

**Identifying and Learning from Exemplary Volunteer Resource Managers:
A Look at Best Practices in Managing Volunteer Resources**

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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations thrive to the extent that their volunteer resource manager follows best practices for hiring, training, and managing volunteers. In an effort to identify some of the best practices in volunteer management, exemplary volunteer resources managers were identified from a consulting outreach program. These managers were then interviewed and the results from these interviews are presented here. Volunteer resource managers shared their best practices for improving volunteer organizational commitment, organizational recognition of volunteers, volunteer satisfaction with communication, volunteer perception of voice, volunteer competence & volunteer contribution, and volunteer burnouts & intentions to quit. In addition to presenting these practices, commentary includes ideas on implementation in general.

Key Words: volunteer resource management, best practices, nonprofit organizations, commitment, burnout

Managing volunteer resources is an essential part of most successful nonprofit organizations (Taylor, Darcy, Hoye & Cuskelly, 2006). Much research is devoted to improving both volunteer experiences and outcomes for nonprofit organizations (Taylor et. al, 2006). However, relatively little research actually focuses on best practices as identified and used by exemplary volunteer resource managers. The purpose of this paper is to identify and

learn from exemplary volunteer resource managers. To identify exemplary volunteer resource managers, the authors used a panel of volunteer resource managers who participated in a nonprofit consulting initiative led by students and faculty at a Southeastern United States University and a Mid-Western United States University. Specifically, researchers and students from these universities administered a climate survey to over 10,000 volunteers from more

than 100 nonprofit organizations across the United States. Program directors at these institutions identified volunteer resource managers whose organizations scored in the top 5% on a number of key volunteer work climate conditions (e.g. volunteer organizational commitment, organizational recognition of volunteers, volunteer satisfaction with communication, volunteer perception of voice, volunteer competence & volunteer contribution, and volunteer burnouts and intentions to quit). The authors then contacted the volunteer resource managers from each organization and interviewed them concerning their management practices. The interview data were then analyzed in order to identify the common best practices regarding volunteer program policies, procedures, and practices. The common best practices are presented in this report and are presented according to which volunteer work climate condition they address.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is the attachment that an individual has to their job (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). If a volunteer is committed to the organization, they will be more satisfied, experience less role ambiguity and they will be less likely to leave the organization (i.e. turnover) (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Of the volunteer managers interviewed, two best practices were identified:

Best Practice 1: Clarify and communicate the connection between volunteer work and the goals, mission, and values of the larger organization.

Best Practice 2: Provide opportunities for volunteers to learn and grow within the volunteer program.

The first practice suggests the importance of volunteers understanding how their respective tasks contribute to the

overall success of the organization. Continually reminding volunteers of the mission and having a leader speak to volunteers at orientation about the mission of the organization seems a natural step in providing this connection. Volunteer resource managers and other leaders in the organization should consider providing feedback to the volunteers about how their efforts directly benefit the constituents of the nonprofit organization. Examples of this include letting volunteers know how many hours they contributed to the organization in a given week/month/year, or perhaps even specific task outcomes (e.g. number of animals rescued or number of meals delivered).

The second practice suggests providing learning opportunities for every volunteer position within the organization. These learning opportunities could include volunteer job specific training or education opportunities concerning what the nonprofit organization accomplishes with their help. Another way to include volunteers is to send a weekly communication (newsletter or email) to the volunteers with opportunities concerning additional training.

Organizational Recognition

Organizational recognition is what the organization does to show volunteers appreciation (McFarland 2005). Recognition can come from management as well as from clients of the organization where appropriate. When volunteers feel appreciated, they also feel more committed to the organization. One overarching best practice for organizational recognition was identified:

Best Practice 1: Say “thank you” as often, genuinely, and in as many ways as possible.

To put it simply, a great way to recognize volunteer efforts is to say “thank you.” Face-to-face “thank you’s” provide a

personal touch and also gives volunteers a chance to interact more with management. In addition to face-to-face recognition, volunteer resource managers should send volunteers thank you notes by mail or email and let them know how appreciated they are. When possible, provide testimonials and thank you's from clients they served or tell them how impressed management was when they observed them performing a duty.

Satisfaction with Communication

Satisfaction with communication refers to how satisfied volunteers are with the flow of information within the organization that directly impacts them (Hecht, 2006). Communication can be from the organization to the volunteers, communication between volunteers and employees, or communication between volunteers and the clients they are serving. Satisfying communication is essential because it is the mechanism by which volunteers remain in touch with the rules, policies, processes, outcomes, mission, and so on of the organization. Best practices for improving satisfaction with communication were identified as the following:

Best Practice 1: Communicate as many volunteer changes as possible.

