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VOLUNTEERS--AN ENDANGERED SPECIES OR NEW BREED

National 4-H News - Grossinger's Speech

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Volunteering doubled in the past ten years. So it seems to be thriving according to a 1974 Census Bureau/ACTION Study which showed that in April of that year there were 37.8 million active volunteers. By now, and according to other authorities, we believe that if every volunteer influenced just one other person, more than a third of the U.S. population was affected. We hope the U.S. Census Bureau puts volunteering into the 1980 questionnaire, for there are many other questions we'd like answers for!

But we do know that older Americans are volunteering much more than they used to. And it is good for their mental health, for finding a new vocation and retirement identity, learning how to use political power are all needs of the elderly.

To the traditional housewife volunteer, we might apply the "Endangered Species" name. Economic pressures, Women's Lib and more paid work opportunities growing out of volunteer experience are drawing them into the labor market. 68% of all women join the labor force during their years, between 21 and 60. Many are quite mobile, moving horizontally as well as vertically as volunteers and as paid workers. For volunteering is no longer doing unattractive jobs out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*. Instead it offers an avenue of social mobility, to new learning which may be counted toward job eligibility according to Civil Service, or academic credit, according to the Educational Testing Service at Princeton.

We know too, you don't have to be rich to volunteer. "Maximum feasible participation of the poor" in OEO program planning and operation has opened a new world for 12% of the volunteers studied in 1974 - they had incomes below \$4,000 per year!

Volunteer leadership is an evolving concept which may become a profession some day. It takes a special kind of personality, not just anyone, and we've learned the hard way that the wrong person trained is still the wrong person! Charles Truax studies three personality characteristics which proved more important in the

helping relationship, counselling, which is an important element in volunteer leadership:

nonpossessive warmth
accurate empathy
genuineness.

Matching needs to needs takes a great deal of sensitivity to individual differences and trust in volunteers, so that people will feel chosen for a special reason, not just handed a job anyone could do. The trust has to be mutual and the choice open to the other people involved, too: the "volunteers" should have some voice in the contract, and so should staff members whose work will be affected by the volunteer. Once all are agreed on common goals, they are then free to work out their own ways to get there. This means no formula, road map or set rules: every situation is unique and must be negotiated. This led a psychiatrist friend of mine to point out that a volunteer leader needs a high tolerance for ambiguity and confusion. True. If you need everything in neat bundles lined up in an orderly sequence, don't get into volunteer leadership: people exercising their free will are likely to be very creative, but they also make waves. Not everyone can stand having the boat rocked unexpectedly!

One of the rewards of working with the older volunteers is seeing how good they are: how much life has given them in wisdom, self-discipline, coping skills. Watching them blossom out as they carve out a new identity and role for themselves is very gratifying. I believe it reverses senescence for them, and it prevents their wisdom and skills from going to waste. One man claims his arthritis doesn't hurt him on Mondays or Thursdays, when he volunteers.

Jumping a generation in matching volunteers to groups has proved very effective. The young and the old both feel shunted aside by the parent age group who carry most of the major responsibilities, so they understand each other and their common problems.

Leadership means enabling other people to develop to their fullest capacity. Not trying to be all things to all people, but bringing out capacities that other people didn't know they had. Shared leadership as an ideal gives everyone a chance to do what he does best and get recognition for being good at it. This is a very important human experience, to find out that what you can do is appreciated by other people, that you have something to give. Everyone should have that experience. So we have to insure that

it's possible by providing out of pocket expense money, lunches, transportation - all the things which the very young and the very old are unlikely to be able to provide for themselves. These are legitimate administrative expenses, part of our budget plan. Not the humiliating experience to have to withdraw because of inflation/fixed income pressures.

Many volunteers are becoming interested in policy making and public issues as they discover widespread needs in their communities. They appreciate access to the decision-makers in the organizations for which they work, and they often have very good ideas about the problems and policies of organizations. So service volunteering frequently leads to promotion to administrative roles: interpretation of the program, trainer of new volunteers, advocacy before community legislators, committee and board roles. Volunteering is an excellent field experience for learning citizenship skills. People can often have much more impact as volunteers than as staff members.

The days of unilateral volunteering have passed. We get extremely ingrown and defensive if we resent having volunteers active in organizations other than our own. It's good for 4-H to know what the PTA and the Scouts are doing. If we let people move horizontally into other organizations they may return to us ready to take on higher level jobs, having been trained by the other organization. And organizations are pooling resources, working cooperatively and planning ahead together as never before, because of the budget crunch on us all. This kind of cooperation cuts overhead costs. It enriches and extends services. One wonders why we didn't do it until we had to! Learning as a volunteer can take many forms - a guest speaker at lunchtime, a field trip to each others' facilities, sharing manuals, films and program materials. The best kind of sharing and highest tribute to a volunteer is to send him forth as a trainer to other agencies. That's real recognition!

Understanding some theories of motivation may help us hold volunteers just as much as it will improve recruitment. At both stages, we have to be careful about untested assumptions and stereotyping. We are likely to think we know, act accordingly and then find out that a person's objectives or feelings are not what we supposed they were. The important thing is to pay attention, to listen and watch for non-verbal clues, as well as what people are able to express. I'm convinced that most people have a sort of Walter Mitty "rescue fantasy." Paid or not, they hope the job will

provide an opportunity to make a big difference to somebody else. And it happens, fortunately, just often enough to keep the hope alive.

But psychologists have identified three general categories of motivating forces, according to Marlene Wilson's Effective Management of Volunteers: for power, in the sense of doing together what I couldn't accomplish alone, overcoming my powerlessness. A hardware store in North Bend, Oregon has a marvelous sign in the window: "Together we can do it yourself!" Then, there's an affiliation need: I want to be with these people and belong. Finally, Marlene thinks the ideal motivation from an organization standpoint is achievement - I want to be productive, and know what I accomplished. She points out that the more you accommodate my kind of motivation, the more energy I will muster to live up to your expectations.

Others have pointed out that energy levels are tied to clarity of goals - what seems like apathy may simply be indecisiveness or not knowing what first steps to take. Orientation must supply a clear vision of the ideal, and good leadership will continue clarifying objectives and sharpening focus on goals to keep everyone energized. The person who has a part in designing goals and objectives will make them his own, and energy levels will rise accordingly. It's very hard to get pepped up about someone else's ideals and goals - our individual value systems and self-images are wrapped up with this and we need a chance to think through the implications before we make common goals our own.

As volunteer administrators, we need a great deal of faith in human nature and in volunteers, especially. Sometimes I think this goes back to whether our own nature is optimistic or pessimistic. But one thing I'm sure of: what ever we really expect of people is what they feel, and they behave accordingly. If we really think I'm ok, you're ok, we'll bring out the best in people - and for volunteers, the best is great!

Charles Hendry as dean of the Toronto School of Social Work described his New Understandings of Leadership to the American Camping Association in a meaningful way:

- THE HEAD - who got there by election or appointment
- A HEAD - a naturally influential person to whom people inevitably turn, no matter what title they have at the moment
- ahead - the leader who anticipates needs planfully, and is ready with the information needed, a range of options for strategies to meet them

Hendry is an optimist, too, for he feels the "ahead" leadership can be learned, and I feel that's the kind volunteers respond to with ever-increasing commitment and competence. Such leadership is confident, and builds volunteer confidence - and that's all they really need from us - new breed and old, they're all pretty special people. Our jobs are pretty special, too, working with the best breed of people in the world!