynamics of trust and the ability of staff and volunteers to share power. Research on patterns of communication will be useful in developing effective training and orientation sessions to foster improved relationships from the outset.

The direction of volunteerism in the next decade will be significantly affected by the ability of staff and volunteers to work together productively. Without a true partnership, neither staff nor volunteers will be able to accomplish a fraction

of what they will accomplish working as a team in pursuit of common goals.

FOOTNOTES

[1]*Americans Volunteer*. Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 1985, 4.

[2]*Daring Goals for a Caring Society*. Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 1987, 5.

[3]Scheier, Ivan, as quoted in Marlene Wilson. Reversing the Resistance of Staff to Volunteers. *Voluntary Action Leadership*, Spring 1981, 21.

[4]Wilson, Marlene. Reversing the Resistance of Staff to Volunteers. *Voluntary Action Leadership*, Spring 1981, 21.

[5]Wilson, Marlene. *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs*, Boulder, Colorado: Volunteer Management Associates, 1976, 186.

[6]Snider, Alan. The Dynamic Tension: Professionals and Volunteers. *Journal of Extension*, Fall, 1985, 9.

[7]Schroder, Deborah. Can This Marriage Be Saved? Thoughts on Making the Paid Staff/Volunteer Relationship Healthier. *Voluntary Action Leadership*, Fall 1986, 16.

[8]Drucker, Peter. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. Harper & Row, 1973, 483 as cited by Marlene Wilson. *op. cit.*, 163.

[9]MacNair, Ray H. Citizen Participation As a Balanced Exchange: An Analysis And Strategy. *Journal of the Community Develpment Society*. 1981 Volume 12, No. 1, 1-19.

[10]MacNair, Ray H., *Ibid.*, 6.

[11]MacNair, Ray H., *Ibid.*, 3.

[12]O'Connell, Brian. *The Board Member's Book*, New York: The Foundation Center, 1985, 49.

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