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ABSTRACT

The introduction and development of volunteer administration and management has led to better functioning volunteer organizations, but "management" is the wrong word to use in all organizational settings with volunteers. Management certainly is not correct terminology when referring to the relationship between a national headquarters and the local, volunteer-run chapters of national volunteer organizations. This can be explained by the lack of essential organizational control in those organizations, the abstract nature of shared values and practices, and the difficulty of imposing sanctions. For this complicated relationship to work, other types of governance are needed that incorporate the complexity, diversity, and dynamics of the relationship between the national organization and its members.

Management Is Not Always the Right Word!

Lucas C.P.M. Meijs

INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to "control" or change the behavior of volunteers at the local and regional levels of national volunteer organizations? This is a major managerial and governing challenge for any national federation of all-volunteer affiliates in local municipalities. From the perspective of the national organization, a certain level of consistency in the functioning of local chapters is needed to be successful. On the other hand, local chapters must be free to adjust national policies to local needs.

As a rule, general policies and practices are supposed to be the same in all local chapters. These policies and practices can be very precisely formulated and strict, but they can also be very vague. Examples of policies are: the organization only allows men to be members, is open to both men and women, or that the board must be at least 25 percent female. Experience shows that some policies are easier to implement at the local level than others. Is it a problem if local chapters take it upon themselves to circumvent or change the policies?

The ideas presented in this article are based on research done in large organizations in the Netherlands with a national scope. Some of the Dutch organizations have more than 1,000 local chapters with more than 20,000 volunteers nationwide. Bear in mind there are only 630 municipalities in the Netherlands! Volunteers perform the primary functions of these organizations, and the local and regional levels are entirely volunteer-run. At the national level there is paid staff, but no organization has more than 50 employees. The regional organizations have an important function in the internal democracy of the organization by gathering the opinions of local chapters as well as supporting them. However, sometimes they develop procedures and activities of their own that differ from the levels above and below them.

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VOLUNTEERS AND THE CONCEPT OF "MANAGEMENT"

A popular definition of management is the process of "planning, organizing, directing, and controlling the activities of employees in combination with other resources to accomplish stated organizational goals" (Steers, et al., 1985). The effectiveness of certain styles of management depends on the situation, and so managers must be able to "read situations" (Morgan, 1986). In transferring management skills from companies with paid staff to national organizations which manage volunteers, one crosses two borders: the border between for-profit and non-profit organizations, and the border between paid and unpaid staff. These differences have been researched and described elsewhere.

Volunteer management and administration is still a relatively young professional area. It is rather well developed in the United States compared to the Netherlands. Its scarce literature is largely U.S.-based, too. The literature concentrates on subjects such as the place of volunteers within organizations, who directs or coordinates them, how to design volunteer jobs, and paid/volunteer staff relations. There is also literature on functional management areas such as marketing and public relations, fund raising, and recruiting and selecting volunteers. The application of general management tools has certainly given volunteer organizations a framework and direction.

Even in the most specialized volunteer literature, suggested management practices are built upon clear relationships between people and organizational levels. Mostly these imply hierarchical and functional relationships in volunteer settings such as non-profit agencies where organizational control is accepted or easily enforced. The situation changes when it comes to national volunteer organizations with local chapters.

Pearce (1993) makes clear that organizational control of volunteers is largely based on three elements: 1) personal relationships; 2) utilizing volunteers for tasks they find personally satisfying; and 3) appeals to shared values.

Every organization has "core" volunteers and more peripheral volunteers. Core volunteers usually spend more time with the organization, give priority to their membership commitments, and are highly visible to other members. Peripheral volunteers do what they are asked to do because of the person who does the asking, and not necessarily because of the position the person holds. Meaningful assignments and appeals to shared values can be effective as control mechanisms under certain conditions, but personal relationships are the primary force with which all-volunteer organizations get their work done.

MANAGEMENT MISTAKES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

All national organizations develop internal systems for making decisions and setting new policies. For example, they may call a meeting of local or regional representatives to set national policies. Sometimes the role of this meeting is simply to "applaud" decisions that the national board and paid staff have come up with, but sometimes this national meeting is indeed the place where there is discussion about decisions. The accepted point of view is that all local chapters will follow these decisions because their representatives were involved in the process.

Absolutely wrong.

Local chapters rarely function as the national level expects. Often local chapters do their best and are not intentionally doing things differently from national policy, but they focus their activities on the primary mission of the organization—what it was established to do for the community. Local chapters may not have much interest in national concerns such as producing standard financial reports, fund raising to support the national office staff, or even recruiting new members if there is no immediate local shortage. The perspective and priorities at the local level are rarely the same as at the national level. Requests from or campaigns developed

by the national office are postponed or forgotten.

There are also those local chapters that just want to do their work differently. They develop different solutions from those suggested by the national level. They may not even open the mail from the national office. Cynics say that within ten miles of the drive home from the national meeting such members have already invented ways of dodging the supposedly agreed-upon policies.

