

The Imitation of Volunteers: Towards an Appropriate Technology of Voluntary Action

By Ivan H. Scheier, Ph.D.

Legacy and Challenge

Who's responsible for what happens to volunteerism? If you're reading these lines, you are, because in one role or another--board, staff, community leader, coordinator, consultant, trainer, or any variety of career -- what you think and do influences our field.

Among readers of this journal, there are no innocent bystanders.

But what shapes us who then shape volunteerism? From whence come the tactics, strategies, principles, skills, attitudes, and world view which leaders of volunteers then transmit to rank and file via training, consulting, guidelines, standards, model projects, and in the very language we use to describe who we are and what we do?

I believe the answer is quite clear. Our knowledge base and the very core of our self-image as leaders are eclectic derivatives of management; business and public administration; leadership theory; organizational development; psychology (especially personnel psychology and the theory of motivation); sociology; social work; communications; public relationship; education and training; and fundraising--with occasional sorties into philosophy, theology, community organization, and a few other fields.

Quite a list of conceptual creditors! What's more, our sense of belonging to them

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is real; for example, we often call ourselves "managers" and "administrators." To be sure, translations and adaptations from established fields help assure a healthy childhood in any profession. Early psychology, for example, leaned heavily on philosophy and even physics. For our field of volunteerism, we can say with pride that we have been humble enough to learn from many sources, and creative enough to adapt and integrate them for our own uses.

This has been a rich legacy of learning from our complex parenthood and one hopes for its continuation. But I believe there comes a time in the life of any field when we must ask if there is anything we can call especially our own. We must either be able to answer yes or implicitly acknowledge second-rate status. The challenge is to concentrate on identifying what, if anything, is different and special about the volunteer experience, and from this derive premise, principle, strategy, tactics and methods which are uniquely appropriate for us.

The "Different" About Us

In any search for ourselves, one pitfall is familiar to any reader of who-dunnits: the best place to hide something is in plain sight. What has been somewhat "hidden in plain sight" all these years is the raw beauty of our quintessential situation: people participating caringly without pay; people doing more than they have to because they want to, the basis being principally a motivational paycheck. We deal with a neglected species of work which is at once voluntary and help-intending, and which, more than most any other kind of work, can be shaped to individual people (vs. shaping people to work).

None of the disciplines we emulate can make all these statements or even most of them about their knowledge and value base. Overlap there may be, but this is a far cry from substantial identity.

There is even "evidence" of a kind that our difference does make a difference. In the past eight years, some of us have begun the attempt to determine what volunteer leadership methods would look like if more directly and explicitly based on the special characteristics and conditions of the prototype volunteer situation. [Barber, 1979; Lewis, 1979; On Background, Vol. I, No.s 3 and 4, 1980; Scheier, 1980b, 1981.] This approach yields principles which at least seem more like our own, and different from those of other fields, e.g., "make the minimum difference in what a person wants to do, and can do, which has the maximum positive impact on other people." From this and related principles, methods emerged which seem to differ from standard management procedures. I believe one main reason for this was that these "people approach" strategies were deliberately designed to capitalize on the special advantages of the volunteer situation, while acknowledging its special restrictions. The names, at least, sounded different: Minimax, Need Overlap Analysis, the Bridge, the Neighborhood Enabler, The Task Enrichment System, etc.

Except for the names, the "evidence" described above is simply a claim registered with references for your consideration and conclusions.

Towards An Appropriate Technology: Two Parts

I happen to believe there is something there, and I suppose what we are groping towards might be called an "appropriate technology" of voluntary action -- "appropriate" because in modeling primarily on "the volunteer situation" it asks neither too much nor too little of volunteers and their leadership.

An appropriate technology for voluntary action would have two parts. One part, just alluded to, bases methodology on the prototypical volunteer experience. Another thrust parallels this effort for values in volunteerism. The technical sector is coming into place, I believe; little more is said about it here. The second more ethical part is scarcely begun. Its key proposition is an essential homily; any person or organization claiming to lead and/or represent volunteers, must be able clearly to perceive and articulate the values volunteers stand for; more, she/he should live and work by those values.

