

Effectively Equipping Volunteers for Greater Impact

Kristi Slattery

Masters Thesis

Northwest University

Author Note

This thesis paper is being submitted to Professor Inslee on 04/11/2012. Questions about this material should be directed to Kristi.Slattery10@northwestu.edu.

Abstract

Volunteerism is the act of selflessly giving of one's life by responding to a need in one's local or global community as an act of service free of pay. Community development through volunteer efforts and effective leadership has the potential to change lives. With the limited resources organizations have, it becomes increasingly important to effectively equip volunteers for positions with the hope of creating both a lasting impact and increased retention rates. The elements that contribute to increased volunteer retention rates include a culture of volunteer value within an organization, volunteer personal reflection and understanding, leadership characteristics of the volunteer administrator, and the administrative efforts of the volunteer program to equip a volunteer for the right position.

Keywords: Volunteers, Leadership, Retention, Equipping, Community Development

Effectively Equipping Volunteers for Greater Impact

Volunteerism is generally considered an altruistic activity. Some people volunteer with the intention to promote good in the community or improve quality of life. However, others volunteer to build upon their own skill development, to meet other like-minded community members, to network for possible employment, to have fun, out of religious obligation, and a variety of other reasons that could be considered self-serving. Wilson (2000) described volunteering as an activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization (p. 215). According to Cole and Fisher (1993), volunteers meet a human need, contribute to creative and responsible social development and potentially extend the work of professionals and other employed persons in community service fields (p. 178). For the purpose of this document, volunteerism is viewed as the act of selflessly giving of one's life by responding to a need in one's local or global community as an act of service free of pay.

Fewer than half of nonprofits that manage volunteers have adopted important volunteer management practices such as matching volunteer skills with appropriate assignments, recognizing the contributions of volunteers, measuring the impact of volunteers, providing volunteers with training and professional development, and training paid staff to work with volunteers (Eisner, Grim, Maynard & Washburn, 2009). A study by United Way of King County in Washington State included an online survey of 603 nonprofits in the Seattle area. The purpose of the survey was to better understand the challenges and opportunities nonprofits in King County face in managing volunteers. The study found that several key issues which have long troubled the field of volunteerism continue to challenge local nonprofits, including low retention rates (Lynch & Russell, 2009). In fact, it was discovered that only 17 percent of survey participants reported more than 75 percent of their volunteers were still volunteering a year after

their first involvement (Lynch & Russell, 2009, p. 5). These studies suggest that volunteer retention is connected to effective management practices. Recognizing the factors behind volunteer retention has been shown to be the key to helping build a successful volunteer program and ultimately providing the vital resources that organizations need to provide a lasting impact on their community. Volunteers are a valuable resource for organizations. Chapman and White (2011) stated:

Over 50 percent of the adult population in the United States report that they are involved in some volunteer activity over the course of a year - this indicates that tens of millions of individuals are giving of their time to serve others in some way (p. 165).

Volunteerism is a large industry, one that affects so many lives from those being served to those who are actually doing the serving. As a volunteer administrator, I have seen first-hand the positive impact volunteers have on the community. Volunteers have the potential to help the hurting, feed the hungry, support the hopeless, nurture abandoned children and ultimately make the kind of difference that has the potential to transform their community. Both the organization I currently work for and other organizations in my community would cease to exist or, at a minimum, would have less of an impact without engaging volunteers. Much of the information presented in this paper also comes through my perspective as a professional practitioner currently working in the field of volunteer administration.

This document will seek to recommend elements that contribute to an effective volunteer program where volunteer turnover is minimized. These elements include developing a culture of volunteer value within an organization, volunteer personal reflection and understanding of their abilities, leadership characteristics of the volunteer administrator, and the administrative efforts of the volunteer program to equip a volunteer for the right position. This document is also

written with the intention of its ideas being replicated across many venues including churches, nonprofits, and community organizations and will therefore remain general in nature.

Value of Volunteers

Volunteers are incredible people doing extraordinary things. Merrill (2006) explained, “Communities and individuals benefit when citizens work together without regard for ethnic, gender, racial, religious, social, and age differences” (p. 12). Since America’s founding volunteers have been central to society, whether to help a single individual or ignite change that benefits millions. People in America have come together through voluntary organizations for over 230 years (Independent Sector, n.d.). The Independent Sector is the leadership network for nonprofits, foundations, and corporate giving programs committed to advancing the common good in America and around the world. They strive to strengthen and mobilize the nonprofit community to promote active citizens in vibrant communities. According to the Independent Sector, the estimated dollar value of volunteer time for 2010 was \$21.36 per hour - this estimate helps acknowledge the value of individuals who dedicate their time, talents, and energy to making a difference (Independent Sector, n.d.). Charitable organizations can use this estimate to quantify the enormous value volunteers provide and hopefully recognize the financial value to advocate for their growing volunteer program.

Volunteer programs are strategic tools that have the potential to contribute significantly to an organization. Volunteers bring a unique perspective, innovative ideas, enthusiasm, and free support to the organization they are striving to help. When effectively equipped for service, these individuals help fulfill an organization’s mission, solve community problems, create tangible benefits that lead to healthier communities where neighbors know each other, and gain a better sense of personal accomplishment. While volunteers are an essential ingredient for a healthy

organization, volunteer retention is a growing problem facing many local nonprofits. Each year about one-third of those who had volunteered did not donate their time the following year (Eisner et al., 2009). Not only does not volunteering in subsequent years have a negative financial consequence, it also contributes to a loss of human capital. Human capital is a resource of knowledge and competency attributes that is embodied in the ability to learn and the foundation of understanding that supports an organization's success. Human capital is too valuable for an organization to risk losing.

According to Chapman and White (2011), the turnover rate of volunteer workers is extremely high and is one of the major challenges for administrators of organizations that utilize volunteers (p. 168). The need to continually train new volunteers due to turnover affects a staff member's ability to manage their time effectively. The missing critical step that I have identified is that volunteers are not consistently equipped effectively for their service position which results in the volunteer quickly losing interest, burning out and ultimately leaving the organization. The cyclical downside of turnover is that volunteer administrators are unable to pay attention to equipping volunteers while they are constantly trying to fill a need within the organization. Effectively equipping volunteers for service positively contributes to increased retention rates through matching individuals with positions and needs where they can serve out of their strengths, passions, past experience, and spiritual gifting.

