

## ABSTRACT

*Organizational communication practices have direct impact on the feelings of commitment volunteers have for their organizations. An analysis of one church's communication practices provides guidelines volunteer organizations can use to initiate and sustain member activity.*

# Improving Volunteer Commitment to Organizations

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Organizational commitment is primary to the functioning of organizations which rely upon volunteers. Commitment has been explored in many profit settings, yet it is difficult to transfer the conclusions drawn from work done in those settings to organizations where the workers (volunteers) based their participation solely upon intrinsic rewards.

As a result of this research focus on profit-making, salary-paying organizations, organizational commitment has been equated to professional or job commitment and is often measured through pen and paper tests. In their review of four popular organizational commitment instruments, Barge and Schlueter (1988) show that only one (the Mowday, Steers, & Porter Organizational Commitment Questionnaire) does not include elements relating to pay or salary. They point out, however, that all four treat communication as an antecedent condition to commitment.

Organizational commitment has been explored as part of organizational identity (Cheney, 1983) but some of the elements, such as decision making, do not translate easily to volunteer organizations. In their review of the organizational commitment literature, Eisenberg, Monge, and Miller (1983) define organizational commitment as: "1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; 2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and 3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization" (p. 181).

Organizational commitment has been linked to absenteeism and turnover, and

used as an indicator of organizational effectiveness. Eisenberg, Monge, and Miller (1983) indicate that "there is no simple or direct relationship from either communication network involvement or job involvement to organizational commitment. Instead, communication activity is differentially related to commitment depending upon the level of job involvement of the employee" (p. 193). Once again, the operationalizations of these variables do not correlate to the volunteer context, thus making it difficult to apply these findings.

In the study of social influence associations—volunteer organizations that attempt to influence public policy—membership commitment is reciprocal to the organization's normative social control system (Knoke & Wood, 1981). While we see similarities between these types of organizations and community support volunteer organizations, differences are too significant to consider as parallel the two types of organizations and the commitment of their members. The basic similarity between those two types of organizations is that each gains essential resources from members in terms of skill, time, money, and support. The basic difference is in the goal of the organization. Knoke and Wood (1981) focus completely on volunteer organizations whose goal is to influence social values and shape public policy by directing individual energies toward collective interests to change general societal values (e.g., civil rights groups). There is a need to focus on volunteer organizations which supply community support and services.

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A volunteer organization may be defined as an organization with a formal and public identity. Most members give their time and energy to the organization without monetary expectations or exchange. The output of these types of organizations typically includes services to the organization's community with additional output being the satisfaction of the individual needs of its members.

As rhetorical and interpretive organizational communication research indicates (Putnam, 1982; Putnam, 1983; and Vaughn, 1988), organizations are value-laden structures, and the affinity individuals feel towards the values which organizations espouse may be a primary reason for joining and sustaining membership with an organization. Although values are strong indicators of organizational choice, organizational commitment as it is usually studied also depends upon other factors—monetary reward, status, networking, and interpersonal rewards—as reasons people join and stay with organizations. Clearly, the monetary factor is a major force in organizational choice, but it is absent in volunteer organizations. With the current focus on organizational communication, it is not possible to translate many research findings and quantitative methodologies to the volunteer organization context.

## RESEARCH FOCUS

Important questions remain to be explored. Why do people join and support the activities of volunteer organizations? What specifically do volunteer organizations do to entice and retain membership? What are the communication strategies of volunteer organizations and how effective are they?

These are important questions as our culture is entering an era of dependence upon volunteer organizations to provide an ever-increasing load of physical and psychological support and services that cannot be provided by governmental entities. President Bush has encouraged citizens to become involved in their communities. His encouragement appears to have paid off. Kantrowitz reports in the July 10, 1989, issue of *Newsweek*:

After years of apathy Americans are volunteering more than ever. According to a 1987-1988 survey by Independent Sector, an umbrella organization for most of the major charitable groups in the country, 45 percent of those surveyed said they regularly volunteered—and more than a third of them reported spending more time on volunteer work in the last three years. In all, it is estimated that 80 million adults gave a total of 19.5 billion hours in 1987. . . . They certainly were needed. Bush's compassionate call to service comes after the tightfisted Reagan years, in which public funding of social services was drastically cut (p. 36).

To explore the questions surrounding commitment to volunteer organizations, the researchers took advantage of an unusual opportunity in a midsize southern city to examine the phenomenal growth of a Methodist church. Within the last five years, the church has sustained unprecedented growth, making it the fourth fastest growing Methodist church in the United States. In addition to its unusually high growth rate, the church has one of the highest member attendance percentages for churches. Over four Sundays, the church averages attendance by 85% of its members. This is an extremely active church as each week the church is host to over 40 group meetings, excluding its Sunday Church School Program. While some volunteer organizations are having difficulty in attracting and retaining new members, this organization appears to have developed a strategy that works. Membership and organizational activity continue to increase.