"Volunteer Values" as Leadership Behavior Guides

Earlier work enables us to identify five important inter-related values expressed by the act of volunteering [AAVS, 1978; Barber and Scheier, 1979; Scheier, 1978; Wilson,

1980]. These are the values of participation in a free society; respect for the dignity and worth of every individual; pride in work; caution concerning the excesses of extreme materialism; and the ethic of practicing what we preach about ethics.

Each of these "volunteer values" will be examined in the light of what it implies for the behavior of leadership individuals and organizations in our field. Our approach builds on the pioneer achievement of the AVA Code of Professional Ethics (AAVS, 1978), and attempts to extend it in two ways. Value-consistent vs. value-inconsistent behaviors are described and their implications drawn: 1) for volunteer leadership individuals in general, not just directors/coordinators of volunteer services; and 2) for the behavior of organizations as well as individuals in the volunteer leadership field.

I'm serious about holding our feet to the fire on this one, in terms of what we do as leaders, not just what we say. Any dissonance or contradictions between the values volunteers represent and the values exhibited by the behavior of their leadership/spokespersons, forbodes a disabling alienation between volunteers and their leadership and a consequent ineffectiveness in that leadership.

Moreover, as volunteer leadership more perfectly lives the values represented by its "constituency" it will be healthier in the sense of practicing what it preaches, and more visible to the nation at large as something special.

This is not a saints and sinners scenario. Thus, the preceding sermonette is superfluous for most volunteer leadership people, except perhaps to raise their awareness of the significance of the decency already natural to them, and to refine their expectations vis-a-vis volunteer leadership organizations which seek their affiliation and support. The intention is certainly not to preach absolute perfection in emulating volunteer ideals. Here any pointing fingers, my own included, are likely to be generously curved.

Nor are volunteers proposed as candidates for canonization. To be sure, they are admired as good people, whose behavior preserves some endangered species of everyday ethics. But (thankfully) our approach need not require that volunteers be perfect people, flawlessly embodying every ethical ideal.

A. The Value of Participation In a Free Society

Volunteers choose to participate, without the powerful inducement of money. In this and other ways, they personify the virtues of involvement.

For starters, leadership people should themselves be doing some volunteering, preferably of the type they teach and talk about. Thus, useful as it is, volunteering on a policy board, especially a prestigious state or national board, does not ordinarily equip us to understand the hopes and frustrations of front-line local volunteers.

We should be doing volunteer work ourselves because we want to, because it is value-consistent, and because our effectiveness as leaders needs a constantly refreshed direct understanding of what it's like to be whom we seek to lead. This is why a history of having been a volunteer some time ago is very risky as a current data base; memory of the experience fades and filters readily.

Concurrent front-line volunteer experience should impact positively on a leader's level of sensitivity and relevance. However, the leader's choice to seek such involvement is mainly a matter of private conscience and commitment. It is not ordinarily a matter for public proclamation or examination as a credential.

Another kind of value-consistent behavior should be public, and is in fact glaringly obvious in the breach as well as the observance. We cannot credibly urge other people to involve volunteers, when we fail fully to do so ourselves, as leadership individuals and organizations.

Where is the volunteer leadership organization or volunteer program that, as it solicits your dollars, endorsement, support, or participation makes sure its own operation involves clear and vigorous model non-token, intelligent delegation to volunteers, in a rich variety of responsible as well as routine roles, in service as well as policy-setting? Are these involvements geographically accessible to the widest possible range of people? Does the organization's treatment of its volunteers mirror (highly polished) the exemplary standards it exhorts others to observe in volunteer-staff relations, recognition, supervision, evaluation, minority involvement, etc.?

It should not be necessary to mention such matters. Yet, incredibly, the bias that it is easier/better to get more money and hire people for the work, than to suffer the "inconvenience of volunteers" is not unknown among volunteer leadership organizations and programs. Classic ironies here include failure to tap the full potential of service volunteers to assist the work of: 1) salaried volunteer coordinators and 2) volunteer leadership organizations.

