Critical Thinking:
Helping Volunteers Make Better Decisions

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Today's non-profit organizations are increasingly called upon to implement more programs and reach larger numbers of clientele without substantial increases in financial, material, and paid staff. Consequently, these organizations must rely more heavily upon volunteers to assist and manage organizational programs. Volunteer administrators cannot always be present when volunteers function in the communities and interact with clientele. As non-formal ambassadors and representatives of non-profit organizations and programs, it is imperative that volunteers be challenged to learn "how to think" rather than just "what to think." They must develop the personal capacities to make critical decisions regarding their actions on behalf of the organization. Unfortunately, such critical decisions in today's highly complex and rapidly-changing social environment are often without simplistic "right" or "wrong" answers or easily-reached solutions. If volunteers are not fully prepared to deal with the ambiguities and situations that demand on-the-spot decisions, they may contribute to issues for the program and organization, and may become more of a liability than an asset. Finally, today's volunteers are increasingly demanding to be part of organizational decision-making related to the programs and activities with which they are involved. Safrit and Merrill (1999) reinforce this observation when they concluded that "Today's . . . volunteers want to be part of the decision-making process, engaged in the planning and evaluation of programs and projects. They look for leadership rather than management" (p. 38).

Additionally, volunteers can be highly effective teachers in a non-profit organization, both of an organization's clientele and other volunteers. Drennan (1980, p. 110) suggested that "Carefully trained volunteer... teachers are as productive as professional instructors." Finley (1987) identified several advantages to having volunteers teach in organizations and serve as organizational representatives in communities. He suggested that volunteers: (a) are most often individuals who talk the same language and share similar life experiences as clientele (including other volunteers); (b) speak with an authority that derives from their experience with utilizing the ideas they teach; (c) are usually respected within their communities, and their recommendations carry weight with clientele; (d) are perceived to be more easily accessible than professional educators; (e) volunteer to teach subject matter in which they are highly interested and, consequently, teach with enthusiasm; (f) are easier for some clientele to relate to than professionals; and (g) inspire confidence and self esteem in clientele.

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The educational partnership between volunteers, organizations and communities has enormous value not only to a specific organization and its clientele, but also to the individual volunteer and the community at large (Finley, 1987). Volunteers benefit organizations in that they extend the organization's outreach to a greater number of clientele. Volunteers generate enthusiasm and interest among clientele, and create a positive image for the organization by allowing it to provide immediate information and services to clientele about specific topics and needs. Volunteers relieve professionals of many time-consuming, individual requests for specific information and services, thus allowing professionals to pursue other organizational needs and objectives. Volunteers enable nonprofit organizations to address a larger number of needs and issues to a greater depth and with more continuity in these times of paid staff maintenance and/or cutbacks.

Organizational clientele benefit from volunteers in that more individuals are able to receive immediate information and/or services regarding specific subjects and needs. A greater number of clientele are able to develop skills and expertise regarding specific subject matter areas, and fulfill specific needs regarding particular issues, because of information and services delivered by volunteers.

The individual volunteer benefits by having the opportunity to pursue a personal interest and consequently gain personal satisfaction, learn new information, develop new skills, or enhance existing knowledge. Volunteers develop leadership and social skills as they interact with clientele and other volunteers. They develop personal pride and self-satisfaction as they help clients and gain status and satisfaction from becoming recognized service providers and experts in specific areas.

Finally, neighborhoods and communities benefit from the contributions of volunteers in that the services and information provided by volunteers help individuals and their families improve their homes, businesses, and neighborhoods. Greater citizen enthusiasm and rapport develop within communities when volunteers share their skills and enthu-

siasm for new information and practices, thus helping others and encouraging others to become interested in a subject. Furthermore, recognizing outstanding local volunteers can contribute to overall community pride.

EXPANDING VOLUNTEER ROLES AND SKILLS

Volunteers can function effectively as integral components of organizations. According to the American Red Cross (1990), they are considered central to the organization, not mere extensions of paid staff. Their jobs range from service and middle management to the highest echelons of leadership. "Paid and volunteer American Red Cross staff believe overwhelmingly that volunteers can handle any job—including managerial positions—if they have the necessary time and skills" (p. 13).

