# Empowering a Profession: Leverage Points and Process

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BACKGROUND

This is the third in a series of articles on empowering the profession of volunteer administration, understood broadly to include any volunteer or paid career significantly involving leadership of volunteers. By "empowerment" we mean enhanced status and respect for the careerists and the volunteers they serve. We also mean more generous resource allocation in support of the volunteer programs and groups served by these volunteer administrators.

The first article in the series looked at labels for what people generally classed as volunteer administrators actually do. We found frequent justification for broader, more inclusive, and hence more impressive titles such as "community resource development," "community relations coordinator," "human resource development," and "community-based support systems." We also found that a significant number of people who used to call themselves "volunteer administrators" or a similar title, were beginning to change their names to the broader (and we believe more powerful) names. The article (Scheier, 1988a) concluded that while "... it is all too easy for an uneducated (on volunteers) executive to downplay a person labelled as 'only' responsible for volunteers" that same executive might "... think twice, or even thrice before trivializing the work of a person who, as part of a seamless package, was bringing in not only volunteers, but also materials, equipment, money, information and community support."

The second article (Scheier, 1988b) moved from a narrow-broad polarity in professional self-concept to a subsidiary-autonomous one:

> *... insofar as volunteer administration continues to see itself as derivative, passive and dependent, others naturally tend to see us in the same way. Beginning to define ourselves as powerful, active and autonomous is the first step in becoming so.*

Suggested tactics here included: 1) concentrate more on settings, such as the entirely volunteer group and the freelance volunteer, in which volunteers are more independent and self-directed. 2) Concentrate more on what is special in volunteerism, hence where we are experts and teachers and thus more powerful. Examples of such specialness might be "intangible rewards are at least as important as money," and "building work around people is both feasible and effective." Finally, 3) take statements of the type, "how does X (*e.g.*, the economy) affect volunteerism?" and turn them around to statements of the type "how does volunteerism impact X (*e.g.*, the economy)?"

Impact is the theme of this third article in the series. The question is: how can our relatively limited resources be leveraged to produce maximum empowerment of the profession? This in turn breaks down into two major issues:

First, how much should responsibility for change depend on one person? Is the individual volunteer administrator to be our major "change agent," or should we be targeting a more widespread responsibility in the volunteer program-sponsoring organization?

Secondly, what is the best balance between sheer articulation of ideal standards for volunteer programs and more attention to how we *motivate* organizations and individuals to comply with these standards?

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## BALANCING INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Somewhere in the consensus philosophy of volunteerism, I sense a strong faith in the power of the individual: the belief that significant change in systems will occur as a result of bootstrap efforts by individuals, working largely alone. Probably this philosophy has shaped our primary approach to empowering the profession. The individual identified as the instigator of change is the Volunteer Administrator / Director / Coordinator.

In this key person, we seek the highest possible dedication and competence. Our continuing efforts to support him or her include a simple willingness to cheer, a readiness to counsel in times of frustration and stress, and an eagerness to instill a sense of being special—not everyone can do your job. The latter connects with programs to upgrade skills experientially and through more formal learning, then validate the achievement via certification programs or in other ways.

This mix of education and validation can be assessed on three levels: 1) the satisfaction and affirmation it affords the practitioner who participates; 2) increased ability to do his/her job; and 3) enhanced status and respect given the volunteer program and the volunteer administrator by the host organization—essentially, empowerment of the profession as we have defined it here.

On the first two levels, I believe current education-validation approaches are justifable, in part by current results and in part by their promise for the future. I am not nearly as sanguine about justification at the third level. To begin with, the approach seems to imply as typical a relatively unskilled volunteer administrator "holding back" an organization which is "rarin' to go." If we can just bring the volunteer administrator up to the organization's level of knowledgeable readiness, all will be well.

