SELF-HELP AND HELPING (SHAH)

Exploring Volunteer Space

Chapter 14
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Introduction

SHAH attempts to integrate self-help and other-help models of volunteering, with responsibility for program design and direction given to the self-helpers. In terms of this chapter it suggests one way of overall coordination of:

> Volunteer Self-Helpers VSH or A
> Mutuality of Helping VSH <----> VSH
> And Other-Helpers A ---> B

The other-helpers include both paid and unpaid people.

In terms of the dimensions described elsewhere in this book, SHAH coordinates group and individual volunteering, continuous and occasional, and aspects of service, policy, and advocacy. SHAH is a consciousness-raising device on possibilities, plus a flexible process format; it has not yet reached the point of being a specific methodology.

1. Formation of the Self-Help Group
Volunteer self-helpers (VSH) can be any type of person or group. For example, they can be a group of young people who need jobs, a neighborhood group in a trailer park who want playgrounds for their kids, Parents Without Partners, or a group of artists who want to start a gallery. One question often raised is, how do the groups form in the first place? Perhaps an agency has formed or can form self-helpers into client groups; perhaps they are naturally existing groups, such as a neighborhood common-interest group or a formally constituted club or organization. Maybe the process can be made attractive enough to lure people into a group. Or perhaps a community organizer or coordinator can identify major issues and problems in a community, and catalyze group formation. There is some precedent for this in the Countryside Council Program of Minnesota where a community coordinator acts as a facilitator or catalyst and is answerable to the community rather than to any special-interest group or agency. This person can be a volunteer or a paid agency person, but must have a facilitative rather than a directive style.

Probably the most frequent way self-help groups are formed stems from the stimulation provided by a visible, credible priority need shared by the potential self-helpers. If public services or crime in a neighborhood are bad enough, people will get together to try to do something about it, and they will need little or no prompting to do so. The outsider coming in to catalyze may be more in the position of touching a spark to tinder. Moreover, individuals within a group do not need to have any other common primary problems to function together on the identified problem.

Let's now move through Figure 2, which outlines the SHAH process.

2. Volunteer Self-Helpers - Upper Right Circle

This involves the resource exchange process among self-helpers, previously described in Chapter 12. As noted there, anywhere from eight to ten to 150 people can be involved at one time. The young people who want paid jobs, first connect glad gives and needs within their self-help network to see how much they can do for themselves on that score and/or how well they can develop their own action plan to do something about it.

3. Volunteer Peer Successes - Lower Right Circle

Let's say the priority self-help problem remains to find jobs. First, volunteer peer successes (VPS) are selected by volunteer self-helpers. These are people who have experienced the problem the self-helpers are dealing with and who have had some success in dealing with this problem. In our previous terminology VPS are self-interested helpers because they are self-help alumni who have been through the problem, sympathize with people who have it, and might be glad to share their expertise. In other words, the volunteer peer success people are valuable to the self-helpers because they naturally understand the problem situation, are likely to be trusted, and have extremely relevant information to share. For getting jobs, their reality-tested advice could include how to work the system, when to cut your hair, when to smile and shake hands, and good leads to people who are particularly open to giving youth a chance for jobs.

Volunteer peer successes in the SHAH mode will often be precisely the kind of indigenous people we can't recruit from the top for jobs we define as significant. They often can be recruited by the volunteer self-helper because they are their friends and peers. The recruiting is personal and for an immediately understandable purpose - a problem they have previously suffered and succeeded in solving.

Screening? Peer success volunteers have succeeded in solving the problem; their "recruiter," the self-helper, now has the problem and a direct understanding of what it takes to tackle it. Who could be in a better position to judge?

4. Volunteer Other Resources - The Lower Left Circle

Volunteer peer success people might not actually have the jobs our self-helpers need. At this point (lower-left circle), the classical other-helping volunteers are involved as volunteer-other resources (VOR), selected by the self-helper/peer success volunteer team. This team would select the help they need from a human resource bank of volunteers (job-finders, volunteer employers, etc.), possibly formed by the local Voluntary Action Center or Volunteer Bureau, or a national organization like Volunteers in Technical Assistance, or possibly already existing as a community voluntary group. In addition to having relevant skills experiences, these other-helping resource volunteers might also be valuable for their connections, clout, and knowledge of where help is to be found. Many of them might be the kind of middle-class people often associated with formal volunteer programs, but here they would fill the role of on-call, occasional, special service resource people doing what they can do well and what they want to do (glad gives). As indicated in Chapter 8, such occasional service is congenial to many middle-class people who might refuse a longer commitment to continuing service not in their natural aptitude area. They also have the added motivation of knowing that their services are needed, because "clients" have specifically requested the services.

The peer success/other-resources combination is a potent one in helping solve self-helper problems. Both have key portions of the needed relevant knowledge. In addition, peer successes have especially good natural communication and empathy with the self-helpers, while the other-helping resource people bring unique skills, experiences, acts, and power to the total team - which includes all three types of volunteers.