Volunteer program development is a process in which organizations maximize the human capital available to them and increase the value of those volunteers. For an organization, this also translates into volunteers committing to serve for an extended period of time so that the organization's recruitment, training and management efforts are maximized. Cole and Fisher (1993) clarified this process, as recruitment induces people to become involved in an

organization, placement locates volunteers in appropriate positions; but the learning process converts the raw material of human resources into the valuable asset on which every nonprofit organizations depends (p. 97). Organizations depend on the resource of human capital, thus an investment must be made in matching volunteers with the right position. This process begins with the personal understanding and reflection of each prospective volunteer.

Volunteer Personal Understanding

Prior to volunteering, it is important for a prospective volunteer to determine where volunteering fits into their life, especially within their future goals and daily priorities. Barnes and Sharpe (2009) explained that a volunteer's decision to become and remain a volunteer is tied to their ability to integrate their volunteer efforts with their personal lives, interests and vocations (p. 176). It is important for a volunteer administrator to encourage the balance of priorities and expectations of life with the commitment that volunteers make to the organization.

Everyone has been equipped with the spiritual gifts, heart, motivation, abilities, personality and experiences that we need to be successful to follow God's plan and purpose for our life (Warren, 2004, p. 80). The process of discerning how the aforementioned combining forces guide us is the challenge. But with any challenge comes the potential for great benefit. Harkavy (2007) stated "When you begin to live your life in an intentional and on-purpose way, you will start to benefit many others tremendously" (p. 132). For the volunteer that is interested in partnering with an organization, it is essential that they put effort into understanding their gifts and strengths especially as it relates to their area of service and passion. Hybels (2004) explained that volunteers should use whatever understanding they have of their personality, passions, areas of interest, talents, and preferences to guide them in a general serving direction as they look for need in their church and community (p. 71).

The volunteer administrator can certainly provide the resources an individual may need on their journey of self-discovery (see Appendix B for recommended resources). However, for the process to be honest, the individual needs to be genuine in their efforts to discover their motivation and the characteristics necessary to be an asset to the organization they intend to serve. Not only does this effort contribute to buy-in, it also supports the possibility for a volunteer's willingness to commit to an organization long-term. However, this process of self-discovery takes time. In fact, the process of self-discovery often happens through reflection during life activities including volunteering. Overly formalizing and controlling the volunteer experience reduces pathways for engagement and opportunities for volunteers to flourish in their work (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009, p. 185). It is important for the volunteer administrator to remain flexible and explore together with the prospective volunteer to find the right position fit within the organization. The critical personal areas for a volunteer to reflect upon and understand are their strengths, passions, past experiences, and spiritual gifting. Reference appendix B for additional resources to support a volunteer in their effort to understand and reflect upon their own ability and calling.

Strengths

Clifton, Leisveld, and Winseman (2008) explained, "A strength is the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity. This ability is a powerful, productive combination of talent, skill, and knowledge" (p. 7). Strengths are talents complimented by skill and knowledge - they are natural activities that come easily. These characteristics can be recognized through feedback from others, identifying activities one is naturally inclined toward, or by engaging in an activity that brings joy and fulfillment. A suggested process of identifying ability or talent can begin by:

- Examining a list of personal achievements – were there any common actions associated with each achievement?
- Identifying attributes that friends or co-workers affirm (i.e. good listening skills, hospitality, leadership, etc.) (Ellis, Hamer, McQueen, n.d., p. 11).
- Identifying the tasks within your profession that are done well.
- Asking the question - What do you love to do and do well?
- What would people pay you for or ask for your help with if that were an option?

By evaluating each of these elements and looking for common themes, a strength or ability can be inferred from that list. Clifton et al. (2008) explained that you will be most successful in whatever you do by building your life around your greatest natural abilities rather than your weaknesses (p. 2). Furthermore, Rath (2007) proposed you cannot be whatever you want, but you can be a lot more of what you already are. However, it is also important to recognize that some abilities and talents take time to refine and will always be in the development phase (Ellis et al., n.d. p. 11). By identifying strengths, it gives us permission to stop trying to be who we are not and concentrate on who we are – who we were created to be (Clifton et al, 2008, p. 11). The need for a volunteer to discover or at least begin thinking about their strengths and abilities is significant to the process of matching a volunteer with a position in which they can work out of their strengths and which will contribute to a greater long term commitment.

Passion

Identifying a volunteer's passion is critical to ensure not just that they are matched with a good position, but also to determine if they are appropriately matched with the organization. Most organizational involvement and commitments are motivated by the passion of the volunteer (Ellis et al., n.d., p.10). Areas of passion can include specific populations of people such as

children, elderly, those living in poverty or causes and issues such as AIDS, homelessness, injustice, human trafficking, etc. Passion might also include activities such as fundraising, counseling, project management, maintenance, etc. It is vital for volunteers to understand what they are passionate about before looking for a volunteer opportunity. Barnes and Sharpe (2009) observed “For volunteers, particularly highly committed volunteers, their involvement was strongly tied to individual interests, passions, and values” (p. 117). Volunteers can identify their passions by identifying which topics they get really excited about, the issues that make them frustrated, or by attempting to identify the population they would help today if they could. If it is determined that the interested volunteer does not have a passion for the cause or potential position, it is best for the volunteer administrator to recommend that the potential volunteer find a different organization to volunteer with.

Experience

Experience influences our future, the decisions we make, and the capacity in which we live our lives. Every person has both positive and negative experiences that pepper our past and impact how we will fulfill our calling. It is important for volunteers to identify these experiences and how those experiences have impacted an understanding to foster motivation and potential future behavior. For example, if someone once worked as an administrative professional and had a negative experience, they may come into a volunteer administrative position with negative preconceptions and have a less than positive experience regardless of the strength of the organization. Experience mars our past and guides our future. It is critical for volunteers to understand and acknowledge their past experiences, as the right assessment tool can only be useful if a person has past serving experience to help inform their personal reflection (Hybels, 2004, p. 70).

