

Barriers to the Development of Volunteer Leadership Competencies: Why Johnnie Can't Lead Volunteers

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INTRODUCTION

Sue Vinyard (1993), noted author and speaker on leading volunteers, states:

The volunteer coordinator of the next century will have to command a broader and broader range of expertise to be able to meet the challenges of leading volunteer efforts within organizations. Far deeper than knowing how to plan, organize, staff, direct, control, and reward, the Volunteer Program Executive will have to move far beyond these basic functions of management to embrace techniques and strategies that are both complex and interdependent (p.129).

Vinyard emphasizes that the volunteer manager of the future will need to empower the entire organization around her to be the best it can be (1993). She further states that managers of volunteers will have to manage their time to include the acquisition and assimilation of new knowledge. This may include reading extensively, attending seminars, or enrolling in graduate courses. Volunteer administrators (VAs) must also be able to transfer this information to the information users through appropriate communication methods. The VAs of the future must be adept at watching trends that may affect how they do business in the future. In addition, volunteer administrators must be adept at creating and maintaining a supportive, ethical, friendly, and productive climate for volunteers and paid staff. Do volunteer administrators possess these skills?

Fisher and Cole noted that most volunteer

administrators are initiated into the profession through on-the-job or previous volunteer experience (1993). Few have formal advanced training in the administration of volunteer programs, management, or personnel experience. In fact, a study of the membership of the Association of Volunteer Administrators in 2000 discovered that 77.8% of volunteer administrators surveyed had received no formal training in volunteer administration prior to their first job experience as a volunteer administrator (Brudney & Schmahl, 2002). More than 26% of the members responding stated that at the time of the survey, they still had not completed any formal training in volunteer administration. About 25% had taken some college courses or completed university certificate programs. Almost 65% had taken some nonuniversity courses, but it is not known how many. A little more than 10% had a nonuniversity certificate in volunteer administration.

Numerous studies have identified the deficiencies of Extension professionals in coordinating volunteers and volunteer programs (Culp & Kohlhagen, 2001; Hange, Seevers & VanLeeuwen, 2002; King and Safrit, 1998). King and Safrit (1998), and Collins (2001) each found gaps between Extension professionals' perceived importance of volunteer management competencies and their competence in these areas. They believe that these gaps represent training needs for these professionals. Hange, Seevers & VanLeeuwen (2002) also found that agents' competencies in nine areas of volunteer administration did not match their perceived importance of those competencies.

Why is the competence of the volunteer administrator (VA) such an important issue?

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Let's examine the state of volunteerism in the United States today. The Independent Sector (2002) estimates that in 1998 more than 109 million Americans volunteered for nonprofit organizations and human service agencies, a 17% increase over 1995. These volunteers accounted for an estimated \$225 billion dollars of services to these organizations, the equivalent of over 9 million full-time employees. More than 80% of nonprofit organizations in the United States rely on volunteers to accomplish almost one-third of their work (Ericksen-Mendoza & Heffron, 1998). Volunteers alone cannot improve their communities. Volunteers need the direction of volunteer administrators who can focus their efforts toward solving specific problems. Volunteer administrators not only recruit, screen, train, and supervise volunteers, they serve as a volunteer management "consultant" to other employees in the agency who utilize volunteers.

The competencies required for volunteer administrators to be effective are well documented. The Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) has defined the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by volunteer administrators as part of their professional credentialing program. Boyd (2003) independently identified a set of competencies that volunteer administrators will need in the coming decade that are in line with those promoted by the AVA. Schmiesing, Gliem, and Safrit (2002) also identified similar competencies.

In a 1999 study, volunteer administrators identified their own professional development as one of the most important trends affecting their profession in the coming decade (Culp & Nolan, 1999). What prevents those who direct volunteers from attaining the competencies needed to effectively do their jobs?

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to develop consensus among a panel of experts regarding the competencies that would be required by volunteer administrators in the year 2010 and to identify any barriers that volunteer administrators face in acquiring those competencies. The competencies identified in this study

have been discussed in previous publications (Boyd, 2003); this article addresses the barriers VAs face in acquiring the skills and knowledge required to be successful in their jobs.

METHODS/PROCEDURES

This study used the Delphi technique for developing group consensus. The Delphi technique was first developed by the Rand Corporation in the 1950s. It is a technique primarily used for forecasting, policy investigations, and goal-setting (Ulschak, 1983). While the majority of its use in educational research has been in the area of curriculum development, it has also been widely used to determine essential competencies in many fields (Martin & Frick, 1998; Shinn & Smith, 1999). The Delphi technique uses a panel of experts in a given field to develop consensus regarding the answer to a specific question or series of questions.

