Volunteer Management: Once More with Meaning

WRITTEN BY JENNIFER WOODILL  CREATED ON FRIDAY, 21 MARCH 2008 00:00

Volunteering is widely recognized as a key strategy of community engagement and participation. Providing much-needed support and services at a community level, volunteering also delivers on civic and philanthropic values within society at large. Volunteering has been widely highlighted in “big picture” discussions about community development, social inclusion, social capital, and community health. It is also frequently cited as a key expression of civic engagement and participation generally in society, and rates of volunteering have been used to measure overall community health. 

Volunteering is recognized as a key activity in national and international circles that promotes social inclusion and social justice, beginning at the grassroots level but extending to societal changes at local, national, and international levels. The United Nations Development Programme articulates the benefits this way: “Volunteering brings benefits to both society at large and the individual volunteer. It makes important contributions, economically as well as socially. It contributes to a
And for many, volunteering opens the door to new opportunities for personal and professional development. For example, in a study on volunteerism, newcomers to Canada report benefits that include acquiring professional experience and contacts in a new country, reducing social isolation, gaining an opportunity to practice English, and getting a chance to learn more about social-service work and Canadian society in general. Volunteering offers a unique strategy for social change, providing support to society and those who volunteer.

Volunteering can play a critical role in fostering social inclusion. But how do those who make decisions about volunteer recruitment think about these questions—indeed, do they think about these questions at all?

I came to this discussion from a personal perspective. After years of doing front-line community work in an organization with strong community development principles, I applied to work as a volunteer coordinator. I had done research on the role of volunteering in fostering social inclusion and social justice, and I wanted to play my part in the vision.

But soon after, I developed the sinking feeling that I was in the wrong job. New to a volunteer management role (though I had worked with volunteers for years), I wanted to learn everything to do my job well. I jumped headfirst into a new world: I read voraciously about management practices, joined the local Association for Volunteer Administration, and connected with other managers. I learned about topics of interest for volunteer managers, such as recruiting, screening, evaluation, risk management, and so on. My big-picture questions about how voluntarism connects to community development, civic engagement, and social inclusion were never discussed in these resources, however, or in meetings with other volunteer managers. I felt as though I had landed in a completely different profession, perhaps as a factory manager of sorts, churning out well-oiled volunteers as efficiently as possible. I began to wonder what was going on.

I realized that volunteering suffered from a serious disconnect. While theoretical discussions of voluntarism recognize it as a powerful tool for civic engagement and community development, these ideas have not translated into volunteer management practice on the ground. Under increasing pressure to professionalize volunteer management, there has been little reflection on practice and, in particular, how “best practices” limit opportunities for citizen engagement and social inclusion. I believe that the underlying principles of endorsed best practices are the principles of efficiency, resource development, and control and that social exclusion is an inevitable result of using these principles at the center of volunteer management practice. This discussion challenges traditional practices and suggests how to make social inclusion a central goal of volunteer management.

Working with Volunteers: Key Questions

Why has—or hasn’t—your organization recruited volunteers? To fill a void in labor, to encourage community involvement, or both? What role do volunteers play? Are volunteers allocated to manual labor tasks or front-line service work, or do you involve volunteers at a “higher” level, in, say, advocacy, research, and so on?

Do volunteers see themselves as members of your organization or merely as helpers?

Who makes decisions about who can and can’t volunteer at your agency? Who is the gatekeeper, and how is this responsibility negotiated?

Does your volunteer coordinator view himself as an administrator, gatekeeper, or community development worker? In terms of responsibilities and authority, how is the coordinator positioned in your agency?

Who makes up your volunteer force? How diverse is the volunteer base? Do volunteers reflect the community in terms of cultural diversity, age, and class? If not, why? How does your organization’s voluntarism affect society at large? Could it have greater impact if more people participated in volunteering?

What skills, capacities, and relationships do volunteers develop at your organization? Does your organization have a volunteer development program in place?

