Practical Volunteer Administrator Professional Development Strategies

Robert F. Long, Ph.D.
(Editor's Note: no current contact information available)

(Editor-generated) Abstract

The author argues that the world in which volunteer administrators operate is demanding more and more sophisticated leadership and management to keep volunteer based organizations healthy. He suggests that by improving individual understanding of personal professional development as volunteer administrators, a foundation can be laid for leading others in their professional development planning. The process he suggests is designed to help volunteer administrators: 1) identify and define the components of professional development relevant to them; 2) communicate the role of each component to others; and 3) design and lead the design of professional development for themselves and others.

(Editor-generated) Key Words:

professional development, personal development, leadership, management, issues, trends

Introduction

By improving individual understanding of personal professional development as volunteer administrators, a foundation can be laid for leading others in their professional development planning. Expertise must be created in order to build quality practical models to be shared more widely. Leaders of volunteer administrators are challenged to build personally to act locally to impact globally!

Building on volunteer administration's traditions in direct service functions, additional administrative training is crucial to meeting the challenges of an increasingly complex management environment. The days of providing leadership and making decisions based on past experience alone are gone. The world in which administrators operate is demanding more and more sophisticated leadership and management to keep volunteer based organizations healthy. It is time to develop an active personal approach to professional development and the ability to lead others in their own professional development. It may be among the most important things volunteer-based organization leaders can do for the future.

This paper presents a simple and practical process that is intended to take the reader through a personal analytical experience to establish a professional development plan. The primary audience includes heads of organizations who provide leadership to volunteer administrators. It should also be useful as a planning guide to volunteer administrators themselves. An improved understanding of the process, an awareness of the current issues, and a focus on planning should help administrators who must lead others in establishing professional development plans. The process is designed to help volunteer administrators: 1) identify and define the components of professional development relevant to them; 2) communicate the role of each component to others; and 3) design and lead the design of professional development for themselves and others.

This will be accomplished through a

combination of information presentation and analytical exercises on historical perspectives, relevant issues and trends, curricular and co-curricular components, and potential training alternatives.

Historical Perspectives

To establish an understanding of current professional development practices in volunteer administration, it is useful to develop some insight into its history. It is important to know who the first volunteer administrators were and where they developed their skills. The history of organized volunteer activities in this country shows that the leaders were most often selected from within the volunteer group itself. Special skills and expertise came mainly from the experience of doing the particular work. There were no specific administrative preparation opportunities. Early volunteer administrators included militia captains, fire chiefs, and wagonmasters.

The early leaders of efforts to formalize the work of volunteer administration were those organizations that involved the most volunteers. At some point the amount of administrative functions grew to where some assigned time had to be given to those growing responsibilities. When such assignments were made, the first formally-recognized volunteer administrators were created. Hospitals, youth organizations, and community recreation programs were among the first to take this evolutionary step when they created positions called Directors of Volunteers and Volunteer Supervisors. These were among the first professionals in the field and set the stage for both paid and unpaid staff being assigned the' official responsibilities to administer the work of volunteers (Ellis & Noyes, 1990).

Although efforts to organize the work of volunteer administration are important

steps toward professionalization, there is still much to be done before it can be called a formal profession. It is useful to consider the generally-accepted attributes of a profession and determine how volunteer administration compares. Greenwood's (1957) early studies of the social work field present a list of the attributes of a profession that is still useful: systematic body of knowledge and theory, professional authority, sanction of the community, regulative code of ethics, and professional culture. A quick review of this list illustrates that volunteer administration, in some settings and with some organizations, may have nearly all of these attributes. However, these are not universally identifiable with the work and its practitioners. Further efforts will likely pay the most dividends if they are focused on contributing to the body of knowledge in volunteer administration, and on understanding and applying the knowledge base. Then will come the identification of the profession (Wilensky, 1964, p. 138).

A review of the professional organizations emerging in the field shows that support for a wide range of professional development activities is being established. The Association for Volunteer Administration has led the movement since 1960 and set the stage for efforts geared toward professionalism. A number of other organizations have been established to focus on a range of aspects of the work of administering volunteer-based programs. The Independent Sector was established in 1980 to connect major, national voluntary, non-profit, youth and human service organizations and private foundations. VOLUNTEER: The National Center was created in 1984 (it has now merged into the Points of Light Foundation) to mobilize for support to volunteerism. These and others offer opportunities for professional development, research, advocacy, and other

important needs of a profession. Although this is by no means an inclusive list of related professional organizations, it does illustrate the history of such efforts and the demonstrated interest and support for volunteer administrators working in the field (Ellis & Noyes, 1990).

