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Break the Impasse: First Value the Manager of Volunteers

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ABSTRACT: *(maximum 120 words, Times New Roman 11pt italics, single line spacing)*

Volunteer management is at an impasse in the nonprofit sector. Not yet recognised for its complexity, salary levels tend to be low and organisational support varied for those staff members who are employed to undertake this important role. We contend that it is necessary for volunteer involving organisations to recognise the complex job that is volunteer management, and to value more highly the skill set, role and work of volunteer managers. This will inevitably lead to better volunteer experiences, and to greater appreciation of volunteering as well as ensuring the ongoing commitment of volunteers to their respective organisations.

Keywords: not-for-profit; volunteers; professional identities

The National Volunteering Strategy consultation report issued by the Federal government in 2011 identified inter alia that “Volunteer managers and coordinators are important but often unrecognised and inadequately supported.” (DPMC, 2011, n.p.). This echoed earlier calls from the sector with respect to valuing volunteering, which included a manifesto published by ProBono Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, seeking government commitment to enhanced support of volunteering: “Supporting good volunteer management needs to be much more on the agenda.” (PBA & CSI, 2010, section.9).

For many years the Australasian Association of Volunteer Administrators, now the Australasian Association of Managers of Volunteers, has sought to gain recognition and support for the work of their members, with similar campaigns in other countries such as Scotland and England leading to mixed results (Usiskin, 2010). Despite this, work undertaken in 2009 and 2010, investigated, in part, the status and roles of volunteer managers and determined that there was a wide ranging variability in the way they were recognised by their organisations (Paull, Holloway & Burnett, 2010). The evidence included inconsistent titles for the role of the manager of volunteers and limited allocation of time to the role which was either only part time work or as part of another job. In addition, wide variation in the salary levels of the positions was coupled with limited support apparently available to these managers, highlighting that they were not necessarily valued in a way that would benefit volunteers, volunteering and volunteer-involving organisations.

Capturing the complex phenomenon which is volunteer management is not an easy task. In the early 1990s, English researcher Roger Hedley (1992) observed that managing volunteers is far more complex than managing paid staff. In the ensuing 20 years there has been a growth in the discussion about the myriad of issues which have emerged with respect to the importance of good volunteer management within volunteer-involving organisations.

Volunteer management has a flavour all of its own derived from shoestring budgets, a host of contextual variables, a varied history and unclear future. The pressures associated with context and complexity requires that the landscape of volunteer management needs reconsideration, and a new formula needs to be devised to recognise and take this important role to a new level. Setting aside the management of volunteers in “all volunteer” organisations, this paper explores the issue of valuing managers of volunteers by identifying the complexity of the role, acknowledging the status of volunteer managers, and volunteer-involving organisations, and working towards recognition of the role of ‘volunteer manager’ as important, even if it is not yet identifiable as a profession (Haski-Leventhal, 2009).

THE COMPLEXITY OF VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Although it is acknowledged that volunteer management has been part of the extant literature, particularly the practitioner literature, for a long time (e.g. Davies, 198; Kupke, date), the management of volunteers has received increasing attention in recent years (e.g. Brudney & Meijs, 2009; Hill & Stevens, 2011; Meijs, & Ten Hoorn, 2008). There are a number of reasons for this – including increased demands for excellence in service delivery from clients and beneficiaries of volunteer effort and also from funders; increasing levels of risk management requirements stipulated by insurance providers; increasing concerns about financial and fiduciary responsibility of non-profit boards and management committees; increasing expectations from volunteers themselves that their work will be well organised and their time well spent; and, some interest in volunteer management practices as a source of innovation for the management of paid staff.

There is agreement that volunteers need to be managed, although there are a range of schools of thought about how this should be approached (REF?). Key to most discussions of volunteer

management is the absence of the instrumental contract which ties paid workers to their organisations. Volunteers feel connected and committed to their organisations for a range of reasons, and the topic of motivation to volunteer is one of volunteering's most researched topics (e.g. Dolnicar and Randle, 2007). Studies which examine motivation to volunteer (e.g. Clary and Snyder et al and follow on studies) demonstrate clearly that a manager of volunteers needs to be able to tailor any management approach to meet the diverse needs of the volunteers under their management.

Volunteer management needs to offer volunteers a well-organised and emergent approach to satisfy their needs and consequently retain their services and commitment (Rochester, Ellis Paine, & Howlett, 2010). Recent attention to the existence of a psychological contract between volunteers and their organisations has continued to confirm that volunteers expect their voluntary activity to be well organised and satisfying. This research has also highlighted that there is more to the volunteers' psychological contract than has currently been investigated, including an expectation of relative freedom to engage, or not, in voluntary activities (Nichols, 2012). This interest in the psychological contract for volunteers has highlighted the continued need for organisations to take into account obligations on both sides of the contract: this will include such activities as individual matching, in order to provide a good volunteer experience (see Vantilborgh and associates: 2011, 2012, 2013; Willems et al. 2012). In the 1980s, Colomy, Chen and Andrews (1987) concluded that well organised and well managed volunteer programs were better able to keep their volunteers, and Famer and Fedor (1999) established a clear link between unmet volunteer expectations about organisational support in the decision of volunteers to withdraw their services. The underlying tenet appears to be good management is vital and needs to be tailored to the particular situation and people, including to the values based and voluntary nature of the activity.