This study required three rounds to achieve consensus among thirteen experts in volunteer administration. The panel of experts consisted of volunteer administrators, directors of regional volunteer centers, Cooperative Extension volunteer development specialists, and university faculty members from across the nation. These experts were identified by their reputation among volunteer administrators, their involvement in the profession, or their research and publication record in the field.

Round I – The initial round required the jury of experts to respond to three open-ended questions. The jury was asked to identify three to five competencies that they believed volunteer administrators would need in the year 2010. A competency was identified as a knowledge, skill, motive or characteristic that causes or predicts outstanding performance. They were next asked to identify any barriers that they perceived would prevent volunteer administrators from achieving these competencies. A barrier was defined as anything that impedes the acquisition of these competencies. And finally, the jury was asked to identify ways for organizations to motivate (both intrinsically and extrinsically) volunteer administrators to acquire these competencies or overcome any barriers. Fif-

teen of the original 20 members of the jury responded to the first round for a response rate of seventy-five percent. Dalky (1969) found that when the size of the jury was greater than 13, mean correlations were greater than 0.80, thus satisfying questions of process reliability.

Round II – Faculty members with experience in volunteer administration examined the statements identified in Round I to find commonalities among them and to combine similar statements. The original language of the expert jury members was retained without trying to clarify or interpret meaning. Combining similar statements resulted in 33 competency statements, 15 barrier statements, and 21 statements regarding motivation. These statements were used to create the instrument for Round II. In Round II, the jury was asked to rate their strength of agreement for each statement on a six-point Likert-type scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree. All fifteen members of the jury who responded in Round I also responded to Round II.

Round III – The purpose of Round III was to begin the process of developing consensus among the jury. Those statements that received a 5 or 6 (agree or strongly agree) from at least two-thirds of the jury responding in Round II were kept for the third round. Jury members were sent a third revised instrument and asked to re-evaluate each statement retained from the second round using a six-point Likert-type scale. Thirteen of the 15 jury members responded to this round. Dillman's Tailored Design Method (2000) was used for nonresponse follow-up. Frequency distributions were again used to select responses based on a two-thirds majority.

FINDINGS

The original 33 barriers identified during Round I were reduced to 15 in Round II. Consensus was reached on 12 of those barriers by the third round. These barriers are listed in Figure 1. The barriers fall into three categories: organizational barriers, individual traits of the volunteer administrator, and lack of opportunities.

FIGURE 1

Barriers that Discourage Volunteer Administrators from Acquiring Leadership and Management Competencies

ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

- Lack of organizational commitment/support to volunteers
- Organizational hiring practices
- Volunteer administrator has too many responsibilities other than volunteer administration
- Other professionals in the agency are threatened by volunteers
- An organization that doesn't foster a positive environment for the development of the individual
- Lack of importance given to the role of volunteer administrator

INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS

- Lack of knowledge of necessary volunteer management skills
- Lack of basic understanding of volunteer systems and the drivers of those systems
- Unwillingness of volunteer administrator to learn or change

LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

- Lack of pre-service or in-service training for volunteer administrators
- Lack of access to necessary training/education to acquire the competencies

(Boyd, 2003, p. 52).

Six of the barriers identified deal with organizational cultures where the use of volunteers to achieve the organization's mission isn't valued. The lack of organizational support may come from a lack of understanding on the part of the organization's leadership. Organizations that have a short history of utilizing volunteers may not understand that volunteer programs are not free, but require financial support as well as changes in organizational policies and attitude. Many volunteer administrators are saddled with too many other responsibilities, demonstrating a lack of importance given to that role in the organization. Such organizations also lack an environment that fosters the improvement and development of their employees. Volunteer administrators aren't encouraged to seek the development of needed competencies.

Lack of knowledge on the part of the volunteer administrator is also a barrier. How can volunteer administrators seek skills they don't realize they need? The fact that most

volunteer administrators enter the profession without any prior experience (Fisher & Cole, 1993) may account for their lack of understanding of volunteer systems.

While there are many books available, as well as a growing number of Web sites, on the topic of volunteer administration, many volunteer administrators still do not have access to accurate up-to-date information on managing and leading volunteers. This is especially true for volunteer administrators in rural areas where support organizations may not exist, Internet access is limited, and traveling to professional conferences and workshops is expensive.

Eliminating the Barriers

When asked to identify ways to motivate volunteer administrators to develop these competencies and remove any barriers, the expert panel reached consensus on 20 items. These statements are listed in Figure 2.