Best Practice 2: Create a consistent flow of communication.

For the first practice, if something changes within the organization, no matter how small the change, communicate it to the volunteers to keep them in the loop. This helps volunteers feel like they are a part of the organization and they feel important knowing that they are being kept up to date on policy changes. Make sure to provide reasoning for *why* the change was made and how it affects the volunteers and the organization. If there is a rule change that affects volunteers, they should know all the

details so they can affectively follow the rule but also effectively live out the mission of the organization.

For the second practice, every volunteer program should have an established and consistent flow of communication. One way to communicate with volunteers is through organization newsletters and emails. The emails and newsletters can talk about new policy changes, highlight the volunteer of the month or provide a testimonial from a client affected by the organization.

Perception of Voice

Volunteers' perception of voice refers to whether volunteers feel they are being heard and listened to by management in the organization (Spencer, 1986). Whether volunteers actually share their opinions or ideas is not as important as whether they have the opportunity and feel comfortable doing so in multiple environments. They need to believe the environment of the organization is receptive to their feedback. The volunteer resource managers identified two best practices as follows:

Best Practice 1: Create multiple ways to listen to volunteers.

Best Practice 2: Follow up with volunteers to "close the loop."

Volunteers should have multiple ways they can provide feedback to the organization. To name a few, management might consider providing a suggestion box, emails, monthly feedback meetings and an open door policy as ways to provide volunteers a chance to provide their feedback and opinions. By providing a variety of ways that volunteers can provide feedback, volunteers should never feel that they cannot or should not express their concerns.

Additionally, “closing the loop” concerns following up after communicating an organizational change and ensuring that volunteers understand the change and the reasons behind it. When a volunteer voices their opinion, it is essential that follow-up communication that explains what action was taken or not taken is received (e.g. email, phone, or face-to-face visit). The key is to make certain volunteers who voice their ideas, opinions, or concerns continue to feel supported and willing to voice those concerns in the future.

Volunteer Competence & Volunteer Contribution

Volunteer competence refers to one being able to successfully carry out tasks and meet performance standards (Deci et al., 2006). Ideally, volunteers should feel able to complete any and all tasks they are assigned. Volunteer contribution refers to the extent to which a volunteer feels that what they do for the organization and its clients makes a positive difference for others. When volunteers feel that they are contributing to the organization and the clients being served then they will feel more connected to the organization. The volunteer resource managers identified the following best practices for improving volunteer competence and contribution:

Best Practice 1: Provide excellent volunteer training.

Best Practice 2: Provide autonomy and responsibility.

Adequate training may be an obvious “best practice” for improving competence, however, it was frequently cited as important but underused. Volunteer resource managers should require training for the volunteers before they ever volunteer in the organization. Volunteers should be provided extensive orientation training as

well as a job-specific training followed by job shadowing with senior volunteers where possible. Additionally, volunteers typically prefer jobs where they have increased autonomy and responsibility. In order to accomplish this, volunteer resource managers need to give volunteers an opportunity to work independently within the organization. One possibility would be to take a job previously held by paid staff and break it up into jobs for volunteers.

Burnout & Intentions to Quit

Burnout and intentions to quit among volunteers are not positive for the organization, the management, employees or the volunteers. Burnout is an emotional state characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Volunteer intention to quit is the extent to which the volunteer is thinking of terminating their volunteer service with the organization (Leiter, Jackson & Shaughnessy, 2009). Burnout and intentions to quit are related in that high levels of burnout are associated with intentions to quit and are also negatively associated with job satisfaction (Leiter, Jackson, & Shaughnessy, 2009). Four best practices were identified to address burnout and reduce intentions to quit:

Best Practice 1: Prevent over-commitment by volunteers.

Best Practice 2: Listen to volunteers.

Best Practice 3: Hold frequent appreciation events for volunteers.

Best Practice 4: Conduct exit interviews.

Although these are mostly self-explanatory, the key is to incorporate the practices in a practical fashion that does not also over-burden paid staff or the volunteer resource manager. First, volunteer resource managers should encourage volunteers to

start off slowly with volunteer hours. If the volunteer manager sets a maximum number of hours at the beginning that is low and gradually increase it, then volunteers will not take on more than they can handle. Second, volunteer resource managers should consider asking volunteers how they feel and then listen to what they say. By being a sounding board for volunteers, volunteer resource managers may learn important information that could allow them to better utilize their volunteer resources. Third, holding frequent volunteer appreciation events is yet another way to say “thank you”. Volunteers will feel appreciated by the fact that the volunteer manager took the time to create a separate event just to thank them. Fourth, though turnover is inevitable, volunteer resource managers can gain important insights by interviewing volunteers who quit. This is a great opportunity for feedback about the organization and a great way to find out growth areas within the organization.

