

Empowering a Profession: What's in Our Name?

Ivan H. Scheier, Ph.D.

This article looks at labels for what people who call themselves volunteer administrators actually do. In many cases there seems to be justification for broader, more inclusive and hence more impressive titles such as "community resource development," "community relations coordinator," "human resource development," or "community-based support systems." At present, we may be allowing ourselves to be seen as too narrow in what we do, hence more expendable, and hence disempowered both as individuals and as a profession.

THE UNEMPOWERED PROFESSION

All too often, our profession is underpaid and over-frustrated, lacking in status and respect for ourselves and our volunteer programs. Consider, if you will, these statements in a checklist probing organizational receptivity to volunteers (Scheier, 1987a).

- A well qualified person has been designated to coordinate/direct the volunteer program.
- This person is allowed enough time to do the job properly (and enough budget for professional development).
- The coordinator position is at management level.
- The coordinator has ample opportunities to participate in organizational decision-making.
- The volunteer program office is conveniently located and easily accessible to both staff and volunteers.

And so on. The last statement is unnecessarily cruel to those who read these lines in the agency attic or cellar—symbolically, if not literally. The point is, we find very few perfect scores on this checklist, and quite a few appalling ones. Test it out for yourself on the first five or six volunteer-"using" organizations that come to mind. Rate each of the five statements on a scale from 5 for "perfect" to 1 for "very poor," and see how many organizations score as high as 20 out of 25 possible points. Or even 15. And these five statements cover only the *basics* of professional status. Indeed, after fifty self-proclaimed years as a profession, why is it even necessary to ask such questions anymore?

THE MULTIPLE USE OF STRATEGIES

For volunteer administration today, the number one challenge is to empower the profession. Many focus on "credentialing" as a form of empowerment and tend to concentrate on one preferred approach, such as certification or public education. This is the first in a series of articles which proposes to encourage thinking in terms of a range of strategic alternatives, considered together. This, first of all, offers more options to choose among in finding the approach best suited to current situation and capability, for an individual or an organization. A second benefit is the potential for capitalizing on mutually reinforcing interaction between strategies, and avoiding mutually conflicting ones. Thus, certification might be a far more effective

Over the past twenty-five years, *Ivan Scheier* has been a volunteer, a volunteer coordinator, director of a volunteer center, researcher, author, publisher and—both in North America and overseas—a trainer and consultant in the volunteer leadership field. Involvements have included: President of The Association of Voluntary Action Scholars, Executive Director of the National Information Center on Volunteerism, and Chairperson of the Alliance for Volunteerism. He is currently Director of the National Center for Creative Community, headquartered in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and President of Yellowfire Press, Boulder, Colorado.

remedy if coupled with a successful effort to make total funding for an organization contingent on meaningful, professionally-led involvement of volunteers. Precedent for the funding-contingency strategy does exist (Donnery, 1979), albeit without certification of program leadership as a criterion.

On the other hand, two strategies might mutually conflict. For example, efforts to mobilize a maximum number of volunteer leaders as advocates for the profession could be crippled by a certification process which was feasible for only a few, leaving the rest feeling left out, splitting the strength of the field.

Generally, when we focus on only one strategy for empowering the profession, we are something like the tennis player who concentrates entirely on his forehand, seriously neglecting backhand, serve and other crucial parts of the game such as tactically-timed tantrums. I, for one, would not bet on his winning very often.

Thus, in considering a series of strategic options, I only suggest that considering all together is better than counting on any one alone. No single approach is seen as necessarily "better" or "higher priority" than any other. Nor do I accept the excuse that narrowness of focus is required by lack of resources. Alone or in combination, appropriate strategies are often more energizing than draining. Moreover, some of these empowerment approaches mainly involve thinking about ourselves in new and different ways. That doesn't cost money, though there may be some other costs, and you can't get a grant to cover them. In any case, changes in how we see ourselves are central to everything else we do, and everything others do about us. So let us begin there.

Mr. Shakespeare wondered: "What's in a name?" The response—"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"—probably begs the question, which is not how nice we *actually* smell, but how much our aroma is *appreciated*.

"What's in a name?" Ask any woman who's tired of being called "girl"; check with any black who was once called "colored." In fact—think of it—very few of us are fully immune from such semantic slights on the basis of our sex, ethnic,

racial or religious background, and, yes, occupational group. ("You say you're a volunteer administrator? Yes, but what do you do for a *living*?")

Generally, we can't wait for others to change the negative names they use for us. At some point we must take the initiative in changing our self-labelling and persuading others to go along with us on that. Just as blacks did, and as women did.

And as volunteer administrators should do? That is the question here. Since strong emotion sometimes overwhelms practical consideration in the choice of names, I need to assure readers now that the word "volunteer" will be treated with respect in all that follows.

WORD ORDER AND ITS IMPLICATIONS (ARE WE JUST FOR VOLUNTEERS?)

What's in our name as a profession, then, that might relate to the respect we get or don't get? To start with, what's in the name of the programs we work with, and from which we get our identity? One issue is what labels imply about whom a program is designed to serve. Consider: Whom is a latchkey program for? . . . Latchkey children, of course. Whom is a victim assistance program for? . . . Victims, naturally. Whom, then, is a volunteer program for? . . . Volunteers?