Traditional Volunteer Management

Linda Graff and Paul Reed report an estimated 2 percent annual decline in volunteerism, amounting to a 20 percent decline over the next decade. While the decrease is disconcerting, these numbers beg a question: how many people try to volunteer but aren’t successful? We assume that volunteerism is declining because fewer people want to volunteer. But could there be a more complex story underlying this decline? Do prospective volunteers face barriers that discourage participation? Do some face more barriers than others?

In fact, social exclusion is an inevitable result of conducting volunteer management based on the principles of efficiency, resource development, and control. These principles are all interrelated and work to support one another. Efficiency is about finding volunteers as quickly as possible who will do the job as quickly as possible. In our sector, efficiency is an epidemic that ultimately values quantity over quality of connection. Efficiency justifies turning a prospective volunteer away because he doesn’t fit neatly into an organization’s predetermined needs.

The principle of resource development views volunteers—much like money—as resources or assets. You can
see this principle at work by identifying where volunteer management lives within an organizational structure. Often volunteer management is housed with administrative and fundraising functions. This principle underlies the trend to merge and calculate how worked, people employed, and placing dollar values on the value of a resource. Again, quantity rules over quality, because a numerical value cannot express relationships developed or the ability to cultivate passion in another’s work. This principle of resource development allows an organization to deem a prospective volunteer “not worth the effort” after conducting a quick cost-benefit analysis. But if a volunteer is poorly educated or he has a disability, traditional management principles don’t view him as a valuable resource.

The principle of control plays out in all volunteer management practices, which enforce top-down systems with clear rules of accountability and responsibility. A controlled system doesn’t allow for gray areas, and communication is top-down. Volunteer managers decide how volunteers can be involved, and volunteers decide only whether they like the mode of involvement. If not, they have to go elsewhere. There is no flexibility or reciprocity in a controlled system.

The principles of efficiency, resource development, and control direct volunteer management practices, where the focus is on finding people to do the work as quickly and easily as possible. So while volunteering can be a win-win strategy for both organizations and volunteers, it cannot meet this potential when the scales are tipped to benefit organizations at the expense of citizen engagement and inclusion.

There is a disconnection between volunteer management practices and the broader goals of the social-service sector—ostensibly to support people as they make progress in their lives. Indeed, consider these scenarios, where organizations’ ostensible goal to promote volunteerism is discouraged in practice. When an organization has a program that theoretically supports newcomers but rejects them as volunteers, for example, there is a disconnect. When an employment program seeks volunteers but refuses to accept the unemployed on the premise that they will ultimately find jobs and will lack commitment, there is a disconnect. And finally, when we don’t view our work with volunteers as integral to our support of communities, there is also a disconnect.

I propose an alternate way of approaching volunteer work and management, where the emphasis is on social inclusion and community development. With this alternate way of thinking, planning for volunteer involvement, practices, and management structure starts with these central questions: “How can we find creative ways for community members to get involved in and engaged by our work? How can we develop an organizational culture where volunteer engagement and involvement is central to all our programs? How can we develop a culture in which volunteers are completely integrated into the organization?” These questions move us in new and creative directions.

In this model, recruitment is a fluid process and happens continuously. Volunteer managers play an integral role in an organization, balancing the organization’s need for volunteers with the interest and assets of those who want to volunteer. Instead of developing job descriptions and then recruiting to fill these volunteer positions, managers define roles and responsibilities in a more fluid way. Someone who wants to share his skills can approach a needy organization with a proposal for volunteering, and the job description can be written spontaneously. An annual asset-mapping exercise with volunteers can highlight the skills of volunteers and programming can then be developed to exploit shared assets. Perhaps new programs and activities are born from volunteer talents.

In this model, a commitment to social inclusion requires that an audit be conducted regularly on volunteer opportunities available and how such opportunities limit participation from community members. If most volunteer opportunities require strong proficiency in English to participate, for example, then the requirement should exclude those lacking a high level of proficiency. But in this model, an organization also makes a commitment to think creatively about ways to create opportunities for newcomers to volunteer. Instead of finding the “best” person for the “job,” an organization makes a commitment not to exclude newcomers from participation in a community and to create meaningful space for their engagement.

