

What They Really Want: Assessing Psychological Contracts of Volunteers

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INTRODUCTION

Knowing what volunteers really want when they are volunteering is important both to managers of volunteers assigned to recruit excellent volunteers and to the organizations that rely on volunteers for their very existence. While Clary, Snyder and colleagues have proffered the Volunteer Functions Inventory as a means of categorizing the reasons why volunteers join organizations (e.g., Clary, Snyder and Ridge, 1992; Clary, Snyder and Stukas, 1996), what volunteers want from organizations throughout their tenure is less clear. This study seeks to clarify the terms of that relationship using the concept of psychological contract.

This paper defines the psychological contract and explains how its terms arise, it also explains why understanding the terms of the contract is important to nonprofits, discusses the method in which the potential elements of the contract were identified, and reports the findings with respect to what both volunteers and managers of volunteers believe to be part of the psychological contract that arises for the typical volunteer experience.

WHAT IS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT?

The psychological contract represents the understandings held by the volunteer and the nonprofit regarding promises made between them (c.f., Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993). Knowing what these respective understandings are important for both volunteers and nonprofits because both use their version of the understandings to interpret whether the relationship is good or not. From the perspective of the nonprofit, it would be simplest if the promises made when the volunteer was

recruited were the only ones that were considered when evaluating the relationship. In reality, the volunteer's understandings are shaped by a variety of factors, including the volunteer's history with that organization, with other organizations, the volunteer's knowledge of how others have been treated by the organization, and the social norms. While some of the behaviors are task-specific, this study concerns itself with the general understandings that volunteers have about how they are to behave and how they are to be treated in the volunteer setting. These understandings are the basis for the psychological contracts of volunteers (Robinson, 1996).

Understanding what these items are is important to nonprofits. Self-monitoring theory suggests that individuals behave in a manner they believe is expected or appropriate for the context (Day, Schleicher, Unckless and Hiller, 2002). Therefore volunteers are likely to behave as they believe they have promised to behave. Similarly, volunteers are likely to judge the behavior of the nonprofit in light of their understandings of how the nonprofit has promised to treat them. When the nonprofit lives up to the volunteers' understandings of the promises, the nonprofit is typically judged favorably. When volunteers believe the nonprofit has not lived up to its promises, they believe the psychological contract has been breached. That breach, may have negative implications for the nonprofit with respect to the attitudes and behaviors of the volunteers experiencing the breach such as a refusal to continue volunteering or badmouthing of the organization. When volunteers are intended to be assets to the organization, clearly neither of these outcomes is desirable.

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FINDING THE TERMS

In order to determine the terms of the psychological contracts of volunteers, I worked with the Junior League of Chicago. With their assistance, we held focus groups made up of either volunteers or managers of volunteers from a variety of different organizations. These focus groups generated lists of items that they believed volunteers promised nonprofits for which they volunteered, and items that they believed were promised to volunteers by the nonprofits. A second wave of focus groups included both managers of volunteers and volunteers in each group. These groups further honed the lists that had been generated by the first wave of focus groups, suggesting additional items, clarifying items, and noting items that did not resonate with them.

Once these lists had been generated, we conducted pilot studies to determine which items had enough resonance with a larger volunteer community to merit inclusion in the main study. Pilot participants were asked to rate each item regarding what is to be given and received by volunteers and by the nonprofit organizations from 1 to 7 where 1=not part of the obligation and 7=very much part of the obligation. The manager of volunteers answered the same questions on behalf of the organization.

The items remaining after the focus groups and the pilot study generated two distinct lists of obligations, one that focused on the promises made by the organization to the volunteers, and the other focused on the promises made by the volunteers to the organization. The promises made to the organization by the volunteers included both behavioral and attitudinal obligations.

The behavioral obligations were centered on promises made in four areas: loyalty, work, obedience and responsibility. Volunteers promised to be loyal to the organization and to keep its confidences. In the work category, volunteers promised to work extra hours, be willing to take on extra work, to work at other locations, to find desirable work within the organization, to be willing to try new

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things, to be willing to take on undesirable work as well as desirable work, and to find a way to make a contribution within the organization. With respect to rules, volunteers

promised to conform to the organization's rules and to accept the demands of the organization that conflict with their personal preferences. Promises with regard to responsibility were to make responsible decisions, to be honest and up-front with the organization, to show up when expected, to communicate with the organization with respect to scheduling and to be reliable. Volunteers also promised to display positive mental attitudes, to maintain good social relations with others, and to be enthusiastic. Each volunteer made these promises to the organization to a greater or lesser degree.

