

Helping Volunteers Navigate Difficult Issues: Applying Solution Based Techniques

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Abstract

At some point or another, the business of working with people will lend itself to mediating difficult interpersonal situations. Finding the right tools to solve these problems is of critical importance to a volunteer organization's overall positive presence in communities. The Solution Focused approach to solving problems is strategic, exploratory, and solution-based rather than problem-oriented. As the name implies, this approach to problem solving is focused on solutions and not on factors that lead to a problem. The Solution Focused approach is a here-and-now type approach that places emphasis on the present and future. Rather than analyzing problems, volunteer resource managers (VRM) can engage volunteers in conversations about potential solutions. It is a distinctly positive approach to problem solving.

Key Words: Volunteers, Management, Leadership, Mediation

Introduction

Professionals working in volunteer organizations understand the value and importance of mobilizing volunteers to achieve goals beyond what one can do themselves. Very few organizations value this work force more than youth serving agencies. 4-H programs, scouts, youth athletic programs, and church groups all recruit, train, and rely on volunteers. Their success depends on the caliber of volunteers who manage the foundation of the programs in which they volunteer for. Keeping volunteers aligned with organizational expectations, philosophies and goals can be a challenge especially when conflict complicates this relationship. How do you empower volunteers to find viable solutions to problems while maintaining the organizational philosophies?

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these problems is of critical importance to a volunteer organizations overall positive presence in communities. When difficult situations occur it is common for volunteers to focus on the cause of the problem, how it started, who did and said what, and how these things deviated from normal expectations. Generally, people have preconceived ideas of how things should work and when they do not take place in such a way, a problem occurs. Many of us have the propensity to focus on the problem and highlight what went wrong. For volunteer resource managers, one of the biggest hurdles initially in solving volunteer problems is repositioning focus from reliving the issue to thinking about steps that can be taken to solve the problem.

Positive management of problem situations can retain quality volunteers, increase volunteer ownership of their efforts and make the overall experiences positive for clientele. Nonprofit organizations that actively listen to volunteers' suggestions and

demonstrate social accountability have a greater likelihood of seeing volunteers stay with an organization for an extended period of time because they not only understand the nonprofit but also feel it is capable of accomplishing its mission (Waters and Bortee, 2007).

Many techniques can be used to manage conflict, but one in particular can be empowering to volunteers, adaptable and easily implemented by volunteer resource managers. After evaluating the efficacy of Solution Focused Therapy in a wide variety of settings through 15 various studies, Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) suggest that Solution Focused Therapy may be useful in a broad range of applications.

History and Basic Principles of the Solution Focused Therapy

Solution Focused Therapy (SFT) has its roots in clinical social work and was developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg in the 1980's (De Shazer et al., 1986). The solution-focused mission is to create conversation that focuses on solutions. The technique is goal-driven, individual based, and focuses on strengths (what is good that is happening) rather than on weaknesses, such as problems (Wallerstedt and Higgins, 2000).

While SFT is primarily utilized by mental health therapists as a tool to guide clients, its foundations can also be adapted for use in other disciplines. Its effectiveness is well established and supported by a solid and growing body of research. Since its origins in the mid-1980s, solution-focused therapy has proved to be an effective intervention across a whole range of problem presentations (Iveson, 2002).

Since its inception over two decades ago, Solution-focused Therapy has earned its place within social science disciplines and is widely accepted in the fields of

counseling, social work, education and business. The techniques used in this approach are extremely adaptable to many situations, can be applied quickly, and do not require a long term investment of time to find solutions to problems. The approach has strength in focusing on moving forward with positive change rather than focusing on the roots of the issue or past history. More importantly, the techniques actively engage volunteers in finding the solution or solving the problem. The process empowers volunteers to take ownership of a situation and outline their own steps in solving the conflict.

Four Basic Solution Focused Strategies to Help Guide Volunteers

The Miracle Question: Probably the most well-known and popular intervention within the solution-focused approach is the "miracle question" (de Shazer, 1988). It is one of the defining principles of the Solution Focused approach (de Shazer, 1988). The miracle question is a method of constructing conversation to help clientele envision how the future will be different when the conflict/problem is no longer present, thus shifting a volunteer's focus from reliving the problem. During this process of questions, goals can often be identified by volunteers with guidance of the VRM. Careful consideration to how the question is framed will help clientele move away from what the problem is and focus on how to begin solving the issue.