Volunteering is one behavioral endorsement of the value of participation. Another value-consistent set of behaviors has to do

with the encouragement and use of input from volunteers, members, consumers of services, and all who have a stake in our work.

Where does your leadership person stand on this one? Does she/he have plenty of time for open questions and interaction, for careful and concerned listening? What sort of priority does the leadership organization place on regular, accessible channels for input and feedback from its members, consumers, publics, and non-members, too? Are these communication mechanisms well-used, with sensitive listeners at the other end, ready and able to try to do something about what they hear? Indeed, genuinely broad and deep participation is as much a matter of attitude as of structure - the attitude of being gladly open vs. narrowly defensive in actively seeking and considering suggestions on vital subjects. Seeking input only on the relatively trivial or absolutely pre-decided topic is merely to play participatory games. So is the irritable assumption that people are "apathetic" or "poor sports" when they don't choose to participate within the quite possibly arbitrary frameworks we have established.

B. Respect for the Dignity and Worth of Every Individual

Volunteers put flesh on this ideal in at least two ways:

- 1) They witness a faith that individuals can still make a difference in an otherwise impersonal age of big government, big business, big labor, big philanthropy, and perhaps big volunteerism too.
- 2) Volunteers are often willing and able to give individualized attention to weak and vulnerable people, when paid staff are too busy to do so. What this attention says to clients loud and clear is that "you matter" and "we believe in your potential."

One important way in which volunteers show respect for clients is by finding them worthy of listening to. Once again, the effective imitation of volunteers requires a truly listening leadership. Thus, at workshops, conferences, and consultations, value-consistent leadership style is readily recognized: the person is with the people served--frequently, easily, eagerly and even enjoyably--rather than clustered or cloistered with her/his "own kind." The latter behavior reveals the backside of this value--the class-conscious notion that some individuals are more worthy than others simply because they are officers, staff, educated, experienced, professional, certified, etc. Thus, while perfection of a certification process is a high priority for AVA, it is also the place where we are most in danger of violating our own code of ethics on the dignity and worth

of every individual. The minimum protection is to stop well short of ratifying automatically any kind of inherent privilege: educational, chronological, or financial. AVA's new certification plan is on the safe side here, because it is competency-based.

Commitment to the dignity and worth of every individual is also reflected in organizational style. For example, the effective imitation of volunteers should have leadership individuals and organizations listening with concern to the powerless and poor as much as to the powerful and rich; to the non-member and the non-contributor as carefully as to the member and money-giver; and to the non-conformist along with the "team player." When realistic organizational or individual needs for control are not held in reasonable check, it is easy to confuse unity with unanimity, and to question the motivational integrity of dissent. But this is to fail the ultimate test of respect for the dignity and worth of an individual--when she/he is in the out-voted minority, or simply resolute in disagreement. Generically, we are really talking about the politico-social value of pluralism, which volunteerism is said to represent and reinforce in a society (Black, 1979). Indeed as we become more aware of policy and advocacy as integral parts of the volunteer family, we are going to have to learn to respect volunteers holding a wide range of diverse opinion and convictions on any given topic; including opinions with which we as leaders may strongly differ. The parallel practice in our organizations would carefully avoid the suffocation or subversion of dissent.

More generally, the balance struck between individual and organizational needs reflects our commitment to individual worth and dignity. Beyond a certain point an organization is clearly counter-modeling volunteer values when it sacrifices individuals on the altar of organizational priorities, rather than viewing the organization mainly as a way of encouraging and supporting growth and development in individuals.

Finally, our commitment to the dignity and worth of every individual is tested in practice by the kinds of recommendations emphasized in our training, technical assistance, consultation, and publications. Thus, one value-consistent position would be a strong endorsement of significant volunteer and client input into volunteer programs, with practical suggestions on how to make that happen more--even when agency/staff resistance makes this a tactless tactic.

A related value-consistent approach would be explicitly skeptical and, if necessary, courageously confrontative in regard to any organizational arrangement which emphasizes

subordinate service roles for volunteers and/or token advisory or policy roles.