A thorough analysis of this organization will aid in exploring questions about organizational commitment when monetary factors are not present.

Churches are very similar to volunteer organizations in that they rely upon the volunteer commitment of their members. Specifically, this study set out to determine what and how the church was communicating to its potential and present constituents that made them want to become and remain members. Of course, the profession of faith accounts for a large

share of church member commitment. But profession of faith should exist for members of any church. In comparing this church to others of the same faith and others in the same geographical area, this church has a substantially larger and more active substructure. This substructure is a web of small, focused groups that serve individual and community needs. The tasks or concerns of the groups are quite varied; few have a direct connection to profession of faith. Thus, in comparing this church to volunteer organizations, this parallel can be drawn: the church's substructure relies solely upon the volunteer activity of its members.

#### METHODOLOGY

To begin an exploration into volunteer organization commitment, five focus group interviews (three female groups and two male groups) were conducted. Typical focus strategy is to conduct enough (generally two or three) focus group interviews to get consensus in the data and to continue to conduct focus group interviews (seldom more than six to eight) until the information obtained becomes redundant (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). All three researchers agreed that the focus groups met the consensus and redundancy criteria with the five focus groups. Interviewees were randomly selected from the church membership roster. They were screened over the telephone and invited to attend a group discussion about their church. The following questions became the focus of those group interviews:

1. We all have ideas or theories about why things happen the way they do. From what I've read about your church, it's my impression that it is experiencing growth in church membership right now. What's your perception of the growth of the church and what do you believe accounts for any growth that the church has seen?
2. How do you see yourself participating in the growth process?
3. Where do you think this growth will lead?

4. What are the positives and negatives about your organization's growth?
5. Why were you initially attracted to this particular church when there were other churches to choose from?
6. What's the attraction now since you're a part of this church?
7. Has that attraction changed since you've joined this church? How?
8. People sometimes use these phrases—sense of community, commitment, identify with, loyalty to, belonging—to describe their feelings toward an organization. How would you describe your feelings toward this church?
9. What people or groups of people in the church have had an impact on the development of your feelings towards this church?
10. What do you do to show your sense of community/commitment/identification/loyalty/belonging?

To broaden the focus to other volunteer organizations, the focus group discussants were asked specifically to compare their religious organization to other volunteer organizations. The following questions were the center of that discussion:

1. How are community/civic/volunteer organizations different from or similar to this church as an organization?
2. Does sense of community/commitment/identification/loyalty/belonging for these other types of groups differ from your commitment to this church?
3. How could other community/civic/volunteer groups benefit from the growth experiences of this church? What advice would you give them about attracting and retaining members?

The focus group interaction was recorded, transcribed and verified. Several general themes became apparent in the focus group discussions. To further explore these, eight one-on-one interviews were conducted with other church members who had not participated in the focus

group discussions. These members were selected from the church membership directory, screened over the telephone, and invited to a personal interview to discuss their church and volunteer organizations. These interviewees were screened to ensure that they were volunteers or had recently been volunteers in other organizations.

The one-on-one interviews were conducted to provide validation of the group discussions, to allow the interviewers to more specifically explore earlier responses, and to make direct comparisons between religious and other volunteer organizations. Like the focus group methodology, the one-on-one interviewing was stopped when the information became redundant. These interviews were also recorded, transcribed, and verified. The following questions served as the outline for the part of the interview focusing on individual member commitment to the church:

1. How did you come to this church?
2. Why do you think this church is attractive to visitors?
3. Why do you attend this church?
4. What words can you think of that describe why you attend this church regularly? Some people have used these words to describe their experience with the church—accepting, active, blessed, caring, close, comfortable, dedicated, loving, wanted, welcomed. Which of these words, if any, do you see as describing your experience?
5. What did people in the church do or say that causes these words to come to mind?
6. How do you see yourself participating in the growth process of this church?

The following questions were used in the individual interviews to encourage interviewees to compare their volunteer activity outside the church to the activity in the church:

Focusing now on your involvement in another volunteer organization such as the American Red Cross (or the Cancer

Society, your volunteer work at the hospital, etc.):

1. How did you come to this organization?
2. Why do you think this organization attracts members?
3. What words can you think of that describe why this organization attracts members?
4. Why do you attend meetings, functions, or activities of this organization?
5. What words can you think of that describe why you attend meetings/functions of this organization?
6. What kinds of things did people do or say that cause these words to come to mind?
7. How do you see yourself participating in the growth of this organization?