Spiritual Gifts

Many nonprofits are founded on Christian biblical principles. When engaging with faith-based organizations and churches, it is essential that volunteers not only understand their personal spiritual gifts but also understand why spiritual gifts play an important role to them as a volunteer. *Christianity Today* explained, “By using the gift-based method of recruiting, you can help people achieve God’s call on their lives through the use of their spiritual gifts” (March 8, 2005). For a volunteer administrator, placing volunteers according to their spiritual giftedness and not the ministry’s needs requires trust in God that He will bring the right people to meet those needs. One strategy in gifts-based ministry placement is to develop job descriptions that include the spiritual gifts that are needed or recommended for that position (*Christianity Today*, March 8, 2005).

Spiritual gifts cover an incredible spectrum of possibilities for volunteers to be God’s hands and feet here on earth. These gifts are the means for a volunteer to serve their neighbor while loving and honoring God. The challenge with spiritual gifts (as with strengths and passions) is that they are less something you figure out ahead of time and more something God reveals as you continue in your ministry journey. Once gifts discovery happens, we continue to develop them through service and by allowing God to work in and through us.

There are a lot of spiritual gift assessments to choose from that are both web-based or can be found through literature. Determining which assessment best fits the organization is a discussion that the volunteer administrator must have with other staff members. Aspects of an assessment to consider are whether the assessment affirms the organization’s biblical theoretical belief, its cost, and if the test and results are user friendly.

Leadership Characteristics of the Volunteer Administrator

Organizations that utilize volunteers most effectively do so as part of a coordinated volunteer program. A coordinated effort includes the leadership of the volunteer administrator whose main focus is to support volunteers in achieving the organization's mission. A volunteer administrator is a human resource (HR) professional for unpaid staff, and casts and supports an organization's vision, engages the community, and promotes a culture of empowered volunteers. It takes a leader to mobilize the powerful energy and passion of individual volunteers into a dynamic movement (McKee & McKee, 2008, p. 117). A volunteer leader has the potential to lead volunteers to great impact, but must possess a certain set of skills and principles to help their organization to be successful through this effort. McKee and McKee (2008) go on to explain that "As a volunteer leader, your job is to focus all the passion, energy, and enthusiasm of your volunteers into a successful organization to make a lasting impact" (p. 117). Cole and Fisher (1993) defined the leadership of the volunteer administrator as the process that helps direct and mobilize people and/or their ideas (p. 5).

Volunteers come from all facets of life and have much to offer and contribute to the community they are serving. As a leader of volunteers, it is important to capitalize on all that volunteers can contribute and make the most of their time, yet making sure that all volunteer activities connect to the organization's mission. It is through the aforementioned balance that volunteer administrators mobilize the collective power of the community for greater good. For this type of leadership, it is imperative to have a specific skill set and internal motivation to include passion, humility, a desire to impart knowledge, flexibility, vision, an ability to capitalize on strengths, and an aptitude towards discernment.

Passion

The first of these skills is Passion. There is nothing more influential than the passionate power of a community of volunteers. The leader of this community of volunteers must also personify that same level of passion both for the cause and for their position as leader. McKee and McKee (2008) explained that the foundation to volunteer leadership is passion (p.118). Recruiting, motivating, appreciating, managing, and retaining volunteers begins with the volunteer administrator's passion. Then what volunteers do depends on their passion.

Humility

Leadership must also be rooted in humility and cannot possess a desire for power or vain conceit, all in an effort to achieve greatness in working towards the mission of the organization. Conn and Ortiz (2004) claimed, "There is no room for urban leaders who want to have followers and position. Their major characteristic must be for serving others. For both the indigenous and relocating leader there is a need to see the heart of the individual caring for others. This kind of leader is imperative" (p. 405). Effective leadership will not thrive when pride interferes. It is essential for leaders to reflect on the motivation behind their passion. Effective leadership of volunteers cannot be self-serving; it must be humble, with a desire to see others achieve success.

Humility in leadership is an essential way of being. Service based leadership is not just a moral approach, but is also the most effective way of leading, as serving others is a fundamental, universal human value (Keith, 2008, p.2). This type of leadership is a way of life as these concepts are integrated within ourselves to create wholeness and authenticity in how we show up. The practice of self-awareness, actively listening, authentically caring for others, and being present does not just lend itself to the professional environment; it's a way of living out every encounter with the intention of being self-aware, actively listening, etc. In the world of volunteer

administration the aforementioned practice is imperative as every aspect of life relates to leadership within the community the volunteer administrator is serving and potentially living within.

Ability to Impart Knowledge

A leader doesn't hoard their knowledge, in fact they need to pass it along in order to develop others and create positive change. Houston (2004) defined leadership as multifaceted as "A leader is there to meet some basic need of the people and to help all the people to achieve as many good things as possible" (p. 227). This statement implies that leaders must make plans for succession and are not to be threatened by others growing in leadership. The effectiveness of a leader of volunteers is defined by the community of volunteers they have brought together, partnered with their ability to bring up the next generation of leadership. Life is lived through three stages: learning, leading, and legacy. We learn from the leaders before us, then lead and teach others, then step away as our legacy is carried forward. Volunteer administrators must therefore teach and lead others in a direction that allows this process of leadership evolution to take place.

When community members are invited to volunteer, it is imperative to provide them with the resources they need to be successful but also to help them understand the mission and how organizational decisions are made to support that mission. The resources necessary to empower volunteers must include clear communication about what is valued as an organization, how those values connect with the mission and how those values guide action or behavior. Assumptions should not be made about how a volunteer understands your organization or how they will respond when put in a volunteer position. Over communication is always critical, especially

when it comes to empowering volunteers through an understanding of mission, vision and values.

Flexibility

Leadership also requires flexibility. A good leader will exercise discernment in hearing others, will assess priorities and conflict of opinions, and will not act on emotion or arrogance in order to see their own agenda achieved; leaders must be flexible in their approach and response to others. Calahan (2004) stated, “The elder must not insist on having his own way; in fact, he must be willing to yield his right. He has an eternal focus. This does not mean that he never speaks up and on occasion may not be able to support a decision, but the pattern of his life is that he yields his rights” (p. 28). Through having an outward focus on the bigger picture a leader can coach their team to success, yet allow them to carry out the mission through their own abilities. It is through this flexible approach that a leadership legacy is carried forward.