Finally, a volunteer-imitating leadership would vigorously support in word and deed, the proposition that everybody has something to give as volunteers. This includes clients, transitional and other "non-traditional" volunteers; the very young all the way to the very old, in a vast range of acceptable types and styles of contribution [ENERGIZE, 1981; Scheier, 1980a]. Note particularly, here, the readiness to accept support and encourage self-help and mutual help/ network models, as at least close relatives to volunteerism. Indeed, look for anything like this which finally and forever exorcises patronizing stereotypes of helping.

C. The Dignity and Value of Work In and Of Itself

Eliminate money as a primary incentive, and you've gone a long way towards saying work must have substantial value for its own sake. This is why volunteers testify eloquently to a pride-in-work principle, a rare proclamation indeed in a society where money is the main measure of the value of work (and people?).

Value-consistent leadership behaviors include:

- 1) Accuracy and honesty in packaging roles for volunteers (vs., for example, allowing a person to believe their volunteer policy participation is real, then ignoring or circumventing their input);
- 2) Skilled, sensitive, resolute efforts to maximize responsibility and growth opportunity in all volunteer work roles, plus strong advocacy for respectful attention to this volunteer work on resumes.

In the matter of volunteer job design my own belief is that value-consistency particularly welcomes the enrichment of intrinsic attractiveness of work for volunteers, as distinct from an emphasis on extrinsic incentives, additions not in the work itself, and perhaps closer to substitutes for money (Scheier, 1980a).

D. A Remedy Against Extreme Materialism

Leadership people and organizations usually need some money to achieve their purposes. At the same time, the volunteer example proclaims certain basic qualities of caring as not for sale, having no price tag, and scarcely even discussable in dollar terms.

This bubble in the consciousness of modern volunteerism has been around since approximately Day One. I claim both numerous and

distinguished company in not having thought my way completely through the apparent anomaly. This is why the following sounds like an invitation to suffer along with Hamlet--in hopes of converting anguished monologue to productive dialogue.

Sometimes it seems like volunteer leadership individuals and organizations never heard of the not-for-money alternative. No one scrambles harder for dollars than we do, or places higher priority on teaching others to do the same. Money-raising techniques are a prominent, popular feature of our workshops, textbooks, and technical assistance. But sometimes, when our hair is down, some of us will concede peril to our souls in compromising what we see as needed in favor of what there's money for; in over-representing the rich and powerful in our councils; or simply because money-worry takes too much time and effort away from thinking about what we're supposed to be doing, and whom it's for. Somewhere, there may be a soul-searching threshold at which our staff or board spends too much time talking about money, and needs to start talking about why we're talking so much about money (is it 25% of our time? 75%? 98%).

Overbalancing towards dollar-based decisions is possible even when the primary purpose of the volunteer effort is to raise money. Here, one sometimes sees leadership which seems to want volunteer focus on fund-raising activities so much that it doesn't seriously offer fund-raising volunteers opportunities for direct personal involvement in the problem-situations they are raising money to deal with. (This is probably shortsighted policy in any case.)

Finally, even what we call major issues in volunteerism--gas mileage allotments, tax deductions or credits, enabling funds, insurance protection--are essentially dollar-and-cents oriented. Important as these matters are, they seem to redefine the benefits and protections of voluntary work principally in materialistic terms.

Sometimes the irony is overpowering: we who claim leadership of people not primarily motivated by money, seem motivated by nothing else.

The foregoing may only feed the guilt pangs about money that many of us have now and then. But in the first place, most of our fund-raising efforts are dedicated to helping others, rather than for selfish gain. Even when there's also something for us in it, as volunteer leaders we can be comfortable. For, as I've argued elsewhere (Scheier, 1980a, Chap. 15), nothing in the volunteer philosophy need imply disdain for the importance of money, and we are fools if we do so, for among other things we then deserve the

counterpart bias: disrespect for anything which is unpaid, including volunteer work (Scheier, 1980a, Chap. 15). Moreover, even implying that money is unimportant or "dirty," is arrogantly insensitive to the sufferings of poor people.