The far more typical situation is precisely opposite: a skilled, dedicated volunteer administrator frustrated by a relatively indifferent agency that is significantly innocent of real understanding of what it takes to effectively support a volunteer program. Here, it is the *organization* whose "competence" needs to be upgraded and validated *vis-à-vis* volunteers; system change must lead individual change, rather than *vice versa*.

Of course, there is always some hope of impacting organizations via the validated excellence of individual volunteer coordinators. But doing so on a widespread basis involves a kind of catch-22. Organizations which are least supportive of the profession are least likely to invest substantially in the time and money necessary for upgrading and validating the skills of a volunteer administrator. If the volunteer administrator "does it on his/her own" anyhow, this organization is less likely to appreciate and recognize the achievement, or heed suggestions based on the volunteer administrator's newly acquired expertise. Essentially, "the rich get richer while the poor stay poor."

### *Emphasizing Organizational Responsibility*

Recently, I sense movement towards wider organizational accountability for empowerment of volunteer administrators and programs. This certainly includes the volunteer administrator who is, or should be, part of the organizational team. But others will not be assigned specific supportive responsibilities. These other players will need to do some definite things; will be required to bring specific competencies into play. Almost always, the support team will include the Executive Director and the Board of Directors. Also frequently involved might be middle management, line staff, volunteers themselves, and perhaps even funding sources.

Thus far, Executive Directors or other top management are most prominent among the other players being held more responsible for the specific support of volunteer programs (and through them, volunteer administrators). The title of an important new book pretty much tells the story: *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success* (Ellis, 1986). Even more recently, volunteer program guidelines published by the National Association on Volunteers in Criminal Justice (NAVCJ, 1988) clearly distinguish between (p. 11)

*. . . policy guidelines (which) are the responsibility of the agency or institutional administrator to implement directly or to delegate with careful accountability (and) . . . operational guidelines (which) are the responsibility of the volunteer coordinator or person in a similar role, to implement with the full support of the agency or institutional administrator.*

Local volunteer centers are also starting to provide leadership in the effort to upgrade organizational support for volunteer programs. Thus, Akron, Ohio's volunteer center has just issued a "Volunteer Program Certification Manual" (Schumann, 1988). Note first of all that it is the *program* or *organization* which must earn certification, rather than the individual volunteer administrator. The monkey is placed on that broader back in statements such as these: "The administration of the organization shall approve the plan for the volunteer program and shall provide support for its continuing development" (Schumann, 1988). There are, of course, connections to the role of the individual volunteer administrator in statements which require that the organization ". . . have a position designated and filled to coordinate and be responsible for the volunteer program." The manual then describes this role in impressive terms, at least implying that the organization will treat this person with respect, pay a decent salary, invest heavily in his/her professional development, *etc.*—everything we've always yearned for. It is only the route to the dream that differs. Where before, the volunteer administrator was almost singlehandedly responsible for upgrading organizational support, here the organization is answerable for upgrading the role of the volunteer administrator.

## "MOTIVATING" FOR COMPLIANCE

The increasing assignment of program empowerment duties to host agencies doesn't mean that volunteer administrators as individuals can abdicate that challenge. Both together are far more effective than either alone. But neither will be effective unless *motivated* to discharge their responsibilities skillfully and faithfully. The point is, our job is not finished with the sheer *issuance* of guidelines, standards or other goal-targets. The most elegant standards are useless when ignored. An integral part of the standard-setting task is therefore the incorporation of features ensuring that people take these standards seriously, invest in them, and persist in implementing them on a widespread basis. How we might do this is the second main issue addressed by this article.

First, let's consider pathways to professional power which envisage the individual volunteer administrator as the key change agent, with validated competency as the enabling basis for change. The Association for Volunteer Administration's recently formulated five-year goals indicate how this might be accomplished (AVA, 1988): "Employers look to AVA standards in hiring volunteer administrators" and "Certified in Volunteer Administration (CVA) is acknowledged as the desired standard of effective performance for volunteer administration." The implication I draw from this is that if CVA became a general requirement for hiring in our field, volunteer administrators with CVAs would be more valued (empowered) by their employers. (Presumably, volunteer administrators *without* CVAs would no longer *be* in the field, after "grandparent"-type tolerance expired.)

