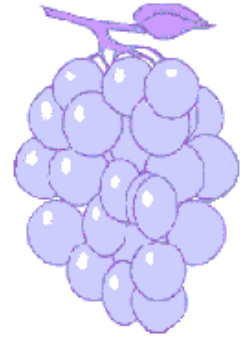

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Volunteer Administration: An Emerging Misnomer

Dr. Ivan Scheier

This is a continuation of our series of articles addressing the question: "do people whose job title suggests they work with volunteers still do so, exclusively or even mainly?"

The answer is "no," based on responses 53 practitioners to an Expansion Checklist presented in Grapevine several issues ago. We took as criterion workers who might be called "volunteers" today, but probably would not have been 10-15 years ago, e.g., are not within the traditional/historical definition of "volunteer."

Checklist Results

People who have the word "volunteer" in their job title are today dealing with many kinds of workers who would not have been called volunteers 10-15 years ago and, by many of us, would not be called volunteers today.

- Between 3/4 and 4/5 of the practitioner-respondents reported they work with court-referred community service workers, students with school requirements, interns, apprentices and practicum students, an 'people who voluntarily contribute things (donors).
- About half of the respondents reported they worked with paid staff of the agency who were contributing extra time as volunteers, released time workers, clients who were doing voluntary work, positively influential people in a clients lie who weren't formally registered as volunteers, and low-income people who were working for the agency as a condition of receiving public assistance.
- Between 10% and a third of the practitioners take some responsibility for people fully-reimbursed for work related expenses, other 'pressured participants (mandated) not mentioned elsewhere, mutual assistance sets, including self-helpers in groups, and barter-rewarded workers.

Every one of the 14 types of workers represented in the checklist was worked with by at least some of the 53 practitioners, never less than 10% and ranging upward to 85%.

Almost two-thirds of the practitioners dealt with half or more of the 14 types. Nobody worked with less than three of them and one person worked with all 14. Generally, the wider-responsibility finding pertained across all service areas represented in the study.

Moreover, 14 types of workers on "the new helping team" may only be the beginning. Asked to identify 'other people who come to us as a result of pressured participation' or mandate," the respondents collectively suggested a total of 21, with very few exact repeats. Among the most intriguing are physicians who "suggested" their employees volunteer at the hospital and parents who paid their children to participate in a "volunteer: program which they (the parents) decided was valuable.

Two other overall conclusions from Expansion Checklist results:

- The 14 types of workers were called "volunteers" about half the time.
- The practitioners reported getting credit for working with these types of people as part of their job responsibilities only about one-quarter of the time.

In other words, practitioners are taking responsibility for mobilizing and supporting many community people without getting credit for doing so as part of their job responsibility. In many cases, the people they deal with are not even identified as volunteers. Clearly we have a serious "credit gap" as well as an "identity gap."

Issues and Questions

I'll just throw out a few starter questions here. So please consider yourself invited to help me write the next article with your thoughts on these questions. In your response, please say if you're willing to be quoted by name or would prefer to remain anonymous.

- Unpaid and voluntary (prompting more from the inside than the outside) were once core defining characteristics of the concept of volunteering. *What does it mean to expand the word 'volunteer' to workers who do not have these defining characteristics, at least not clearly? Will "volunteer" in such cases mean as much?*
- If airline pilots were also driving buses, trains, taxis and trucks as part of their job, should they still be called "airline pilots?" *Does it make sense to keep the word "volunteer" in our job titles (as the only defining word) if in fact we're responsible for many other kinds of workers? What about titles such as "Community Service Coordinator," "Director of (Voluntary) Community Services," or even "Coordinator of Community-Based Support Systems?" Alterations such as this appear to be happening already. Should we be encouraging this to happen more frequently and more quickly? If so, how?*
- *What potential for empowerment do more inclusive job titles have for practitioners? Or dangers?*
- Can we assume that all 14 kinds of workers have motivations identical to one another and to traditional volunteers? If not, *what is being done to help us understand the increased variety of motivations we now have to deal with? Should recognition ceremonies for mandated workers be the same as for others?*
- *Does a policy on volunteers apply well enough to the other members of "the new helping team" or do they require somewhat distinct and desperate policies? If so, do we have sufficient models to work from.*
- Do we plan to keep the different another types of workers isolated from another in separate sub-program. *If not, what are we doing to understand better the interactions among them and traditional volunteers?*
- *Is staff more receptive to some of these kinds of workers than to others, or to traditional volunteers? If so, what are the implications for overall acceptance of the community human resource" program?*
- *What happens to the identity of the traditional volunteer and the respect for her when immersed in this larger mix of workers? Is it diminished? Somehow enhanced? How?*
- *To what extent do the competencies developed to define the qualifications of a volunteer administrator apply to a coordinator of this new and wider helping team?*

- And last, has the term '*volunteer administration*' become something of a misnomer for what we are actually doing?

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