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Contents

From the Editor

Leadership in Collaboration: Applying the Connective Leadership Model
Norman A. Dolch

Fostering Sustainable Collaborative Relationships
John D. Vogelsang

The New York AIDS Coalition Collaboration Project
Elizabeth Levine

Managerial Sensemaking of Volunteer Motivation: Do Managers See Things The Volunteer Way?
Matthew A. Liao-Troth and Craig Dunn

Core Elements of Successful Capacity Building:
Lessons from the New York City Beacons Initiative
Arva Rice
Managerial Sensemaking of Volunteer Motivation: Do Managers See Things the Volunteer Way?

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Professional managers of volunteers have high expectations placed on them by two decidedly different constituencies: their own supervisors and the volunteers with whom they interact. Newcomers to these professional positions often experience role conflict as a result of these dual expectations. If professional managers have come from the ranks of volunteers, they must shift their mental outlook or risk being ineffective in meeting organizational goals. For example, a volunteer youth activities director with the YMCA may become a paid employee with fiscal responsibility over youth activities. To be successful in this new position, the primary focus must be to maintain fiscal performance. It is less likely that such employees will be evaluated on the basis of the quality of the youth experience; volunteers would be responsible for that.

If managers are hired from outside the organization rather than promoted from within, it is likely they hold more senior management positions, and their interactions with “front line” volunteers is limited. If fresh from college, such managers will be trying to make sense of their new organization and their position within it, while simultaneously defining themselves professionally. In either case, such managers are the most susceptible to being caught between two potentially different mental views of the organization: that of the volunteers and that of the paid professionals.

Making Sense of It All

People make sense of the world around them using a variety of psychological processes. Through sensemaking (Weick, 1993; Weick, 1979), people build a mental understanding of the world in which they live. Weick (1979, 45) defines sensemaking as a mental process having three steps: selection, retention and enactment. Selection addresses an individual’s limited
ability to observe – people only observe a small amount of activity around them so they must select, either consciously or unconsciously, what is observed. Retention refers to the storage of the observation and an individual’s ability to link observed phenomenon to relevant or irrelevant issues. Enactment is the process of acting on an individual’s beliefs as to why things are the way they are, usually accomplished in a manner that reinforces their beliefs (which are themselves constructed from the selected and retained images of what is observed). Sensemaking is therefore a cyclical process: people act on their beliefs, and these actions reinforce their beliefs.

When presented with an issue that does not fit their mental image, people will switch from “autopilot” to active pursuit of new information until they have selected new observations that redefine their thoughts, or redefine their observations (Louis and Sutton, 1991). For example, a common sense-making challenge concerns the ability of women to do work formerly limited to men. Upon encountering their first female boss, employees who have had a long string of male supervisors must mentally redefine the type of person who can now wear the boss label.

Newcomers to an organization are thrown into a situation in which they are required to come to a quick understanding of their environment. The newcomer will be experiencing the change between the current and previous settings, the contrast between what they encounter and what their expectations were, and the surprise of what was not expected at all (Louis, 1980). Such newcomers will need particular assistance in two ways: interpreting events in the new job setting, and appreciating the cultural assumptions of others in the new job environment (Louis, 1980). In such situations, the views of a person’s work group will be of paramount importance, as these will provide the strongest inputs for creating a new social construct (Fulk, 1993).

If the newcomer is managing volunteers in a nonprofit organization (or any other organization that uses volunteers), the peers of the newcomer will be other paid professionals in the organization; the majority of people with whom the newcomer actually works, however, may well be unpaid volunteers. Though working for the same organization or cause, professionals and volunteers may not necessarily share the same general cognitive construction of their work environment. More particularly, managers and volunteers may differ in their understanding of the motivations behind voluntary engagement with the nonprofit organization—and such differences in cognition can have a profound impact on organizational effectiveness.
Application In Volunteer Management

Our study is grounded in research conducted by Anderson and Moore (1978) who surveyed volunteers on the reasons volunteers give for volunteering. Unlike Anderson and Moore, however, we mailed surveys to managers of volunteers, rather than to the volunteers themselves. Our research design allowed for conclusions relating to whether or not managers make sense of volunteer motivation in the same way volunteers themselves do. In a study of workers and their supervisors, Kovach (1987) found that paid employees and their paid supervisors would attribute different motives to employees' behavior. We were curious to know if such differences applied to managers and volunteers as well.

