

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to assist managers of volunteers in volunteer organizations to find new ways to secure and retain volunteer commitment. The project was developed based on the apparent change in volunteer commitment from a long-term to a more short-term character, which has resulted in organizations having fewer resources to deal with increasing workloads. This problem generated the study's main premise: the more able the organization is to meet an individual's personal learning needs, the more likely the individual will be motivated and committed to serving the organization. The findings provided support for the use of the model — "Linking Volunteer Motivation and Commitment through Learning Activities" — as a systematic approach to the development of volunteers.

Linking Motivation and Commitment through Learning Activities in the Volunteer Sector

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INTRODUCTION

Many volunteer organizations fail to meet the changing learning needs of volunteers. While this article recommends a systematic and holistic approach to learning, trends suggest that many volunteer organizations bypass the whole learning process (Wandersman and Abraham, 1997). In organizations that do provide learning opportunities, learning is equated with and is thus severely limited to initial and didactic skills training to satisfy minimal role requirements and does not offer further opportunities for personal development and growth. Orientation courses tend to be superficial, offering little in the way of understanding the organization's goals and mission. Some organizations provide only formal learning courses, while failing to recognize the value of informal opportunities. For example, 95% of Canadians learn informally (Canadian Lifelong Learning Journal, 1999). Finally, many organizations still focus their learning efforts on the needs of the long-term, traditional or continuous service volunteer rather than on the short-term, episodic volunteer even though the latter's quality of contribution can be quite high.

MOTIVATION AND COMMITMENT

Volunteer action, supported by adult learning principles and practices, can reinforce motivational needs and establish conditions for commitment.

Motivation refers to forces acting on (external) and acting within (internal) individuals to initiate and direct their behaviour (Moore, 1985), whether to achieve a desirable goal or remove a sense of disequilibrium. For example, a volunteer may join to fulfil an altruistic need to help the homeless, but may also be moved out of a sense of uneasiness about his or her own comfort. Volunteers are motivated variously to 1) Help others in need; 2) Be involved with others in social relationships; 3) Learn about the world around them or learn a new skill, and 4) Grow and develop psychologically (Clary, Snyder and Ridge, 1992).

Commitment, specifically organizational commitment, is referred to in the literature as psychological attachment to the organization, congruence between individual and organizational goals and values, willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization, desire to maintain membership and identification with

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organizational goals and norms (Harris, Stevens and Chachere, 1999). Some of the factors that contribute to organizational commitment are treating individuals with respect, having concern for quality customer service, having clear job definitions, keeping the job stimulating and up-to-date, having access to resources to do the job and providing opportunity to grow and develop.

Individuals require that organizations meet four key conditions to secure their commitment: 1) Congruence with his/her "helping" goals and values; 2) Ability for him/her to influence organizational decisions; 3) Congruence between his/her competencies and the job role, and 4) Congruence of his/her personal development goals with opportunities provided by the organization (Kinlaw, 1999).

Adult learning: Managers of volunteers help create the best conditions for motivating and retaining volunteers when the learning experiences they offer relate to the key motivational need(s) of individuals to join a volunteer organization and the key commitment condition(s) to stay or exert effort on the organization's behalf. Volunteer managers are assisted in this endeavour because volunteerism, by its nature, requires individuals to be engaged in continuous learning. Educational activities provide opportunities for volunteers to learn the skills, knowledge and attitudes inherent in successful voluntary action (Bengels, 1999). Volunteerism offers opportunities for personal growth, for developing unused talents or skills, for learning career advancement skills, for gaining experiences through new relationships and for acquiring a sense of purpose and meaning (Kerka, 1998).

The principles of adult learning are grounded in humanistic assumptions that are at the heart of volunteerism. These include adults' needs to:

- Know why they should learn something before they take ownership of the learning process

- Feel responsible for their learning decisions
- Connect learning with their prior experiences
- Learn to solve problems or perform tasks better.

Thus, the manager of volunteers must develop a structured and systematic approach to learning that encompasses motivational needs, adult learning needs and commitment conditions. The following model attempts to clarify the linkages amongst these themes in a way that assumes a more systematic connection than has previously been apparent in the volunteer literature.