In this new model, volunteers work alongside staff rather than in a strict hierarchy. Volunteers are involved at all organizational levels, not just in front-line work but also in supporting managers and directors, perhaps as volunteer consultants, trainers or researchers. The interaction between staff and volunteers is more fluid, whereby staffers mentor volunteers, but volunteers also play a mentoring role, sharing expertise with staff.

In this model, staffers actively encourage and support clients who want to volunteer to gain new skills, meet new people, and get involved in their community. When clients become volunteers, their relationship to the organization changes significantly. As clients, they came to the organization for help and services. As volunteers, they are motivated to get and give help and develop a sense of pride through their participation. Staff members are committed to provide extra support to volunteers who need it and view this work as integrated with the larger goals of the organization and the goal of enabling volunteers to move forward.

In this model, risk management strategies must be considered in light of a social-inclusion perspective. An organization acknowledges that while volunteer screening is sometimes necessary (a sex offender should be prohibited from volunteering at an organization that works with children, for example), that screening often serves to exclude those who already face barriers to volunteering. In this model, organizations acknowledge that life is inherently risky, innovation is risky, and the safe route is not necessarily the best route.

**What Next?**

This discussion just begins to scratch the surface of the conversation, a conversation that must go deeper with those who are passionate about changing our approach to volunteer management. Bring this perspective to your organization, and get those at the top on board. Convey the importance of volunteerism in terms of promoting civic engagement and social inclusion and the exclusionary effect of traditional volunteer management practices. Find a way to reflect creatively on your organizational principles and practices as you...
work with volunteers. Finally, talk to funders about the potential of embracing volunteer management as a tool for civic engagement and community development. When funders make this connection and buy in to its importance, you can establish the argument for funds to support this important work. Note, however, that acquiring funding is a long-term goal without much yield in the near term. In the meantime, organizations have to think creatively and change practices because of lack of money.

Let’s get reinspired by volunteerism as a tool for social change. As the United Nations puts it, volunteerism “contributes to a more cohesive society by building trust and reciprocity among citizens.” This important work should not be taken lightly. This is work that is inspiring.

Bibliography

Kelly, Colleen. "A People Lens: Why Can’t We Find Board Members and Other Volunteers We Require?" Volunteer Vancouver, 2006.

NOTES

4. This quote illustrates the win-win: “By caring and contributing to change, volunteers decrease suffering and disparity, while they gain skills, self-esteem, and change their lives. People work to improve the lives of their neighbors and, in return, enhance their own.” “Making a Case for Volunteer Centres;” Volunteer Ontario, 1996.
5. Graff and Reed, 2007.
6. Robert Putnam argues that linking social capital, also known as “scaling up,” creates connections between social strata (such as a volunteer connecting with a senior manager), enabling lower-income workers to gain access to networks, power, and wealth.

Jennifer Woodill developed these ideas while working at St. Christopher House (www.stchristishouse.org), a social service agency committed to community development thinking and practice. Woodill now works at the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario as a community volunteer specialist, and can be reached at jwoodill@hsf.on.ca.

Terms: Organizational Management and Change, Spring 2008

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That's not a new model!

not at all - it is a well known model that organizations use when they really understand the value of their volunteers

It is a new model for 90% of organizations that involve volunteers. If you doubt that, just have a look at how organizations, including Pew, talk about the value of volunteers/volunteer involvement!

It's a new idea for many people, believe it or not. Many people who get involved in community organizations come from a for-profit, hierarchical mindset and are not familiar with the theories and practices of volunteer engagement, or why that differs from employment.
When I first joined the fundraising profession, I was repeatedly told that it was my job to manage volunteers. And that mostly meant, get volunteers to do the stuff I wanted them to do - or the stuff that the agency wanted done. Ten years later, I tried to write up my own experience about how to engage volunteers. You'll see my description of "empowering volunteers" - "enabling them to do fundraising stuff" in my book STRATEGIC FUND DEVELOPMENT. And in each edition since that first one in 1997, I have added more enabling functions. Check out the third edition, published by John Wiley & Sons in March 2011.

What I describe is good for all volunteers, not just fundraising volunteers. What I describe is good for board members. And what I describe is also good for staff.

