

Going Up? A Look at Your Upward Mobility Potential

By Ivan H. Scheier, Ph.D.

This article assumes you are:

- an administrator/director/coordinator of volunteers;
- in a similar people-involvement role under some other name;
- considering this career line, although you are not in it now; or
- a resource person, consultant or friend to any of the above.

Also assumed is that you are interested in helping yourself or another in evaluating and improving prospects for upward mobility in the volunteer administration profession.

Which way is up? Upward can be any combination of more money, higher status or greater challenge and scope for creativity. The mix differs for each individual; so do optimum tradeoffs between elements in the mix, e.g., the willingness to forego more money for greater challenge. Each individual should clarify his/her own unique mixture-definition of upwardness, as a crucial first step in the upward mobility assessment process.

This process identifies the number and range of career opportunities an individual is currently prepared to capitalize on, then encourages the person also to consider additional possible pathways to professional advancement.

The process cannot guarantee that you will learn about all suitable career openings and have a fair chance to be considered for them. Remedies for this presently imperfect situation are mentioned at the end of this article.

Nevertheless, as you clarify and ex-

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pand the range of career opportunities you are prepared to consider, you will be more alert to identify them as they occur, more poised to apply for them. You will have a somewhat better chance of going further, faster in our profession, and our profession will have a little better chance of holding onto good, ambitious people.

TEN FACTORS AFFECTING UPWARD MOBILITY IN A CAREER

The self-assessment system is based on 10 factors believed to condition a person's prospects for career advancement.

I wish I could claim the factors were research-derived, for we need much more research on our profession. Instead, the factors are based on 15 years of field experience and observation, as a volunteer coordinator first of all, and then as a staff member working with volunteer directors, while with the National Information Center on Volunteerism. About a year ago, the concepts were first systematized in something like their present form. Since then, formal feedback on the process has been received at six workshops attended by a total of 350 people. Most of these people were administrators of volunteer services or in allied roles. I am, therefore, indebted to dozens of secret co-authors for many resulting improvements in the system.

The 10 factors are assembled in a self-rating form near the end of this article. Before that, let's look at each factor individually.

1. *Desire: "I have a very strong desire to be upwardly mobile.*

As the coaches say, "desire" is very important in this game. It will power your status and prospects on most of the other nine factors. This puts it positively, of course. The flip side of desire is frustration.

It's also okay to be satisfied where

you are. Your present combination of money, status, challenge and scope for growth may be satisfactory to excellent. "Looking around" is still reasonable in most cases, because there is almost always some room for improvement, and someday your present situation might change for the worse. But beware of the "restless reflex" which erroneously assumes progress is impossible without movement. And check your parachute before you jump.

Others will desire upward mobility, but not in our profession. They see our career mainly as a stepping-stone to progress in another (sometimes related) profession. Someday we may have a better chance to make settlers of such transients, but first we must improve career ladder prospects within volunteer administration.

2. Goal Clarity: "I have a very clear picture of the higher level position(s) I'd like to be in, for both nearer and further futures."
3. Pathway Clarity: "I have a very clear idea of the pathways or avenues open to me for upward mobility, and how I can use these pathways."

These are the knowing-where-you're going questions.

Can you clearly visualize a set of more fulfilling work roles and situations you would like to occupy, say, two to five years hence? If you can, you will be more alert to see and seize opportunities which approach your dream role. You will also be in a better position to shape toward the ideal, whatever opportunities do come along (including your present job). However, be sure to allow reasonable flexibility in your ideals, and be ready to consider openings which are shy of perfection in our imperfect world.

Goal clarity also helps launch pathway analysis.

4. Service Area Crossover: "I am willing to accept administrator/director/coordinator positions in any areas of human service, and I would feel fully competent to do so."
5. Related Role Flexibility: "I am willing and able to explore people-involvement leadership positions above and beyond the director/administrator role."
6. Geographical Scope: "I am fully (vs. partially or not all) flexible in my scope of geographical movement, to capitalize on employment opportunities anywhere."

Depending on your answers to these three questions, the number of career opportunities conceivably open to you varies from one to one million. Conditions beyond your control will determine

some responses; for example, family or health situations may mean you can't move to other locations to accept better positions there. Other responses are within your control; they depend on your attitudes toward the profession and your own abilities.

First, we need some background, very approximate because, again, we lack research on the profession.

There are approximately 80,000 to 100,000 positions in volunteer administration in the United States today. (Gowdey, 1975) This would be about one such position for every 2,500 persons, or 80 positions in a community of 200,000 persons.

You will also want to know the number of career positions existing in your area of human service; for example, 3,000 in criminal justice; about 4,000 hospital directors; maybe 300 to 400 volunteer coordinators in churches and growing rapidly — another point to consider here.