There are a number of important challenges to professionalization that must be considered as we move ahead with efforts to further refine our practice. The relative youth of the knowledge base is a problem that can only be addressed by continuing a concerted effort to study volunteer administration and build understanding and a strong conceptual framework. There are some real elements of resistance to such efforts. There is an historic and somewhat natural tension between professional practice in the field and higher education. Experienced professionals in a young profession naturally resist the attempts to move their discipline into the academy. They often believe that experience is the only teacher. Higher education must deal with this to do a credible job of study in the field. This situation also makes it difficult to have campus-based theoretical findings applied in the field.

There is also a natural pulling between the expectations of practice in direct service positions and administrative positions. It is likely that those moving into administrative positions have little or no formal training in this arena. It is more likely that they will have training and experience in the direct service work of the organization. This is a challenge for those providing administrative training and a point of concern for those impacted by untrained practitioners. As the knowledge base expands and training opportunities become more readily available, there is a need for flexibility and balance in program design and content.

A case can be made for study in several disciplines within the academy today. The work of volunteer administration crosses many academic disciplines. Academic programs need to take this into consideration, along with the individual needs of the learners and their work settings. An improved understanding of the historical perspectives helps planning for the future. It becomes increasingly important to an emerging profession that professionalization through the developing body of knowledge and professional preparation programs does not ignore or limit the history, social impact and activism, open and broad community perspective, and caring attitudes valued by volunteer-based programs (Silin, 1985).

Issues and Trends

Future volunteer administrators may be best described as "Community Resource Developers"—people skilled at identifying human needs within the community and organizing resources to address these problems. Less concern will be given only to the volunteer aspect and more attention to bringing all necessary and available resources to bear on the need. Administrative skills will be called upon to create, as well as manage, the responses to the needs. This projected trend illustrates the growing demand for new elements and approaches to preparing administrators to lead important community-based programs.

The focus of this section is on identifying a list of issues and trends that will impact volunteer administration. The following questions can be used to increase awareness of the issues and serve as a basis for a critical analysis of the potential trends. Such an exercise can provide personal insight to areas of needed professional development. (The sample responses may be useful in the process.)

What societal issues are impacting the need for professional development?
Litigation; Child care; Family structure; Changing work place; Government services; Homelessness; Child abuse; Health risks; Changing demographics; Specialization; Profit organization services; Less community concern

What organizational issues are impacting the need for professional development?
Competition and duplication; Tax laws; Health insurance; Fair Labor Standards; Volunteers as a budget item; Employee benefits

What administrative issues are impacting the need for professional development?
Volunteer/staff relations; Training; Screening and selection; Risk management; Computer management; Reduced budgets; Cutback management

What volunteer issues are impacting the need for professional development?
Leadership; Effectiveness; Training; Evaluation

Curricular Components
It is important to have a strategic plan for professional development because there are limited resources and time to engage training. There is a need for a balanced curriculum which includes human growth and development, leadership development, and management training (Jachowicz & Long, 1991). Across these curricular components, a list of administrative competencies and qualities needs to be established and accepted in order to develop useful plans. The Association for Volunteer Administration's "Summary of Competency Statements" could serve as a useful guide in developing the list. An acceptable list of administrative competencies could include the following categories, taken from the

American Humanics Competency Outline (Jachowicz & Long, 1991): leadership, planning, recruiting, motivating, program development, funding development, public relations, management, personnel management, training, evaluation, financial administration, and marketing. The following five discussion questions are designed as a guide for the process of refining individual lists:
1. Which competencies are usually the strongest and weakest for volunteer administration?
2. Which competencies are best developed in class?
3. Which competencies are best developed in experience?
4. Which competencies are best developed in a combination of the two?
5. What foundation experiences are most useful to volunteer administration?