In order for volunteers to function successfully in middle management roles, they "need a chance to grow beyond their immediate job requirements and grow in both technical and interpersonal skills" (American Red Cross, 1990, p. 7). Yeager (1992) stated that "Volunteer managers often need to help groups make decisions. Boards need to set policy for volunteer involvement, staff need to direct the activities of organization, direct service volunteers need to decide how to carry out tasks, and clients need to indicate their preferences and concerns about services, often impacting the volunteer program" (p. 18). Adversely, "Less than satisfactory volunteer work occurs when ... staff or volunteers are: inadequately prepared ... do not understand how to work together; or do not respect each other's ideas" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, no date). Traditionally, volunteer training programs have focused upon specific subject matter, organizational, or interpersonal skills. However, volunteer training opportunities must include components that challenge volunteers to develop important processing skills.

Even more critical is appropriate, learner-focused and application-based training for those volunteers who themselves teach or train organizational clients or other volunteers. Jimmerson and Cordill (1994) concluded that volunteers who teach appear to be self-directed learners, with varying learning

styles yet who prefer being both actively involved in planning training sessions and actively engaged in the training itself. Macduff and Long (1993-1994) and Gaston (2000) proposed volunteer training approaches that involve active listening of volunteer participants and multiple ways for volunteer participants to process information into their own training designs.

Volunteer administrators and managers must challenge all volunteers, and especially volunteer middle managers, to critically analyze the choices facing them, reflect upon the possible outcomes of each choice, and then make a management decision based upon their best judgement. These are all components of critical thinking.

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Ennis (1985) defined critical thinking as "reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 45). It is an essential element of problem solving, decision making, and evaluating one's position on issues. Critical thinking is not an esoteric mental operation but rather an essential component of everyday thought and deliberation.

Critical thinking is an internal dialogue consisting of such questions as "Do I agree with what is being said?", "Based on what I know, is the statement true?", "How do I really feel about what is being said?", or "What implications does this decision have for me and my future?" (Jones, 1989). It is the ability to see that problems may have many solutions, an alternative to making decisions by blind acceptance, impulse or whim, or simply "going along with the crowd. Critical thinking is exploring and imagining alternatives, and it involves developing insight into information and claims that bombard us. Duchesne (1996) investigated the importance of organizational leaders who "must continually make decisions, solve problems, and chart effective courses of action" (p. 1). In contemporary not-for-profit organizations, volunteer board and advisory committee members, direct-service volunteers who work with especially vulnerable populations, volunteer project coordinators, and any

volunteer who functions without constant paid-staff supervision must have sufficient leadership abilities to enable them to make on-site and spur-of-the-moment decisions that are within the sponsoring organization's philosophy, mission, and policies.

To foster critical thinking in volunteers, non-profit organizational culture must: (a) Provide the opportunity for volunteers to consider the strengths and weaknesses of opposing points of view; (b) actively involve volunteers in evaluating alternative solutions to real-life issues and problems; (c) provide opportunities for them to reflect on, discuss, and evaluate personal beliefs and actions; (d) raise ethical questions about various consequences of actions and decisions; and (e) encourage dialogue among volunteers and administrators about contradictions in thoughts, words, and actions. Additionally, volunteer training environments must generate thought-provoking questions, with a focus on "how" and "why" as opposed to "what." The emphasis needs to be on developing problem-solving strategies rather than on conforming to the "right" answers. Romanish (1986) stated that learning environments "must be devoted to the opening of minds, or better yet, the prevention of their closing" (p. 47). As volunteer administrators, we must challenge volunteer middle managers to seek for their own "best answers" to the ethical situations facing them rather than prescribing our best answer to them. McVey (1995) concluded that "thinking is a matter of learning various task-specific thought processes. Critical thinking is the development of common sense—knowing what to do next" (p. 96).

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES THAT NURTURE CRITICAL THINKING

Many volunteer administrators and managers currently encourage critical thinking techniques and strategies among volunteers. However, some professionals perceive a need for further training in this area. For example, in Jones' (1989) study, a majority of responding home economists indicated that they could benefit from additional training and practice in effective use of critical thinking techniques.

There are numerous instructional strategies that volunteer administrators and managers may use that will foster critical thinking skills in volunteers, especially those who actively make management-type decisions on behalf of the sponsoring organization. Following are descriptions of selected strategies that are especially applicable to volunteer audiences, each with examples of contexts in which they are appropriate.