Brudney and Meijs identify that "two out of five volunteers have stopped volunteering at some point because of one or more shortcomings in the way organisations manage (or fail to manage) volunteers, such as not making good use of volunteers' time or good use of their talents, or not defining volunteer tasks clearly" (2009, p. 568). They propose a model of volunteer management which involves "negotiation between organisation and volunteer to arrive at both realistic and

satisfying work assignments that help organizations” (p. 577) as well as providing to volunteers the types of experience that will lead to retention, and subsequently to recruitment of new volunteers.

In keeping with this approach, there is evidence that adaptation of practices developed for paid employees, are favoured because this provides a base for development of more effective volunteer management. Despite the views of some that this approach may fail to recognise the voluntary status of volunteers, there is evidence that adaptation of human resource practices is effective, with emphasis on appropriate adaptation (e.g. Ferreira, Proenca, & Proenca, 2012).

Cavanagh, McNeil and Bartram, in a study of one “grass roots” organisation identified that “Members recognised that effective HRM practices allow for the exchange processes that foster member participation to occur” (2013, p. 11), but that there is a delicate balance to be achieved in seeking to ensure that the essence of the organisation is preserved, and avoiding over-bureaucratisation. Volunteer managers have long recognised this need (Tyzack, 1996).

Volunteer management needs to be adapted to suit the type of organisation (Rochester, Ellis Paine & Howlett, 2010) in the same way that other management practices, including Human Resource Management, need to be adapted to fit the particular context (Boxall & Purcell, 2011). This discussion supports the need for adaptation of volunteer management practices to take into account the heterogeneity of volunteers, their expectations and their experiences, thereby supporting Meijs and Ten Hoorn’s (2008) conclusion that there is no “one best way” of managing volunteers.

Volunteer management has nuances and differences related to where the volunteer activity is taking place – be it in, for example, human services, sport, environment, government or business contexts. In similar organisations in the same industry there will be local nuances which affect volunteer managers, and which are vital to the adaptation of volunteer management practices to that organisation. The organisational norms which develop about how volunteers are, or are *not*, managed will be influenced by, and will influence, the role of the volunteer manager, paid or unpaid.

Brudney and Meijs express concern that an over reliance on “the traditional model of volunteer management” fails to recognise the “fissures in the foundation of the traditional volunteer management” (2009, p. XX??), positing the argument that the approach sets up for a repetitive cycle of continual recruitment and fails to focus on retention. It might be argued, however, that it is not the

traditional model of volunteer management which is at fault, but the failure to *value* those who manage volunteers, and to recognise the agility this role requires in adapting, *or not*, volunteer management practices to suit all occasions, models and approaches, which are the basis for the “fissures” in the foundations. Valuing the considerable skill set that is required for good volunteer management corresponds with organisational and societal views about the value of volunteering itself.

VALUING VOLUNTEERING

Within the field of study, volunteers and volunteering are often defined in relation to paid work. In general terms, this is to be expected given that the absence of payment and the voluntary nature of the act are central characteristics of volunteering. There has long been a paradox associated with volunteer effort, which has been increasingly influential in the way volunteering is valued. Volunteering is seen to be at the same time both altruistic and above paid work, and yet somehow not as important as paid work. This in turn leads to a lower status for volunteering in organisations which have both paid and unpaid workers, and a lack of support and status for managers of volunteers and their programs. The result has been lower status for nonprofit organisations at the societal level, particularly all-volunteer organisations such as voluntary associations.

Cordery, Proctor Thomson and Smith posit, for example that the “invisibility” of the volunteer contribution to the performance of organisations is “likely to diminish external stakeholders’ perception of volunteers’ essential contributions or feed into stakeholders’ concerns that volunteers’ efforts are not appropriately recognised” (2013, p. 47). Similarly, Stirling and Bull (2011) when discussing ambulance services suggest that “economic invisibility” of volunteers is created by the fact that in a world where pay levels reflect status, non-payment implies lower status, thus reflecting the lack of visibility within society of the nonprofit sector as a whole. They argue that “structures and systems helped to reproduce the status quo of limited resources and voice for volunteers” (2011, p. 208), a conclusion which may apply in other organisations.

The status afforded volunteering, and thereby the volunteer manager in many instances, is reflected in the [lack of] resources which organisations put into volunteer programmes. The amount of support received by the manager in terms of training and development, time allocation and other

resources are part of this picture. Managers of volunteers are often time poor and trying to cope with many pressures including administrative requirements and demands from other parts of the organisation. Paid managers of volunteers are often responsible for a range of duties beyond managing volunteers, or they occupy part time positions. Some volunteers feel that the respect of the organisation for the volunteer program is reflected in the 'who' and 'how' of the management of volunteers. If the program is valued and respected, a person who both values and respects the volunteers will be appointed to the position. Therefore, the way the organisation supports and appoints the volunteer manager is seen to be connected to the value placed on volunteers and volunteer programs by organisations. Many, it seems, see the volunteer program as merely an add-on or cost saving measure. This contributes to the lack of recognition of the importance of volunteer management, and therefore those with responsibility for that management responsibility. Organisations need to acknowledge and value their volunteer program by "better recognition of the importance of the paid staff who manage the volunteers, both in terms of pay and conditions and in terms of the training and support offered them." (Paull, 2009, p. 8).

