Organizational Effectiveness in Utilizing Episodic Volunteers Based on Perceptions of 4-H Youth Development Professionals

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Abstract

Managing contemporary volunteer programs requires administrators to be alert to trends and their implications for voluntary agencies. The reality of episodic volunteerism and practitioners' attitudes related to this phenomenon of modern volunteer management was the focus of this study. The Points of Light Foundation's Changing the Paradigm Report Action Principles (Allen, 1995) and Macduff's (1991) indicators of organizational readiness for episodic volunteers provided the bases for this exploratory, descriptive-correlational study assessing 4-H Youth Development agents' perceptions of organizational effectiveness in utilizing episodic volunteers. Study findings reveal valuable information for the profession in preparing administrators for the reality of episodic volunteer involvement.

Key Words:
episodic, volunteers, 4-H, organizational, paradigm

Effectively involving volunteers in 4-H Youth Development programs is critical to success. No other program delivery area in Cooperative Extension depends so heavily on volunteers. In fact, Rasmussen (1989) refers to volunteers as the heart of the modern 4-H program. Volunteer involvement provides the energy and community support necessary to make events and activities available for young people in North Carolina, and this has been the case since the beginnings of 4-H club work in the state in 1909. Local lay leaders with specific subject matter knowledge led Corn Clubs and Tomato Clubs, precursors to modern 4-H clubs (Clark, 1984). Local clubs were not organized until leaders were identified and accepted by the parents of potential members (Brunner, 1949). Agents trained these adult leaders to conduct programs for club members.

Currently, in North Carolina, at least one professional youth development staff person is based in each of the state's 100 counties and on the Qualla Boundary to assume responsibility for 4-H youth development work locally. These

professionals spend approximately 25 percent of their time in the management of the 25,000 volunteers involved in delivering 4-H programming to more than 200,000 youth annually.

North Carolina 4-H volunteers may serve in any of six categories of service (Groff, 1994). They may provide programs to 4-H youth directly, they may serve other volunteers as trainers or middle managers, or they may provide indirect services with technical support for ongoing programs. Volunteers may be advocates for young people in 4-H as they solicit funding and seek public support for legislation that impacts 4-H programs, are sometimes asked to serve in administrative roles to carry out larger programs, and may also serve on policy setting boards and councils to assist in program planning and decision making. Regardless of the assigned task, volunteers play critical roles in delivering 4-H programs. As 4-H programs expand to meet the changing needs of today's youth, the need for adult volunteer involvement also continues to expand.

Episodic Volunteering

Episodic volunteering involves volunteer opportunities or jobs that allow for short durations of service, usually 3 to 4 months or less (Macduff, 1991). These jobs may be one-time projects or activities, or they may be assignments that recur, with the same volunteers returning year after year to provide needed service. This type of volunteer involvement is also called sporadic volunteering (Andrews, 2000), short-term volunteering (Macduff, 1995), informal volunteering (Scheier, 1980), or any of several similar names. Many organizations that involve vol- unteers include episodic opportunities in addition to longer-term volunteer assign- ments. This allows for greater volunteer participation by a larger diversity of individuals.

For more than 20 years, the trend toward episodic volunteering has been discussed among administrators of volunteers. A 1987 study conducted by the National Volunteer Center and JC Penney Company found that 79 percent of those participating in the study, indicating that they did not volunteer, said they would be more interested in volunteering if the commitments were of shorter duration (National Volunteer Center, 1989). The Independent Sector's 1999 report showed that while the number of adults volunteering increased, the amount of time volunteering each week decreased. Safrit and Merrill (2000) indicated that episodic volunteering is no longer merely a trend, but rather the reality within which administrators of volunteers must function.

Macduff (1991) identified five considerations in assessing organizational readiness for involving episodic volunteers. They were (1) episodic volunteer positions currently exist in the organization and position descriptions are in place; (2) ongoing volunteer and paid staff members are accepting of episodic volunteers in the organization; (3) financial and human resources are available for investing in the development of episodic volunteer opportunities; (4) there is documented need for episodic volunteer assignments; and (5) there is organizational support for the creation of an additional component in the volunteer program. She stated that agencies working through this assessment process to prepare for episodic volunteer involvement are more successful in the addition of episodic volunteers, and that there are no short cuts to providing quality, effective opportunities for those attracted by short-term service opportunities.