English language word order seems to imply it, though that's probably not what we mean—not consciously, anyhow. By itself, the phrasing might be little more than a pseudo-significant slip of the tongue. However, some volunteer administrators relentlessly reinforce the implication of the word order; that is, they act as if volunteer programs are *primarily* for volunteers. Virtually all the concern about proper placement, training, supervision, and above all recognition, is targeted on volunteers, rather than staff or clients. I, for one, am rarely satisfied with the emphasis on what I see as the crucial justification of agency volunteer programs: that volunteers are a means to an end, and that end is to serve clients, staff, and the organization. *They* are whom the volunteer program is *for*. Otherwise, would you, as an executive, place high priority on a program which even gave the impression of being run for the benefit

of one "special group" other than the clients you are mandated to serve? Is it possible that this kind of connotation is why most organizations do not have a "staff program" to go with their "volunteer program?"

A BROADER DOMAIN OF GIFTING

Thus far, the argument may seem dependent on semantic speculation. We move more towards empirical evidence when we rephrase the question "Whom is a Volunteer Program for?" to "What does a Volunteer Administrator do?" and "To what extent are these functions confined solely to the Volunteer Program?" On these questions, we do have data from a recent pilot study (Scheier, 1987b) of a sample of widely geographically diverse volunteer administrators/coordinators. There were 93 in the core sample, and 123 in a wider sample who answered some, but not all of the survey questions. The study concluded that ". . . about three quarters of careerists in our sample spend a significant amount of their time (about half) doing other things for their organization besides managing the volunteer program."

Very recent data from a larger study generally confirm this finding. Appel (1987) found that among those working full time, with some responsibility for the volunteer program, about 40% spent less than half their time on the program, while only 33% spent full time on it.

Moreover, (Scheier, 1987b) ". . . the average careerist in the core sample doesn't perform only one other function besides volunteer management; they perform *four* other functions." To find out what these other functions might be, the study asked the following question:

"What are some of the other things you do besides coordinate the volunteer program? (They can be more than one thing)." In descending order, from a high of about 85% of the core sample to a low of about 40%, the study participants said they were doing the following other things besides managing the volunteer program: public relations; program or organizational development; communications; marketing; fundraising; personnel; supervision; and staff development. The

foregoing seven functions were presented as structured alternatives in the study, because they were considered likely possibilities for other things volunteer administrators might be doing. In additional open-ended responses, volunteer administrators mentioned, with somewhat less frequency, responsibilities such as guest relations, information services, community outreach, and community resource development. (About seven or eight percent described themselves in terms of the last-mentioned label.)

In interpreting these preliminary data, and adding some field impressions of my own, I will be noting several dimensions in which volunteer administration, as actually practiced, seems to be growing beyond volunteers, while still proudly including them as part of a larger package of services. Thus, in addition to the time and talent of volunteers, many volunteer administrators today actually also help bring in contributions of materials (food, clothing, equipment), money, information, and friendship and support for the organization. This broader constellation of community support suggests an appropriately broader job title. Indeed, as just noted, in some parts of North America, people who once were called administrators/directors/coordinators of volunteers now identify themselves as in charge of "community resource development" or a similar title—I recently proposed "Community-based Support Systems." Notice, as per an earlier discussion in this article, I did not say "Community Support Systems" since I meant to convey that the support is *from* the community, not *for* it.

In any case, the broader scope of actual resources we develop, and the possibility of a broader job title appropriate to it, suggests an analogy in terms of stability and status for our profession. It is like the difference between trying to ride a one-wheeled bicycle ("just" volunteer time) and riding a six-wheeled vehicle (volunteer time and ideas plus materials, money, information, and support from the community). The latter provides a far more stable platform; the unicycle has its ups and downs, unless you happen to be a circus acrobat.

GIFTING IN ONE DIRECTION OR BOTH?

Working in not just one, but in *multiple* dimensions of community gifting is how some of us stretch our label as volunteer administrators. Another way some of us may do more than we admit to doing, involves *direction* of flow between agency and community.

Ordinarily, we think of volunteer administrators as *bringing in* to the organization what the community has to offer. But some people who call themselves volunteer administrators or coordinators are also (or instead) engaged in *sending out* into the community what their organization has to offer. This may include employees, students, congregation, clients, as volunteers; material or monetary gifts; and information of an educational or promotional sort about the organization, as when the person called "volunteer administrator" is also in charge of public relations or public information, visitor tours, or the like. Given this mix, some people who used to go under the name Director/Administrator of Volunteers are now called "Community Relations Coordinator," or some similar name.

NARROW VS. WIDER TARGETS THAT WE SERVE

A third kind of enlargement of narrowly defined volunteer administration begins with the executive's realization that those who run volunteer programs competently have to be talented generalists with a wide range of people and program skills. But instead of giving them and the volunteer program more credit and status for this, one tack is based on the insight that *staff* need these skills and sensitivities much as volunteers do; maybe more. So, the volunteer administrator may be "pulled off the job" with volunteers, partly or entirely, to function in areas such as staff development, intra-agency communications (the newsletter, for instance), program planning and evaluation (not just for volunteer programs), personnel and the like. In such cases, the title "volunteer administrator" is likely to evolve into something like "human resource development" specialist/coordinator/director. And sometimes, especially in smaller organizations, this "everything person" has another name: Executive Director.