It seems to me such a strategy requires that most careerists will agree to go for a reasonably standard certification or equivalent validated competency. Is this happening? The best estimates I can make—and they are not nearly as good as we need—suggest a figure of about 100,000 volunteer administrators/coordinators/directors/managers/supervisors in the field today. I doubt if more than two or three thousand of these have some widely recognized official validation of competency—a certification, certificate, academic degree or significant set of academic credits in the field of volunteer administration.[1] What we have then is only about 2 or 3% of practitioners today officially validated/certified as volunteer administrators—possibly as few as 1% or as many as 5%; it doesn't really matter. No way can such a small percentage seriously impact the behavior of human service organizations and systems as a whole. At least roughly parallel would be a union

with 2% of a workforce demanding that employers with access to the other 98% hire only their 2% and invest especially heavily in their support.

Is it that practitioners haven't really heard yet about certification and other validated competency programs—or haven't heard enough? Possibly, yet I seem to recall that for at least twenty years, individual certification programs have been marketed to practitioners, often quite skillfully and intensively. This being so, we badly need a thorough representative survey of people who, knowing about validated competency programs, have chosen not to participate. We need to know why; we need to know what their other needs and priorities may be. Studies in progress (*e.g.*, Cole) should provide helpful information on the point.

Meanwhile, we can share impressions; here are some of mine. First of all, some people may be persuaded as we are: their *organization* needs changing for more than they do. Further, as a respected colleague and an advocate of individual certification programs once told me, she had no problem making it hard for incompetent people to pass themselves off as volunteer administrators. Neither do I. But what if we are making it hard for *competent* people to pass themselves off as volunteer administrators? What if, in the name of achievement, we are actually imposing economic sanctions? Only consider: your typical volunteer administrator is a highly motivated learner who yearns for recognition as a professional. That should produce widespread participation in competency acquisition and validation programs—or would, if practitioners could afford the time and money.

We will not find the answer to that particular question by surveying groups already certified as practitioners, especially those who are members of national professional associations—these demonstrably *can* afford such programs. On the other hand, a recent study which tried for a broader sample (Scheier, 1987) concluded that:

> *. . . what we seem to have here is people who, according to numerous other studies, tend to be poorly paid. Moreover, the present study further shows that about three-quarters of them are only part-time on the volunteer program, with almost as much time going to other functions. These people must therefore spread little (professional development) money and less time over several subject areas. . .*

Indeed, though these people do have some hands-on involvement with the volunteer program, their primary professional identification may be elsewhere, *e.g.*, as social worker, teacher, librarian, recreation worker, Executive Director of a small non-profit.

Like it or not, this group forms a large part of our constituency and our market for individual certification programs. We must therefore try to make such programs more accessible to them both time- and money-wise. There are some encouraging signs here. AVA, as I understand it, is seriously exploring ways in which its certification program might be better coordinated with local colleges and universities. Among other things, that would make certification more accessible to practitioners living in range of such colleges and universities.

## INCENTIVES FOR ORGANIZATIONS

On that happy day when everyone has a CVA, it will still matter a great deal whether employees attach much importance to that fact. Therefore, the motivation of organizations is a key consideration in the empowerment of professions—ours or anyone else's. At the very least, we must communicate to the organizations we wish to impact exactly what we would like them to do and who is responsible for doing it (see previous discussion). This means guidelines and standards for organizational support of volunteer programs and volunteer administrators. Largely ineffective here are obtuse descriptions of unreachable utopias. Instead, guidelines must carefully consider and incorporate in their preparation compelling reasons why target organizations should take them seriously. Simply *issuing* guidelines is a minor part of the challenge.

