

In Search of Volunteer Management: Ideas for Excellence

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While volunteering is as "old as the hills", the focus on volunteer management is a new thrust of the late twentieth century. Certainly, volunteers are unique from employed staff, but many of the principles for "managing" volunteers have been taken directly from the personnel management literature. Marlene Wilson's book, *THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS* is an excellent example of applying personnel management principles to volunteer management.

Good reasons exist for broadening the approach to working with volunteers from strictly business management techniques, but there are many reasons why we ought to look at the business models which are available for us to use. These business models do offer some parallels for volunteer management and these ideas are being widely discussed and researched. The field of volunteer management can be enhanced by analyzing what the business models have to offer.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss primarily the ideas presented by Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. in their best selling book, *IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE*. This will be supplemented by some comments from another bestseller, *MEGATRENDS* by John Naisbitt.

While *MEGATRENDS* has been applied to a number of societal issues, *IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE* has been largely applied to the busi-

ness community, since it describes in detail how specific successful corporations function. From among the ideas in *IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE*, the eight principles of excellence can give volunteer managers some "food for thought":

1. A bias for action: a preference for doing something (anything) rather than sending a question through cycles and cycles of analyses and committee reports.
2. Staying close to the customer--learning his (her) preferences and catering to them.
3. Autonomy and entrepreneurship--breaking the corporation into small companies and encouraging them to think independently and competitively.
4. Productivity through people--creating in all employees the awareness that their best efforts are essential and that they will share in the rewards of the company's success.
5. Hands-on, value driven--insisting that executives keep in touch with the firm's essential business.
6. Stick to the knitting--remaining with the business the company knows best.

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7. Simple form, lean staff--few administrative layers, few people at the upper levels.

8. Simultaneous loose-tight properties--fostering a climate where there is dedication to the central values of the company combined with tolerance for all employees who accept those values.

The conclusions drawn by Peters and Waterman are not earth-shaking. However, their descriptions of how the principles are embodied in the 50 best-run American companies have many direct implications for the volunteer administration field even though we may have never really thought about volunteer management in those terms.

Volunteer administrators can take hints from the best run companies and from those who are watching the pulse of societal changes. One of the complaints against the business schools of this country has been that numerative, rationalistic approaches to management have predominated with little regard for the customers and the workers. While volunteer administrators have certainly cared about the people involved, they have also found it necessary to find a balance between concern for people and concern for the task at hand. Peters and Waterman suggest that without the people connection, nothing is possible.

Peters and Waterman say it is important to note that not all eight of their principles are abundant in every best company they studied, but all had a predominance of the eight. Therefore, if you are interested in evaluating your volunteer management style and system in relation to these suggested principles, it may not be possible to adhere to all the principles. However, the principles do offer insights for improving and justifying the work of volunteer administrators.

A BIAS FOR ACTION

A preference for doing something rather than sending ideas around and around through staff or committees is what Peters and Waterman call a "bias for action." In this sort of organization, the leaders (volunteer administrators) are willing to try new things, to experiment. Experimenting is considered a way to learn new things cheaply and has always been a function of nonprofit organizations in this country.

The volunteer administrator encourages volunteers to have a bias for action also. Positive reinforcement should be given to those who complete an action or a goal. Opportunities can be found for "good news swapping," where people tell what actions they were able to do or complete. A system of informal communication is also established within an organization which has a "bias for action."

To reach goals or to solve problems, small groups are the building blocks. Peters and Waterman refer to "chunking"--breaking things up to encourage organizational fluidity and action. This should not be confused with organizational charts, but rather it is the use of task forces, ad hoc committees, etc. The purpose is not to produce paper (as often occurs in hierarchies), but to produce solutions! The often-quoted business phrase KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) is applicable here as well. The volunteer administrator must strive to keep the organization from becoming overly complex because complexity only inhibits action.

Momentum is built in an organization by small successes. These require a bias for action. The world cannot be changed in one day, but plans can be made to lead to steps to result in action.

In MEGATRENDS, which explores major social changes of this decade, Naisbitt discusses two trends which also relate to the "bias for action": the move from representative to par-

ticipatory action; and the transition from hierarchies to networking. Both are examples of how people get directly involved in the action as opposed to having it come to them from above.

CLOSE TO THE CUSTOMER

People are the most important aspects of our organization, but we do not always administer in that way. It is true that all business success rests on something labeled a "sale," which at least momentarily weds the company and the customer. In our volunteer organizations, much success rests on something labeled an "experience" which hopefully weds the organization through the volunteer with the client, participant, or whatever we call the clientele.

As the best companies have learned to do and as successful volunteer administrators have done all along, we must continue to listen to the users (both the clients and the volunteers) with whom we work. All complaints must be answered. (Peters and Waterman say the best companies answer complaints within 24 hours.) Our "customers" must see our volunteer organizations as offering quality, reliability, and service. If clients and participants do recognize these qualities in us, they will continue to make use of our services and they may even become volunteers themselves.

Staying close to the "customer" is also a goal which we must instill in those volunteers with direct client service assignments. Each customer, client, participant is an individual with whom the volunteer must interact. The principle of staying close to the customer essentially applies at all levels. Volunteers must believe this almost as much as volunteer administrators.