Critical Analysis

Critical analysis involves an individual volunteer (or small groups of volunteers) in critiquing material (e.g., items from the popular press) related to a specific topic or issue. For example, when investigating possible volunteer roles within a specific organization, a volunteer administrator or manager asks volunteers to read and critique articles from current newspapers and news magazines regarding current societal events and issues. Questions such as the following might be considered: "What are the most pressing needs facing American society?", "Which of these are also important to our immediate communities? Why? Which of these needs and issues are currently being addressed by our organization? How do they relate to our organization's mission?", "Which needs and issues not being addressed currently by our organization, should be addressed? Why?", or "How can volunteers help our organization better address these needs and issues?"

Debate Teams

Another effective instructional strategy is the use of debate teams. In this activity, volunteers are assigned to one of two opposing teams, one in support of a specific issue and the other opposed. Team members from each side present evidence and reasons in support of their team's position. For example, volunteers could debate the pros and cons of annual, mandatory training for all agency volunteers. What are the benefits of mandatory training? What are the drawbacks? This strategy is most effective if volunteers are asked to serve on a team whose position differs from their own.

Dramatization

Another type of strategy, dramatization, relies upon dialogue and action to assist volunteers in interpreting and analyzing situations. It differs from role playing in requiring a longer period of time and a holistic, well-developed plot. An example of dramatization involves staging and videotaping a meeting of an organization's board of directors, who volunteer their time and expertise as board members. The volunteer administrator or manager shows a video of a board meeting that deals with the issue of whether or not to provide supplemental personal liability insurance, paid for by the organization, for all volunteers. After viewing enough of the segment to develop a basic understanding of the situation, small groups of volunteers write the remainder of the script and then act out the alternative ending. Some groups might develop alternatives based upon the volunteer perspective while other groups base their endings on a board member or organizational perspective.

Action Maze

Action mazes provide excellent instructional formats for fostering decision-making skills in individuals. Volunteers are divided into groups consisting of two or three members. Each group is given a specific situation (or determines its own situation) as part of a larger issue to be explored. Each group member develops at least two responses to the situation and must identify the consequences of each alternative. The group's situation is described on a small piece of poster paper. Group members write each alternative response on the front sides of individual adhesive notes that are attached to the poster paper. These may be lifted to reveal the consequences of each individual response, which are written directly on the poster paper. When completed, the action mazes are exchanged among teams. Another team reads the first team's situation, chooses an alternative response, identifies its own consequences for that particular response, and then compares its consequences with those of the original group. As an example, a volunteer administrator or manager could develop an action

maze to help volunteers examine the issue of sexual harassment. Separate teams could address specific situations in which a volunteer believes he or she has been sexually harassed by an administrator or manager and (a) does nothing about it, (b) shares their concerns with another volunteer or a paid staff member, (c) confronts the individually directly, (d) initiates legal action against the individual and/or organization, and (e) quits with no explanation.

Critical Incident

The critical incident instructional strategy involves presenting the most dramatic or important part of a critical situation or issue to a group of volunteers, who must then resolve the situation or issue. The facilitator has complete information about the situation but shares it only in response to direct questions from the volunteers. After the volunteers share their solutions, the facilitator points out pertinent points the volunteers may have overlooked. The critical incident strategy emphasizes the importance of gathering complete information before making decisions. As an example, a discussion concerning a volunteer who disagrees with an organizational policy that they believe is ethically wrong could focus on the critical incident presented by an administrator who tells the volunteer, "Either you follow our policy or you'll be dismissed." Or consider a volunteer who tells a client, "I don't care that you got stuck in traffic. You weren't here on time, so you'll have to reschedule."

Scenario Building

In this strategy, volunteers develop a detailed written description of a specified situation. The volunteer administrator or manager provides them with questions to address as they build their scenarios and guides them in setting goals and determining strategies. For example, a facilitator may develop a scenario involving an administrator who has decided to replace a long-term volunteer serving in a specific capacity with a new volunteer. Volunteers could consider such questions as "Whose decision is it?", "How does this make me feel towards the organization?",

"Do I agree with this decision? Why, or why not?", and "How does this make me feel about myself as a person and not just a volunteer?"

Socratic Questioning

This strategy involves the use of the "right" questions, as opposed to questions that tend to bring closure to volunteers' thinking by simply requiring a "yes" or no" answer or by asking volunteers to repeat information they have received. Such questions require only recall, not the processing or synthesis of information. In contrast, Socratic questioning can facilitate the exchange of ideas and viewpoints, give new meaning to content, explore applications to problems, and provide implications for real-life situations. The following are illustrations of Socratic questions: "If this situation would happen to you, what would you do?" "That's one possible approach to the issue; can you think of another possible approach?"; "What impact will that decision have on your decision to volunteer?"; and "Why did you come up with that solution to this problem?"