Here is one example from the Netherlands. A membership organization has activities for children from 6 to 17 years of age. At 17 the youth must decide if they want to become volunteers or leave the organization. Frequently they leave at age 14 or 15 because they feel they already have accomplished all the exciting things available. To prevent early departures, the organization developed a national policy for local chapters prohibiting popular activities for 6-to-8-year-old children such as outdoor camping and special games. Only teenagers would get this chance.

Nevertheless, some local chapters continued to sponsor the most popular events with young children. To gain control, the national level tried to sanction these chapters by cancelling insurance for the forbidden activities. In response, some local chapters simply obtained different insurance. Meanwhile, the local chapters that rebelled against national policy continued to use the national name and image.

Traditional management techniques seem to be ineffective in creating local chapters that function as hoped for by the national level. It is not easy to direct local chapters, let alone control them, without losing them altogether. Here are some reasons for the "failure" of management techniques in these situations.

ABSENT PERSONAL
RELATIONS AND CONTACTS

In the Netherlands and the United States contact between the national level and local chapters is very limited and impersonal. The balance between the numbers of paid staff and volunteers at the national level and volunteers at the local level is so uneven (the average in the Dutch study is 200 national versus 15,000 local) that it is almost impossible to have personal contacts with most, if not all, volunteers. The national level can try to reach everyone through a newsletter or member magazine. But will individual members read, understand, and follow national "management" requests?

Most organizations do try to have regular written and oral contact with members of local boards, especially chairpeople, secretaries, and treasurers. But research indicates that a lot of the mail coming from the national level (by some guesses, as high as 20 percent) is opened too late, or not at all. Attendance at national meetings of specific officers can be as poor as 50 percent.

National volunteers and staff tell many stories about the difficulties they have getting in touch with someone at the local level. There are stunning examples of local chapters never returning telephone calls, refusing to use answering machines, endlessly postponing meetings with representatives from the national level, and failing to inform the national office about name and address changes.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL
AND GEOGRAPHIC DISTANCE

Of course geographical distance is also an important factor. Not only does distance hinder communication by making it less frequent, less personal, and more expensive, but it also prevents people from meeting each other in accidental, informal ways. In local volunteer organizations, members are likely to meet each other in the street or in malls, schools, and churches. At these moments members are reminded of the commitments they made to the organization or, to put it more precisely, to the neighbor they meet. The effect of distance can be felt even at the regional level.

THE ABSTRACT NATURE
OF SHARED VALUES

Organizational control is helped by shared values, and practices based upon these values. These form the traditions or mores of the organization. The more similar the mores among the local chapters of an organization, the more they contribute to organizational control. In the biggest national organizations any similarity of values across the entire organization is of a very abstract nature or perhaps more of an illusion than real.

One group studied in the Netherlands is a merger of three different Christian-based churches. Most local chapters of this organization open their meetings with a Bible reading. Some also pray. But there are other chapters that just start with the business at hand. Although the national organization believes it has a sound, shared-values basis in religion, moving from chapter to chapter shows differences between mores and practices. Effective behavior is different in different chapters. The differences are so strong that some members are not accepted in all chapters.

Another organization officially decided that their policy would be for local chapters to develop their own activities and carry them out as they wished. For example, local groups decide themselves if they want mixed boys and girls activities, allow girls to be members, or whether to require uniforms. Such a policy of local decision-making is easy to "control" from the national level, but as each local group evolves its own programs, connection to the national level and any set of shared values becomes increasingly vague. Eventually it can be questioned whether allowing each local chapter to be independent will produce sufficient shared values for total organizational success.

SANCTIONS AND THE NEED FOR
CONTINUING RELATIONSHIPS

Volunteer management practices allow organizations to remove non-functioning volunteers. If the organization's volunteers fail to meet their obligations, those already in peripheral roles simply will not be asked again. This is not as easy with core volunteers.

In order to be willing to deal with members who are not contributing as desired, organizations must feel confident that it is possible to find new volunteers. The situation is made more difficult in the Netherlands where many churches, grass-roots organizations, self-help and advocacy groups knowingly accept people as volunteers who are refused elsewhere. In addition, at the national level it is not so easy to terminate a relationship with a local volunteer, especially since local volunteers who have contact with the national level are almost certainly core volunteers in their chapters (Sills, 1957). Even trying to fire such members would certainly lead to a big political fight between the national and local boards, a fight that would end in a Pyrrhic victory.

DISCUSSION

So the question arises: What should national organizations do to "control" or change the behavior of volunteers at the local and regional levels instead of managing them?

It is clear that most local chapters do accept the leadership of the national level, and try to implement national policies as well as they can. There are techniques that can be used to try to get sufficient consistency at the local level, but "management" it is not. The concept of management is based upon clear relationships between the managers and those who are managed. Such a relationship between national headquarters and local chapters simply cannot be clarified even with attempts at written contracts. It is too easy for local chapters to dodge such agreements on the basis that they outline intent, not rules.

