

# Ego Development Theory in Volunteer Management

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## INTRODUCTION

Volunteer motivation is a constant concern for the volunteer administrator. There is the initial motivation to volunteer on which the manager may capitalize in order to successfully recruit volunteers for the program. There is also the motivation for the volunteer to continue in the volunteer position, which may not necessarily be the same as the initial motivation. The motivation to continue, specifically the internal motivation, is of particular concern to the volunteer administrator.

Marlene Wilson revolutionized the field of volunteer management in 1976 with the publication of her book, *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs*. Wilson's intention was to synthesize available information from the fields of business and management, behavioral sciences, and communications into the newly emerging profession of volunteer management. This synthesis of disciplines was the first book of its sort written for volunteer administrators. Consequently, many later writers dealing with volunteer motivation have drawn heavily from her ideas.

In explaining the motivation of volunteers, both to volunteer initially and to continue volunteering, Wilson drew from the work of several behavioral scientists, specifically applying their theories to volunteers and volunteer management.

These theories have provided Wilson and other writers in volunteer management (Freeman, 1981; Taylor and Wild, 1984) with a basis for training, job design, and management ideas which will encourage volunteers to continue in their volunteer positions.

However, the theories do not provide an adequate explanation for the origin of needs and motives which they describe, nor do they provide an altogether adequate basis for understanding a volunteer's internal motivation and how or why it may change during the course of a volunteering experience.

## MOTIVATION THEORIES IN THE VOLUNTEER LITERATURE

Probably the most widely known of the theories is Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which proposes a progression of levels of need: physiological (the most basic), safety, social, esteem and, finally, self-actualization, towards which all people theoretically are striving. Among Maslow's comments on how the hierarchy functions is the idea that a need which has been met is no longer a motivator. He also says that if, after a person has moved up on the hierarchy, a basic need is not met, the person will regress on the hierarchy to the level of the unmet need.

Another theory which Wilson considered, and which has been widely used in volunteer management, is Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory. Herzberg distinguishes two separate categories of motivational factors which affect people and how they work. The first, which he calls hygiene factors, are those which are related to the person's work environment, for example, money, status, supervision, and working conditions. These factors in themselves do not motivate people, but their absence serves as a demotivator.

The second category of Herzberg's factors are motivators. These are the satisfying factors which relate to the job itself,

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such as achievement, recognition for accomplishment, increased responsibility, and growth and development.

The work of McClelland and Atkinson receives the greatest amount of Wilson's attention and is also highly utilized in volunteer literature. These psychologists have identified three distinct motives which affect a person's behavior: the need for achievement, the need for power, and the need for affiliation. They have identified characteristics and behavior patterns which are associated with each motive. McClelland, in later work, amended the three categories by splitting the need for power into two different forms—a positive type which he calls socialized power (*e.g.*, when power is used to empower others), and a negative type called personalized power (in which power and control are used on others).

Townsend (1971) and Wilson point out that the needs in the first three levels of Maslow's hierarchy have been met by most of today's work force in the United States, both paid and non-paid. This leaves two very broad levels of need—esteem and self-actualization—with which to attempt to understand how to retain a volunteer.

Neither Herzberg nor McClelland and Atkinson are dealing with a hierarchy in their theories (although Herzberg's "motivators" seem to be more in effect in the upper levels of Maslow's hierarchy, and hygiene factors in the lower levels). McClelland and Atkinson provide an interpretation of why people act as they do, based on a type of need. But the three types of need they discuss do not offer an explanation for why a person is in one of the categories, why he/she has this particular need at this time, or why the person's need may change over the course of a volunteer experience. If a volunteer is placed in a job based on the current personal need, as some writers suggest doing, what will happen if the person develops a different need? How do we account for this change? Is this one of the reasons we lose volunteers who were apparently satisfied for a period of time?

There is another way to understand a volunteer's needs and motives: by considering the person in terms of his/her

individual development. The developmental process does not end when a person reaches "adulthood." It is a lifelong process. One of the dimensions of adult development which can be very helpful in volunteer management is that of ego development. By ego, it is not meant Freud's concept of ego which is in unconscious conflict with the super-ego or id, nor is this the popular notion of ego referring to egotism or conceit. Instead, the consideration here is the

*aspect of the personality that "keeps things together" by striving for coherence and assigning meaning to experience (Weathersby, 1981, p. 52).*

Ego provides a frame of reference that structures one's world and searches for the deeper meaning of experiences (Marienau and Chickering, 1982). The leading theorist of ego development, Loevinger (1976), considers ego to be *not just a personality trait, but a master trait second only to intelligence in determining an individual's pattern of responses to situations (Weathersby, p. 52).*

Loevinger describes this master personality trait as a hierarchy of stages: Pre-Social, Symbiotic, and Impulsive are the Pre-Conventional stages usually found in children. Most adults are in the next stages: Self-Protective, Conformist, Self-Aware, Conscientious, Individualistic, Autonomous, and Integrated.

