Second Generation Volunteer Administration: Moving from Transaction to Transformative Volunteer Learning Environments

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Abstract

Volunteer resource managers are primarily charged with oversight of transactions or tasks conducted by their volunteer force for the improvement of social, economic, or environmental conditions. However, a deeper goal focuses on the developmental aspects of working with individual volunteers. Transformative learning focuses more on the development of volunteers in addition to task accomplishment and often brings changes in work styles, world views, and/or personalities. Transformative learning can lead to better and more autonomous decision making and personal actions that better align with personal values. Transformed volunteers often provide deeper and more meaningful service than those simply accomplishing tasks. The life and work of the volunteer resource manager can also be impacted by the volunteer's growth process.

Keywords:

volunteer, management, transformation, transactional, learning, development

Introduction

For many years as a volunteer resource manager, I believed my job was to find, manage, and recognize volunteers to carry out tasks that extended and deepened the impact of the organization I worked for. My assumption was all I needed to do was match a volunteer's interests and skills with the work that needed to be done. It took me two decades to realize that volunteers are much more effective if their volunteer experience is open to higher levels of personal development and organizational responsibility (i.e., transformative learning) in addition to only task-based work (i.e., transactional activity). This required me to shift my perspectives from being just a manager of volunteer resources and tasks to also becoming an architect of a transformative environment for individual volunteers' learning and personal development.

Most people volunteer to create meaning in their lives or the lives of others (Burns et al., 2005; Clary et al., 1998; Finkelstein, 2007). They share their skills, resources, time, and/or dedication to the organization and sometimes volunteer for personal gain or recognition. In the process of "doing," volunteers often experience profound personal changes that transform who they are or how they see the world. Since most managers of volunteer resources know that successful volunteerism is mainly about relationships, it would behoove managers of volunteer resources to better

understand how to develop, nurture, and support such transformative learning for individual volunteers in the larger organizational volunteer development environment.

Transactional Volunteer Resource Management

Many popular volunteer management or development models (Boyce, 1971; Boyd, 2004; Brudney, 1990; Culp, Deppe, Castillo & Wells, 1998; Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem & Gliem, 2005; Wilson, 1976) focus primarily on key steps or concepts for a volunteer resource manager to follow to successfully integrate volunteers into the operations and programs of the organization. These models tend to be transactional in nature; the volunteer provides time, resources, and/or skills to the organization and in exchange the organization gives the volunteer an opportunity to help others and be recognized for their service.

The role of the volunteer resource manager in a transactional approach includes serving as a manager of people, things and activities, providing instrumental learning focusing on technical/content and skills-base learning (Kreber & Cranton, 2000; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). This approach to volunteer resource management focuses mainly on tasks to be completed and programs to be delivered, and often includes specific job descriptions for volunteers. The volunteer administrator focuses on skill development for volunteers and serves as an expert on the organization and its work.

Transformational Volunteer Resource Management

In contrast to transactional volunteer resource management, transformational work with volunteers focuses on transformative learning. Transformative learning is defined as "the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience, or perspectives on the world by means of critical reflection" (Cranton, 1994, p. vii). In this approach, individual volunteer learning is not solely about tasks and program delivery, but also about nurturing individual volunteer development and holistic organizational change. Change is transformative when individuals, groups, and organizations arrive at new perspectives and actions that greatly differ from past views and behaviors. Mezirow (1991) suggests individuals transform by reconstructing their frames of reference. As individuals explore, question, affirm, and change their meaning schemes, they are transformed. Mezirow (1995) further suggested that individuals pass through 10 phases of personal transformation: (1) experiencing a disorienting dilemma, (2) undergoing self-examination, (3) conducting a critical assessment of internalized role assumptions and feeling a sense of alienation from traditional social expectation, (4) relating one's discontent to similar experiences of others or to public issues – recognizing that one's problem is shared and not exclusively a private matter, (5) exploring options for new ways of acting, (6) building competence and self-confidence in new roles, (7) planning a course of action, (8) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, (9) making provisional efforts to try new roles and to assess feedback, and (10) reintegrating into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective. Critical reflection on assumptions and reflective discourse, the focal point of this process, encourages the development of transformative learning. Individuals experiencing transforming learning need support from others for the transformative learning to be sustained over time (Cranton, 1994).