To summarize thus far, some people who used to call themselves volunteer administrators / directors / coordinators / managers now have titles or subtitles such as the following to describe what they do:

Community Resources Development
Community Relations Coordinator
Human Resource Development*

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR NAME AND WHY

I strongly suspect that quite a few others would like to change their names in this direction, but aren't sure how to. Indeed, it may not always be possible, but you can at least try, when the name change is relevant and useful. You might begin by pointing out that the name change is reality-based and likely to develop a wider range of resources for the organization. Maybe that will win official approval. If it doesn't, you might use the enlarged name unofficially, informally and/or concurrently and/or as a subtitle.

Another scenario occurs when the person was never called "volunteer administrator" in the first place. Though indeed working with volunteers part-time, she/he also always has done some or all of the other community or human resource things described earlier in this article. Here, the problem might be the somewhat easier one of finding an appropriate job title where none has existed previously.

But why take all this trouble to change a name, especially one we've worked so hard to market all these years? The first reason would be that the new title recognizes the reality of a larger job responsibility. By analogy, both "violinist" and "symphony conductor" are honorable job titles. But you don't call yourself a violinist when in fact you are a symphony conductor—not usually, anyhow, not even when you can in fact also play the violin. Calling yourself violinist simply doesn't tell the

* The recent study by Appel (1987) shows that people who spend at least some of their time working with the volunteer program do so under a very wide range of titles, including some similar or identical to the three mentioned in the text.

whole story. Nor can a violinist alone be as effective an advocate for the orchestra as a whole—including violinists.

More specifically for the present case, it is all too easy for the uneducated (on volunteers) executive to downplay a person labelled as "only" responsible for volunteers. We've all heard the litanies: volunteers are a luxury; besides, they work free, why don't you? And so on, *ad nauseam*. But this 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 materials, equipment, money, information and community support. That's a far more serious thing to risk losing. Not incidentally, staff at all levels might be less likely to resist a professional with the potential to garner for them a veritable cornucopia of community resources versus one whose only stock in trade was suspiciously substitutive volunteers.

But is even this worth throwing out the great word "volunteer" and all it stands for? No, it is not. In the first place, we might often be able to use concurrently dual program titles, one highlighting the term "volunteer," the other accommodating the broader community or human resource concept of which volunteers are a part. Your situation will best determine which will be the title and which the subtitle. Or perhaps the two names can be used alternatively depending on the appropriateness of the situation.

Moreover, much as most of us respect the word "volunteer" and everything it represents, a number of other people—rhetoric aside—do not. And *their* perceptions are most often at the root of our status problems, especially when they are decision-makers, as they often are. To the extent that the concept "volunteer" still suffers the slings and arrows of outrageous stereotyping, it is no service either to volunteers or ourselves to suffer those slings, alone and exposed. In such a situation, we must at the very least consider as an alternative associating volunteer programs with a broader concept many executives will take more seriously: for example, "community resource development." Under such an umbrella, volunteers can still receive separate identifica-

tion and recognition and they *will* receive, I believe, *more* organizational support. Indeed, I know of at least one instance in which, when the Director of Volunteer Services (DVS) "moved up" to "Community Relations Coordinator," the volunteer program clearly benefitted from her increased prestige. While still retaining some of her hands-on attention, this volunteer program was also assigned another full-time person as its new DVS.

THE NEED FOR MORE INFORMATION

Is such a satisfying scenario repeatable, or just a rare stroke of luck? We don't know yet. Even before that, how often and under what circumstances are we most likely to have a name and concept change of the type: "volunteer administrator" to "community resource coordinator?" We don't know this, either. My guess—only that—is that the latter kind of name is somewhat more likely to exist or evolve in:

- a small organization which can't afford a full-time volunteer administrator in the first place (although there is already one exception to that in the "Community Relations Coordinator" example just given!).
- somewhat paradoxically, where a paid or volunteer staff person is putting in more than a few hours a week. It's hard to diversify when you don't really have time to do even one thing well.

But, to repeat, we don't know. And I do not think we should wait too long to find out. For one thing, we need to know if our field is going to have to incorporate people dealing with community resources at substantially different levels of generality, some "just" with volunteers as volunteer administrators, and others with volunteers plus a range of other human and community resources. Denying the possibility won't make it go away.

But enough of speculation; The Center for Creative Community has a ten-item survey specifically designed to add more evidence to the mix. If you share an interest in the matter, write and request a copy. The address is P.O. Box 2427, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504. Even better, encourage colleagues to do the same at meetings of professional associations, at

workshops, in your newsletters. AVA has indicated interest in such a study and while this is not official AVA endorsement, the results will be shared fully with AVA when there is a statistically significant sample. The write-up of results will also be offered to *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* and also communicated via *The Dovia Exchange* (Center for Creative Community, 1988).

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