Since managers have very little reward power over volunteers in the form of financial compensation, an understanding of volunteer involvement is central to the success of a manager of volunteers and to the effectiveness of the organizations they manage. Our primary research question – do managers and volunteers ascribe the same motives to voluntary behavior? – was explored through comparing managerial observations of volunteer motives with those of volunteers themselves. If managers and volunteers share similar attributions of motivation, then there is support for a model of common sensemaking of volunteer motivation. However, due to different environments, peer groups, and organizational expectations, it is anticipated that managers and volunteers do not make sense of their environment in the same way.

This study also examines a possible social desirability and self-perception bias on the part of volunteers – who might reasonably be expected to over-report altruism as their motivation for volunteering (Gidron, 1978; Smith, 1981; Francies, 1983). The altruistic deception construct presented by Smith (1981) would suggest volunteers (as well as people in general) mentally construct their volunteer work as having been motivated by altruistic purposes, regardless of other less praiseworthy reasons for engaging in such activity. Smith's altruistic deception argument is that there is a social bias favoring altruistic justification for voluntary behavior over a more self-interested rationale. Due to their freedom from the anticipated self-perception bias of volunteers, it is expected managers will attribute less altruism to the volunteers' motives than will the volunteers themselves. In order to empirically test these conjectures, the survey data of managers were analyzed and then compared with Anderson and Moore's findings. More altruistic and less altruistic motives were separated and can be found in Table 1.
TABLE 1
More and Less Altruistic Motives Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Altruistic</th>
<th>Less Altruistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help Others</td>
<td>Companionship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the Community</td>
<td>Feel Useful and Needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends (who volunteer there)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gain Work-Related Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meet People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occupy Spare Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-fulfillment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process of sensemaking should be affected by the environment of the individual, as these external cues provide one strong input to the cognitive process. For example, it can be expected that an individual who has been a volunteer but is now a manager will have a cognitive construct more similar to volunteers than will a manager who has never been a volunteer. Likewise, a manager who has greater exposure to volunteers will make sense of volunteer motivation more similarly to volunteers themselves than will an individual with less exposure to volunteers. Thus we would expect that increased managerial exposure to volunteers would lead to similar constructs of volunteer motivation between managers and volunteers.

Managers have an opportunity to interact with many volunteers, and thereby a great opportunity to understand the ways in which these volunteers make sense of their own motivation to serve the organization. Thus, it is expected that managers with greater job tenure (as differentiated from time of engagement with volunteers) will have social constructs more closely aligned with those of volunteers than will managers who have less tenure in their job.

Finally, Eagly and Crowley (1986) present a system of social constructs that place different gendered expectations on people of different sexes. One of the reasons women have been so well received as professionals in nonprofit organizations is that charity has historically been seen as women’s work (Reskin and Roos, 1990), and that such work met women’s social role expectations to use their more caring and empathetic nature to nurture those in need, as compared with men who are expected to be involved in heroic and chivalrous altruistic social roles (Eagly and Crowley, 1986). As nonprofits have risen in financial stewardship, there has been a commensurate re-gen-
dering of the role of professionals in nonprofits towards men (Reskin and Roos, 1990). Recent findings in prosocial behavior concur that there are no consistent sex or gender role differences in helping behavior (Miller, Bernzweig, Eisenberg, and Fabes, 1991), though there might be a slight difference in cognitive structures leading to the helping behavior (Mills, Pedersen, and Grusec, 1989), and that social roles are a large determinant of behavior (Eagly and Wood, 1991). We would therefore not expect major differences between the sensemaking of male and female managers.