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Volunteer resource managers often provide this type of support and facilitate this type of learning process by creating conditions for individual, group and community-wide dialogue and learning that enhance transformation (Mezirow, 2005). In particular, Mezirow (2000) believed transformative learning requires open discussion with others to explore, question, reinforce, and/or justify personal assumptions. Volunteer resource managers may also model critical thinking through critical debate, and critical questioning that result in articulation and examination of assumptions (Brookfield, 1987; Cranton, 1998). Safrit and Jones (2003) described several specific methods that volunteer resource managers may use to nurture critical thinking in volunteers.

While many volunteer resource managers establish relationships with individual volunteers and groups of volunteers that facilitate transformative learning, they often lack formal training or conscious preparation in forming and maintaining these helping relationships to promote transformative learning (Robertson, 1996). Both my personal experiences and the research suggest that volunteer resource managers who excel as architects of transformative learning environments are most often also open to being transformed themselves through work with volunteers. They are volunteer-centered and process-oriented; serve as role models for, and mentors and supporters of, volunteers; focus on critical reflection with volunteers; and are not threatened by personal or organizational change (Franz, 2003).

Conditions Promoting Transformative Learning with Volunteers

If volunteer resource managers want to create environments that help transform volunteers, they need to understand what conditions promote this type of learning.

Scholars have explored conditions of transformative learning in adult learning environments for almost three decades. Mezirow (2000), the "father" of transformative learning theory, began his studies with women's consciousness raising groups in the 1970's. He suggested specific conditions that promote personal transformation including critical reflection on assumptions, reflective discourse, a trigger event or disorienting dilemma, and the learner's emotional intelligence. Other scholars have added to Mezirow's work by suggesting that transformative learning conditions include a mentoring learning community, examination of the origin of personal beliefs, support from others to support new ways of thinking and being, opportunities for committed action, a learning organization that supports change, freedom from personal constraints that work against change, and opportunities for action that commits to the new way of thinking and being (Cranton, 1996; Daloz, 2000; Yorks & Marsick, 2000). These transformative learning conditions are very similar to the major components of the Points of Light Foundation's (Allen, 1992) benchmark *Changing the Paradigm* project: (1) Lay the foundation for volunteerism through mission and vision; (2) Combine inspiring leadership with effective management; (3) Build understanding and commitment; and (4) Learn, grow, and change.

My research and professional experience in supporting Cooperative Extension professionals working as volunteer resource managers (Franz, 2003) suggests the following conditions are needed for transformative learning in volunteer development contexts:

- A learning environment with a strong partner who facilitates change in the volunteer ;
- A learning environment that promotes critical reflection where

transformed partners verbalize old assumptions, revise assumptions, and reflect on the change;

- A learning environment that promotes critical events that change the way volunteers see themselves and/or their world that often solidifies the partnership between the volunteer and the organization (often through the volunteer resource manager);

- A fundamental difference in people working together including fundamental differences in personalities, work styles, and/or worldviews but a common and deep commitment to the group's purpose; and

- A relationship that allows independence with interdependence where joint work is strong but individual autonomy is also valued.

Volunteer resource managers should contemplate how these and similar conditions can be integrated into their respective volunteer organizations and management practices to better promote and support volunteer transformational learning to enhance and deepen volunteers' experiences and impacts.