Creative Visualization

Using this strategy, volunteers are asked to think ahead to a situation in which they might at some point find themselves. With volunteers' eyes closed and bodies relaxed, the facilitator helps them create a mental image of the situation, setting the stage by asking questions that create a visual picture of the situation and the accompanying emotions. Creative visualization could be employed by asking volunteers to imagine themselves as the administrator or manager of the volunteer program. The volunteers are asked to visualize the answers to questions such as, "Who influences the decisions you make?", "How do you spend a normal day?", "How do you better motivate the volunteers in your program?", and "How do you help individual volunteers resolve conflicts among themselves?" The same process could be used to have volunteers visualize what it would be like to be a client of the organization. Are they satisfied with the services they receive? What would they like to see volunteers do

differently? If asked, would they pay for the volunteer services they've received?

Listening Teams

In this instructional strategy, the administrator or manager divides volunteers into several listening teams prior to a presentation or panel discussion on an issue. Each team is assigned a specific listening task. At the conclusion of the presentation, each team asks questions or presents reactions related to the task for which it was responsible. As an example, suppose that the group is listening to an individual who is a well-known volunteer expert. The audience can be divided into three listening groups: one that listens for the feelings that the speaker communicates, another that focuses on the factual information the speaker presents, and a third that identifies any advice that the speaker conveys or implies.

Journal Writing

In this strategy, volunteers are asked to keep a journal or diary between training sessions to encourage them to reflect on personal actions and behaviors that relate to the program topic. For example, as part of teaching interpersonal skills, a volunteer administrator or manager could ask volunteers to keep a journal in which they record conflicts they have observed or experienced, how the conflict was addressed, and their personal feelings regarding the outcome.

Quotations or Cartoons

Here, a facilitator uses quotations and cartoons to encourage critical thinking and questioning among volunteers. The material could be displayed in the training location for volunteers to read during breaks, or it could be included in mailings and newsletters. Group discussion increases the effectiveness of this strategy and can be initiated by such questions as, "What do you think this quote means?", "What does this cartoon say to you?", or "How does this cartoon relate to your personal life?" A volunteer administrator or manager could develop a resource file of "Calvin and Hobbes" or "The Far Side" cartoons, for example, which could help volunteers explore the challenges of accepting responsibility, dealing with organizational change, or working with difficult people. Quotes from historical figures could serve as an effective strategy to stimulate discussion and encourage sharing of opinions, such as Robert Kennedy's "Some men see things as they are and say 'why'...I dream of things that never were and ask 'why not?'".

Inventing

With this strategy, the facilitator asks volunteers to invent new products or services and to describe their attributes. Volunteers may work individually or in small groups to develop their ideas. For example, as part of improving volunteer retention, they might invent new ways to recognize volunteers for their contributions. Or, a group of volunteers discussing their respective roles and responsibilities could be asked to invent the "perfect" volunteer position and explain why they incorporated specific characteristics into the design of their new "product."

Pluses, Minuses, and Implications

One way to analyze various alternative solutions to a situation is to identify the pluses, minuses, and implications (PMI) of each alternative. Volunteers may work individually or in small groups. The analysis involves listing and discussing the aspects of a particular decision for an individual, group, or entire community. When possible, the facilitator may lead the entire group in discussing the highlights of small-group discussions. Using the PMI strategy, volunteers can discuss the pluses, minuses, and implications of numerous volunteer organization-related critical decisions they might face, such as whether or not the organization should expand it's outreach into new communities or initiate a new program, or whether an individual should continue as a volunteer or leave the organization.

SUMMARY

According to the Points of Light Foundation (1992, June):

Today, as our nation faces complex and growing social problems, we need the time and talent of every American committed to building healthier, safer, more just communities. Most importantly, we need to give renewed priority to finding ways in which each of us, working individually and collectively as volunteers, can help address serious social problems. (p. 1)

Volunteers must not be considered merely a means to an end in contemporary non-profit organizations. As volunteer administrators, we must recognize, engage, and value each individual volunteer's diverse and unique assets and contributions to our programs and to our communities. Volunteers who have been encouraged to develop critical thinking skills will be better prepared to address the complex issues we face today and the future challenges of tomorrow. Nurturing critical thinking skills in volunteers is a "value-added" approach to volunteer development that results in sustained, meaningful volunteer empowerment rather than mere ongoing volunteer management.

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