Moving Beyond the Volunteer Management System

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Picture yourself standing in front of a large poster board with a packet of Post-it® Notes in one hand and a pen in the other hand. You are a volunteer manager. Your task is to identify all of the tasks you perform in your job. Write each task on a Post-it® Note and stick it to the poster board in front of you. I will assume that you will begin to list tasks such as: answer inquiries, interview potential volunteers, return phone calls, develop orientation and training materials, write volunteer job descriptions, check on references, conduct training, identify volunteer opportunities, train staff about volunteers, manage volunteers, plan national volunteer recognition week, write thank you notes to volunteers, schedule volunteers, produce a volunteer newsletter, evaluate volunteers, etc. etc. etc. You will easily have 20 to 30 Post-it® Notes on your poster board. When viewed as a set of unrelated tasks, managing volunteers seems overwhelming. If however, we take the Post-it® Notes and group them into related activities we begin to develop a pattern or plan for the work. Communication tasks might include phone calls, letter writing, interviewing, newsletters, and evaluations. Arranging the parts into organized components is a systems approach to volunteer management. A system "is an organized, integrated whole made up of diverse but interrelated and interdependent parts" (Webster, 1996).

Researchers and practitioners have long recognized that volunteer managers deal with diverse managerial responsibilities, and for many years have tried to make a simple itemization of the functions that are required to manage volunteer programs. Harriet Naylor, one of the early pioneers in the profession of volunteer management, wrote about the importance of finding, training, and working with volunteers.

Some of the earliest literature about volunteer management systems comes from 4-H, a major program of the Cooperative Extension Service. Several studies done in the early 1970s discussed the important of volunteers for program delivery in reaching the 4-H goals. Historically, 4-H has viewed volunteer management in the context of leadership development as they developed models for training volunteers to serve in leadership capacities in youth development programs. Volunteers were (and are) engaged extensively as group and project leaders. It is not surprising, therefore that one of the earliest volunteer system models was derived from a leadership development model composed of "seven sub-processes or phases: leader identification, leader selection, leader orientation, leader training, leader utilizations, leader recognition and leader evaluation." (Smith, Miller, Kwarteng, 1987). Boyce (1971) believed this model correlated with the basic components of a volunteer development program: identifying volunteer opportunities, selecting volunteers, orienting volunteers, utilizing volunteers, recognizing volunteers, and evaluating volunteers, programs and program managers. By 1992 this I.S.O.T.U.R.E. Model (derived from the first letter of each of the preceding components) for volunteer program development was widely recognized among 4-H professionals as a practical, easy to learn and apply system for volunteer program development (Safrit, Smith, 1992).

Marlene Wilson, (1976) one of the earliest authors on volunteer management practices, taught the first formal volunteer management courses focusing on six components of a volunteer management system: organizational climate; planning and evaluation; designing jobs and recruiting; interviewing and placing; training and communications. Ellis (1986)

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divided the components into new subsets and developed a Volunteer Management Task Analysis that included: program planning and administration; recruitment and P.R.; interviewing and screening; orientation & training; supervision; motivation and recognition; program evaluation; record keeping and reporting; and other responsibilities.

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In the 1980s volunteer management was clearly an emerging profession. Sarah Jane Rehnborg, at The Charles A. Dana Center, The University of Texas in Austin, was one of the first practitioners to focus her dissertation research on a study of the competencies required for volunteer managers. This research led to the development of the four functional areas of volunteer management in the performance-based assessment program for the certification of volunteer administrators through the Association for Volunteer Administration (Rehnborg, 1982). The four AVA functional areas were identified as program planning and organizing; staffing and directing; controlling; and agency, community and professional relations

Through the 1990s a variety of management systems have been identified. The LOOP System promotes locating, orienting, operating, and perpetuating (Penrod, 1991). The Volunteer Rerention Cycle focused on pre-recruitment, recruitment, interview, selection/placement, orientation, training, review, reassignment, recognition, assessment, and coaching (MacKenzie & Moore 1993). The GEMS System identifies generate, educate, mobilize, and sustain as the key elements of volunteer program development (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998).