Exercising flexibility will also require a leader to think critically, see the big picture, and effectively predict outcomes and anticipate need. Additionally, a leader balances flexibility with an unwavering ability to stand for justice and truth rooted in the mission they are fighting for and to stand firm and make decisions that are for the good of the volunteer community and for those being served. These characteristics speak to the importance of seeking unity of purpose and mind, as well as aligning personal values with the values of the organization in which they are leading.

Vision

Volunteer administrators must be visionaries. They must look to the future to identify client and organizational needs, while thinking creatively of how to effectively engage the community. Cole and Fisher (1993) explained that the visionary leader “Challenges the status

quo and makes complete contentment with the present unthinkable” (p. 7). Without a visionary leader, volunteers may be directed just to react to needs and find complacency with the status quo versus working toward the dream of the potential. A leader of volunteers who is a visionary, will put volunteers into creative and engaging positions in which a need is anticipated and planned for. Cole and Fisher (1993) also explained:

Vision is particularly important for nonprofit organizations because most lack a “bottom line,” rely heavily on unpaid personnel and reward them with intangible benefits. A clearly articulated vision defines for an organization’s volunteers both the nature of their responsibilities and the level of performance to which they may aspire (p. 6).

A volunteer administrator can have a vision, but unless that vision comes out of the mission and core values, it will not hold value for the organization. A vision provides a goal which is worth striving for.

People in leadership are often visionary. However, the mark of a true leader is the ability to allow and inspire others to dream which gives permission for the development and implementation of their own vision. Empowering volunteers adds a sense of significance to the work being accomplished, emphasizes their abilities and adds value to the organization (Cole & Fisher, 1993, p.10). Inspirational leadership capitalizes on the strengths of those being led. Challenging people and inspiring them towards a shared vision can be a transformational experience for volunteers. Burkus (2011) explained that leaders seek to actively involve followers, simultaneously challenging them to complete lofty acts and building their self-efficacy while at the same time strengthening them. Intentionality in leadership promotes community building, which is critical in the field of volunteer management. Leaders know that you cannot leave community-building to chance, it has to be intentional (McKee & McKee, 2008, p. 123).

Capitalizes on Strengths

Effective leadership also capitalizes on strengths and empowers people to be utilized in the ways in which they as volunteers have been gifted. Rath (2007) explained that each person “Has greater potential for success in specific areas and the key to human development is building on who you already are” (p. 8). He goes on to shatter the “American Dream” when he said “You *cannot* be anything you want to be – but you *can* be a lot more of who you already are” (p. 9). Though being aware of one’s weaknesses is important, developing strengths can set people free to explore the possibilities of how best to contribute. This empowerment has the potential of great benefit to any organization, as it creates an atmosphere of inspired and empowered volunteer participants. Batten, Batten, and Howard (1997) explored:

When we search for, dwell on, or reiterate a person’s weaknesses, we stultify that person’s possibilities, reduce feelings of significance, inhibit growth on and off the job, and seriously hamper performance. This is counterproductive! When we overemphasize the weaknesses of people, we shackle them with a miserable self-image. On the other hand, when we strive diligently and truthfully to help them understand or use their strengths, we set them free (p. 50).

This type of leadership that humbly leads from behind while mobilizing people with to work through their strengths, provides the foundation from which they can launch forward to success both personally and as part of an organization.

Discernment

Discernment is an imperative aspect of leadership. Harkavy (2007) explained, “Discernment refers to the ability to see what is not visible, to understand what is not being said” (p. 39). Discernment enables a leader to ask effective questions, unearth roadblocks, and remove

fears and doubts that keep a team member from reaching their potential (Harkavy, 2007, p. 39). In other words, a discerning leader knows what questions to ask that help the volunteer discover for themselves the issue at hand. Helping people discern their strengths, calling, etc. is not something that can happen in one or two conversations but rather over a significant amount of time. This time requirement suggests that as a volunteer leader, the most difficult responsibility is attempting to evaluate volunteer qualifications (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 81).

The more you invest in people and the more focused and intentional you become about helping people overcome obstacles, the more you will develop your discernment muscle (Harkavy, 2007, p. 41). As with any skill, practice makes perfect, and in this case it is getting to know the motivation of your volunteers. Asking questions such as “what inspires them to volunteer?” or “why are they volunteering for your organization?” will help the volunteer administrator understand why someone is motivated to volunteer with their organization. Discernment involves understanding the heart of your volunteers (Harkavy, 2007, p. 43). Being relational is an important leadership quality for anyone that is a leader of volunteers.

As a result of demonstrating the characteristics of passion, humility, ability to impart knowledge, flexibility, vision, capitalize on strengths and discernment, leadership will be respected and valued. Genuine passion, humility, the ability to empower and teach, flexibility, unity in purpose, an ability to effectively help others learn and understand their potential will enable a volunteer leader to earn respect from those being led. This respect is also fostered and developed over time. Reflecting on these necessary qualities will often help to ensure that as a leader of volunteers, you are doing your best to be a good steward of the volunteers and goals that have been entrusted to you as a volunteer administrator. When leaders mobilize volunteers

to live out their passion, volunteers have the potential for incredible impact beyond what can be imagined; they can achieve extraordinary things.

Administrative Strategies of Volunteer Program

In many organizations the perception is developed that only the volunteer administrator should be interacting with volunteers and that they are the only staff member responsible for volunteer management. Lynch and Russell (2009) challenged this idea and explained, “Organizations with effective volunteer programs not only employ a designated volunteer program manager but also expect all staff to participate in and encourage volunteer involvement” (p. 4). Volunteer programs have the greatest impact with an organizational commitment to volunteer engagement that starts at the top and continues down through each successive level. The way an organization values their volunteers becomes an integral part of their culture. This is especially true as volunteers are introduced to and welcomed into an organization.

