Strategies for Engaging Volunteers By Uncovering Individual Motivations

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Abstract

A small group of motivated volunteers can accomplish incredible things. A constant challenge for any volunteer organizer is not just to find motivated workers, but to hone his or her skills at figuring out how to bring out the energy and passion of volunteers. In this paper we describe a model of volunteer resources management that places individuals within a complex network of individuals and organizations. Oftentimes volunteers come to a project through their membership of another group — be it a school, church, or community organization. Yet each volunteer is an individual, and has individual motivations that may or may not coincide with the motivations of the organizations to which s/he belong. We present two strategies which the authors (a college service learning coordinator and a college professor) have found helpful in uncovering latent motivation in groups of volunteers. When working with individuals, a structured form of 'one-on-one conversations' can help quickly drive conversations toward identifying underlying motivations. Working in classroom groups, the construction of a Community Contribution Statement provides a structure for identifying individual motivations and placing them within the context of a larger class project. Both approaches focus on the importance of acknowledging individual motivation.

Key Words: Partnership Development, Volunteer Motivation, Volunteer Coordination

Introduction

Anyone who organizes volunteers- whether they are individuals volunteering in a community context, or students doing volunteer work in an educational context- knows that finding ways to motivate volunteers is a key ingredient to the success of a project. This paper describes specific strategies for identifying the personal interests and passions of volunteers to ensure effective volunteer resource management. We present a model of volunteerism that places individuals within a complex network of individuals and organizations. Oftentimes volunteers come to a project through their membership of another group — be it a school, church, or community organization. Yet each volunteer is an individual, and has individual motivations that may or may not coincide with the motivations of the organizations to which she or he belong. We present two strategies which the authors (a college service learning coordinator and a college professor) have found helpful in uncovering latent motivation in groups of volunteers. When working with individual volunteers, a structured *one-on-one conversation* can help quickly drive conversations toward identifying underlying motivations. Working in classroom groups, the construction of a c*ommunity contribution statement* provides a structure for identifying individual motivations and placing them within the context of a larger class project. Both approaches focus on the importance of acknowledging individual motivation.

Literature Context

Motivating volunteers requires a deep understanding of their individual interests. The term 'reciprocity' is often used in the partnership literature and focuses motivation at the organizational level (Sandman, 2008; McLean and Behringer, 2008; Stoecker, 2005). Authors such as Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq and Morrison (2010), Gilchrist (2009) and Bringle, Clayton and Price (2009) describe the richer context of complex networks that include dynamic relationships and competing motivations. We argue that for the full potential of a volunteer network to be realized, the individual motivations of each participant must be recognized and honored. Thus the idea of reciprocity is extended from the organization to the individual — each individual needs to get something from partnership work, just as the volunteer organization receives benefit from efforts of each individual volunteer.

Listening Strategies

One-on-One Conversations: Stephen Eberle, Director of Partnerships

As the Director of Partnerships, my work is frontloaded in partnership development and light on project implementation. This is to say that the early stages of a partnership are where I spend the most of my time and energy. I listen to the ideas of both faculty members and community stakeholders and try to match the appropriate players together to create a project. Many community members know exactly what kind of program they are trying to build and they can name the exact help the college can offer. Many professors know exactly what kind of class they want to teach and what kind of service-learning experience they wish for their students to have. These wishes and desires are transactional; they include little room for the variables and few opportunities that come with partnership. Of course, sometimes a transaction fills the exact need of the college or the community. But a series of successful transactions can lead to partnership and transformation – if the college and the community are open to variables.

Another key to partnership comes in learning the self-interest of your community partner and articulating your own self-interest. Unfortunately self-interest can be confused with selfishness leading one to pursue a selfless attitude. Denying the benefits that can come to us personally and professionally through partnership in an effort to stay focused on one's constituents can stifle a partnership and prevent it from growing to its full potential. Identifying and articulating that self-interest helps us present projects honestly and transparently. This can only be done by moving beyond the boundaries of a professional relationship and asking questions that get to the core of the person sitting in front of you.

When developing a partnership, it's important to uncover self-interest to determine whether the project we identify is mutually beneficial for both parties. Often a faculty member will come to me with a set plan for a service-learning experience. I listen to his/her ideas, capturing the key fundamentals of the course proposal. I ask questions about why the faculty member is interested in those topics. I try to learn what personally touches him/her and how it lines up with his/her values. Then I try to walk the faculty member back a few steps, deconstructing the syllabus and the expectations and the schedule and every other detail of the service learning engagement. We brainstorm some potential partners in the community, and then I set out to talk to the partner. The only way our partnership can be reciprocal is if the faculty member and the community partner plan the course and the experience together.