*Each stage is defined by the characteristics that are most predominant at that stage, although these same characteristics may be present, to a greater or lesser degree, at all stages (Oja, 1980, p. 21).*

The total pattern of characteristics must be present, however, in order to adequately define a stage. The stages of ego development are not tied to given ages, as are stages in the life-age developmental theories which were popularized in the 1970's.

Each stage in the sequence is more complex than the previous one, and none can be skipped in the course of development. Individuals may stabilize at certain stages and, consequently, not develop beyond those stages. In the general population of adults, there are representatives of each stage, who are "characterized in terms of the features specific to the

stages at which they stabilized." (Oja, p. 21).

A volunteer administrator who becomes familiar with the characteristics of the different ego stages as described by Loevinger and with the characteristics and behavior patterns which McClelland and Atkinson describe for each type of motivation will begin to see a correlation between ego stages and the motives which McClelland and Atkinson describe. There is also a correlation between Loevinger's ego stages and Maslow's levels of need. However, Maslow considers his hierarchy as a progression leading to the highest state of psychological health, self-actualization. This contradicts Loevinger's view that health and ego development are not the same. A higher ego stage is not necessarily a better one—it represents a more complex understanding of the world. The person is not necessarily happier or better adjusted; there are happy people at all stages.

#### SOME TYPICAL VOLUNTEERS IN THE STAGES OF EGO DEVELOPMENT

Ray is a long-time volunteer in a large hospital. He has a role of authority in his program, acting as a middle manager now. He tends not to trust people, and is concerned that they will take advantage of him. His relationships, therefore, are manipulative. He uses his power to control others, and believes that the rules are to be used for his own advantage. This "negative-power" motivation is characteristic of the Self-Protective ego stage.

Alice volunteers at the local children's museum. She had been a housewife for many years when she decided it would be good to acquire work credentials that will help her find a paying job when her children are older. She is friendly with everyone (even though she may not like each person) and she wants everyone to get along. A feeling of belonging is most important to Alice, and she feels strongly that rules and procedures (which others have devised) should be followed. She is also very concerned with her appearance. Alice is at the Conformist ego stage, which is related to an affiliation motivation.

Liz is at the Self-Aware transition level, which is between the Conformist stage and the following Conscientious stage. After working many years as a volunteer leader with a youth group, while apparently at the Conformist stage, Liz was chosen to represent her state at a special national program intended to cultivate middle managers in the volunteer program structure. She received training at national headquarters in Washington (traveling by air for the first time in her life), and returned to her home to prepare exhibits and train other leaders in the state. Liz's self-confidence is growing markedly, and although she is still concerned with getting approval from other leaders, she is beginning to have self-evaluated standards for behavior.

Robert is on the Board of Directors of the local United Way chapter. He takes his responsibilities seriously, and particularly enjoys tackling new problems that arise in the fund-raising efforts. He also enjoys developing long-term goals for the organization. Because he has high standards, he enjoys doing things well. He thinks for himself, but is sensitive to the opinions and feelings of other members of the group. Robert's achievement motivation is an outgrowth of his Conscientious ego stage.

Tim is a volunteer tutor in a county-wide literacy program. In the past few years, he has become disillusioned with many of the organizations to which he belongs. Lately, he has been reconsidering what "shoulds" need to control his life. Tim is a very competent person, with high standards. He wants to make a contribution, but wants his contribution to reflect his real values and his uniqueness. Becoming a literacy volunteer was a direct result of his new line of thinking. Tim has reached the Individualistic stage. He is less concerned with achievement and ideals now, and more with interpersonal relationships and how much they mean to his life. He can see past rules and procedures to the real purpose of an activity.

Sarah became a volunteer at the City Library when she could not locate an artifact in the historical collection and subsequently learned that staffing help was desperately needed to keep up the col-

lection. Sarah is an introspective person who enjoys working alone for several hours each week with the dusty old books and papers. She is well liked by other volunteers and staff members because she respects people and is very sensitive to their feelings and needs. She is working on deepening her understanding of the world and of herself. Sarah is at the Autonomous stage of ego development.

The highest stage in the ego development scheme, the Integrated stage, is rare, according to Loevinger. It contains the strong sense of identity which is found at the Autonomous level, and also includes "the capacity to reconcile conflicting demands, to renounce the unattainable, and to truly cherish individuality" (Oja, p. 24).