Volunteerism Trends and Transformative Learning

Four current trends in volunteerism are linked to transformative learning (Seevers, Graham, & Conklin, 2007). The first is volunteer burnout. For most organizations, finding volunteers willing to give substantial time to their work is becoming more challenging. Creating transformative learning environments can help recruit and retain volunteers by deepening the volunteer experience. Many volunteers want to do more than help with organizational tasks. They want to have a meaningful volunteer experience. Many volunteers discover this meaning when their volunteer experience changes who they are. For example, I worked with a volunteer Master Gardener who was asked to provide gardening lessons for female prisoners in her community. She was very apprehensive of this work because she didn't believe the women were worth her time. However, she was dedicated to the Cooperative Extension mission to bring education to underserved and at-risk populations so she agreed to give it a try. After just one gardening lesson at the prison, her perspective on the women prisoners had radically changed. She realized they had values similar to hers and they wanted to lead successful lives. This transformation in her perspective on the value of female prisoners not only deepened her dedication to her volunteer work at the prison, she also changed the views of other volunteers and paid staff as she told them about her change in perspective. This Master Gardener who had been close to burning out in her volunteer experience was renewed and also renewed others due to her new way of seeing her volunteer work.

A second trend in volunteerism that relates to transformative learning is competition for good volunteers. Every community seems to have a few people who are highly valued as volunteers. In fact, there aren't usually enough to go around for all the volunteer work that needs to be done. Volunteers who are transformed by the organizations they work with tend to be more dedicated to that organization than other groups where they simply carry out tasks as a worker bee. In recent research I conducted with 4-H camp counselors, they spoke over and over again about how they see their whole lives through a 4-H camp lens because their volunteer experience has deeply changed the way they see the world. This ranged from changing their occupational path, to developing and solidifying their true self (Franz et al., 2008).

A third trend in volunteerism that can be addressed by transformative learning is the need for human touch. The increasing

presence of technology in the lives of volunteers is leaving some of them hungry for face-to-face experiences with others. Transformative volunteerism experiences come from human-to-human interactions and most often happen when the people a volunteer works with are fundamentally different (Franz, 2003). Volunteer resource managers can set the stage for this type of transformation by getting to know each volunteer and matching them with others different from them.

This also directly relates to diversity, the final volunteerism trend that intersects with transformative learning. As our volunteer force and organizations become more and more diverse, transformation in perspective and actions are more likely to happen as we learn from each other through difference. However our strong grounding in a common goal channels that diversity to improving the world economically, environmentally, and/or socially.

Implications of Transformative Learning for Volunteer Resource Management

Transformative learning theory may sound like the latest and greatest way to improve volunteerism but what specifically does this theory mean for volunteer administration? From my experience and research I suggest volunteer resource managers wanting to promote transformative learning in volunteers need to:

• Focus not just on the tasks volunteers carry out but on the process of developing those volunteers while they are engaged in tasks;

• Become an architect of a learning environment that promotes transformation by setting up critical events to trigger change or create dissonance, promote critical thinking and critical questioning in volunteers as they carry out and evaluate their volunteer efforts, and provide support and/or support systems to help volunteers try

out new ways of seeing and being in a safe environment;

• Set up situations for volunteers and clients to transform each other by consciously matching people with different backgrounds, philosophies, and personalities;

• Believe in and carry out a holist treatment of volunteers and their personal development – a wrap around of experiences and support that promotes and sustains change;

• Provide balance between four approaches to volunteer development – service, content transmission, facilitation, and transformative learning; and

• Be aware that the most common age for volunteers is 35 to 54 years of age which happens to coincide with midlife change for many individuals. This provides a great opportunity for volunteer administrators to help those going through midlife change to do so in safe and positive ways.

Good transformative environments are about the intersection of human relationships and diversity of personalities, work styles, and/or worldviews grounded in common purpose. This diversity requires volunteer administrators to be well versed in managing dissonance and also providing safe cognitive environments during the change process and to being open to change themselves.

Conclusions

Volunteer resource managers are primarily charged with the oversight of transactions or tasks conducted by their volunteer force for the improvement of social, economic, or environmental conditions. However, a deeper goal focuses on the developmental aspects of working with volunteers. Transformative learning focuses more on the development of volunteers in addition to task accomplishment and often brings changes in

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