Organizational culture is implicated in both motivating volunteer administrators to acquire the competencies and removing barriers to their attainment. Recognizing the importance of volunteer contributions to the agency's mission, acknowledging and rewarding volunteer administrators for acquiring the competencies, and recognizing the professionalism of the volunteer coordinator position both internally and externally to the organization all require an organizational culture that values the contributions of volunteers. Paddy Bowen, Executive Director of Volunteer Canada, describes an organizational need to invest in the professional development of volunteer administrators, "Organizationally, we need to invest time and effort on our management systems around volunteers, from the board to the mail room" (2001, p.37).

It may be up to the volunteer administrator to develop such a culture within their organization. Evaluating the contributions that volunteers make to the organization and communicating those impacts to the leadership of the organization and to other stakeholders such as donors is crucial to establishing the essential contribution of volunteers. Such evaluations must go beyond dollars saved to describe impact on the organization's

FIGURE 2

Motivation Factors and Management Practices that Encourage the Attainment of Volunteer Administration Competencies

MOTIVATING FACTORS

- Require adequate pre-service training before hiring volunteer coordinator.
- Require additional training as part of the job expectations and performance review.
- Recognize the importance of volunteer contributions to the agency's mission.
- Acknowledge and reward volunteer administrators for attaining the competencies.
- Include the volunteer administrator in key decision-making and management meetings.
- Recognize the professionalism of the volunteer coordinator position both internally and externally to the organization.
- Express how volunteer management skills learned are transferable to other jobs and to personal life.
- Profile success stories.
- Create an environment and desire for life-long learning.

REMOVING BARRIERS

- Orient volunteer administrators as to the complexity of the position.
- Provide appropriate levels of guidance and support.
- Reimburse staff for training/professional development.
- Refocus positions to focus only on volunteer administration.
- Offer graduate courses in volunteer administration.
- Make sure volunteer program's goals and activities support the organizational mission/vision.
- Allow flexible work schedules and official time to obtain needed training.
- Realistically advertise for the required knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- Provide access to professional development materials in volunteer administration.
- Make technology and applications accessible to help volunteer administrators do their job.
- Offer an exciting array of professional development opportunities.

(Boyd, 2003, p. 53).

clientele or community (Culp and Nall, 2000). Making sure that the volunteer program is aligned with the agency's mission will also serve to underscore the importance of the volunteers. Volunteer administrators must also work with other paid staff to help them develop the skills and attitudes necessary for working with volunteers. In addition, VAs

must include other paid staff members in discovering ways that volunteers can contribute to the agency and in developing those jobs and job descriptions.

Agency leaders should recognize the importance and the complexity of the volunteer administrator's role. For most organizations, volunteer coordination is a full-time job. Releasing VAs from other duties to concentrate fully on leading the volunteer program would also give them time to acquire the needed skills. Leaders can also make the acquisition of competencies part of the performance appraisal system, rewarding VAs for their efforts at professional development. The acquisition of VA competencies should not cost the volunteer administrator. Agencies should be prepared to reimburse the VA for reasonable expenses related to their professional development. This may be especially important in rural areas where VAs must travel some distance for professional development opportunities. Investing in a professional development library could pay dividends to the agency since all paid staff members could improve their volunteer management skills.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In their study to identify trends that will affect volunteer leadership in the next ten years, Culp and Nolan (1999) identified the volunteer administrator's professional development as the second most critical trend. The implications are clear: organizations that depend on volunteers to carry out their mission must either hire volunteer administrators with these competencies or make opportunities and resources available for volunteer administrators to acquire them.

This study identified several ways that volunteer administrators can be motivated to acquire volunteer leadership competencies. While requiring adequate pre-service training and recognizing volunteer administrators for attaining the required competencies are both easily implemented management practices, the other motivating factors identified in this study may require a change in the agency's

organizational culture. Recognizing the professionalism of the volunteer administrator position, involving the volunteer administrator in the decision-making process, and creating an atmosphere that encourages life-long learning are factors that cannot be implemented overnight. Edgar Schein, in his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, states that it is the prime task of the leader to manage the organizational culture (1996).

Multiple barriers may impede volunteer administrators from attaining these competencies. Strategic direction from the organizational leadership will be required to eliminate such barriers. Reallocating resources, aligning the volunteer mission with that of the organization, and redefining the volunteer administrator position to focus only on the volunteer program will greatly enhance the volunteer administrator's ability to attain the required competencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations for organizations utilizing volunteers to achieve their mission:

1. Organizations should seek employees who have the necessary competencies in volunteer administration for volunteer management positions;
2. Organizations should make the acquisition of volunteer administration competencies a part of the employee's performance expectations;
3. Organizations should redirect resources to assist volunteer administrators in acquiring the competencies, including provision of educational materials, professional development time, and reimbursement for professional development expenses related to acquiring the competencies; and
4. Organizations should examine their organizational culture to determine if any of the barriers identified in this study are preventing employees from acquiring the needed competencies in volunteer administration.

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