These elements were then factor analyzed to identify which were the salient elements of the volunteer psychological contract. The factor analysis generated five terms. Communication with the organization formed a single-item measure. Obeying the rules set down by the organization and showing up when expected formed a two-item measure ($\alpha=.6838$). While these items are clearly important from the organizational perspective, they only provide marginal reliability and therefore were not included in the items tested. A third item, tapping into willingness to go to other locations, keeping organizational secrets, and accepting the demands of the organizations which conflict with personal preferences, failed to achieve sufficient reliability ($\alpha=.3350$) and was not included. Likewise, a two-item measure tapping into the willingness to take a leadership position and getting information on new areas, also failed to achieve sufficient reliability to be included ($\alpha=.3962$). The final set of items, focusing on professional behavior while volunteering, achieved a strong level of reliability ($\alpha=.9057$).

Likewise, the promises made to the volunteers by the organizations fell into one attitudinal category and four behavioral categories: providing skills, creating an appropriate orga-

nizational context, co-workers and feedback. With respect to the attitudes that emerged from the discussions in the focus groups, organizations promised to respect volunteers' needs, and give them support with their personal problems. In the skills category of behavior, the organizations promised to provide training, career development, and information on new areas. With respect to co-workers, the organization obligated itself to provide competent, reliable co-workers and to give volunteers the opportunity to work with different groups of people. The organization also obligated itself to provide sufficient quality feedback, to provide the opportunity for the volunteer to ask questions and get clarification, to give the volunteer a sense of the meaning or purpose behind the work being done, and to appreciate the work done by the volunteer. With respect to the provision of the organizational context, the organization promised to provide the volunteer with sufficient power to accomplish the tasks as well as support for the work to be done. In that category the organization also promised to give the volunteer advanced notice of relevant organizational or policy changes, and to give the volunteer sufficient responsibility. Factor analysis of these items indicated that these elements loaded onto a single factor, comprised of six behaviors. These six items had a strong reliability score ($\alpha = .9558$).

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The items that the data indicated volunteers promise to do for the organizations for which they volunteer include: being willing to try new things, being loyal to the organization, holding a positive attitude, taking an active role in finding a niche within the organization, making responsible decisions, looking for a way to make a contribution to the organization and making work with the organization a priority. This set of terms is particularly interesting in that it indicates that while volunteers do indeed recognize that

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they have made promises creating obligations to the organization across all of the categories identified in the focus groups, they do not recognize every potential obligation in the category as being part of their promises to the organization. This suggests that volunteers have relatively professional expectations

for their own behavior.

With respect to the promises made by the manager of volunteers, key elements were fairness in assigning jobs, giving volunteers sufficient power to accomplish their work, giving volunteers the opportunity to ask questions and seek task clarification, being flexible in the scheduling of volunteers and respecting the needs of volunteers. Notably none of the attitudinal elements loaded onto the final factor. These elements suggest that volunteers expect to be treated professionally with respect to the tasks at hand, but flexibly with respect to scheduling.

These 13 questions represent the basic elements of the psychological contract across organizations. While each specific individual may hold any one belief more or less strongly in a particular organizational context, overall these beliefs are the most salient shapers of the way in which volunteers and nonprofits relate to each other. These elements are not the only elements of the psychological contract, however. Specific jobs within an organization will include other specific elements. However, these terms can be viewed as the basic assumptions with respect to the course of dealing between volunteer and nonprofit.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The good news for organizations is the level of professionalism that volunteers expect, of themselves, and of the distribution and completion of work. The more difficult elements are those that deal with the flexibility necessary to respect the needs and interests of the volunteers. Psychological contract theory suggests that breach of the contract occurs only when one party either refuses to comply with their promises or when the

understandings of the promises are incongruent (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Knowing what the key terms of the contract are to both parties may pave the way for a frank, professional discussion with potential volunteers that may serve to limit breaches rooted in incongruent expectations for behavior, which in turn may lead to a stronger, more reliable volunteer cadre. While future research in this area should evaluate the ways in which incongruence in the understandings of these terms exist, simply knowing the potential sources is a giant step toward monitoring interactions with volunteers so as to shape expectations accordingly.

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