Methods

Sample

Anderson and Moore obtained their list of agencies from 49 branches of the Canadian Volunteer Bureau, the largest nonprofit umbrella agency in Canada. The survey list for the present study was obtained from the United Way of San Diego County, a local branch of the largest nonprofit umbrella agency in the United States.

The agencies in our study were categorized according to primary services provided as: a). Adult Care Services, b). Community Enhancement, c). Disabled Services, d). Health Services, e). Human Dignity and Rights, f). Human Services, and g). Youth Services (United Way of San Diego County, 1991).

Survey Measures and Research Procedures

Two surveys were mailed to each executive director of 100 human service agencies. Each executive director was requested to distribute the survey to two entry level managers (defined as an entry level job position within that agency) who currently managed volunteers for the agency. Respondents were requested not to speak with others about their answers until they had completed and returned the survey. A self-addressed stamped envelope accompanied each survey. Follow-up phone calls were made to all agencies to request participation by the agency; however, participating agencies were not tracked, thereby assuring the anonymity of responses.

The survey measured what managers thought motivated volunteers. For each of ten different attributes, managers were asked to rate the strength of a variety of motivations to volunteer. These motives can be found in Table 1.

Managers were asked to include the ages and gender of the volun-
teers, the percentage of volunteers who worked full time in paid positions outside of the organization, the percentage of volunteers who are currently otherwise employed, and the educational level of the volunteers. The managers were also asked the area of service upon which the agency concentrated; these categories were consistent with the ‘types of agencies’ listed in Directions (United Way of San Diego County, 1991).

The final survey section included items designed to gather general information about the managers themselves. The data from this section were used to determine a general demographic profile of the managers, including their amount of exposure to volunteers, their tenure in their current job, and their gender.

Results

A total of fifty-three usable surveys were returned out of a possible one hundred sixty-eight (some of the 100 agencies surveyed did not use volunteers), for a respectable 31.5% response rate. The returned surveys were representative of the agency population listed in Directions (United Way of San Diego County, 1991). All of the seven types of agencies are represented, and in proportions which allowed for the conclusion that the sample was statistically representative of the population of nonprofit organizations.

Demographics

Statistically the gender and age of the volunteers reflect those of U. S. volunteers in general (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1986), while academic degree and work status did not. Demographic data of volunteers is not available for the Anderson and Moore (1978) study, but their assumptions include a sample representative of volunteers as a whole.

The over-education of volunteers in the San Diego area as compared with the Hodgkinson and Weitzman (1986) national survey could be explained in any of a number of ways. The most likely explanation is that because of the higher technological nature of most of the industry in San Diego—as well as an expansive and affordable post-secondary public education system and a large body of military personnel holding tuition reimbursement opportunities—there are a greater number of higher degrees per capita in California than in the nation as a whole (United States Bureau of the Census, 1991).
The geographic location of the sample could similarly skew the work data. Because of the higher costs of living in California relative to the rest of the United States, two income households are more common than for the rest of the country (United States Bureau of the Census, 1991). Therefore, proportionally more people in this state are employed full time than in other parts of the country. There is no theoretical rational for arguing, however, that lack of representativeness with respect to these two demographic dimensions systematically biases the research findings.