What, then, might motivate employers to invest heavily in the implementation of guidelines and standards for enhanced support of volunteer administrators and their programs? To begin with, the

guidelines and standards themselves must be:

1. credible, valid, and demonstrably based on consensus field experience of volunteer-involving organizations and volunteers themselves.

2. clear, understandable, and without jargon.

3. definite in distinguishing guidelines which are (a) the sole or primary responsibility of volunteer administrators, (b) the sole or primary responsibility of executive directors or others in the organization, and (c) a shared responsiblity of the volunteer administrator and others in the organization.

4. concise, especially when targeted on people who aren't volunteer specialists and presumably have other things to do besides peruse voluminous technical treatises on volunteer administration.

5. general enough to be flexible and flexible enough to be general, and this in several ways:

(a) allows discretion for differences in volunteer program setting without trying to detail every variation thereof. Thus, prison volunter programs require a certain obsession with security checks; most volunteer programs within churches do not.

(b) relatable to policy and advocacy as well as service volunteering.

(c) relatable to the broader functions of which volunteer programs are often a part, *e.g.*, "community resource development" (Scheier, 1988a).

6. do-able. This typically involves a delicate balance between the ideal and the realistic, perfection and attainability. For example, on merit alone, I believe a qualified volunteer administrator is worth at least $50,000 a year. Seriously. But I doubt if I would put that in a guideline for, say, struggling nonprofits (is there any other kind?) or a well-ossified government service bureaucracy. Guidelines which insist on the purely ideal, regardless of conditions in the real world, risk coming across as pure fantasy. At the other extreme, making compliance too easy ("$15,000 a year is okay") is counter-productive and somewhat hypocritical, too.

7. as part of do-able, *learn*-able. We must make it as easy as possible for people to understand and use the guidelines. Thus, the standards and guidelines currently under development by Ann Jacobson and colleagues include a self-study guide for users.[2] I would also hope that workshops on the guidelines can be made available concurrent with their publication.

Our first seven "guidelines for guidelines" have tended to move from more "internal" features (*e.g.*, clear, concise language), to more "external" incentives (*e.g.*, workshops which might or might not be associated with issuance of guidelines). That trend continues in the next several suggestions for motivating organizations to incorporate the standards and guidelines.

8. As noted earlier, a solid experiential basis will enhance guideline credibility (paragraph 1 preceding). Equally important is the widest possible participation in preparation of the standards and in endorsement of the finished product. An earlier set of standards and guidelines for the field of volunteerism (Jacobson, 1978) listed over 60 organizations and individuals as contributors, plus 19 national organizations as endorsers. A more recent guidelines and standards (NAVCJ, 1988) proudly acknowledges the participation of over 200 "co-authors." Next time around, let's add, for each community we can, prominent *local* endorsers such as the volunteer center; The Retired Senior Volunteer Program; the local professional association of volunteer administrators (DOVIA); the City/County volunteer office; United Way; college, church or corporate clearinghouses; the city human services department; the Junior League, and others.

9. The host organization's willingness to implement the standards should be "solemnized" in a written agreement which includes descriptions of benefits for observance of the standards.

10. Organizations relish recognition as much as individuals, and maybe more. Therefore, local professional associations can:

> *Join with the local volunteer center and/or* RSVP *and/or other interested groups to reward those organizations which comply with basic standards in their volunteer programs. These standards, of course, include adequate pay,*

*status and responsibility for the volunteer coordinator. As pioneered by the Volunteer Center of Tarrant County (Fort Worth) Texas, this is a carrot (vs. a stick) approach. Agencies that adequately observe volunteer program standards get a Certificate of Participation. Agencies exhibiting more than adequate performance get a Certificate of Excellence awarded in a public ceremony. There are no directly punitive sanctions but, of course, questions may be asked, and embarrassment ensue, when an agency does not get one of these certificates in a public ceremony, and/or public mention in the Volunteer Center's widely distributed newsletter (National DOVIA Network, 1987).*

Please note: the person who gets this award, or fails to get it, is the Executive Director of the organization, not the volunteer administrator.