JAYNE CRAVENS | 19 MONTHS AGO

I could not love this article more than I do. I'm completely blown away. I want to make it required reading of every corporation that says they want to promote volunteerism because it saves money. I want to make it required reading of every volunteer manager who reports volunteer engagement success in terms of money saved from not paying an employee or consultant. I'm known for writing disagreeing, highly-critical comments on online articles and blogs about volunteer management - but this, this I want to memorize for immediate recall.

Another person commented here that this is not a new model. Indeed, for [I]some[/I] organizations, it's not, and it's something that many have been talking about for years, including myself. But for most organization, it IS a new model. For most volunteer-involving organizations, for most government officials, for most corporate folks promoting volunteerism, this is a brand-new model, one that is in stark contrast to what they promote - which is volunteers save money (which, they don't, but that's another conversation), and the way to judge success of volunteer involvement is - was work done?. Yes, many of us have been talking about the model Jennifer details here for a long time, myself included. But Jennifer frames it in a way that's better than anything I've ever said or written.

Can Jennifer Woodill be enticed to come back to Twitter? Jennifer, or @jenwoodill, we need your voice! Don't make me stalk you!


TOM CANON | 15 MONTHS AGO

Well written article! Your points are all valid, and should be included with all current Volunteer Management practices. Organizations should strive to find the perfect blend of how they/we currently operate regarding volunteers, and ideally, moving towards the goals you've stated. Culture changes (which is how I view this) can take a long time, but you get there one step at a time!

KEEAN WELLAR | 54 MONTHS AGO

Terrific Jennifer! These are by no means new tensions with respect to human services and volunteerism. In fact, similar challenges are bestowed upon many an eager young professional (or someone new to the field) looking to contribute to change, but feeling more like a cog in a systems wheel. This has been going on since "organizing" began - probably in caves

Truth be told, the "need" to "have volunteers" is considered a burden by many charities, and these (over)management processes come in part from that negative perspective.

About 4 years ago our organization (LiveWorkPlay.ca) started to think about volunteers very differently - I hope that we had always respected and valued them, but we definitely were very limiting as to how they were invited to contribute. This shift went hand in hand with an important and dramatic mission shift where we began to think more about how we are changing the community, rather than a focus that was more or less restricted to the direct services and supports we provide to people with intellectual disabilities. Once we had this new focus on how to change the community (how to help other citizens welcome our members in workplaces, neighbourhoods, recreation, etc) volunteers suddenly became CRITICAL to our mission as networkers, gatekeepers, and holders of key relationships with and between our members and communities.
The work of our Volunteer Coordinator and developments with each volunteer is linked directly to the work of the rest of the staff team. We are just 11 people so perhaps that is more easily accomplished in larger organizations where I often see the “volunteer division” as an almost distinct entity that perhaps more satisfies a “need to be seen as having volunteers” than as a commitment to tapping the strengths of the community in the pursuit of social change.

JILL FRIEDMAN FIXLER | 13 MONTHS AGO  
Thank you Jennifer for a thoughtful piece. I couldn’t agree more with your general thesis. I too have worked in the nonprofit sector for over 30 years. As an organizational development consultant specializing in volunteer engagement, it is my observation that virtually every volunteer program in existence today is based on the needs and desires of traditionalist volunteers born before 1946. The strategies that worked so well with this Greatest Generation fall woefully short with Baby Boomers and the generations that follow. Their expectations for service vary dramatically from that of their parents and grandparents. They look for roles that are meaningful with high impact that engage their skills, talents and resources. They reject hierarchical systems and desire collaborative relationships with other staff and volunteer leaders. They aren’t interested in staying for a lifetime, only as long as the work is interesting, challenging and where they can see results. And volunteering needs to align with the demands of their lives and lifestyles and that certainly doesn’t synch with the 9 to 5 mentality of many nonprofit organizations today.