Determining the community partner's self-interest is also imperative when putting together a project. The director of a social service non-profit certainly has an interest in serving the poor, keeping the food pantry stocked, reducing the workload of staff, and advertising their parenting program. But the director is a person with self-interest. S/he may have a boss downtown who drives him/her nuts . S/he may want to get a promotion. S/he may want to spend more time with a new spouse. Once I know these things I can ask "how will this partnership benefit the both of us?"

In short, in order for me to build a truly reciprocal partnership with the director of this social service organization, I need to develop a personal relationship with him/her. I need to have one-to-one conversations with him/her where I uncover his/her self-interest. S/he needs to have those conversations with me. From there we can start putting the programmatic pieces together. How can I work with this director to put together a program that meets the needs of our institutional mission while also affords us the opportunity to advance in our jobs? It's possible. But most do-gooders act selfless and ignore themselves. That's where hidden agendas and competing priorities can run reciprocity off the rails.

Community Contribution Statement: Eric Malm, Assistant Professor of Economics and Business

As a college professor who teaches a course on community economic development that is linked to a community arts festival each spring, I'm concerned about more than just having a successful learning and service experience in a particular semester. The long-term viability and success of my class depends directly on the contributions that students make to the community each semester. Simply put, if students don't produce, then the partnership upon which the course is based will wither and die. And the relationships with those in the community, who are also partners in potential future efforts, may be put in jeopardy (for both me and other faculty at the institution).

The carrot or stick of a grade is not enough to motivate many students to take the risks and make the effort that is involved in community-based projects. Students can show up for an event, or make a token effort to follow up with a community member about a project, but ultimately if students don't feel some degree of ownership in the project many of them will exert little effort. Yet when students do feel ownership or a connection with a project they are capable of making meaningful contributions, oftentimes going beyond what a teacher might ask of them. The challenge is finding ways of connecting the volunteer project with the individual interests of students.

The *community contribution statement* is a tool I have developed to help identify and build connections between students' interests and the needs (both current and potential) of a community project (in this case an annual arts festival). The idea was adapted from a university self-directed learning program (Hironaka, 2011). The creation of the statement is a multi-week process. First, members of the community come into class and tell their personal stories about why they participate in the arts festival. These stories model volunteerism in general, and illustrate how volunteers connect their personal interests and passions with the needs of a community project. The second step is for students to write a paragraph or two describing ways that they could picture themselves contributing to the arts festival. While the students are shown a list of projects that have been done in the past, and told about the festival operating committees, they are encouraged to think broadly and creatively about how they could bring part of themselves into the project.

I meet with each student individually to discuss their ideas and take notes. Then I go through and try to match student interest with festival needs. Some student interests (say, in graphic design) are fairly easy to link to a known community need (like the design of a program book). Other student interests (like creating a video) might not have been done in the past, but can be easily incorporated into a known community need (creating a video that can be used for marketing). Even student interests that appear to be far from the community need (like running a volleyball activity for kids), can be 'adjusted' into an activity that fits (like creating a set of children's activities). Honoring and respecting the ideas that students bring forward is critical; and it can be surprising to see how student ideas can influence how the festival takes shape.

Students then create a formal community contribution statement document that has three sections: *contribution area*, *learning goals* and *assessment*. The contribution area section describes, in detail, what they will do to contribute to the festival. This section combines their individual interest and the community need. The learning goals section asks them to think about what it is they expect to learn while doing the activity. This section is intended to remind them that they should expect to get something out of their participation—that they will both give and receive. The assessment section describes how the students will know if they did what they said they would do. This section both helps them think about how they might measure their progress, and also reminds them that part of their class grade is tied to their success. The community contribution statement represents a process of inclusion, and a sort of contract describing what they student will do during the class.

Conclusions

In the heat of the moment it's often easy for a volunteer organizer to be focused on getting done what 'they' (or the volunteer organization or college) wants to accomplish. Yet most people involved in this sort of work recognize the importance of engaging individuals on a personal level. In this paper we present two related models for identifying and cultivating the individual interests of volunteers. The *one-on-one conversation* provides a framework for consciously and systematically identifying latent motivations of individuals. The *community contribution statement* provides a framework for identifying individual interests and connecting them to the needs of the community project. Both tools provide a way of broadening the definition of reciprocity to include all participants in a partnership students, faculty, staff, community partners, community members, other stakeholders.

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About the Authors

Dr. Eric Malm is an assistant professor of economics and business at Cabrini College. A former business owner, Eric teaches an interdisciplinary course on community economic development that is part of the college's service-focused core curriculum. In addition to his teaching, he serves as a board member of the Norristown Arts Council. Eric has a Ph. D. in economics from Temple University.

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