11. Referral of volunteers as leverage. Yes, the occasional volunteer program, well-managed in a popular cause, still struggles to find things to do for all the wonderful volunteers who want to help. Most of the rest of us would dearly love to have that problem. Now, there is a pretty consistent pattern in the way volunteer-supplying clearinghouses react to this general shortage. Other things being equal, they favor referring volunteers to organizations they believe treat same decently. Conversely, they tend to withhold referrals from organizations they believe mistreat volunteers. Most everyone does this but hardly anyone talks about it publicly. Wouldn't it be more honest—and *effective* in empowering the profession—if we were explicit and organized, and documented our decisions every step of the way? To achieve this, the Volunteer Center or other clearinghouse could:

(a) Employ its own liaison/consultant/monitor volunteers, each assigned a small set of agencies receiving or wishing to receive volunteers from the clearinghouse. As consultants, these liaisons can positively help their assigned agencies meet the standards, affirm them when they do, and document it when they do not. Quite a few volunteer centers today have liaison volunteers of this type.

(b) Have people to follow up clearinghouse referrals of volunteers to agencies. This can be part of the agency liaison role described in (a) above, or it can be a separate role for other volunteer center people. Basically, this person tries to keep in touch with clearinghouse-referred volunteers to see how they are doing; this can be on a sample basis if follow-up on every volunteer is too large a task. In either case, good news is shared with the agency to which the volunteer was referred. Other kinds of news are also shared, along with efforts to clarify, negotiate and improve the troublesome situation.

(c) Involve the volunteers who have been referred by the clearinghouse as part of the program-monitoring process. Give referred volunteers ten questions or so either to ask their host agencies or to at least keep in mind on an ongoing basis. These questions can be on one side of a wallet-sized card, with instructions for their use on the other side. Sample questions might be:

"Do you have a job description for the work you're asking me to do?"

"What sort of training do you have for your volunteers?"

Agencies should receive copies of these standards-related questions and be advised that volunteers are using them. Indeed, agency input should be sought in original formulation of the questions.

The 10-question process will help referred volunteers give useful feedback to follow-up interviewers described in (b) above. The process also has *impact* on agencies by reminding them regularly of the importance of volunteer program standards.

The liaison, follow-up and ten-question suggestions will strengthen the use of volunteer referral as leverage in empowerment of volunteer programs/administrators. It does this in three ways:

- provides an information base for diagnosing and dealing with problems in the treatment of volunteers or volunteer administrators.
- where improvement fails to occur within a reasonable time, provides solid evidence on which to justify the clearinghouse's withholding volunteers from the agency.
- where treatment is good, justifies sending relatively more volunteers to the

agency, and is also a basis for public recognition of agencies which have effectively implemented volunteer program standards (paragraph 10 above).

Overall, this leverage strategy is a promising one. But it requires the collaboration of all volunteer-supplying sources in a community, *e.g.*, the volunteer center, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, college, church and corporate clearinghouses.

12. Volunteers are one component of resource allocation; money is another. Executive Directors of agencies are inclined to take the latter very seriously. Here we are talking about *overall* funding of an agency, not just the volunteer program.

The providers of dollars can be United Way, foundations, government sources, religious groups, and/or corporations. Whichever they are, we should begin to approach them with the proposal that they make overall funding for an agency significantly contingent on meaningful, professionally-led involvement of volunteers. The arguments are persuasive. A viable volunteer program stretches available budget, strongly implies that the agency has credibility with the community and, at least potentially, is responsive to its input.

