

Measurement in Volunteer Administration: Seven Arenas

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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations regularly measure and evaluate the structure and output of their direct service programs, but rarely pay such attention to their volunteer programs. This paper outlines the importance of data collection and evaluation of volunteer programs in order to better serve and cultivate support from various stakeholders. We present seven arenas in which different metric data about a volunteer program would be used to deliver messages to different audiences and for different reasons: 1) outputs and stories from volunteers presented to the wider public can promote the organization's client advocacy; 2) outputs, outcomes, and anecdotes should be delivered to grantmakers and donors when seeking grants and contributions; 3) outputs and reports of volunteer satisfaction should guide volunteer administrative staff regarding future administrative decisions; 4) outputs and budget-related outcomes will support the organization's decision makers during strategic planning; 5) outcomes, impacts, and volunteer and staff satisfaction reports can garner support from the Board and the top management team for improved program delivery; 6) expanded value-added calculations should be incorporated by the Board, donors, and watchdogs as a component of financial and social accounting; 7) all of the above information should be measured and reported to advocate for greater volunteer management capacity. While these efforts for measuring, tracking, and evaluating volunteer-related data require money, time, and expertise,

organizations that invest in them will reap benefits that include greater internal and public expression of their mission, stronger outputs, improved volunteer management, more effective program delivery, and increasingly robust impacts on our communities.

Key Words: Measurement, evaluation, management

Introduction

Socrates is said to have declared that the ‘unexamined life is not worth living,’ a maxim that underscores the value of never letting a day go by without reflecting on ways to improve our life’s walk. Were Socrates to spend time working or volunteering with modern nonprofit organizations, perhaps he would utter a corollary: The unexamined volunteer program is not worth volunteering for. Volunteer programs could become appreciably more effective by investing small amounts of time creating measurements and evaluating metrics. Whereas Chandler and Torbert (2003) outlined 27 ‘flavors’ of social action research, we note 7 different ‘arenas’ where measurement and evaluation can be powerful tools for operating, sustaining, and improving volunteer administration.

Safrit (2012) observes that the literature on volunteer administration has described, albeit superficially, the value of evaluation for nearly 50 years. This lack of focus on measurement and evaluation reflects the fact that many volunteer administrators do not have the time, resources, or expertise to examine their programs in a systematic way. Nonetheless, Safrit (2012: 389-90) argues that “evaluation is a critical, if not *the most* critical, component of managing an overall volunteer program and subsequently documenting the impacts and ultimate value of the program to the target clientele it is designed to serve as well as the larger society in which it operates.” The purpose of this article is to outline the importance of data collection and evaluation in serving and cultivating an organization’s many different stakeholders. The goals include greater expression, stronger outputs, better volunteer management, a more effective organization, and increasingly robust impacts on our communities.

Arena 1: Messaging for Advocacy

- Audience: General public, potential stakeholders
- Type of information: Stories, counts, and outputs

Nonprofits advocate both for their own survival and for their broader social mission (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014). They variously advertise program strengths, staff accomplishments, fundraising efficiency, and community engagement, among other successes. Participation of volunteers in nonprofits reflects community engagement and the currency of mission. Stories of volunteer participation appear in speeches, reports, and social media. The number of volunteers and their aggregate hours are quick-hit statistics that advocate for the viability of program and mission. Where money talks, volunteer hours can be monetized and used in general advocacy campaigns.

Indeed, when monetized, volunteers represent a primary financial resource for many nonprofits. A widely used source is Independent Sector’s (2015) estimation of volunteer value, which is derived from the average hourly wage of nonagricultural workers plus 12 percent (to approximate the value of fringe benefits). In 2013, volunteers were valued at \$22.55 per hour (Independent Sector 2015). Tracking volunteer hours and monetizing volunteer value enhances a nonprofit’s reputation, thereby augmenting advocacy efforts. One study, however, suggests that many nonprofits neither monetize volunteer hours, nor do they use this information for advocacy purposes. Mook, Sousa, Elgie, and Quarter (2005) reported that only about one-third of nonprofits in their study kept records of volunteer contributions to their organizations. Over 90 percent of nonprofits admitted to not estimating the financial value of volunteer contributions, citing that it did not apply to their messaging, that they had simply not considered it, or that the

estimated value was not desirable (p. 408). Consequently, the tracking and reporting of volunteer contributions can be an important tool for advocacy or community engagement, but only if decision-makers see the value and implement appropriate measures.