A traditional version of the miracle question would be framed like this (adopted from Dolan, 2010): *"Suppose our meeting is over, you go home, do whatever you planned to do for the rest of the day. And then, sometime in the evening, you get tired and go to sleep. And in the middle of the night, when you are fast asleep, a miracle happens and all the problems that brought you here*

today are solved just like that. But since the miracle happened over night nobody is telling you that the miracle happened. When you wake up the next morning, how are you going to start discovering that the miracle happened? ... What else are you going to notice?"

A VRM working with a volunteer can frame the Miracle question depending on the context of the volunteer problem. For example, a 4-H volunteer may be frustrated with their teen officers in their 4-H club. The Miracle question may look similar to the following: *"If you woke up tomorrow, and a miracle happened so that you no longer felt your 4-H club officers do not follow through with their responsibilities, what would you see differently? What would the first signs be that a miracle has occurred within your club? What would 4-H members be doing differently in your club?"* *"What would you be doing differently?"*

The use of this question reframes the problem into positive discussion. Beyond that, you have engaged the volunteer to identify, on their own, what changes need to occur to begin to move the 4-H club into effectiveness. The "first signs that a miracle happened" is meant to direct the volunteer towards outlining the initial steps for change. VRM's need to guide volunteers to develop positive goals, or what they will do, rather than focus on the volunteer's frustration and complaints. For example: *"What will you be doing differently when someone says you have successful officers in your 4-H Club?"*

Scaling Questions: Scaling questions can be used to identify useful differences for volunteers and may help to establish goals as well. Scaling questions also can help volunteers incrementally set goals. They enable volunteers to focus on steps that can eventually lead to positive change. The

range of a scale can be defined in different ways each time the question is asked, but typically a range from "the worst the problem has ever been" (zero or one) to "the best things could ever possibly be" (ten). The volunteer is asked to rate their current position on the scale, and questions are then used to help the volunteer identify resources (e.g. "what's stopping your club from slipping one point lower down the scale?"), exceptions (e.g. "on a day when your club is one point higher on the scale, what would tell you that it was a 'one point higher' day?") and to describe a preferred future (e.g. "where on the scale would be good enough? What would a day at that point on the scale look like?").

Exception Seeking Questions: The objective of this strategy is to refocus the volunteer to search for times when the problem is less severe or absent. Again, it's a strategy that shifts discussion away from the circumstances that created the issue. Exception seeking questions help volunteers reflect and identify what has worked in the past and can be used to encourage the volunteer to repeat such behaviors. Simply asking the volunteer to outline a time when the problem did not exist and then encourage the volunteer to describe what different circumstances existed in that situation can expose significant changes that can be implemented to resolve the issue at hand. For example: *"I understand you and Mary are having challenges working together in your 4-H club. You and Mary have been advising your 4-H club together for many years. Can you think of times when you worked well together? Describe how that worked for you? When the problem did not exist, what were you doing then?"*

Coping Questions: Coping questions are designed to elicit information about volunteer resources that may have gone unnoticed by them. Examples of coping

strategies can be brought forth from even the most heated volunteer problems. For example: *"I can see that things have been really difficult for you and your involvement with the local horse committee, yet I am struck by the fact that, even so, you manage to devote a lot of time, expertise and effort working with the group. How do you do that?"*

Genuine interest and empathy can help to highlight strengths of their commitment. The initial summary "I can see that things have been really difficult for you" validates their situation. The second part "you manage to devote a lot of time and effort." is also a valid comment, but one that counters the problem. Undeniably, they cope and coping questions start to gently and supportively challenge the problem-focused narrative (de Shazer, 1988).

Conclusion

The goal of solving conflict should be positive resolution. Any time you can accomplish this task while at the same time empowering volunteers in the process, it is a win/win. If conflict can be managed well, it will often times enable an organizations to have better retention rates and satisfaction among volunteers. The SFT approach can be another tool in the VRM's arsenal of mediation strategies that can be drawn upon when the opportunity presents itself. With a bit of practice and deliberate thought into framing questions, the strategy can produce desired results and engage volunteers in their own problem solving actions.

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About the Author

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