## RESULTS

From the focus group and the eight personal interviews, three themes about the church's communication style persisted. They are:

1. All members of the church know the philosophy of the church and can tell others that philosophy in their own words.
2. Members of the church feel a strong sense of belonging to the church not because they are one of a large organization but because they are members of smaller groups that make up the larger organization.
3. Members of the church are active in the church because they volunteer for what they *want* to do rather than being expected to do what they are able to.

## DISCUSSION

### *Sharing in the Church's Management Philosophy*

The first communication strategy—having constituents know and be able to repeat the philosophy of the organization—is a strategy many organizations strive for, yet few achieve. Many organizations spend large sums of money to put the “philosophy” of the organization before its people in catchy phrases or slo-

gans hoping that constant repetition will help its constituents remember the philosophy.

The management of the church has gone beyond simple repetition to achieve member recognition and understanding of the church's philosophy. The values of the church have been communicated in multiple network patterns resulting in member embodiment of the church's philosophy. Nearly every church member in this study said that the church was successful because: 1) everyone is welcome—every religion, every color, every socio-economic status; this church is to serve all people; 2) it is okay to try anything because it is okay to fail, the church and its activities are not bound by artificial parameters that dictate "a church does not do that" or "a similar activity has failed in the past"; 3) people become involved by letting them become involved at their own pace; church attendance or other church activity is not an issue until it is a personal issue for that person.

While these management philosophies are easy to enumerate, this church has succeeded in their practice. The successful communication of church policies is embodied in the practice of the policies making this church a good example of structuration theory (Poole & McPhee, 1983). The church has developed a climate that actively and positively serves itself. Members of this church are able to believe in the policies because they see them enacted over and over. The result is joint ownership. Members feel that they are a vital part of the church because they are also able to enact "their" management policies.

To help new members assimilate the philosophy of the church, the church holds classes expressly for new members to serve this function. An excerpt from one of the focus group discussions illustrates:

One of the things that impressed me right off was when we first joined . . . right on to one of Jeff's new member classes. So that everyone in that class, everybody knows where the church came from and where it is going. Other churches, you know, you just join and

don't worry about where we came from. Here, it's "I'll tell you what you need to know to look on down the road from here." So everybody starts out here understanding where we are going and where we have been, and where we come from, what made us, what brought us to this point. This lets you fit in and help go beyond from there. That's important to me.

#### *Not One of Many, But One of a Few*

This church has a rather large membership and one that crosses most demographic lines. To serve all of its members, the minister preaches three Sunday sermons. To attend to all of the members' ministry needs, two additional associate ministers help with visitations and assimilation. Completing the church's staff are an administrator, a youth director, a music director, and a children's coordinator. Having these additional church staff members helps in bringing personal attention to the 1,600 members. More crucial is allowing church members to develop their own groups to meet their own special interests and needs.

Church members have developed groups to ring handbells, support those who are grieving a loss, teach auto mechanics, aid the homeless, educate the illiterate, and support singles, to name just a few. These groups are recognized by the church in the weekly newsletter and Sunday sermon. Being a member of these identifiable units of the church gives members a sense of identity and influence within the larger church structure. The activities and the membership of these groups are controlled by the group members, not by the church leadership. The groups serve individual member need and further serve to personalize member involvement within the church.

These excerpts from the focus group discussions illustrate:

It's just not Sunday morning preaching or Wednesday night Bible study, but it's something going on for everybody in the family. The whole family can be involved in it. And that just feeds on itself. In just the year we have been here, I have seen groups grow . . . I am just

real excited to be caught up in part of the growth. I think it's self-perpetuating.

I think that a key is that you have to work to retain people, get them involved. It's sort of easy to get people to join, but it's difficult to keep them interested. I was real active in . . . for years, and we set records every year for getting new members. We had a heck of a turnover. We just couldn't keep them because we didn't have programs that focused on that. All we tried to do was just keep getting new members. And that's one thing that I think this church has been great at is getting new members involved, finding out what everybody's interests are, and getting somebody to contact them in whatever interest group . . . rather than just worrying about getting them on the rolls. If you think about this church, it is a large number of small groups. Everybody feels comfortable in a small group. . . . It's not a thousand people meeting every Wednesday night . . . because of all those small groups and because of that love, that connection, that fellowship, people just keep coming in and there is always somewhere for somebody to do something.

Groups run a risk of becoming segregated or isolated from the larger organization and other groups in the church. However, the church actively works to tie groups to one another by sharing announcements about all groups' activities, encouraging multiple group membership, and treating all groups equally. Thus, the church has been able to discourage cliques that develop in other organizations.

