Résumés and Interviews: Hardly for Volunteers

Nick Levinson, New York City

Volunteers are bursting in. Better print up some applications, collect résumés, and schedule interviews.

No, wait a minute.

They sound like the best practices of volunteer management. They reveal experience, point to relationships with past managers, and are a forum for interests. By forcing applicants into writing, they become clear and accountable, and you select clean volunteers, perhaps the best of the lot. After years of use in paid employment, these should be good tools, facilitating consistent judgments and reducing your liabilities.

I should approve. But I don't.

In my experience as a volunteer, they don't work. I'm uncomfortable with them, and, with few exceptions, I don't think you should use them. As a coordinator, I've never needed them.

1. Programs that use them tend to apply the wrong model to volunteer selection. They choose volunteers much as they choose paid staff, ignoring a key difference.

If you have an opening for one child care worker, paid, and you receive ten applications, you select the finest and thank the other nine for coming. The nine leave, even if they're almost as good.

If you have an opening for one child care worker, volunteer, and ten applicants arrive, you put all ten to work. Even if nine lack requisite personalities, maybe they'll drive vans, scout sites for day trips, do renovations, or answer parents' questions.

Strictly speaking, using résumés and interviews doesn't prevent extensive use of volunteers. But, in practice, the mindset of high selectivity dampens volunteer inclusion.

When I'm in charge, I think of what work needs to get done. I see someone around. I ask if they can do it. Asking takes 60 seconds. If they affirm, I set them up and check their work. That's all the résumé I need.

2. These systems foster competition where none should exist.

I want to add to agency capabilities, not kick anyone out. When I contact an organization, I want to help where they want it. I don't like being rated above others who are also good, so they get curtailed or terminated. I want us all to stay, so the organization can do more.

I also don't want a rating as less good and therefore useless, if I can add to your output and your fulfillment of institutional goals. Grading on a curve doesn't help either of us. We should both be doing as much as possible, in addition to what everyone else does.

I craft my applications consistently with that value. I downplay my abilities. Since my most advanced experiences and capabilities are mainly from volunteering, downplaying is easier.

This has an unfortunate advantage. Many managers prefer that volunteers be inexperienced, so they won't compete with folks on the payroll. Thus, by downplaying, I look less threatening, and more palatable.

But overreliance on a résumé can make it

Nick Levinson has volunteered over several decades in three dozen centers, including issue-oriented groups and political campaigns, sometimes simultaneously, in the New York City metropolitan area. He prefers walking in, gathering his assignments, and executing them. In some cases, he appointed himself as ad hoc volunteer coordinator, too. Occasionally, he pesters managers.

harder for anyone ever to accept that I can perform a needed task. Waiting until the résumé has been forgotten is harder when they're used for initial classification, and I have to break out of an assigned track.

These first-day screens lay an ambivalent impression. Instead of seeing your professionalism, I fear you won't use most volunteers, and therefore that your organization isn't committed to its goals. I think about leaving, and I've hardly started.

3. Résumés tend to hide what's not written.

I've used mine to acknowledge shortcomings, showing I'm human. But even those don't help enough.

We may have skills we can't talk much about. For example, I have some skills in law, electricity, and plumbing, but I'm not licensed in any of those fields. I can do those kinds of work legally, but I have to choose the environment, relationships, and tasks, and I have to reserve my option to decline. And, for some of it, confidentiality means I can't talk about past successes. So there's not much I can put on a résumé about these fields.

4. Interests tend to get confused.

Résumés are used partly to identify an applicant's pattern of interests.

Yet, what we've done for ages may be something we hate. I've had very good technical skills in computers. But I've wished my computer had a neck, so I could strangle it. Those technical skills have probably saved me thousands of dollars and consecutive months I couldn't afford to lose. I'm glad I've read hundreds of books in cultivating those skills. But, in themselves, computers are not fun. I never volunteer anywhere so I can run their computers. This has jolted quite a few people. What we've done well for eons may not be our interest.

We may instead volunteer in order to develop a budding pursuit. Your question then is our skill level and degree of responsibility. Evidence of that just may not fit on a résumé, with its emphasis on long experience and earlier schooling.