Arena 2: Messaging for Soliciting Grants and Contributions

- Audience: Foundations and individual donors
- Type of information: Stories, any available measures

In recent decades, grantmakers have solicited impact reports as a condition of funding (Cordery & Sinclair, 2013). An organization with an established track record of collecting and reporting on various metrics of a successful volunteer program might prove more qualified for funding than one that does not. Funders value both the organization's capability to track volunteer program metrics as well as the meaning and impact of those metrics.

Hotchkiss, Unruh, and Fottler (2014) note that "a significant proportion of nonprofit-generated value is a product of volunteer contributions and therefore should be documented to accurately reflect the nonprofit performance" (p. 1115). If a grantmaker seeks to fund nonprofits with the greatest reach and impact, it may prefer to support an organization that has demonstrated an effective use of volunteer resources; one that can illustrate the cost savings as well as the value that its volunteer program adds to its overall mission. Additionally, a well-managed and well-documented volunteer program may attract funding because of the implication that a successful volunteer program translates to other successful programs within that organization.

Organizations that track volunteer metrics also tend to be more successful at soliciting corporate funding. Perry (2006) observed that the American branch of Credit Suisse decided "that instead of selecting charities that had a particular mission, it would favor those that relied heavily on volunteers to accomplish their goals" (p. 14). In 2005, most of the corporation's \$5 million in grants "...went to charities with active volunteer programs" (Perry, 2006, p. 14). Failure to track the accomplishments of a volunteer program will automatically preclude an organization from receiving funding from corporations that have adopted Credit Suisse's funding philosophy.

Lastly, organizations that commit to recording volunteer metrics will be stronger candidates for funding from individuals. Volunteers develop attachments to the organizations for which they volunteer, and those "who fondly remember their experiences are highly likely to be motivated to offer financial aid to an organization to assure its future within their community even when they are no longer able to volunteer" (Hotchkiss et al., 2014, p. 1119). Long-term donations, however, are best sustained when the organization maintains regular contact with its former volunteer, a practice that is often neglected (Hotchkiss et al. 2014, p. 1120). Without continued contact, volunteers may not feel valued by the organization, and may reciprocate by withholding their financial support. Regular and ongoing communication with active and former volunteers can only be accomplished with proper management of volunteer data.

Arena 3: Metrics for Improved Volunteer Administration

- Audience: Volunteer administration staff
- Type of information: Outputs, satisfaction

Hager and Brudney (2011) report that two in three U.S. charities have difficulty recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers. Nonprofits can improve their volunteer recruitment by adequately tracking metric data about current volunteers. By understanding who their volunteers are, volunteer managers can “tailor volunteer pitches to the volunteer's stage of life. Is the volunteer still working? Does he or she have kids at home? What about duties caring for older family members?” (Nelson, 2009, p. 32). Tailoring the message when asking individuals to volunteer will ensure a more attractive request to the volunteer and a better match with the organization’s needs.

Many adults volunteer in hopes of making social connections, and they will be more inclined to volunteer with an organization that can prove that it has a robust volunteer program (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). A dynamic volunteer program will also inspire confidence in potential volunteers who might correlate the large number of volunteers with a perception that the nonprofit treats its volunteers respectfully, and provides fulfilling roles.

Volunteers “often can't see the connection between their activities and the mission of the organization” (Blum, 2008, p. 21). Failing to track volunteer inputs “denies volunteers a full appreciation of their contributions” and this disconnect between volunteer activities and mission fulfillment can lead to turnover (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2011, p. 220). Tracking and reporting volunteer contributions, on the other hand, can help to retain volunteers by showing them the outcomes of their work, which will also inspire a high quality of volunteering work ethic (King, 2010). Another mechanism to improve volunteer retention involves tracking volunteer job satisfaction, which “increases the likelihood of predicting retention-related outcomes, namely turnover potential,” and responding accordingly (Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2001, p. 46).

Finally, maintaining volunteer data can mitigate risk both to the volunteer and the organization. For example, to minimize risk in situations where volunteers are charged with collecting cash donations or who are allowed to work unsupervised shifts, a database containing volunteer data could be used to evaluate and track volunteer assignments, performance, training skills, concerns, etc. (c.f., Moore 2004, p. 27).