Volunteer administrators and the organization in which they work often expect volunteers to “fit in,” yet often leave the volunteers on their own to discover what they are to fit in to and how they are expected to do this within the organization (Silver, n.d). This type of trial-and-error training and orientation process is costly in time and people, plus it does not effectively equip volunteers for their assigned positions. When volunteers receive orientation, they are often told only what they need to know as staff attempts to hide various organizational dynamics which may not be perceived with a positive reaction. Hiding the inner workings of how the organization runs not only compromises the agency’s integrity, it also sets the volunteer up for failure. People are social beings and have a need to belong and be accepted by people who are important to them, such as the organization they are volunteering for (Blanchard & Ridge, 2009, p. 59). An organizational culture of authenticity puts everyone on the same team. Hybels (2004) explained

that organizations need to create a culture of encouragement by taking the time to look each other in the eye and remind each other that the work being accomplished matters (p. 117). For a volunteer program to be successful, it must not only be compatible but also an integral part of the agency's organizational culture. One step to address and support an organizational commitment that values volunteer engagement is to develop a volunteer program purpose statement.

As high volunteer turnover is a significant issue facing local nonprofits, it becomes increasingly important to properly equip volunteers for appropriate positions in hopes that they will find their volunteer work fulfilling, meaningful, and desire to continue to partner with that organization in the future to make a lasting difference. Developing a purpose statement for an organization's volunteer program can be a powerful tool to promote understanding of volunteer involvement, staff buy-in, and to contribute to a positive organizational culture that values volunteers. This authentic statement which is unique to each organization provides the foundation for effective volunteer management but is different than the organization's mission statement. A purpose statement describes how a volunteer program contributes to the achievement of the organization's mission (United Way, n.d.). A discussion needs to be facilitated as to what the fundamental motivation is for involving volunteers within an organization. The outcome of such a discussion should be explained through a formal purpose statement that articulates the mission and goals of the organization, describes the role of volunteers in attaining these goals, and defines the nature of the volunteer/paid-staff partnerships (Cole & Fischer, 1993, p. 27). Defining this statement sets the organization up for success in effectively equipping volunteers for the positions in which they will serve. See Appendix A for a recommended process to develop a volunteer program purpose statement for your organization.

Matching Volunteers with the Right Position

Staffing and directing volunteers are important management functions. Cole and Fisher (1993) explained that the most important functions of the volunteer administrator are planning for efficient and effective use of volunteers, designing volunteer positions, recruiting and screening volunteers, preparing them for assignments, placing them in positions, training and supervising and overseeing their work (pp.19-20). One of these management functions is ensuring that the right individual is assigned to the right volunteer assignment. A challenge faced by most volunteer administrators is ensuring that the work of volunteers contributes to the achievement of the organization's mission. To accomplish the aforementioned, it is necessary that the right volunteers are in the right roles with the right responsibilities. Collins (2005) explained that volunteers and a lack of resources pose a set of challenges, but greatness flows first and foremost from having the right people in the key seats, not the other way around (p. 14). Organizations are intentional about hiring the *right* staff, so why not take this same approach with volunteers to not only maximize the free resources they offer but also to be a good steward of those resources.

To discover a volunteer's potential, a volunteer administrator must also understand the applicant's strengths and abilities, passion, past experience, and spiritual gifting to be able to match a volunteer with a need or an open volunteer position that is a good fit for both the volunteer and the organization. These recommendations not only apply to new volunteers, but to existing volunteers as well. Finding the right fit will contribute to the likelihood that the volunteer relationship will last and ultimately contribute to a higher and positive retention rate. As was stated earlier in this document, low retention rates are a significant issue facing

organizations. Volunteer management requires relationship building and time to understand the volunteer in order to effectively equip them for service that meets the organizational need.

Position Descriptions

One of the most important factors in managing an effective volunteer program is the design of volunteer positions. A good place to start this process is through designing mission driven position descriptions for each focused area of need. It is important that volunteers are fulfilling real organizational needs and not simply working on needless tasks so as to be involved. The process also needs to be sensitive to the need to combine positions that are used to accomplish tasks that paid staff dislike and with more interesting activities in order to create a “purposeful and unified whole” position (Cole & Fisher, 1993, p. 32). In order to help potential volunteers determine the degree of commitment they can make, they should be provided with clear job descriptions and estimates of the time required for completing tasks (Dhami & Joy, 2007, p. 17). It is also important to list examples of strengths and abilities, past experience, skills, and spiritual gifting that are recommended for a positive staffing match.

These position descriptions should also be designed similar to paid staff positions. Position descriptions lend a level of credibility, professionalism, and consistency to the organization’s hiring practices. Cole and Fisher (1993) argued that volunteer roles should be developed in a manner consistent with the organization’s philosophy of volunteerism and guidelines of ethics (p. 32). Each position description should describe the responsibilities, time commitment, and qualifications required of prospective volunteers as well as identifying the accountable supervisor, a means for measuring performance, and most importantly how this position supports the mission. Volunteers need to know what is expected of them and job descriptions do that through providing clear expectations (Volunteer Canada, 2001, p. 9). To

attract and retain volunteers, position descriptions should be designed to demonstrate how a position will potentially be personally satisfying and intrinsically motivating for the volunteer (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 42).

As was explained earlier, once a volunteer is recruited for a position, it is important for the organization to encourage commitment so that the volunteer can find fulfillment, but more importantly so that the organization can maximize the human capital resources offered them. Dhami and Joy (2007) explained “In order to help potential volunteers determine the degree of commitment they can make, they should be provided with clear job descriptions and estimates of the time required for completing tasks” (p. 17). To recruit a volunteer that understands a certain set of expectations only to change expectations once they are in their assigned role demonstrates a lack of organizational integrity. The volunteer will most likely walk away from the originally understood position. Commitment should not be minimized and individuals should not be misled about the level of commitment that is expected. These mistakes rarely lead to a positive outcome (Mckee & McKee, 2008, p. 28).

At a minimum, volunteer position descriptions should include title, purpose, activities/tasks, measure of results, qualifications (including suggested strengths, experience, required skills, and spiritual gifting, if appropriate), timeframe/level of commitment, general location where work will be performed, staff supervisor, and benefits to the volunteer. Position descriptions should contain specific information about the goal of the program, the objectives to be achieved, the responsibilities to be assumed by the volunteer, and the manner in which work is to be evaluated (Cole & Fisher, 1993, p. 39). Some questions to be considered while designing position descriptions include:

- What is the position/What is the need a volunteer will fill?