5. Interests are distracting. We're giving service to further your ends.

You may have no need whatsoever for any of my skills. But I may support your organization's mission and be happy emptying your garbage cans.

I want to know your needs. I'll tell you if I can fulfill any of them, which ones I can't help with, and whether I can refer you to someone else for some of them.

Interviews should allow that, since the interviewer is an insider. But interviewers feel they shouldn't tell me about open projects until everything else has been decided.

Please tell us your wants.

6. Titles are in short supply.

Many places refuse to give titles to volunteers to describe their functions. They're afraid to acknowledge what volunteers do. And some of us refuse titles.

Count on skills, not titles.

7. Relationships are important. Past relationships may tell you something about future ones.

But how much do we ever learn from those named in an interview or on a résumé?

Past managers won't risk litigation.

Praise may damn when organizations compete. And any groups with overlapping constituencies may compete.

As a volunteer, I've experienced omission of my work. In one place, much of it was described as having been done by a staffer elsewhere.

Because volunteers are unpaid, some staff believe we don't do much of value. They downgrade the work we do.

A more invidious assumption is that volunteering is a career stage from which one should escape into a paid position. So, some managers are dubious about our doing more volunteer work. More than dubious, they may misinterpret our choice to volunteer without pay as a refusal to work for them, and feel that our application elsewhere is stabbing them in the back.

Many nonprofits are interested more in our not volunteering elsewhere than in working us while we're there. Their personnel recommendations are going to be tepid, at best. A few recommendations, negative and posi-

tive, are informative. They're infrequent, unfortunately.

8. Responsibility doesn't need to be measured by a résumé, nor is it so evident from an interview.

Assign work along an ascending scale of responsibility, and examine relationships and results.

9. In most contexts, even competitive ones, screening turns out to be completely unnecessary.

Your worst nightmare might be spies, a spy being someone who wants information about the agency in order to advance the interests of a competing agency. Spies are more frequent in political campaigns. Even organizations that are indirectly involved in politics tend to use many of the same people and methods, and they, too, worry about spies.

Rather than screen them out, turn them to your advantage. If you can work them, you can work nearly anyone. Here's how: Spies want your trust, and usually spy better from inside. Solution: Give them harmless outdoor work. Let them leaflet for your cause, accompanied by a trusted leafletter. They won't risk throwing leaflets away, lest their companion report it. They'll want to be good, so you'll invite them inside as a reward.

Instead, when they come back from a great job educating everyone in town, invite them to leaflet again. And again, and again, for as many times as they're willing. (Rotate the companions.) You're protected and they're getting a needed job done.

10. Extensive intake simply to keep you busy is a miserable waste of time. The agency needs you more.

There's plenty to do by focusing on recruitment, retention, assignments, and monitoring managers' use of volunteers.

SAVING GRACES

There's a legitimate use for all these tools.

Security for sensitive work is a reasonable concern, and for that you should know an applicant's background.

However, the same tools are overused in order to eliminate applicants or narrow volunteers' work for irrelevant reasons.

And if you try to limit these tools to security reviews, managers who see volunteers as taking their jobs will start claiming that security issues lurk in most of our backgrounds.

Many paid managers, staff, and consultants see volunteers as competition for jobs. Our willingness to work for free creates a model that disturbs them. They don't want the CEO influenced into not spending money on people. Therefore, they'll want to prove that volunteers can't do much, except maybe empty garbage cans, and often they're woozy even about that.

You'll need to track how these tools are actually used. You'll have to force managers to incorporate volunteers, perhaps dropping this or that one but ultimately using many, and using them effectively.

Move quickly from screening to utilization. Early during utilization, you and the volunteer should explore more possibilities. Volunteers can advance rapidly, as abilities and commitments warrant.

Who Will Lead the Change?

Jill Canono, Tallahassee, Florida

During the last decade, not-for-profit organizations have followed the trend of many business models and allocated resources to rethink, re-invent, re-organize, re-tool, and reengineer our volunteer programs to better fit the needs of "stakeholders." Interestingly, the prefix "re" is defined in the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary as, "again, back, backward." Have our efforts and momentum been moving in the wrong direction? If we truly want to elevate the field and build capacity, it is imperative that a new conceptual framework is developed using different thinking, new language, and fresh approaches that are generated, promoted, and used by professionals within the field. Current thinking among experts in organization change management such as Peter Block, Peter Senge, and Margaret Wheatley suggest that it is time to "transform" existing models and their supporting systems. Transformation, as defined in the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, is a process that implies "major change in form, nature, and function."