Arena 4: Metrics for Broader Organizational Strategic Planning

- Audience: Decision makers
- Type of information: Outputs, outcomes tied to budget

Nonprofits should consider implementing measuring and reporting protocols of its volunteer program when it engages in the strategic planning process, which guides the organization to prepare for the creation, development, and/or expansion of programs and services. Volunteer management teams provide an essential stakeholder’s viewpoint in this process that is both introspective and forward-looking. Pivotal to the successful implementation of a strategic plan are metrics and measurements; without them, the strategic plan “is a group of intentions always on the verge of greatness” (Talley & Fram, 2010: p. 52). During planning, the volunteer management team should consider what functions volunteers carry out, how many and what types of volunteers will be needed, and what skill-sets are required for achieving strategic goals. When planning to expand a volunteer program, the volunteer management team’s effective planning will depend heavily upon the valuation and measurement of previous outputs.

Effective strategic planning also relies upon the development and measurement of outcomes. Outcomes differ from outputs in that outputs are the nonprofit's activities and services, while outcomes are the results or impact of those activities and services on the community (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011). Volunteers are often directly involved in the program delivery or outputs; if properly measured and documented, those outputs will reveal the volunteers' contributions to the organization's outcomes. To facilitate the forward-looking vision of the strategic plan, the volunteer manager must utilize measurements and metrics to create quantifiable validation that fosters the nonprofit's ability to create an achievable strategic plan. This visioning allows the nonprofit to conceptualize, through its strategic plan, expanded services and programs to meet the needs of its service area.

Arena 5: Metrics for Improved Program Delivery

- Audience: Board, top management team
- Type of information: Outcomes, impacts, satisfaction

Volunteers bring countless benefits to a nonprofit organization and its clients, including increased levels and quality of services, increased public support, improved community relations, services that otherwise would not have been provided, and more attention to clients (Handy & Mook, 2011). Measuring and tracking volunteer inputs and corresponding outputs will help demonstrate the impact volunteers have on program delivery. These data can guide and encourage the board and administration to better incorporate the organization's volunteer program to contribute to stronger program development and service delivery. A stronger volunteer program that measures and evaluates metrics about its volunteers can effectively translate to better program and organizational capacity.

One important metric that easily corresponds with improved program delivery is that of volunteer satisfaction. As was mentioned above in Arena 4, tracking volunteer satisfaction is important for better administration of volunteers, but volunteer satisfaction has other consequences for the organization. A satisfied volunteer will be much more likely to do a better job serving the clients than a disgruntled volunteer (Dwyer, Bono, Snyder, Nov, & Berson, 2013). Volunteers tend to be more satisfied when they know their efforts positively impact the organization's mission and program delivery. "Impact may be considered the ultimate effects and changes that a volunteer-based program has brought about upon those involved with the program (i.e. its stakeholders), including the program's targeted clientele and their surrounding neighborhoods and communities, as well as the volunteer organization itself and its paid and volunteer staff" (Safrit, 2012, p. 392). Any data that can be used to explain the quality of program delivery will benefit future organizational and program planning and administration.

Arena 6: As a Component of Financial and Social Accounting

- Audience: Board, donors, watchdogs
- Type of information: Expanded value-added calculations

'Social accounting' aims to expand the parameters of traditional financial accounting by including "a systematic analysis of the effects of an organization on its communities of interest or stakeholders...for the accounting statement" (Mook and Quarter, 2006, 248). This topic is

particularly relevant for the volunteer management team because it involves establishing a dollar value for non-monetized assets, such as volunteer labor.

More funders, shareholders, creditors, and governmental agencies are recognizing nonprofit “value-added” statements, including accounting regulatory bodies such as the Financial Accounting Standards Board (Mook, Richmond, and Quarter, 2013). The inclusion of volunteer value represents social resources that differentiate the value-added statement from a conventional income statement (Mook & Quarter, 2006). The volunteer manager’s reporting of volunteer value benefits the nonprofit overall by more accurately reflecting the value of the organization to the community and displaying the impact of funders’ investments on the organization. Measuring the value-added volunteer’s efforts increases the chances of receiving funding dollars from the short list of donors, foundations, and governmental agencies (Mazzioni, Sculz, and Klann, 2014).