A thorough analysis of an individual list and answers to these questions will serve as useful preparation for professional development planning. Either rank ordering or identifying key points is the best way to select the individual curriculum components to be pursued. Figure 1 is a "Professional Development Plan Design" sheet that may be useful in the planning process.

Co-Curricular Components and Training Sources
Building from the listing of qualities and competencies needed in a curriculum, it is important to identify a list of developmental experiences that may be accessed for training. There is a wide range of possible educational formats and approaches to be considered in designing professional development plans. Creativity in locating existing opportunities or establishing new ones is essential.

*Figure 1.*Professional Development Plan Design

What personal "qualities" are essential to your success as a volunteer administrator?

What professional "competencies" are essential to your success as a volunteer administrator?

List the qualities and competencies that you would like to address in your professional development plan:

List the subject areas that you would include in your plan and potential sources for each auricular and co-curricular area. Separate the areas into two categories:

REQUIRED (or absolutely necessary to your continued success):

SUBJECT: SOURCES:

_____   _____

_____   _____

ELECTIVE (or not necessary but useful to your professional development):

SUBJECT: SOURCES:

_____   _____

_____   _____

Look to the institutions of higher education in a local area for professional development, extramural courses, continuing education, and guided individual study (correspondence courses). Investigate the wide range of professional associations and organizations providing related training programs. Work within the local cohort group of related organizations to examine opportunities for collaborative training. There may be interest in cooperative training and resource sharing programs.

Consider organizing "cross-training" programs that could broaden the experience base among similar organizations and serve as a valuable training vehicle. In such a program, people could be traded among organizations for specific projects, expertise, and time frames to accomplish a task and gain targeted experiences. Focusing on the internal opportunities within a given organization will likely find similar cross training options within and among positions. Special training programs can be organized around staff retreats, workshops, and seminars. Always consider sharing expertise among the staff of the organization where the costs are less and the rewards can be great.

A special internship program could be organized to focus on a very specific individual training need and the work could benefit the organization. The resource and expertise could be targeted and the experience negotiated around a formal agreement.

Finally, the individual should be empowered to organize personal professional development opportunities. From direct volunteer experiences with targeted administrative assignments to service on a local board of directors, there is tremendous potential to engage field work for training. A creative approach to organizing a personal mentorship with someone identified as having the desired expertise can be easily negotiated and yield tremendous benefits to the individuals and the organizations involved. The whole idea of self-directed learning is at the historic roots of volunteer administration and may still be the best method of getting exactly what is desired out of a professional development experience.

Conclusion

Engage all those possibly connected with the design of professional development programs. Help them assess the issues and work through the following strategic planning steps: 1) Build a list of desired qualities and competencies; 2) Match the list with training opportunities; 3) Lead the development of personal design strategies; 4) Help build a personal rationale for the plan; and 5) Revisit/rethink decisions regularly.

Take the time to establish individual plans in order to lead others in doing the same. More active planning of professional development efforts will improve professional practice while contributing to the professionalism of volunteer administration. It is important to build personally to act locally to impact globally!

References

Association for Volunteer Administration. (1991). *Summary of competency statements.* Available from AVA Certification Program, P.O. Box 4584, Boulder, CO, 80306.

Ellis, S.J., & Noyes, K.H. (1990). *By the people: A history of Americans as volunteers.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Greenwood, E. (1957). Attributes of a profession. *Social Work,* July, 45-55.

Jachowicz, P., & Long, R.F. (1991). A curriculum for youth and human service professional leadership. *Humanics: The Journal of Leadership for Youth and Human Service,* Fall, 12-16.

Silin, J.G. (1985). Authority as knowledge: A problem of professionalization. *Young Children,* March,41-46.

Wilensky, H.L. (1964). The professionalization of everyone. *The American Journal of Sociology, LXX* (2), 138-146.

About the Author

At the time this article was written*,* Robert F. Long was the McEIroy Professor of Youth Leadership Studies at the University of Northern Iowa. His position involved cooperative leadership of an undergraduate certification program in youth agency administration, a master of arts degree in youth and human service administration, and the Institute for Youth Leaders which received a $629,000 three-year grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to conduct a Community Youth Leaders Project providing professional development for those leading local youth serving organizations. This included an annual research sequence of study, analysis, reporting, and questioning in support of a National Youth Leadership Symposium.