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTEER MANAGERS

It is important to recognize that by using ego development stages as a guideline for understanding the volunteer's motivation, we are able to consider motivation as an aspect of a larger picture: the total personality. We are also able to account for changes in the volunteer's motivation by understanding that it may not be just the motivation which has undergone transition, but a major aspect of the volunteer's personality. Why does the volunteer who so obviously had an "affiliation motivation" when placed initially now appear to be operating from an "achievement motivation?" It is not merely a shift in motivation, but an indication of the on-going development of the individual, a transition from the Conformist ego stage to the Conscientious. By being aware of ego development theory, and not concentrating on motivation alone, the manager will have a better understanding of additional internal factors which are influencing the volunteer's perceptions, attitudes and behaviors.

Not everyone continues along on a constant course of development. Although Maslow theorizes that all individuals strive for self-actualization, research in ego development has produced evidence that many individuals stabilize at certain stages (Oja, p. 21). There is also research evidence which reports that the

Self-Aware ego level is the most predominant adult ego level (Hauser, 1976; Loevinger).

An understanding of ego development will help the volunteer manager understand those volunteers who have stabilized at a stage and provide supports for them. The manager will also better understand volunteers who are in transition and who need appropriate challenges in order to help them in the process of development. These supports and challenges can take many different forms.

#### TRAINING

Of course, it is not possible for all of a volunteer's training situations to be perfectly suited to his/her ego stage. But in planning the types of in-service training and education which can be available to support or challenge an on-the-job volunteer, greater successes will be achieved by acknowledging that different types of learning experience are appropriate to the different ego stages.

For example, one well-known theory of adult learning, andragogy, includes as one of its premises that adults learn best in situations where the teacher/trainer takes the role of "facilitator" rather than "giver of knowledge." The lecture mode is strongly discouraged unless necessary. Self-study and self-assessment are important instructional methods. However, ego development theory suggests that an adult learner/volunteer at the Self-Protective or Conformist stage will perceive the trainer as an external authority who is a presenter of pre-packaged or highly structured information. It is the volunteer at higher stages who will be supported by training which takes the form of discussion groups or self-study, with the trainer acting as a resource person.

Any group of volunteers at a training event will probably include a cross-section of ego stages. This would not permit training design to be completely appropriate for each individual, and it would be unrealistic to expect that this would be possible. The point is that trainers of volunteers should be familiar with the different ego stages and consider the training needs of volunteers in accordance with ego stage. This may mean offering a

variety of training opportunities, in order to make available appropriate types of learning situations in which the variety of volunteers may participate.

#### MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Management techniques should also vary with the individual volunteer. Considering all members of a volunteer corps to be the same "type" of volunteer is just as unreasonable as looking at all members of paid staff in terms of their job titles, be they "secretary" or "executive director." Volunteers (as well as paid staff) at different ego stages have different needs; supervisory supports and challenges are different for each stage.

A volunteer at the Autonomous stage, an introspective person who works well alone, dislikes superficial group activities, and respects people for themselves, will have a difficult time in a rigid organizational system of rules and regulations which reflects an authoritative, Self-Protective style. In fact, this conflict may be too extreme for the volunteer to work in any capacity. In the same way, a Conformist-stage volunteer, who is concerned with impressing "significant others," such as supervisors, and who feels strongly about following the rules and procedures which have been set by others, will need strong support from the manager if asked to serve as a representative on a decision-making committee. Without this support and encouragement to participate, this volunteer will likely follow the voice of the committee's leader.

Consider again the example of Liz, the youth group volunteer leader described previously. When chosen as a key leader, she was at the Conformist stage. Her ongoing development and subsequent transition to the next ego stage were accomplished in several ways. When asked to participate in the key leader program, she was motivated to accept by a desire to impress the professional staff with whom she had worked for so long, and to obtain recognition from her fellow leaders. However, the program challenged her into transition by developing her sense of achievement and by forcing her to set goals in her project and to take risks and gain self-confidence. Much of this was ac-

complished only because of the strong and continuous encouragement of her volunteer manager.

#### CONCLUSION

Ego development theory adds a new dimension to the understanding of volunteer motivation. This more complete understanding, which takes into account developmental transitions and the corresponding motivational changes in volunteers, can help the volunteer manager create a working situation, including in-service training opportunities, which is supportive of volunteers at differing stages of ego development and, where appropriate, promote the volunteers' ongoing development.

We cannot offer volunteers the same benefits and incentives we offer paid workers. We can offer a benefit which, though intangible, is invaluable—an opportunity for personal development.

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