A relatively clear pattern has emerged over the years regarding the core functions of a volunteer manager. Most "systems" included identifying needs, recruiting and selecting volunteers, training and supervision, and recognition. In recent years, some educators and authors have begun to promote higher-level functions such as program planning, risk management, advocacy, and program evaluation. In some ways, this is a return to those early professionals who initially identified the importance of organizational culture, program planning, and evaluation. Fisher & Cole (1993) were the first authors to link the concept of leadership with management of volunteer programs and were also the first to introduce the language of impact assessment, quantitative data, and cost benefits comparisons to volunteer programs.

Contemporary researchers continue to identify new components to create new systems for managing volunteer programs. Trevor Boutall, *A Standards Framework for Managing Volunteers,* published in this issue, has taken the components of a system and established standard of performance for each component. In 2001 AVA reviewed its credentialing program and moved away from focusing on the components of volunteer management and redesigned its credentialing program around five core competencies that serve as a foundation for the profession: commitment to the profession; planning and conceptual design; resource development and management; accountability; and perspective and responsiveness (AVA, 2001).

There is no question that as a profession we must be able to identify basic competencies necessary for effectively carrying out the work of volunteer management. But, as the profession matures, success requires more than a set of standardized skills.

> *While agreeing with and supporting the current renewed focus on identifying and clarifying critical professional competencies needed by volunteer administrators, we believe that equally (if not more) important for the future of volunteer administration are those personal capacities needed in contemporary volunteer administration … the higher level attitudes and aspirations*

needed to take fundamental competencies to our profession and easily adapt them to our ever-changing world. Professional competencies are knowledge and skills based, and serve as a critical intellectual foundation for many professions. They involve fundamental levels of cognitive learning, including assessing, comprehending and applying knowledge (Bloom, 1956) to our day-to-day roles and responsibilities as administrators of volunteer programs. (Safrit & Merrill, 1999, p. 29)

To create professionals for today's increasingly complex world, we must look beyond education that focuses on skills based training. Traditionally, those entering the field have had to rely on workshops that focus exclusively on the individual components of the work, such as position design, recruitment, retention, and recognition. These skill-building workshops help managers do the work, but they focus only on the technical aspects of the job. As long as we continue to focus on these individual components — the systems approach — and fail to demand educational opportunities that develop intellectual and personal capacity, we will continue to have individuals who view the work as a job, rather than as a profession. Professionals recognize and foster educational opportunities that increase their capacity to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and extrapolate information that can be applied to professional responsibilities and situations. Professionals understand the need to support and encourage research that builds an educational foundation. As a profession, managers of volunteers should be demanding greater emphasis on leadership development and personal capacity-building opportunities from their local networks, their international conference, and educational institutions. Two-hour skill building workshops may provide quick answers to immediate problems, but they fail, in the long term, to cultivate the critical thinking skills to help individuals ponder, reflect, and create the new systems that will support volunteerism into the future. In her keynote address at the 1st AVA Asia Pacific Regional Conference, Arlene Schindler emphasized that we must expand our knowledge and develop our capacity as leaders in a profession that is rapidly being recognized around the world.

We must be informed not only in the field of volunteerism, but in economics, trade, medical advances, and social issues. We, who provide opportunities for citizens to participate in the shaping of their societies, must — above all, be informed — about emerging issues, about trends, about what is happening next door as well as what is happening at home. We must be informed beyond our field of volunteerism.

Secondly, we must be trained and skilled, not only by attending conferences such as this, but by broadening our own personal experiences, continuing with our education, becoming volunteers ourselves, understanding and taking advantage of the progress being made in compatible fields. For instance, what is the latest thinking in organizational development, what are the new insights in management, in the required attributes of leadership? And then, we must integrate the best of these into our personal management and leadership practices. (Shindler, 2002, p. 8)

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