Only consider: many people are enabled to volunteer mainly or only because hard work and/or good fortune assures them money enough for decent living. To say that this money does not come from their volunteering is to miss the point: they have the money, and that allows them to volunteer. Indeed, the clear majority of volunteers today are doing so in their "spare time" from salaried employment, or else using volunteering as a stepping-stone to paid work. Those people personify an intimate complementary relation between paid and unpaid work, not a conflict.

Therefore, what we really seem to be saying is not that it's "bad" to accept money in return for work. Rather, we are saying that once one has enough money or its material equivalent for basic life support and a few creature comforts, it is good to do a little extra work of one's choice not for pay.

Such a version of the volunteer value system can with complete consistency advocate decent pay for volunteer coordinators and other staff related to volunteer programs. Nor is there anything here that hates money so much it will give politicians an alibi for saving it by bludgeoning human service budgets. Indeed, another volunteer value--respect for the dignity and worth of every individual--will support surgical removal of fat from such budgets, but object vigorously when the weak and vulnerable are damaged, or when volunteers are exploited as "cheap labor."

Trueness to a less materialistic "volunteer alternative" does appear to suggest certain guidelines for leadership and behavior. Certainly, we should fully respect people and organizations who are not paid for their services as leaders, e.g., the volunteer volunteer coordinator, the consultant-volunteer, etc. In ours, of all professions, these people cannot be seen as second-raters in any sense.

Now, a word to the remunerated among us. Elsewhere I've argued for the reality of a volunteer component in all work, salaried or unsalaried (Scheier, 1980a, Chap. 15). Thus even when "doing it for money," some of our best employees are also "doing it for more than money," working harder than they have to because they want to. This volunteer attitude towards work can occur at any pay grade from zero to a million dollars a year. In fact, the volunteer approach to work probably occurs more frequently at higher salary levels because this "extra mile" approach tends to

attract merit advancements, in any reasonably fair and open employment situation.

Therefore, salaried leadership of volunteers should take special care to model the volunteer attitude in their own work. (The vast majority of us are already dedicated extra milers; we might only articulate better to ourselves and others what this means.) This volunteer attitude for salaried leadership is not only consistent with our values; it is also consistent with any salary level, and particularly the higher ones. I claim only that this is worth a try, and may help assuage any lingering guilt feelings about deserving decent pay for our work (this usually means, higher pay than today). But I'm well aware that exhibiting the volunteer attitude in one's work also invites exploitation from the wrong kind of boss or sponsor. Here, we must simply market our present skills better to employers, and perhaps add other marketable skills based on the uniqueness of volunteering--which bring us full circle to this article's introduction.

The Proof of Everyday Ethics is in the Doing, Not Just the Saying

In the arena of ethics, volunteers are the original "deeds-not-words" folks. So are most volunteer leadership individuals and organizations most of the time. Perhaps the best criteria are daily ones. Thus, leadership individuals and organizations adequately imitate volunteers just insofar as they regularly treat their own colleagues, employees, constituents, clients, and publics with consideration, caring and concern; with patience where needed; with respect and understanding always.

We're only human here, only strugglers toward the ideal. To an already demanding list of desirable leadership qualities we need not add sainthood. But I am especially worried about some commonly accepted leadership characteristics which could actually conflict with caring--notably, an uncritical penchant for "efficiency" in volunteer program operations. At an early extreme, I suspect efficiency is the deadliest enemy kindness ever had, an ever-ready altar on which opportunities for decency are sacrificed to economy in money or time. Having opened this Pandora's box for much more peering into, I'll rest my opening case with any veteran air traveler. What happened to the quality of caring in the passenger cabin as a result of computer-tight deployment of cabin attendants and flights themselves? I would hope the extra attentions volunteers can provide encourage all of us to risk some inefficiency, whenever it allows more leisure for caring.

On the other hand, I do not think our commitment to imitating the volunteer ethic requires that we remain powerless in an era where we cannot afford to be. Elsewhere I

have indicated practical ways in which we can develop value-consistent power (On Background, Volume I, No. 2, 1980a).

The Conclusion as a Beginning

From the vote to the town meeting to the organized policy or advocacy group, volunteers are especially free to speak their minds. I hope many readers will feel prompted to imitate volunteers in this respect, too, for any of the difficult issues raised in this article.

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