New models of interaction are needed that go beyond traditional management, and that keep in mind the uncertain nature of the relationship between the national and local levels of an organiza-

tion. Three different types of interaction and "governability" (Kooiman, 1993) are being studied, and preliminary results were reported at the 1996 I.C.V.A. in Boston. The more concrete results are presented here.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

A national board must work continuously to keep the organization simple. National policies must be uncomplicated, and limited to important issues that relate to the primary processes of the organization. This means making as few demands as possible on the volunteers, especially beyond the mission.

For example, a simple plan for dividing money between the levels (national gets 33 percent of local member contributions) is easier than a complex formula (national gets the first $36 paid by every member, 45 percent of the next $64, and 25 percent of the balance). The more complicated, the more anxious local treasurers become.

Simplification is useful in determining activities, too. For example, one Dutch organization involves 23,000 volunteers in 1,300 local chapters for visits with lonely, sick, and old people "just for a friendly talk" in their own homes. It is very tempting for the national level to prescribe in a very detailed way how many visits should be made, and what should occur during the visits. Instead, the organization has a very simple national policy which is that volunteers and the people they visit decide together on the frequency and type of visits. The only requirements are that the volunteers must go to the home for a visit, and they must respect the privacy of the people they visit.

TRUST

Local chapters must have trust in the national board and paid staff, and in the internal democratic procedures that lead to a decision. To gain such acceptance, the national board visibly must represent the mission and core practices of the organization. Trust can be created by developing quasi-personal contact between the na-

tional and local levels. For example, organizations can establish a "visit national headquarters" program for local volunteers.

One national organization studied has a program in which every week two local groups (60 volunteers) visit the national office. They are welcomed and entertained by the C.E.O., not by a public relations staff member. The mission and accepted practices are presented and discussed. After five years of such visits the plan started paying off in some unexpected ways. Now at local and regional meetings people who have participated in visits to headquarters stand up and say that "the paid staff in the national office work very hard, are honest, and must be trusted."

SUPPORT

Research indicates that national level support of local chapters can be effective in implementing policies and practices. Instead of intervening, and laying down the "law" about what the national organization wants, the national office can foster compliant local chapter behavior by providing needed and wanted support. Such support can be given through ready-to-use materials, consultations from experts, workshops, training, and all kinds of resources.

Using such support materials to implement policies and practices requires a good sense of timing and the right approach. The wrong way to do it is to send materials to local groups and insist that these resources be used. Instead, offer the materials, explaining that the local chapters may use them if helpful and making sure the materials are of excellent quality. The trick is to balance insistence with suggestion.

Part of a good support system can be local chapters helping local chapters. In some organizations, the national level identifies "model" chapters and asks them to share with other chapters their methods and results in implementing a new national policy. Fellow local volunteers generally have more credibility than paid national staff.

But there are also pitfalls to avoid. One organization studied has a strict bylaw defining the allowable forms of cooperation with other organizations. To help enforce it, they produced a list of twenty mistakes made by local chapters in cooperating with others. They attached press clippings, photos, and original letters to drive the point home. The impact of this material is negative and ineffective. Local groups learn only about non-allowed forms of cooperation, and fear becoming the bad examples for next year. As a result, many local groups have decided not to cooperate with other organizations at all, which is not good.

OTHER ISSUES

Management techniques must also be modified and adapted in volunteer groups in which the members are, in turn, representatives of other groups and organizations. Here again, personal relations—so vital to control and consistency—are often weak. This is compounded by the problem of priorities. It can be expected that priority will be given to one's own organization, but not to the group where one is only a representative.

Some volunteers as individuals have problems with "management." For some, volunteering is a way of doing work where they can be autonomous, the boss. Volunteering can be a second chance for people who feel undervalued in other contexts, or even a last resort for some. Often such volunteers are highly motivated and perform well, but they can be tremendously resistant to change within organizations.

Management can also be the wrong term for volunteers in policy-making roles. These people are often well-educated and may be managers themselves in different settings.

A final point is that a "disenchantment" with traditional models of volunteer management can be observed in the United States (Ellis, 1995) whereby volunteers seek more flexibility and independence than simply as assistants to paid staff.

A FINAL REMARK

In conclusion, management is a useful instrument for organizing volunteer work. A volunteer's time should never be wasted (Ellis, 1986), and good planning, organizing, directing, and controlling are effective. But one should not overestimate the potential for managing volunteers, particularly in all-volunteer, national organizations. In real-life situations, direction and control are limited in such organizations, and other methods must be found that allow more of a contribution by individual volunteers. Needed are techniques that do not try to reduce the complexity, diversity, and dynamics of the relationship between the national organization and its members, but which incorporate these forces. Indeed, more research is needed to clarify the relationships between different types of organizational settings in which volunteers are active, and the options available for new managerial approaches.

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