There might still remain parts of the problem which the entire VSH/VPS/VOR team can't handle. In such cases, the team would go to the paid agency helpers.

5. Paid Agency Helpers - Upper Left Circle

If doors need to be opened, other-helping resource volunteers can help the rest of the team with this kind of advocacy. In the job-finding example we began with, the total volunteer team might have succeeded in setting up good jobs for teenagers, but there might be a legal wrinkle; for example, an ordinance forbidding youth employment around certain kinds of machines. Perhaps there might be some other specialized professional skill not yet available which is needed by the team. If the paid agency can't or won't help, other-helping resource volunteers might know some other agency or group who would or should, or they might help form such an agency (advocacy again).

Continual cycling of SHAH in a community might provide a cumulative readout on the relevance of paid agency help. If paid agencies remain irrelevant to the needs which the VSH/VPS/VOR team cannot filter out at the community volunteer level, these agencies or their staff will have to be renewed, reoriented, retrained, or recycled. The same may be said for continuing realignment of the community other-helping volunteer resource bank (VOR) to SHAH-expressed needs. Repeated SHAH cycling thus functions as a community-assessment process, balancing needs and resources.

Finally, the paid agency may complete or continue the cycle by helping to form new groups of volunteer self-helpers, contributing community coordinators or group facilitators to the process. Or the agency might reorient itself and recruit new human resource bank volunteers in response to emerging needs for which present paid or volunteer resources are irrelevant or insufficient.

The line from paid agency (upper-left) to clients who are now self-helpers (upper-right) does not mean the agency decides what is good for them, and then imposes the help upon them. In SHAH, the VSH/VPS/VOR team decides what is needed from the agency.

General Comments on the Self-Help and Helping (SHAH) Process

SHAH conceives helping as a circular process, not as a vertical one. To the extent that any group initiates and dominates the process, it is the volunteer self-helpers. These self-helpers are the traditional client or service consumer groups, though they can also be middle-class or upper-class groups. Anyone can have a problem, and anyone can choose(to deal with it on his or her own, or with community colleagues, before putting the monkey on an agency's back.

The circular process of SHAH is clockwise, initiated by self-helpers (clients). This process is basically different from formal professional models of helping, in which primary controls of helping tend to go in all directions outward from the paid agency to clients with "ownership" of the volunteer program by the agency.

To the extent that client initiative designs SHAH, it is a need filtration, agency-diversion process. It attempts to ensure that the maximum amount of self-help, help from peers, an(informal non-agency help is applied to the service and reduction of need before the problem is passed on to more formal agency or outside help. Possibly, a full SHAH process might divert as much as ninety percent of paid helping agencies' present business. This would leave them more free to concentrate on things which only they can do, while becoming more relevant in other things they ought to be able to do for clients or consumers.

When implementing SHAH, it is important to adapt and be flexible. The self-help and helping process is not a rigid method; it is a series of potential options. As but on example dotted lines on the diagram indicate how SHAH can be short-circuited at any point in the process, without going the whole route from self-helper to agency, and, of course, reversed. Self-helpers, peer successes, and other-helping resource volunteers can range from essentially unorganized collections of individuals to quite highly organized groups.

Finally, you may be able to use some parts of SHAH and not others, and you may be able only to approximate any part of it. (Most of the applications of the resource exchange process discussed in Chapter 12 involve partial applications of SHAH as well.) Yet, for some of us who work in traditional helping agency structures, consideration of SHAH may only raise our consciousness of tomorrow's dream and make us resolve to approximate it wherever possible today.

Of course, SHAH is not the only, or even the simplest way to coordinate self-oriented and other-oriented volunteering. For example, a community might have a number of volunteer groups working in the general area of crime prevention and control. Some of these might lean more towards self-help; for instance, a neighborhood anti-crime organization, or an ex-offender self-help group. Other efforts might be more oriented to helping others; here we might have a volunteer probation officer program, and a local service club's community education program on home security. Wouldn't the total crime prevention scene be more effectively addressed if all these volunteer groups at least shared information and ideas?

A Call for Contact
This chapter has been, a venture outward from traditional other-helping volunteer concepts to see how they may stretch to cover self-interested helping and self-help. What we need is a counter-venture from self-help group leaders, community organizers, and other credible inhabitants of the self-help area, who also know at least a little about other-directed volunteering. Among these groups are the National Self-Help Resource Center, with its associated Community Resource Centers; the Center for Community Change; and the National Association of Neighborhoods. ACTION, the federal volunteer agency, is also getting into the self-help area in a big way. Maybe the best common meeting ground would be such mixture models as food co-ops, CB networks, credit unions, and poetry groups.

Meanwhile, I will be wondering what Saul Alinsky would have said about SHAH and the rest of this chapter. I'm afraid I can guess, though at least a few of his students seem ready to listen.
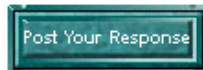
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