- What is unique about the person in this position?
- How does this position contribute to the mission of the organization? Can its usefulness be made clear and concrete to volunteers?
- What are the characteristics, strengths, and needs of the target population being helped (Cole & Fisher, 1993, p. 31)?
- What qualifications will be required of a volunteer in order to serve the client effectively?
- Are volunteers responsible for achieving results, rather than simply performing a set of activities? Is there a process in place for results to be measured?
- What makes this position interesting/why would a volunteer want to fill this position?
- Will time required for training and for support be in proportion to the volunteer time required for actual service (“United Way,” n.d.)?
- Is there a sense of ownership or personal responsibility for something within the organization?
- Does the job consider the varied interests and skills volunteers may bring and the value of their community relationships (“United Way,” n.d.)?
- Does the volunteer have the authority to think? If they come up with a better way of doing a task, can they voice their feedback in an environment that values their insight (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 43)?

The last step of job design is actually one of the first steps of a healthy volunteer management cycle – having created a series of volunteer assignments, the tasks of recruiting, training and managing volunteers to fill them should be easier and, hopefully straightforward (Volunteer Canada, 2001, p. 34). See appendix C for a recommended process for developing position descriptions.

Strategies for Position Matching

Volunteer administrators can achieve success in identifying the best candidates for positions by devising a systematic approach that includes the following components: an application form, a personal interview, screening mechanism, and a measure to understand motivation. Because volunteers generally give their time only if they are motivated to do so, this process is not about persuading people to do something they don't want to do (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 49). Rather, the process is about helping volunteers discern their personal characteristics and together finding a position that not only meets the needs of the organization but is also meaningful for the volunteer. Lynch and McCurley (2006) explained "Volunteer programs are successful when volunteers are working positions they look forward to and want to do - if we [volunteer administrators] fail to give volunteers such positions, we will be plagued by turnover, unreliability, and low morale" (p. 42). This understanding adds significant value to the importance of putting volunteers in the right position.

One of the most difficult responsibilities of the volunteer administrator is attempting to evaluate the qualifications of prospective volunteers and matching them to the best position (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 81). Making a decision for volunteer position placement cannot be completely accurate after a short set of interviews. The best approach would be to implement a trial basis of one to three months at which point a follow-up interview will be conducted with both the volunteer administrator and volunteer to re-evaluate the position placement. Lynch and McCurley (2006) explained that this initial testing period will make it more likely that any problems of mismatching are identified early and corrected quickly (p. 81). This follow-up interview does not need to be as formal as an in-person conversation, rather a phone call or email simply to connect would suffice. During this follow-up conversation, either party may request a

change of assignment. There are many steps leading up to this process that include completing a volunteer application, screening, interview, and understanding motivation.

Application

The application is an essential component and great tool to develop a general understanding of an applicant's volunteer eligibility as well as their strengths, passion, experience, and spiritual gifting. Cole and Fisher (1993) explained, "An application enables the volunteer administrator to make a preliminary assessment of the qualifications of candidates without conducting time-consuming interviews of all prospective volunteers" (p. 45). In the application, the volunteer administrator should include required forms for volunteers to review, consent to, and sign such as a Confidentiality Statement, Drug and Alcohol Policy, Background Check Authorization, or any other required documents specific to the organization. These policies and forms will set the stage of expectations from the very beginning. The application can also include a skills and qualification analysis that examines a volunteer's knowledge, skills, and abilities. Reference appendix D for a sample application form.

Screening

Screening is an essential process to develop and maintain a safe organizational environment, especially when volunteers have access to children or vulnerable populations. In these situations, it is critical to conduct background checks that search for crimes against a person and sexual assault. Screening helps organizations do a better job of assigning volunteers to positions and protecting both the organization and program participants (United Way, n.d.). Effective screening should dispel risks both to clients and the health of an organization to prevent harm and theft while maintaining community credibility.

Interview

Good interviewing skills are essential to performing the most crucial of all volunteer management tasks – matching a potential volunteer with a position that they will enjoy (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 77). However, volunteer interviews have less to do with evaluating whether they are a good fit for the job as much as they are a good fit for the organization. Matching volunteers with the right position comes back to the example Collins (2005) referenced in *Good to Great* about getting the right person on the bus (the right people involved in your organization) then figuring out which seat (volunteer position) on that bus would be the best fit for them. The volunteer interview needs to accomplish three critical steps: recruitment, determining a fit, and setting the ground work for a positive relationship.

The recruiting aspect of the volunteer interview is letting the potential volunteer know they can make a significant contribution to the organization and answering any questions of concerns the volunteer may have. It is a mistaken belief that the person who shows up for an interview has already decided to volunteer with the organization (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 77). The interview is just as much about the volunteer interviewing the organization as it is the organization interviewing the volunteer. A recommended approach to the interview process would be to first conduct a phone interview before inviting a prospective volunteer in for an in person interview. Every conversation will help determine if the prospective volunteer will be a good fit for the organization as well as for the position of need for both parties.

Determining *fit* is an interpersonal process of measuring and matching the needs and interests of the volunteers with those of the organization. Lynch & McCurley (2006) explained, “Finding a fit includes determining the interests and abilities of potential volunteers, determining

their suitability for particular jobs, and assessing their ‘rightness’ for the agency, its style of operation and its mission” (p. 77). Cole and Fisher (1993) stated

In a good fit the volunteer’s beliefs and values parallel the organization’s mission and philosophy, and the volunteer’s personality is compatible with those of current paid and volunteer staff. Determination of fit requires judgment on the part of the volunteer administrator who must combine an objective assessment of knowledge, skill, and ability with a subjective look at the personal elements the individual may bring to the position.

(p.44)

The determination of *fit* is a subjective category that often times relies on the volunteer administrator’s instinct. Relying on instinct is sometimes the only option, but when in doubt (especially for a crucial position), it would be helpful to ask a second staff member to be a part of the interview process.