Statistical analysis revealed managers and volunteers make sense of volunteer motivation in a similar fashion. Anderson and Moore’s (1978) ranking of volunteers’ motivation is very similar to the managers’ perceptions in our study: the top five motivations are both the same and similarly ranked (see Table 2). Managers attribute the same set of motivations to volunteer that the volunteers have already endorsed in Anderson and Moore’s work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Comparing Managers’ Rank Ordering to Volunteers’ Rank Ordering of Motives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Volunteers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Managers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help others</td>
<td>Anderson and Moore (1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel useful and needed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-fulfillment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the community</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain work-related experience</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet people</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companionship</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupy spare time</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of special interest, the two more altruistic motives were similarly ranked by the managers and volunteers. This indicates that the self-perception bias of volunteers is not significant if operational at all, and that altruism is recognized in their respective mental sensemaking by both volunteers and their professional managers as playing a vital role in human volunteer motivation.
No statistical relation was found between volunteer exposure and job tenure of the managers surveyed on the social constructs concerning volunteers’ motivations. Exposure to volunteers and tenure as a volunteer manager do not affect how a manager views volunteer motivation.

A visual check of the data plot, followed up with statistical examination, for our final question concerning attributional differences between male and female managers of volunteers did not reveal significant variance—supporting the conjecture that men and women managers of volunteers do not differ significantly in how they attribute motives to volunteers.

Finally, both age and education level were examined to determine if the sample was systematically biased (as Eisenberg in 1991 pointed out, such bias could mask or create gender effects). There was no statistical relationship found between age and education level of a manager with a manager’s attribution of volunteer motivation, further supporting our claim that there are no gender differences in the attribution of volunteer motivation by managers. In summary:

• Managers tend to make sense of volunteer motivation in the same way that volunteers do.

• Managers and volunteers share a common sense of the role of altruism in volunteer motivation.

• Neither extent of exposure to volunteers, job tenure, nor gender significantly impact managers’ attributions as they relate to volunteer motivations.

Conclusion

In order to be effective, managers must possess an accurate understanding of their employees’ motivations to work. This is equally true whether supervising paid or volunteer workers. The findings of the current study provide some evidence that managers of volunteers generally hold such reliable assessments of employee motivations. This is a particularly important finding as it contradicts earlier survey results regarding the relation of paid managers and employees (Kovach, 1987). Even slight variance in motivational attributions between managers and volunteers, however, may indicate areas in which employment relations may be strengthened. This is all the more true in light of the communication difficulties, inefficiencies in task assignments, high turnover and burn out on the part of both volunteer managers and volunteers themselves which seem to attend nonprofit organizations.
Perhaps the greatest contribution of the current study is to offer some assurance to nonprofit managers that their intuitions about volunteer motivation can be relied upon as a basis for restructuring volunteer incentive programs. Tailoring job rewards as directly as possible to volunteer preferences would likely lead to better volunteer-assignment fit, and thereby reduce both turnover and burnout as well as increase volunteer work satisfaction (Cherrington, Reitz and Scott, 1971). For example, a manager of volunteers could develop an innovative volunteer recognition plan around the significance of the volunteers’ work in light of the importance volunteers place upon “feeling useful and needed.”

While it is necessary that managers understand what values drive volunteers to engage themselves with nonprofit organizations, this knowledge is not sufficient to assure managerial effectiveness. Motivation is a function not only of the desire for particular rewards – a matter which managers seem to have some accurate sense about where their volunteers are concerned – but of the likelihood of being successful and the relationship of success with the desired reward (Cherrington et al., 1971). In addition to the accuracy of their perceptions of volunteer motivations, therefore, managers must seek to assure that volunteers both hold the reasonable expectation that their efforts will lead to increased performance, as well as that volunteers see a link between their volunteer performance and the rewards they desire. While managers may well have one piece of the volunteer motivation puzzle clearly in hand – they have an accurate “read” of what volunteers seek from their volunteer engagement – if there are areas left for improvement they will have to do with clearer specification of the effort-to-performance and performance-to-reward linkages.

Finally, we have only been looking at what motivates volunteers in general. Both our study and that of Anderson and Moore almost 20 years ago have sought to assess the big picture of volunteer motivation. The failing of this approach is that it does not take into account the individual differences of volunteers. A manager’s best approach might well be to understand what motivates each individual volunteer – and to tailor rewards accordingly.

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