MEGATRENDS describes two trends related to the idea of staying close to the customer. The movement from "high tech" to "high tech/high touch" has implications for the personal contact which is needed with customers (and with the volun-

teers themselves). The movement from institutional help to self-help is also an example of allowing volunteers to use the services of the organization as a way to build their own self-worth.

AUTONOMY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The best-run companies push employee autonomy and let employees take control of the work that needs to be done. This has direct implications for enabling volunteers within an organization to accept autonomy and plan the work of the organization. Sometimes an idea posed by a volunteer will not be right at the beginning, but if it is allowed to grow through the freedom the volunteers are given, it just might work.

An environment where people can "blossom," develop self-esteem, and become excited participants is necessary. Networks which allow this to happen must be developed. Communication systems must be informal but have intensity. Networks and communication opportunities give volunteers the tools with which to show their autonomy. Volunteers must be trusted as an important natural resource of the organization for reaching its goals. The volunteer administrator must be able to let people "go" and facilitate their creativity. This is not possible in all situations, but the opportunity should be nurtured if the organization is to be successful.

Within MEGATRENDS we see some parallel trends occurring related to these ideas of autonomy and entrepreneurship--the move from centralization to decentralization of authority, the opportunity for "multiple-options" coming from a previous philosophy of "either/or," and the use of networks rather than hierarchies.

PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH PEOPLE

The previous principles have dealt to some extent with the concept of "productivity through people," but this principle seems to speak especially to volunteer administrators.

The essence of the idea is "respect for the individual." The system is not designed for a we/they relationship, but rather one of partnership. It is the aspect of dealing with people directly and asking them to shine. The adage "nothing succeeds like success" is definitely true in this case. The prime factor is simply the self-perception among the motivated subjects (in this case, volunteers) that they are doing well. It is not a focus on environment, but a focus on the person.

Peters and Waterman suggest that to get productivity through people, we must treat people (volunteers) as adults, as partners. We should treat them with respect--treat them as the primary source of gain within the organization. Respect is shown individuals by training them, giving them reasonable and clear expectations, and giving them an opportunity to step into the job.

Developing team spirit is a part of productivity through people. Allowing people to be involved in decision making through techniques such as quality circles may also be important. The important aspect is the focus on the people. We must not tell them what they cannot do, but what they CAN do.

In MEGATRENDS, Naisbitt talks about institutional to self-help and hierarchies to networking, which are both examples of how productivity through people is becoming more evident in the society as a whole. As volunteer administrators, we have always relied on "people." Productivity through people must continue to be the focus of our organizations.

HANDS-ON, VALUE DRIVEN AND "STICK TO THE KNITTING"

The two principles of hands-on, value driven and stick to the knitting will be discussed together since their implications to volunteerism are similar.

These two principles suggest that the company or organization knows what it stands for, has values that

are clear, and is guided by a set of beliefs about the purpose of the organization. The company in turn makes decisions by "sticking" to what it does best. While the values and beliefs of the organization must be instilled in volunteers, it is up to the volunteer administrator to continually manage the values of the organization to keep in step with societal needs. The volunteer administrator must "breathe excitement and life" into those values and help others understand them. This is what is known as inspiration at the top.

While all these principles of success require great amounts of effort, persistence is vital to keeping the volunteer organization in tune with its "business" of helping people.

The basic philosophy of the hands-on, value driven organization is usually stated in qualitative terms describing what it does well. The values, as Peters and Waterman suggest, are presented at the highest level of abstraction, but action occurs at the most mundane level. The second aspect of this is to "stick to the knitting" and do what you do best, staying close to the goals that have been established. This does not mean the goals may not change from time to time, but the central mission must always be there. All levels of the volunteer organization must understand what the mission is, but the volunteer administrator will be responsible for carrying out those values and plans.

In MEGATRENDS, Naisbitt describes the movement from short-term to long-term planning. This trend has particular application to volunteer management in defining of mission and then in attaining goals.

SIMPLE FORM, LEAN STAFF AND LOOSE-TIGHT PROPERTIES

Since the focus of the volunteer organization is on people, it must be easy for the people (volunteers) to have access to the staff. Thus, there is a need for a simple structure with the main amount of reorganizing oc-

curing around the "edges." Decentralizing and allowing for networking are ways that this can also be carried out.

Simultaneous loose-tight structures are also necessary in organizations although these may at times be difficult to manage. A number of paradoxes exist in internal and external control, simple to complex organizations. Control must exist as well as entrepreneurship. In successful profit-making companies, these dichotomies can occur and are indeed healthy. The successful volunteer administrator must be able to see these paradoxes and continue to achieve the goals as well as solve the problems of the organization. It is not easy to "manage" an organization.

CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned earlier, none of these principles are uniquely new or earth shattering. They serve to underline many of the aspects of management and volunteer administration which we have known all along. It is good, however, to take time to reflect upon the most important aspects of what makes our volunteer organizations effective and to see what the business world offers to our perspective. In summary, we might suggest the following as the basic principles to help us be more effective volunteer administrators:

1. A bias for action
2. Staying close to the clientele
3. Productivity through people
4. Identifying and sticking to the values of the organization

We might hypothesize that the most successful volunteer organizations do uphold these principles. Perhaps there are others which apply more succinctly in our situations. However, Peters and Waterman do give us some principles for evaluating

our success in the volunteer management field. These ideas can assist us in our own search for volunteer administration excellence.

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