There is a need for significant change within the field of volunteer leadership to better position the profession and change the existing management model. This need has been a growing concern, and well documented in recent reports such as *Positioning the Profession* (Silver, 1999), *A Guide to Investing in Volunteer Resources Management: Improve Your Philanthropic Portfolio* (UPS Foundation, 2003), and *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report* (Hager, 2004). In these reports specific recommendations have been made; yet, a more perplexing and reoccurring question within the field is, "what will the model be" and "who will lead the change?"

Margaret Wheatley (2004), a renowned leadership and organizational development expert, uses the analogy of the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly to describe the process of transformation in which organizations experience change. As she describes it, a caterpillar first begins its metamorphosis when it starts to produce small, imaginal cells on its body. These cells are perceived by the caterpillar as foreign bodies that are attacking it. The caterpillar's immune system begins to produce antibodies to kill the imaginal cells. Individual imaginal cells are destroyed by the caterpillar until the cells begin to reproduce in small clusters. As the clusters grow in size, the caterpillar is unable to eliminate all the cells. Gradually, the cell clusters begin to envelop the caterpillar's body until it is completely encased and its resistance surrenders to its natural evolution. After a transformative period in the cocoon stage, the butterfly emerges. The new organism is no longer a caterpillar, nor does it bear any resemblance to its previous state. In fact, there is evidence that the DNA of a caterpillar and a butterfly are actually different; thus the transformation becomes complete. The implications of this are huge: if a transformation of this sort can occur in nature, it serves as a metaphor of hope that change is possible in the most resistant of situations.

Wheatley makes the point that not unlike the caterpillar, those within any profession who are the first or isolated voices that call for change are sometimes muted, ostracized, or replaced. However, as more individuals form clusters of conversations and activities, then true change begins. This author agrees with Wheatley that it is time we use our imaginations to create a new state of being—one that does not resemble today's model and systems. Albert Einstein said "Imagination is

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more important than knowledge." Today, we know we need to change, but it is the full power of our collective imaginations that will manifest a transformation that will result in our evolution.

To transform our models, organizations and programs will require a large number of individuals working together collectively to lead the change. First, it is important that academics produce and incorporate research on volunteerism in curricula and coursework throughout higher education. This will spur their colleagues and students to pursue scholarly investigation of this vital and evolving field. Research for scholarly journals should include naturalistic approaches so that themes, patterns, and trends at the grassroots level can be identified and used to share findings and recommendations. Second, recognized experts have the most influence and clout to promote cutting edge models and new practices to elite and powerful audiences such as CEOs, board members, and funding sources within all sectors. Capitalizing on advocacy and educational opportunities among these elite groups can increase the receptivity and motivation for them to lead change within established institutions. Third, consultants can open the door for change by facilitating the design and implementation of new models with their clients. Entering into contracts to provide traditional strategies and approaches that are merely repackaged does little to further the field or meet the real needs of the organization's staff and volunteers. Fourth, volunteer management associations are positioned to work closely with their membership to convene, facilitate, formulate, design, endorse, and disseminate new models. As a result of widespread and frequent convening opportunities, collective wisdom could be better garnered to increase and enhance conversations that expedite change within the field. Most important, volunteer leaders can benefit from creating vibrant — or engaging in existing — "communities of practice," such as local DOVAs or AVA online discussion forums, so they can meet regularly, either in person or via the internet, to discuss, exchange, and develop ideas about ways to design, initiate, and expedite the transformation. It is through their conversations and experimentation at the grassroots level that we can learn the most and guide new thinking and practices.

New volunteer management models can best be developed from the leadership and contributions of many. Everyone has a role to play on the local, state, national, and international level. The collective wisdom of all will produce the most imaginative and viable models. The time is now, the leaders are each of us within our own spheres of influence, and our mission is to become unified so we can manifest our vision.

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