Table 1
Four Action Principles and the Characteristics of High Effectiveness in Organizations Utilizing Volunteers

Action Principles	Characteristics of High Effectiveness
1. Lay the foundation through mission and vision	1) The mission and priorities of the organization are framed in terms of the problem or issue the organization is addressing, not its short-range institutional concerns. 2) There is a positive vision – clearly articulated, widely shared and openly discussed throughout the organization – of the role of volunteers. 3) Volunteers are seen as valuable human resources that can directly contribute to the achievement of the organization's mission, not primarily as a means to obtaining financial or other material resources.
2. Combine inspiring leadership with effective management	4) Leaders at all levels – policy-making, executive and middle management – work in concert to encourage and facilitate high impact volunteer involvement. 5) There is a clear focal point of leadership for volunteering but the volunteer management function is well-integrated at all levels and in all parts of the organization. 6) Potential barriers to volunteer involvement – liability, confidentiality, location of the organization, hours of operation, etc. – are identified and dealt with forthrightly.
3. Build understanding and collaboration	7) Paid staff are respected and empowered to fully participate in planning, decision making and management related to volunteer involvement. 8) There is a conscious, active effort to reduce the boundaries and increase the teamwork between paid and volunteer staff. 9) Success breeds success as stories of the contributions of volunteers – both historically and currently – are shared among both paid and volunteer staff.
4. Learn, grow and change	10) There is openness to the possibility for change, eagerness to improve performance, and conscious, organized efforts to learn from and about volunteers' experiences in the organization. 11) There is recognition of the value of involving, as volunteers, people from all segments of the community, including those the organization seeks to serve.

From *The Paradigm Organizational Effectiveness Series #1: Creating More Effective Volunteer Involvement* by K. Allen, 1995.

Characteristics of High Effectiveness

In 1991, the "Changing the Paradigm" project was created to encourage and support research to understand not only individuals who are volunteering and the kinds of work being conducted, but also perceived barriers to service (Allen, 1992). More than 400

individuals involved in 20 nonprofit, human service organizations in five different communities were interviewed. This initial phase of the research identified 11 characteristics of high effectiveness that are consistently present in organizations utilizing volunteers (Allen, 1992). The 11 characteristics were grouped into four action principles (Allen, 1995) based on relationships among the characteristics. (Table 1).

While extensive energy was invested in the development of the Action Principles, no research had been conducted to investigate the realities of the characteristics of organizational effectiveness in relationship to the impact of trends on voluntary agencies. The Action Principles provided a solid base for the exploration of episodic volunteer involvement in an organization that has historically depended upon volunteers.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors related to the perceptions of North Carolina 4-H Youth Development agents related to organizational effectiveness in utilizing episodic volunteers. The researcher developed a mailed questionnaire based on the four Action Principles (Allen, 1992) and the five organizational readiness considerations (Macduff, 1991). Additionally, data were collected regarding various programmatic, professional, and personal characteristics of study participants.

Table 2
Associations Among Selected Personal Characteristics, the Action Principles and Organizational Readiness for Episodic Volunteers

Action Principles	Age* N=73	Was Volunteer Activity Episodic* N=72
Action Principle 1		
Importance	.089	.254
Practice	.138	.289
Agreement	.177	.150
Action Principle 2		
Importance	.048	.252
Practice	.116	.239
Agreement	.251	.172
Action Principle 3		
Importance	.077	.277
Practice	.156	.324
Agreement	.130	.220
Action Principle 4		
Importance	.232	.359
Practice	.232	.359
Agreement	.105	.251
Readiness for Episodic Volunteers		
Importance	.080	.335
Practice	.174	.379
Agreement	.364	.056

*Eta coefficient

The four-section instrument collected data from a population consisting of the census of 104 North Carolina 4-H Youth Development agents employed at the time of the study. The researcher established the instrument's validity utilizing a panel of volunteer and/or youth development professionals. Instrument reliability was established utilizing a pilot test group of former 4-H agents and running Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each study construct. Coefficients for the instrument ranged from .56 to .89, well within the reliability levels (.50-.60) needed for exploratory research (Nunnally,

1967). The final response rate for the study was 74%.

Data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program. In the analysis of data, the coefficients offered by Davis (1971) were used in describing measures of association. Frequencies were calculated for each item of the dependent variable. For each of the five dependent variable constructs, a summated score was calculated. The descriptive statistics used for the independent variables concerning the characteristics of' respondents were determined by whether the variable was nominal, ordinal, interval or ratio.

Table 3

Associations Among Selected Professional Characteristics, the Action Principles and Organizational Readiness for Episodic Volunteers

Professional Characteristics

Action Principles	Academic Major* N=70	Participation in Ext. training ** N=73	Participation in Non-Ext. training N=73
Action Principle 1			
Importance	.188	.241	.072
Practice	.188	.147	.178
Agreement	.313	.362	.034
Action Principle 2			
Importance	.238	.181	.114
Practice	.335	.056	.264
Agreement	.290	.348	.019
Action Principle 3			
Importance	.296	.231	.154
Practice	.343	.181	.175
Agreement	.136	.037	.059
Action Principle 4			
Importance	.301	.179	.092
Practice	.301	.179	.092
Agreement	.147	.166	-.066
Readiness for Episodic Volunteers			
Importance	.302	.227	.129
Practice	.280	.268	.371
Agreement	.162	.073	-.190

*Eta Coefficient
** Point-biserial coefficient

Findings

Data revealed moderate positive relationships (Davis, 1971) between respondents' personal participation in episodic volunteer activities and several dependent variables: level of practice of Action Principle 3, level of importance of Action Principle 4, level of practice of Action Principle 4, level of importance of Readiness for Episodic Volunteers and level of practice of Readiness for Episodic Volunteers. (Table 2). A moderate positive relationship was also found between respondents' age and level of agreement with Readiness for Episodic Volunteers.