The disconnect is that while Baby Boomers and the generations that follow know that organizations that engage volunteers are not ready for them, these very same organizations think they are. Fundamental changes need to take place to engage these talented generations in the volunteer marketplace. Staff hired as generalists are rewarded for doing the work, not delegating it. They were not hired for competencies in cultivation, talent management, facilitation, negotiation, and conveying. Volunteer engagement is not part of their position descriptions, goal setting or performance appraisals. Until it is, engaging with volunteers appears to be a matter of individual choice. While some employees shine in this area, it is not because of an organizational imperative, rather their own personal choice.

Your point about the funding communities commitment to this issue is paramount to changing the paradigm here. Without external pressure and priority setting, organizations will continue to do with what they have always done with volunteers, with little hope that significant changes will be made. Outreach and education to funder’s and to organization executives is the first step in making significant change. A compelling case about community collaboration and access to talent in these tough economic times needs to be made. Volunteer managers are often low status in organizations and few are successful in making inroads in placing volunteer engagement as high priority in organizational capacity building.

The push back that I see from executives is organizational denial. There is an assumption that if the organization engages volunteers, it must do it well. There is a lack of vision of what can be done beyond the tried and true of volunteer mobilization. I recently spoke with a visionary CEO of a large nonprofit. His goal is to increase volunteer engagement so that it is ubiquitous within the organization. He wants to see volunteers engaged in every aspect of the organization that currently engages volunteers only in direct service and board governance. He wisely chose to begin this initiative by training all of his senior staff on the principles and opportunities inherent in increasing volunteer talent management in this organization. He is the example of where we need to move board and staff organizational leadership. They need to understand that by increasing volunteer engagement they can significantly increase organizational capacity, even in tough economic times. Once they have this vision and they walk the talk by engaging capacity building volunteers themselves, this paradigm shift is possible. as they begin to see the benefits of volunteer engagement and that it is as critically important as the leadership of staff, things will begin to change.

The times are ripe to make this change in organizational practice. The days of endlessly hiring staff to address growth and programmatic changes are probably over. In this new normal we need to leverage staff and volunteer leaders in more robust ways. The future of nonprofit organizations depends on it. As you imply, these new generations of volunteers will demonstrate their dissatisfaction with what is offered to them with their feet. They will either go elsewhere or not volunteer at all. And that, would be a loss for all of us.

REED DEWEY OF VOLUNTEER FRONTIER | 48 MONTHS AGO  
Thanks to Jennifer for how she has not only framed where many nonprofits are these days but also how to move the field to a new place that considers more of a partnership model between nonprofits and volunteers. In my work with nonprofits, I’ve completely dropped the word “management” out of my vocabulary and use “volunteer
While a little over-used these days in the states, at least takes us in a better direction. I also encourage nonprofits to refer to volunteers by their role/job rather than by their pay grade.

Changing organizational culture towards a more inclusive and holistic approach to involving volunteers is indeed a laudable end game, but I'd suggest that for most nonprofits an incremental approach might be the most realistic way to go. Helping train line staff in progressive volunteer engagement can help them enjoy their jobs, get more done and ultimately make a bigger difference to those they serve.

Jennifer's point about nonprofits often being too obsessed with volunteers bringing in a good return on investment is a valuable reminder about person-hood. Put another way, building meaningful two-way relationships with volunteers moves us away from seeing them as commodities that come and go - to being our advocates, bloggers, funders, board members, skilled volunteers, project leaders, direct service providers and friends.

"social exclusion is an inevitable result of conducting volunteer management based on the principles of efficiency, resource development, and control"

Exactly!

I have been beating my head against a brick wall, trying to communicate this point. Thank you for making it so eloquently.

Thank you for raising some deeper questions about how staffed nonprofits too often view volunteerism, aided and abetted by too much of the volunteer management field which tends to want volunteer management to mimic staff management as much as possible.

First, great article. Thanks Jennifer.

Re: "An annual asset-mapping exercise with volunteers can highlight the skills of volunteers and programming can then be developed to exploit shared assets."

I am very interested in tools and techniques to explore volunteer knowledge-skills-abilities-passions and the fit to volunteer opportunities. This article was the first I've heard of 'asset mapping', and I like the idea. But a web search revealed only community-level (not individual level) asset-mapping into. Can you provide a reference for me to learn more about asset-mapping exercises to do with individuals? Thanks.