THE MODEL

The model "Linking Motivation and Commitment through Learning Experiences" (See Appendix) posits three major themes: Motivational Needs, Learning Activities and Commitment Conditions. Learning Activities links the other two. The model is intended to assist the volunteer manager in selecting learning activities to satisfy volunteers' motivational needs and commitment requirements by organizing them in each of four learning dimensions: Learning about the Organization, Learning about People in the Organization, Learning about the Job and the Specific Skills To Do It, and Learning about Oneself (Fisher and Cole, 1993). Specific learning activities are recommended in each dimension.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH RESULTS

The research goal of this project was to provide support for the model above by exploring volunteer motivation to join and remain in organizations, how volunteers learn, including the conditions that encourage or obstruct them along with the effects of motivation and learning on the quality of volunteer work and the length of time they commit to volunteer activity. Twenty-four volunteer subjects (12 male, 12 female) from 12

volunteer organizations and eight managers of volunteers from eight other organizations in Calgary, Alberta Canada were independently interviewed between January and April 2000 to provide their perspectives on the issues raised above. The volunteer managers' responses were also compared to volunteer perceptions about the methods and value of learning and ultimately with the best practices recommended by volunteers to secure their commitment.

The organizations represented in this study are those having 100 or more volunteers in a wide range of ages, both sexes and varying backgrounds. In each organization, a staff member or volunteer was specifically assigned the role of developing volunteers.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The responses to interviews of the volunteers and managers of volunteers generally supported the major conceptual framework of the model and the specific activities recommended in it. Volunteers' responses to why they join and remain committed to volunteer organizations, how they learned, and the effect on organizational commitment were for the most part consistent with the volunteer managers' understanding of the volunteer mindset and the supportive actions they took.

However, there were a few notable exceptions. In learning about the organization, some volunteers said they were not always given a clear understanding of the mission and goals of the organization. In contrast, managers said they mostly sought to make this information available. Some volunteers said they were often given a cursory orientation and then left on their own to do the job while managers said they provided formal orientations. In learning about the people in the organization, some volunteers said staff were sometimes inaccessible while managers said they sought to make staff support a key element of helping volunteers. In learning about the job, some volunteers said that they failed to learn because the teaching style was unvar-

ied (formal classroom settings) and because resources were limited. Managers agreed that resources were limited but did not directly address the issue of teaching style.

Several recommendations for managers of volunteers about how to best recruit and retain volunteers for the volunteer sector emerged from this study:

Motivation needs: Volunteers generally have one key motivation for joining volunteer organizations (the most common was helping persons in need), although it was not uncommon to find volunteers joining for more than one reason. Involvement was linked to volunteering as part of a work group. Being able to have a social experience with friends was an important condition of joining. While learning was a less important motivator, even for those who joined to get work experience or improve their résumés, volunteers did want to further existing skills or gain new ones. Personal growth was rarely named as a key motivator. It was named, however, as a key condition of further commitment to the organization once the volunteer had some experience, often several years, with that organization.

Recommendation: Identifying the predominating motivators for volunteers and establishing the conditions that support those motivational needs are key elements in setting the scene for retaining volunteer commitment.

Learning activities: Learning about the people in the organization (that is, learning who had skills, information and influence and how to gain access to them) was indicated as the prime means to gain desired skills and knowledge. Learning about the organization (its mission, goals, etc.) was of importance when initially joining the volunteer organization, but less so afterwards. With regard to personal growth, volunteers viewed learning about oneself as a distant goal. Most volunteers (both long-term and short-term) preferred a formal introduction to the organization, but afterwards preferred more informal

methods. Access to skilled or knowledgeable persons was seen as particularly valuable to the volunteer's work on a day-to-day basis.

Recommendation: Identifying the appropriate learning activity and environment to support the volunteers' motivational needs, learning styles and preferred methodology for learning is one of the key ways that volunteer managers can assist their organizations in securing volunteer commitment.