Does all this get us into too much "policing" of volunteer programs? Answer that question with another question: can we ever hope to upgrade volunteer programs until we are prepared to evaluate them? I expect, too, that funding sources are often called upon to attempt evaluation of functions far vaguer than volunteer administration. We have quite well-established guidelines and standards, after all, and ways of monitoring which do not unduly interrupt ongoing program operations (*see, for example, paragraph 11 above*).[3]

Public broadcasting provides one formal precedent for making significant volunteer involvement one condition for receipt of overall agency funding (Dennery, 1979). Informally, grantors occasionally confirm that this consideration (volunteer involvement) is implicit in their decision-making. In such cases, the consideration only needs to become more explicit and information-based.

## SUMMATION AND SPECULATION

Empowerment of our profession depends on acceptance and observance of quality guidelines and standards for volunteer programs. These standards must give specific directions to the host organization regarding appropriate levels of support and respect for the position of volunteer administrator.

We should continue to encourage measuring up to standards at two levels: the individual volunteer administration practitioner and the volunteer-involving organization as a whole. I do, however, believe that the second level, organizational responsibility, holds particular promise for the immediate future. Finally, in fulfilling that promise, we should give more attention to *motivating* organizations for implementation of standards. A dozen suggestions were made in that regard.

Lack of space and experience—not lack of nerve—prevents development of several other leverage possibilities. A few of these are indicated below, simply as "teasers" to deeper consideration.

- The increasing tendency of volunteer administrators to give recognition to *themselves*, for a change, should be applauded and expanded.
- More thought should be given this one:

  *Denver* DOVIA *asked each of its* 150 *members to provide basic data on* 1) *number of volunteers,* 2) *number of clients served by their volunteers, and* 3) *annual dollar value of volunteer services. The results ... were that*: DOVIA (*"represents," "accounts for," "helps make possible"*) 32,000 *volunteers serving over* 915,000 *clients with an estimated annual value of almost* 14 *million dollars* (*National* DOVIA *Network,* 1987).
- In addition to merit, money, charm, and luck, politicians get elected by *volunteers*—the ones who work in their campaigns! Spies who have penetrated the volunteer programs of all major North American political parties report them to be almost entirely innocent of any significant understanding of the principles of volunteer administration. As a profession, we could assertively offer

our expertise, on a volunteer basis of course, and call in some political favors later, perhaps.

- "So Long, Volunteers!" I think one reason Erma Bombeck's powerful essay haunts us so, is that there is an IDEA there, the nucleus of a strategy (Bombeck, 1985). Next National Volunteer Week, why not have volunteers all across North America walk off the job for ten minutes or so; just a short, friendly, symbolic strike. When it takes care not to endanger vital services, that makes a point, too.

FOOTNOTES

[1]I'm unable to find a palpably authoritative basis for either the 100,000 or the 2,000-3,000 estimates and would appreciate being advised of same, if it exists. The last thorough census of professionals that I know of arrived at an estimate of 60,000 practitioners in the volunteer administration field (Gowdey, 1976). I arrived at the 100,000 estimate simply by projecting a healthy growth in the fourteen years since this 1975 survey was taken. More recently, 1983-84 surveys suggest that as of today about 50,000 practitioners in North America belong to local or regional associations of people with a career or other serious interest in leadership of volunteers (National DOVIA Network, 1987). The assumption here is that an approximately equal number of practitioners are either unwilling or unable to join such associations. The estimate of 2,000-3,000 with "widely recognized official validation of competency" came from a quick scan of the number and percentage of people who put "CVA" or some similar designation after their names in a sample of about 7,000 names in directories of local professional associations, on mailing lists, and in correspondence received at the Center for Creative Community over the past 18 months. A "finagle factor" was added to try to adjust for people who had the initials but were not using them.

[2]Personal communication, May, 1988, from Ann Jacobson, Vice-President for Volunteer and Community Resources, Heart of America United Way, Kansas City, Missouri.

[3]Nowhere have I meant to imply that super-elaborate programs are necessary to ensure improved agency support of volunteer programs/administrators.

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