TOWARDS RECOGNITION

Vinton (2012) and others (e.g. Cheung & Kung Ma, 2010) have identified that there are significant benefits for organisations from effective volunteer services, including not having to cut programs during tough economic times, as well as direct benefit to service recipients. Hustinx (2010) highlights the delicate balancing act that is volunteer management. The individual charged with this responsibility must craft a harmonious relationship with the volunteers and provide an activity which is challenging and rewarding without being onerous or overly demanding. Volunteer managers must find the right balance of volunteer autonomy which successfully utilises the gift of time effectively without being too bureaucratic; while at the same time avoiding some of the factors which can lead to volunteer turnover such as a lack of support or guidance and a lack of clear arrangements.

Boezeman and Ellemers (2008) posit that pride and respect, including valuing volunteer work, can be used to foster the commitment by volunteers to organisations. This concept naturally also applies to the activities and attitudes of the manager of volunteers. Setting aside those who occupy unpaid volunteer manager positions, a matter for separate consideration, it is important to

ensure that the recognition of the importance of volunteering to the organisation, and to society in general, extends to the recognition of the manager of volunteers. Volunteers work for free, but good volunteer management costs money, an important concept that is receiving additional recognition (Costs of Volunteering Taskforce, 2006). The costs associated with good volunteer management arises from the complexity of the role of volunteer manager, the need to attract skilled and committed staff to these roles, and the need to provide them with appropriate skills, support and recognition in order to retain them.

Gottlieb, Maitland and Shera (2013) in their paper “take this job and love it” identify multiple factors which make the role of a paid manager of volunteers distinctive. The factors include the support from those around them including from those volunteers they manage, and “the prosocial value expressive nature of the work”, which was shown to predict job satisfaction. They argue that those who occupy these jobs for extended periods of time tend to do so because of the way that the work allows them to reflect their identity. Volunteer managers may have a strong emotional attachment to the volunteers, to the organisation, and to their job. However, with limited career progression opportunities and low paid jobs, only a few can afford to stay in these volunteer manager positions for any length of time. This last issue relates to the concept of meaningful work (MW see Steger and associates: **REFS**) and its intersection with instrumental needs such as salary. This is a matter for further exploration and research.

Volunteer management may not yet be a profession but it deserves recognition as a complex and important job. It is not the individual organisation, but rather the societal view of volunteering which contributes to this situation by an apparent contradiction. This occurs because volunteering is an activity that is, on one hand, valued as an altruistic act and one which contributes to the society in immeasurable ways but, on the other hand, is inadequately resourced and supported. It is necessary, argue Vantilborough et al (2011), to ensure that the changing nature of volunteering is addressed effectively by organisations in how they manage volunteers. This change must necessarily involve recognising volunteers at the individual level, and also valuing the activity of volunteering at both the societal and organisational levels. This includes valuing those who manage them. The flow on effects in terms of quality volunteer experiences, service delivery or organisational benefits are

matters for further investigation, but we argue that these will aid in the efforts to see volunteering valued more highly by society.

Organisations should rethink and reframe the duties, title, pay and level of volunteer manager positions. In addition, they need to consider what level of support is available in terms of skills development, networking, resources and acknowledgement of the nature and scope of the work. Machin and Ellis Paine (2008) called for delegation of appropriate decision-making authority, and the establishment of clear lines of responsibility and accountability as part of a process of ensuring volunteer programs are adequately resourced. Such reviews would need to take into consideration the specific context in which the manager is working in each organisation, and would also serve to move collectively towards enhanced recognition of the importance of effective, tailored management of volunteers.

CONCLUSION

An impasse appears to have been reached with respect to volunteer management. The valuing of volunteering, valuing of volunteer managers, and good volunteer management practices are not separate issues but are instead intertwined. All three elements need to be brought together and reconceptualised. While it is accepted that many volunteer manager positions are located in organisations with limited budgets, cyclical funding and limited ability to commit resources to long term development, it is also the case that nonprofit organisations and other organisations where volunteers are involved will benefit from a new and enlightened perspective on volunteer managers which acknowledges and addresses these factors. The current self-perpetuating low-image situation needs to change, and the only way to move on from this type of impasse is to select and focus on one aspect at a time and commence considerably more effort at 'true' recognition. We suggest that the best starting point is recognising the complex job that is volunteer management, and by doing so, clearly and appreciatively valuing the role and the work of volunteer managers. This will inevitably lead to better volunteer experiences, and to greater appreciation of volunteering.

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