It is so important that a volunteer feel welcomed and wanted during the interview process. If there is a time limit, allocating sufficient time is important for the volunteer to express concerns and ask questions (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 79). The interview process should be a mutual exchange of information; not an interrogation. It can sometimes be helpful to state from the beginning the agenda for the interview and how you anticipate the conversation will go. This framework will set a positive foundation for a positive working relationship and minimize anxiety over expectations.

It is also important for a volunteer to know that the volunteer administrator is not expecting them to make a commitment or sign up for a specific position during the interview. To let the interviewee know that they can take all the information shared with them home to reflect upon is an important practice. The interviewee can then be encouraged to consider what will be

the best position fit for them and if the organization is the right fit for them. Again, by stating that a commitment is not required or expected at the beginning of the interview, the prospective volunteer is more likely to be put at ease thereby helping the interviewer gather an authentic understanding of the interviewee's potential fit with the organization. A recommended strategy would be to follow up with the interviewee in a few days to answer any further questions and determine the next steps such as identifying a position, scheduling an orientation or separating ways. Reference appendix E for a recommended interview process and suggested questions.

Understanding Motivation

In addition to doing something meaningful with their time, each individual has a complex set of other motivations for volunteering (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p.55). Cole and Fisher (1993) explained:

Volunteer motivation falls into three categories – needs, reasons, and benefits. The first group of theories assumes that individual behavior is a result of internal needs, the second that individuals have conscious reasons for their behavior, and the third that behavior is prompted by expected benefits (p.60).

Volunteer motivations might include religious or civic responsibility (need), career advancement (reason), or to benefit a school or legal requirement (benefit). Additionally, people are generally motivated to volunteer through three forces: achievement, affiliation, and power. Achievement motivated volunteers like to work towards goals, are organized, enjoy challenges, are concerned with personal best and can work well along. Affiliation motivates volunteers to seek positions that are relationship opportunities and are concerned with the feelings of other as well as what people think about them. People who want to impact, influence and inspire others are motivated by power. Understanding the underlying motivation of each volunteer will help with discerning

which position would be best for them and how to continue to support that motivation in an effort to promote a long term commitment. Understanding motivation will help the volunteer administrator to discern the authenticity of interest.

Rejecting Potential Volunteers

The purpose of screening, interviewing, and measuring a volunteer's fit for your organization is to determine an impactful and enjoyable position for the volunteer. However, this may not always be possible. Lynch and McCurley (2006) explained that there may be a number of reasons why such rejection must be necessary (p. 85):

- There may not be a suitable position for the volunteer within the agency.
- The volunteer may have expectations that the agency cannot meet.
- The agency and the volunteer may not have congruent philosophies.
- The volunteer walked away because the process felt too tedious.
- The volunteer refuses to agree or does not pass/adhere to the organization's requirements (background checks, time schedules, training commitments).
- The volunteer's behavior or personality does not fit within the organization's culture.

While declining an opportunity for a volunteer to get involved with your organization is never an easy situation, it is the obligation of the volunteer administrator to protect the well-being of clients, staff, organization, and existing volunteers.

Once a Volunteer Accepts an Offered Position

Once a potential volunteer is accepted and invited to support the agency's mission through volunteer efforts there are several critical steps that must take place to set the volunteer and organization up for a successful relationship moving into the future. These steps include orientation, training, and feedback.

Orientation

All volunteers need some level of orientation before starting work. Orientations are more general in nature to provide information every volunteer should know regardless of position. The orientation should strive to address three things: First is an overview of the organization and an explanation as to how the volunteer will contribute to the mission. Second, systems should be explained such as staffing, policies and procedures, facilities, attendance requirements, safety, and avenues to providing feedback both to their supervisor and the volunteer administrator. Lastly, the social connection of where the volunteer fits in with the community of the organization is important to identify as this will forge personal bonds that will sustain volunteer involvement.

Training

Training programs are key to empowering volunteers by helping them adapt to workplace routines and are a significant component to ensuring that volunteers are well equipped for their position assignment. Training, the process in which volunteers are prepared to perform their specific position tasks, can be facilitated through a variety of different settings including lectures, readings, discussion field trips, videos, panel discussion, demonstrations, role-playing, mentor relationships, case studies, simulations, on the job, and more (Lynch & McCurley, 2006, p. 91). At a minimum, it is essential to train volunteers on their job functions. Going beyond what is needed to perform the job can also be positive as that training will provide the volunteer with a big picture understanding of the organization or cause and ultimately increase their potential for impact. Within each organization, required training and the capacity in which information is delivered will be different. But the process in which organizations maximize the human

resources available to them and increase the value of those volunteers is a critical mandate on which every organization depends (Cole & Fisher, 1993, p. 97).

Feedback

What works for one may not work for all. Volunteers need input and perspective from their supervisor in order to understand the impact that they are truly making within the organization. Volunteers must also have an avenue in which they can provide feedback to the organization with an option for anonymity. It is necessary to provide opportunities at least once a year for staff and volunteers to evaluate and provide feedback on the volunteer program, volunteer duties and the organizational attitudes about volunteers (United Way, n.d.). It is then imperative to not just collect this information, but to also learn from it. Based on the feedback received, formal and informal changes to the volunteer program can begin not only impacting existing volunteers but also contributing to the positive integration of future volunteers. It can also be beneficial to provide volunteers with a personal reflective survey not to be shared with the organization, in order to determine if they are still satisfied with the work they are doing, fulfilling their calling, and motivated by the work they do.

Gaps in Research

Areas still in need of further research include the consideration of generational and cultural differences as well as whether volunteer appreciation efforts contribute to increased retention rates. Additionally, this research does not take into consideration volunteers who help with one time needs such as businesses who volunteer for one day of service. It is also recognized that what works for one organization will not work for all, as the environment for social engagement is quickly changing.

Conclusion

Community development through volunteer efforts and effective leadership has the potential to change lives. With the limited resources organizations have, it becomes increasingly important to effectively equip volunteers for positions with the hope of creating both a lasting impact and increased retention rates. The elements that contribute to increased volunteer retention rates include a culture of volunteer value within an organization, leadership characteristics of the volunteer administrator, volunteer personal reflection and understanding, and the administrative efforts of the volunteer program to equip a volunteer for the right position. When all four areas are working in harmony, the potential for greater impact through a community of mobilized volunteers becomes a reality.