By creating a social accounting, expanded, value-added measurement, the volunteer manager reflects the nonprofit’s social and financial responsibility. Since conventional accounting methods do not measure the impact of volunteer’s services, the social impact is often segregated from the economic, relegating social impact to a secondary status (Mook, Handy & Quarter, 2007). The volunteer manager’s measurements of volunteer’s efforts can contribute to a social accounting model that expands the vocabulary of efficiency, effectiveness, and social impact. The volunteer manager’s efforts at measuring volunteer worth for social accounting also enables the nonprofit to be forward-looking by focusing attention on the aspects of the organization’s operations that can project future profitability.

Arena 7: Metrics for Internal Advocacy for (More) Volunteer Management Capacity

- Audience: Board, internal decision-makers
- Type of information: All of the above

Finally, a volunteer program depends upon support from all organizational staff in order to maximize volunteer contributions to the organization’s success and growth. Not all staff have experience working with volunteers, and not all staff consider volunteers to be valuable members of the organizational team. Involving staff in the creation of measurement metrics can both calm resistance to and garner support for volunteer involvement. While Hager and Brudney (2005) report that resistance to volunteers is reportedly low among surveyed organizations, multiple sources suggest that staff resistance to volunteers is borne of: 1) a concern that volunteers will replace paid staff; 2) a belief that working with volunteers is time-consuming; 3) an expectation that volunteers cannot do tasks that require advanced skills; 4) a fear that the quality of service will be diminished; and 5) an uncertainty of how or where volunteers will ‘fit’ into the organization (McCurley & Lynch, 2011). These concerns may be allayed by sharing with staff metric data similar to that suggested above for other audiences. Staff who are skeptical of a volunteer’s contribution might be swayed by learning data that enumerate the number of hours worked by volunteers, or the range of volunteer skills and the tasks performed by volunteers. Sharing a volunteer program’s qualitative and quantitative outputs and outcomes to staff could explain the complementary and supportive role that the volunteer program can have in advancing the organization’s mission. Staff might be more willing to embrace the volunteer program if they know that it lightens their own workload, improves the organization’s reputation with the public and with donors, and improves its overall effectiveness. If a volunteer program has collected this

data for its other audiences or purposes, it would be readily available for a poster or presentation at an organization's all-staff meeting, or in an area where it would be visible to staff.

Conclusion

At a minimum, volunteer administrators should consider collecting and maintaining information about volunteer demographics, skills, interests, and assignments; that data can be maintained on paper or electronically in spreadsheets or databases. Administrators are further encouraged to report on the outputs of the volunteer program and to evaluate those outcomes in relation to program and organizational outputs and outcomes. Every nonprofit's volunteer program should be monitored and evaluated for its effectiveness and its contributions to the larger organization in which it sits.

Many organizations use software specifically designed to track volunteer recruitment, skills and task preferences, engagement, and performance reviews. Cravens (2015) maintains a list of many available programs and their specifications; she also offers guidelines for choosing the appropriate program for an organization. An organization's methodology for measuring and evaluating volunteer input and outcomes should be guided by that organization's mission and by established goals for the volunteer program, which will be unique for each organization. By maintaining records of volunteers' successes, nonprofits have steady access to motivational stories that advance advocacy, and promote funding solicitation. Since grantmakers are more often opting to fund nonprofits that successfully control costs by utilizing volunteers, the maintenance of volunteer data can be directly related to continued solvency. Because volunteer contentment is pivotal to retention, volunteer management programs should create a metrics for measuring volunteer satisfaction. Fulfilled volunteers not only provide long-term service, they are also more likely to donate funds to the nonprofit. Measurement of a nonprofit's volunteer program is crucial when developing a doable strategic plan for the future, and when improving program delivery. Considering the enormous fiscal asset that volunteers represent, nonprofits should adopt financial and social accounting methods that incorporate the value-added of volunteer efforts.

Finally, metrics that quantify volunteer contributions will enable staff, the board of directors, and internal decision-makers to more fully appreciate the benefits created by the organization's volunteers. The more mindfully a nonprofit examines its volunteer program, and the more thoroughly a nonprofit maintains a metrics of volunteer contributions, the more effectively that organization can strengthen its infrastructure, program design and delivery, and mission.

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