Now, let's assume you are a director of volunteer services (DVS) in a hospital located in a community of 200,000 persons. There would be a total of approximately 80 positions in this community, three or four of which would be in hospitals. If your choice on Factor 4 is to remain in this community as a hospital DVS only, there are only two or three other possible openings for you in that community (in addition to upgrading the DVS role in your own hospital). But if and as you believe your volunteer leadership skills are transferable to other areas of human service — welfare, education, churches, etc. — as many as 80 openings are your ceiling potential in that community of 200,000. Wherever you go, that potential will increase twenty- to thirty-fold.

Where you are willing and able to go is Factor 6, geographical scope. The hospital DVS who is ready and able to commute anyplace in the less populated county surrounding our community of 200,000 may increase his/her ceiling of hospital opportunities from three or four to five or six, while possible openings in all service areas might rise from 80 to perhaps 100. Where situation and motivation permit moving anywhere in the United States, the ceiling potential becomes about 4,000 possibilities in hospitals, and 100,000 in all areas of human service. Of course, the probability of a person even hearing about faraway opportunities is much lower, but the possibility is still there.

Factor 5 refers to roles not called administrator/director/coordinator but analogous because, as a major part of the work, they require volunteer involvement

skills and sensitivities. Examples include numerous positions in Scouting, YMCA or YWCA, 4-H, Big Brothers and Sisters, etc., and staff positions in national organizations which depend heavily on their ability to recruit and retain volunteers: the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the National Council of Negro Women, and federal agencies such as ACTION. The cut-off point is hard to determine. For example, some people would include clergy in this second circumference of volunteer leadership. I believe the ultimate stretch on Factor 5 might comprise a million possibilities nationwide. Of course, prospective employers will have to stretch somewhat too.

7. The Resource Person Role: "I have the experience, expertise, and motivation to offer my services as a resource person to other administrators of volunteers — as trainer, consultant, author, educator, etc."

This merits an article all its own. Here are just a few flyby comments to stimulate further thought.

Yes, the role of resource person can be very satisfying. And yes, to some extent you can do it part-time while retaining your daily base as a DVS. In fact, you might have little choice in the matter; only about 500 persons in the United States today make a full-time living in this resource work as individual consultants, or working for Voluntary Action Centers, state offices of volunteerism, or national resource organizations such as VOLUNTEER.

Among the best ways to break in are:

1. Get published in local, state, regional, and national newsletters and journals. For example, AVA's newsletter and Volunteer Administration are always looking for good articles by practitioners.
2. Present yourself for service on committees of professional associations such as AVA, ASDVS, NAVCJ, etc., then produce good work, then consider running for office.
3. Offer your services as a trainer, first at local workshops, then at state, regional and national workshops.
4. Try to get involved in (volunteer) consultant networks.

Clearly, if money figures prominently in your definition of upward mobility, there will be a period of delayed gratification here. But save your press clippings, and be sure to get and save evaluations of your services by trainees and consultees. Somebody will want to see those evaluations someday, when they first consider offering you a fee for your services, or a quantum jump upward in resource-person responsibility as a volun-

teer.

8. Education and Training: "My background of education and training is excellent and fully relevant to my upward mobility goals."

9. On-the-Job Experience: "The depth and variety of my on-the-job experience is fully adequate and relevant to my upward mobility goals."

These two factors pretty much come down to having accepted competencies relevant to your career goals. Sarah Jane Rehnberg's recent article on certification and competency is an authoritative and exciting reference in this general area. (Rehnberg, 1979)

10. Assertiveness: "I am completely confident I am assertive enough in presenting my qualifications to prospective employers."

Assertiveness training is generally available to those who might rate themselves low on this factor. I suppose it's possible to be too assertive in presenting one's qualifications, but I suspect this malady is rare in our field.

The 10 factors are drawn together in Figure 1 as an upward mobility potential self-rating form.

The upward mobility potential score ranges from 20 to 100. The low of 20 is because I believe no one has zero potential for upward mobility; nor has anyone yet achieved a perfect score of 100 (and then presumably gone on to run for President). On a limited sample thus far, scores range quite evenly across the scale.

A score on the low side is no cause for despair. The scale is approximate and probably incomplete in the first place. Moreover, you may be the kind of perfectionist who rates himself or herself on the hard side. Or, for good and sufficient reasons, you may be well-satisfied in your present position. Moreover, people with lower upward mobility potential score have nowhere to go but upward. Virtually every one of the 10 factors is susceptible to substantial betterment over time through improved self-awareness, planning, training and education, or even by well-considered change in your own perspective on the profession.

Beyond that, there are things we must all do together, the things AVA can help us all with, as we help make AVA stronger. This includes some difficult-to-do things which, nevertheless, must be done; for example, a regional and national professional employment service, and attitude change advocacy with employers or potential employers.