#### *Willingness versus Ability in Member Contributions*

Over and over, members told how they appreciated the church's leadership for allowing them to do what they wanted rather than being expected to provide a service similar to their vocation. When a new member joins, each is asked what he or she wants to do by making reference to a list of 156 different tasks on an "activity" list. This information is computer filed, managed, and updated yearly. This allows

members to control their contribution in terms of type of service and amount of service. Many members remarked how their careers had limited them to providing certain services for other churches they had attended.

As an example, one woman told that at another church she was expected to teach Sunday School because she was a kindergarten teacher. At the church in this study, however, she didn't check teaching Sunday School on her "activity" list and thus no one asked her to provide that service. She commented that she appreciated being given a break from the expectation that she would teach Sunday School. The following focus group excerpts explain:

Often times people think that when they come in they are going to be sucked in and overloaded. Sure, they take a stand like "I don't want my whole life to revolve around the church."

Well, in the past, if you were a Sunday School teacher, you've got it forever. But here, I have found if you get on a committee and you find that this is just not your thing, all you have to do is say "this isn't my thing" and they will say "fine, get on another committee." They don't put that guilt on you.

#### *Applications for Volunteer Organizations*

Three very simple principles can be learned from this church and its growth experience. These principles can be applied to volunteer organizations to help them attract and retain members who volunteer their time and services.

First, volunteer organizations need to adopt a "not afraid to try" attitude and make that attitude actively visible. No organization should blindly attempt any project, but when an organization is running on the force of volunteers, it needs to remain open to their suggestions, motivation, and enthusiasm. Volunteers should be included in brainstorming and creative planning sessions. By tapping the creativity of all members rather than relying on only the talents of the organization's leadership, the organization will display an

attitude that says "yes, we are listening" and "yes, your input is valuable." If volunteers do not believe that they are an integral part of the organization, they are likely to feel that their services are not unique or special and that their time is not important because "anyone can do what I do." When volunteers feel this way they are likely to leave the organization.

Adopting the "not being afraid to try" attitude can pervade the organization in other ways. It can inspire volunteers to try harder. This is especially helpful when volunteers are working in situations that appear bleak and full of despair. Being able to develop creative ways of reaching and serving others is at the heart of volunteerism. If this attitude is not at the heart of the volunteer organization, why should an organization expect its volunteers to adopt and maintain a similar attitude?

Second, volunteer organizations need to provide a way for volunteers to personalize their contribution. Having volunteers be active in subgroups of the larger organization is a way for the organization to maintain contact with the volunteer and to avoid a volunteer feeling that he or she is just one of many. Members of subgroups should have contact with one another regularly to enhance this feeling of belonging and to strengthen interpersonal relationships within the volunteer organization. This is one of the greatest factors that creates feelings of organizational commitment.

Subgroups should have specific functions and genuine reasons to exist. Pseudoactivities will not suffice. Subgroups should have an organizational reference in terms of identity and function and should be mentioned in organizational correspondence to volunteer members. Their activities and meetings should be on the organizational calendar, and the meetings of these various groups should be regularly publicized. The subject church publishes a weekly newsletter and distributes a bulletin at its Sunday services. Reminders are also sent regarding important meetings.

Leaders of these subgroups do not necessarily need to be among the organization's leaders. A reporting or notifying relationship can tie the subgroup to the main organization, but organizational

leaders can be overburdened when placed in charge of subgroups that can work well under the direction of a spirited volunteer or a volunteer team. The leaders of these groups need to embody the philosophy of the organization to help in the continual development and structuring of the active and positive climate. Careful selection or training of leaders will help here.

Third, volunteer organizations would benefit from letting volunteers assess what they are willing to do versus what they are able to do. Although a frequent way to uncover a person's abilities is to ask about work experience, stereotyping a volunteer's ability by vocation can be harmful to the volunteer's relationship with the organization. Volunteer organizations might make lists of both physical and cognitive tasks and ask volunteers to identify which tasks they are interested in doing for the volunteer organization. This seems a more fruitful way of matching volunteers to activities rather than asking "Do you want to be a library tour operator?" Finding a volunteer's niche appears to be a critical ingredient to strengthening volunteer organizational commitment. In addition, allowing people to move freely from jobs and groups guards against burnout, sustains organizational interest, and helps to inhibit cliques from forming.

In summary, these three ideas together will be most successful if volunteers know the organization's philosophy, see it in practice, and are able to describe it to others in their own words. These are characteristics of Likert's (1967) participative system where employees are allowed and encouraged to participate in decision making. Likewise, volunteers who participate fully in the development and enactment of their organization will have an increased sense of responsibility and motivation which leads to increased organizational commitment.

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