APPENDIX A**Purpose Statement**

Every organization is different and has different volunteer needs. Answer the following questions to guide the development of a volunteer program purpose statement.

1. What is the mission statement of the organization?

2. What are the core values of the organization?

3. What needs do volunteers address within the mission?

4. How do volunteers help fulfill the mission of the organization?

5. Who are the stakeholders of a volunteer program?

Using the information discovered from answering above question, draft a volunteer program purpose statement. The statement should be approximately two to five sentences.

APPENDIX B

Recommended Resources for Volunteer Personal Understanding

Strengths

A suggested process of identifying ability or talent can begin by:

1. Examination of a list of personal achievements – were there any common actions associated with each achievement?
2. Identification of activities that friends or co-workers affirm (i.e. good listening skills, hospitality, leadership, etc.) (Ellis et al, n.d., p.11).
3. Identification of the tasks within your profession that you do well.
4. Asking the question - What do you love to do and do well?

By evaluating each of these elements and looking for common themes, a strength or ability can be inferred.

Additional resources to reference:

<http://www.literacyworks.org/mi/assessment/findyourstrengths.html>

Rath, T. (2007). *Strengthsfinder 2.0*. New York, NY. Gallup Press

Clifton, D., Leisveld, C., & Winseman, A. (2008) *Living Your Strengths*. NY: Gallup Press

Passion:

Ask yourself four questions:

1. Where does need and joy collide? Volunteering should be motivated by where our greatest passion meets the world's greatest need. The first step to determining passion is to discover what you believe to be the world's greatest need as passion will flow from that.

2. What three movies, books, songs, etc are your favorite? Evaluate these and try to identify the common theme.
3. Ask others “what is my one thing?” When trying to discover passion, sometimes we are too close to ourselves to identify it. Ask people what “one thing” makes you, you. You should see a common thread that will strongly indicate your passion.
4. What one topic causes your ears to “perk,” engage in conversation every time it is brought up, and cause a sense of undeniable excitement within you?

Now evaluate your response to each question – what are the common themes? This should point to your passion.

Spiritual Gifting:

Complete a spiritual gifting assessment. Following are recommended sources:

<http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1>

http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_PDF_Discover_Your_Spiritual_Gifts.pdf

<http://www.kodachrome.org/spiritgift/>

Arthur, K., Lawson, D., & Lawson, BJ. (1995) *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press

Wagner, P. (2005) *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books

APPENDIX C**Position Descriptions**

- 1.) Conduct a needs assessment to fulfill mission
- 2.) Identify tasks to meet needs
- 3.) Identify skills needed to complete tasks
- 4.) Identify roles to define tasks
- 5.) Create job descriptions for roles

Example Position Description:

Position Description: *Role title*

Reports to: *Organization Staff Member*

Key Objective: *Describe how the position supports the mission of your organization*

General Duties: *What are the main tasks volunteers will be completing?*

Qualifications: *Strengths, skills, past experience, spiritual gifting*

Minimum Commitment: *6 months, 1 year, etc.*

Location worksite: *Physical location where work will be performed*

Benefits: *What benefits will the volunteer receive? i.e. training, travel, professional networking, philanthropy, etc.*

APPENDIX D

Volunteer Application Form

1. Contact Information

Name:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Emergency Contact and Relation:

2. Skills, Interests, Passions

Education Background:

Current Occupation:

Previous Work Experience:

Hobbies:

Previous Volunteer Experience:

3. Strengths

Personal and professional achievements:

Activities friends, family, co-workers affirm:

What are tasks that you do well?

What do you love to do and do well?

4. Position Preference

List the different position needs so that the prospective volunteer could identify areas they are most interested in (admin, child care, donation sorting, fundraising, senior care, people with disabilities, etc.).

5. Availability

List position availability options (morning, afternoons, evenings, weekends, etc)

6. Background Screening

Ask questions that are critical to your organization such as:

Have you ever been convicted of a criminal offense?

Have your driving privileges been suspended or revoked in any state?

Have you ever been convicted of child abuse?

Do you use illegal drugs?

Do you have any physical limitations that would prohibit you from performing
basic job functions?

7. References

List 2 non-family references

APPENDIX E

Steps for an efficient and effective interview

1.) Be prepared.

- Review the volunteer's application and have it with you in the interview
- Develop a list of questions to ask, including open-ended questions to explore the volunteers motivation
- Have with you a list of possible volunteer jobs including job descriptions
- Have with you information and material on the organization

2.) Interview introductions

- Make the applicant feel welcomed and thank them for meeting with you.
- Build rapport by explaining what they can expect from the interview
- Tell them from the very beginning that you are not asking for a commitment today and will be asking them to take some time to reflect on the conversation and that you will be following up in a few days.
- Provide them background information on the organization and allow for a discussion about the mission, purpose, and programs.

3.) Interview Questions:

- Is there anything you would like to know before we get started?
- How did you first learn of our organization?

Questions to Determine Motivation

- Why did you decide to become a volunteer at this time?
- What attracted you to our agency? Is there any particular aspect of our work that most interests you?

- What would you like to get out of volunteering here? What will make you feel that you have successful?
- What types of volunteer work have you done before? What did you like best about that work? What did you like least?

Questions to Determine Skills

- What skills do you think you have to contribute?
- What do you like doing? What types of work would you rather avoid?
- What types of experience or training have you had in your work or other volunteering?
- Describe a project or a work experience that you were in charge of and how you went about doing it.
- How do you deal with situations that don't go as you planned?

Questions to Determine fit

- What have you enjoyed most or least about your previous volunteer work and your paid employment?
- Describe your ideal supervisor. How do you prefer that supervisor to relate to you?
- Would you rather work on your own, with a group, or with a partner? Why?
- How does volunteering fit into your life with other priorities? What aspects of your life could impact the quality and frequency of your service?

4.) Closing the Interview

- Present some potential positions that could be a good fit for the volunteer.

- Encourage the volunteer to take the information home with them and reflect upon the interview and information discussed prior to making a decision.
- Explain what will happen next. Let them know that you will follow up with them in a few days to answer any other questions and discuss next steps such as scheduling an orientation if they are interested in volunteering with your organization.

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