The researcher identified moderate positive relationships between the respondents' Academic Major and several dependent is variables: level of agreement of Action Principle 1, level of practice of Action Principle 2, level of practice of Action Principle 3, level of importance of Action Principle 4, level of practice of Action Principle 4, and level of importance of Readiness for Episodic Volunteers. In addition, moderate positive relationships were shown between participation in Extension-sponsored volunteer management training and level of agreement of Action Principle 1 and between participation in Extension-spon-sored volunteer management training and level of agreement of Action Principle 2. A moderate positive relationship was identified between participation in non-Extension sponsored volunteer management training and level of practice of Readiness for Episodic Volunteers (Table 3). Simply stated, those respondents with academic degrees who participated in Extension or non-Extension training to build skills in managing volunteers are more aware of the importance of the four action principles, and put them into practice more often. These individuals are also more prepared for the involvement of episodic volunteers based on their perceptions reported in the study.

Table 4

Associations Among Selected Professional Characteristics, the Action Principles and Organizational Readiness for Episodic Volunteers

Action Principles	Readiness for Episodic Volunteers		
	Level of Importance	Level of Practice	Level of Agreement
Action Principle 1			
Importance	**.874**	.504	-.448
Practice	.394	**.709**	-.203
Agreement	.250	.298	.209
Action Principle 2			
Importance	**.843**	.461	-.449
Practice	.396	.661	-.167
Agreement	.207	.277	.379
Action Principle 3			
Importance	**.876**	.552	-.454
Practice	.394	**.763**	-.149
Agreement	-.174	-.057	.534
Action Principle 4			
Importance	**.849**	.501	-.387
Practice	**.849**	.501	-.387
Agreement	-.160	-.210	.494

Person product-moment coefficient [r] used. N=73
Very strong association statistics are bolded in the table.

The data revealed strong relationships between the respondents' perceptions of organizational effectiveness in managing volunteers and organizational readiness for episodic volunteers (Table 4). The researcher identified 7 very strong, 6 substantial, 11 moderate and 11 low relationships. These data reflect a pattern of concurrently increasing levels of importance, practice and/or agreement with the variables. This reveals a correlation between the perceived importance and practice of the four action principles with perceived readiness for episodic volunteers. Thus, those agents who value and practice high impact volunteer involvement perceive themselves to be well prepared for the involvement of short-term volunteers in their programs. The results are not, however, any indication of causality.

Conclusions and Implications

While the study findings are limited to North Carolina 4-H Youth Development professionals, there are implications for other community-based, volunteer-led agencies. Study findings suggest that more important than personal, professional or programmatic variables, the organization needed to be effectively involving volunteers at all levels with staff in order to be prepared for episodic volunteers. This supports Macduff's (1995) theories that episodic volunteers are more successful in organizations where supervisors have skills in teambuilding and communications, thus helping short-term volunteers become involved with continuous service volunteers and staff.

A critical implication for the profession from this study is confirmation that organizations prepared for high impact volunteer involvement as defined by the "Changing the Paradigm" study will already be practicing the concepts and

valuing the contributions that have been identified as important to organizational readiness for involving episodic volunteers. Rather than focusing on training for the management of episodic volunteers, organizations should truly be focusing on building competencies and capacities needed for administration of any volunteer program.

Study data suggest that while respondents understood the value of involving episodic volunteers and had the operational skills to involve individuals in these roles, they did not necessarily want to include short-term volunteer assignments. Respondents indicated that episodic volunteers were sometimes difficult to manage rather than being important assets to the organization. In agencies like 4-H with a strong tradition of ongoing, long-term volunteers, such attitudes among managers of volunteers may limit the extent to which episodic volunteers are included in the organization.

The relationships identified between participation in volunteer management training and the respective Action Principles are among the most important findings of this study. By providing resources for administrators of volunteers to use in building skills relevant to volunteer involvement, agencies can be assured of greater effectiveness through volunteer involvement. Processes as basic as preparing position descriptions or developing targeted marketing appeals to recruit diverse volunteers can encourage greater episodic volunteer involvement.

The study supports efforts within the profession to increase identified competencies and capacities among administrators of volunteer programs to create greater effectiveness in managing modern voluntary organizations. Work invested in improving general volunteer management skills enhances organizational

success at involving episodic volunteers, a necessity for successful contemporary voluntary agencies.

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