Implications for Volunteer Resource Managers and Limitations

Because the climate dimensions used for this study are strongly related to each other, any given best practice ought to have broad impact across dimensions. For example, if a best practice is implemented for perception of voice it is likely that satisfaction with communication will also improve. This has important implications for implementing these practices. Focusing on one to three areas and implementing those practices well will have a stronger impact on the organization than attempting to implement every practice.

We recommend conducting a simple (and honest) assessment of your own organization. Is communication an issue? Perhaps turnover or training are the most pressing problems? Focus specifically on implementing around your organization’s

weakest point and making it a strength. Once in practice check back in with volunteers to assess effectiveness. Simply communicating more with volunteers and asking them about the effectiveness of newly implemented best practices will have a positive effect on volunteer attitudes.

Ultimately, volunteers want to feel appreciated. Remember that they have taken time to work without monetary compensation. They do not, however, work for free. Attention, thanks and identification with a mission are some of the forms of compensation they receive. By focusing on these best practices, you can make sure your volunteers are adequately “paid”.

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About the Authors

Amanda Backer is an undergraduate student at Creighton University studying Psychology. She currently serves as the coordinator for the Volunteer Management Lab and enjoys working with clients on ways to improve their nonprofit organizations. She enjoys researching burnout, intentions to quit and satisfaction among volunteers.

Dr. Joseph A. Allen is an Assistant Professor in Industrial and Organizational (I/O) Psychology at Creighton University, Omaha. He has 18 publications in academic outlets, another 5 under review, and many works in progress for a number of journals. He has presented 40 papers/posters at regional and national conferences and given more than 10 invited presentations on his research. He currently serves on the editorial board of several journals including the *Journal of Business and Psychology*.

Daniel Bonilla is a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in the Organizational Science program. He helped start the Volunteer Program Assessment, a free consulting and outreach program for volunteer managers. He conducts research on volunteer motivation and frequently volunteers in his local community.

Table 1

Recommended Best Practices for Volunteer Management

| Constructs | Best Practice Themes |
|---|--|
| Organizational Commitment | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Clarify and communicate the connection between volunteer work and the goals, mission and values of the larger organization.2. Provide opportunities for volunteers to learn and grow within the volunteer program. |
| Organizational Recognition | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Say “thank you” as often, genuinely, and in as many ways as possible. |
| Satisfaction with Communication | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Communicate as many volunteer changes as possible.2. Create a consistent flow of communication |
| Perception of Voice | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Create multiple ways to listen to volunteers.2. Follow up with volunteers to “close the loop.” |
| Volunteer Competence and Volunteer Contribution | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Provide excellent volunteer training.2. Provide autonomy and responsibility. |
| Burnout and Intentions to Quit | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Prevent over-commitment by volunteers2. Listen to volunteers3. Hold frequent appreciation events for volunteers.4. Conduct exit interviews. |

Appendix A

Sample Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is _____ and I am a member of the Volunteer Program Assessment through the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Creighton. I am contacting you because your organization completed the VPA in the past year and your volunteers scored exceptionally high in a number of the test dimensions. We are interested in compiling a best practices list and we were hoping you could tell us about some of the practices and behaviors you engage in to maintain such high dimension scores. Specifically, you scored in the top 5% for Perception of Voice, Engagement, and Satisfaction with Paid Staff. Would you mind answering a few questions about these dimensions? I only need 15-20 minutes of your time.

1. Your volunteers scored exceptionally well in the dimension called Perception of Voice. A sample item is *the organization where I volunteer gives me a chance to express my concerns on volunteer related issues*. What policies, procedures, and behaviors do you or others engage in to maintain such high levels of this dimension?
2. Your volunteers scored exceptionally well in the dimension called Engagement. A sample item is *I am proud of the volunteer work that I do*. What policies, procedures, and behaviors do you or others engage in to maintain such high levels of this dimension?
3. Your volunteers scored exceptionally well in the dimension called Satisfaction with Paid Staff. A sample item is *I enjoy working with paid staff*. What policies, procedures, and behaviors do you or others engage in to maintain such high levels of this dimension?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding volunteer management best practices?