Commitment conditions: Being able to work with knowledgeable role models was an important condition of commitment. Short-term volunteers looked to staff as role models for the organization's goals and values, but were energized to stay or provide greater effort for the organization by being recognized for their contribution to the organization. As the volunteers gained experience, access to key decision-makers and opportunities to influence decisions increased as a key condition of commitment. Being asked to take on more responsibility was a demonstration of trust. Having clear congruence between skills learned and the opportunity to use them was often named by volunteers as an important condition of their commitment.

Recommendation: Managers of volunteers need to ensure that what volunteers learn and what they are allowed to do in the organization is congruent, that opportunities to influence organizational decisions are available to volunteers and that the skills required in the job role complement the volunteers' personal development plans.

Short-term volunteerism and learning. The problem that initially led to this study was that volunteer effort was changing from long-term to short-term in character, thus making it difficult for organizations to make the best use of its human resources. The data collected in the interviews suggests that this is quite true—many volunteers are committing shorter periods of time than they have in the past. However, the study also found that many are still committing extensive periods of time on

a continuous basis.

While some literature suggests that the investment character of short-term volunteers may be deleterious to the volunteer organization's efforts, this study found that, even as many volunteers are committing short periods of time, the quality of their effort often meets or exceeds the organization's needs. Many volunteers are also committing short periods of time to several organizations. With regards to short-term commitment for purposes of enhancing a resume, educators of volunteers were aware of this need and seemed to accept it as a new condition of volunteerism. However, few educational practitioners tailored any of their learning activities to meet that need.

Recommendation: Managers of volunteers must structure learning opportunities to accommodate both long-term and short-term commitment as much as possible to get the best performance from each type of volunteer.

CONCLUSIONS

The value of the "Linking Motivation and Commitment through Learning Experiences" model is summarized below.

- The model can be used to organize information about the motivational impetus of volunteers to join an organization and link it to conditions that will maintain volunteer commitment. The linkage is through learning activities supported by motivation and adult learning and commitment theory.
- The model can be used as an institutional assessment tool to establish a developmental learning plan that addresses the motivation, learning and commitment needs of typical volunteers.
- The model can be applied to both short-term and long-term volunteers.
- The model's key constructs were drawn from the research literature on motivation, learning and commitment, and includes the behavioral, affective and cognitive domains of human behavior.

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APPENDIX

A Model Linking Volunteer Motivation and Commitment through Learning Activities

<p>MOTIVATIONAL NEEDS Helping The volunteer needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to help other persons less fortunate 	<p>LEARNING ACTIVITIES Learning about the organization The volunteer manager:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides orientation to culture, history, traditions, goals, social mission, vision 	<p>COMMITMENT CONDITIONS Congruence with 'Helping' goals and values The organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creates social goals and values to help others models a caring attitude
<p>Involvement The volunteer needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to strengthen his/her social relationships 	<p>Learning about the people in the organization The volunteer manager:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clarifies the roles of volunteers • encourages affiliation and socialization • encourages participation through relationship-building, team-building, decision-making and observing • teaches consensus-building, and problem-solving skills • builds on learners' experiences 	<p>Able to influence decisions The organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourages allegiances and partnerships • recognizes the value of relationships • involves volunteers in problem-solving and decision-making
<p>Learning The volunteer needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to learn more about his/her world and exercise unused skills • to gain career-related experience 	<p>Learning about the job and the specific skills to do it The volunteer manager:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promotes individual achievement • trains for real-life situations • provides on-the-job experience • updates volunteers' information and knowledge • establishes standards of performance • provides job skills related to career development 	<p>Congruence between competencies and job role The organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develops learning standards • trains volunteers for real-life situations • uses volunteer skill and knowledge to solve its problems • provides career-related skills and recognizes the value of career-oriented volunteers
<p>Growing The volunteer needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to grow and develop psychologically 	<p>Learning about oneself The volunteer manager:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides time for reflective practice • teaches skills and knowledge for new responsibilities • encourages understanding and being critical of organizational values, goals and priorities • teaches how to handle change 	<p>Congruence with personal development goals The organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilitates learning one's strengths and weaknesses • allows application of new skills and knowledge and gives more responsibility • provides learning outside of the organization • encourages reflective practice • promotes the understanding of and involvement in change