

Strategic Thinking: A Novel Approach to Professionalizing the Profession

Jeanette D. Savage
Consultant, Savage Fowler Consulting
12909 Dove Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44105
Phone: 216.256.3881 * Email: jsavage@savagefowler.com * Fax N/A

Jill M. Fowler
Consultant, Savage Fowler Consulting
12909 Dove Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44105
Phone: 440.522.8877 * Email: jfowler@savagefowler.com * Fax N/A

Abstract

Volunteer resource management is becoming more and more visible as a profession. Colleges and Universities are now offering specific courses in volunteer resource management instead of simply building the subject matter into a human resource or program administration course for nonprofit degrees. Additionally, increased emphasis is being placed on practitioners obtaining professional credentials in the field, and professional associations are working towards developing occupational standards. As a supplement to the efforts of formalizing the training for volunteer resource managers, strategic thinking should be recognized as a skill worth promoting and developing amongst professionals in the field. Strategic thinking was instrumental in all the major advancements of the past few centuries and can be critical to successfully managing and administering volunteer programs and elevating the profession.

Key Words: strategic, credentialing, professionalizing, decision-making

The movement to formalize volunteer resource management as a profession continues to gain ground as colleges offer courses and certificates in volunteer administration, international credentialing increases in popularity, and occupational standards for the profession begin to be developed. In addition to formal training for a position as a professional administrator of volunteer resources, the profession would be greatly served if current professionals in the field increased their use of strategic thinking when making routine and critical programmatic decisions.

Strategic Thinking Defined

Early in the twenty-first century the idea of strategic thinking was a relatively

new concept. It emerged out of the resurgence of strategic planning in the 1990's. Researchers found that only about 4% of the U.S. organizational population was highly competent in strategic thinking (Linkow, 1999). The *2009/2010 Trends in Executive Development* study revealed that the number of strategic thinkers probably hasn't increased much in the last decade. The study expressed great concern regarding the ability of the next generation of leaders to successfully manage in today's turbulent business environment-- specifically because they lack strategic thinking skills (Gaber & Wolfe, 2009).

Strategic thinking is the ability to identify and consider all relevant information in order to determine the most

advantageous course of action (*Guide to Developing*, 2011). It is considered an advanced decision-making skill and “involves recognizing trends and challenging assumptions while maintaining a global view of situations” (Fowler & Savage, 2011, p.85) as well as embracing change. It requires appreciating current situations while researching ways to take advantage of on new opportunities (Fowler & Savage, 2011). Strategic thinkers first ask “what” and not “how”, as in questioning what can and will be done to move forward, not how something will be executed.

Strategic Thinking and the Profession

Noticing the increased visibility of volunteer resource management as a profession Jeanette Savage conducted an online survey of current and previous volunteer resource managers in July 2011 to explore whether or not these professionals share a predominant thinking style. She asked members of two LinkedIn groups, Forum for Volunteer Administrators and Volunteer Coordinators, with profiles indicating they have experience managing volunteer resources to complete the survey. Five hundred thirty-nine professionals received the hyperlink to the survey and one hundred forty-nine people completed it. The initial review of the results found, similar to the aforementioned research findings, that six percent of respondents were exceptional strategic thinkers. There is certainly room for growth and increasing the number of volunteer resource managers with exceptional strategic thinking skills is important for individual professional growth, overall organizational success, and can lead to increased recognition of the profession as an actual profession.

Consider volunteer positions perceived as less than beneficial: volunteer resource managers utilizing strategic thinking, instead of acting on information void of relevant

trends, will explore all consequences and be able to clearly communicate the reason their decision is the most advantageous course of action. They will become appreciated as the foundation for organizational efficiency, and make their department more successful in the long-term (*Guide to Developing*, 2011). Organizations employing volunteer resource managers highly competent in strategic thinking benefit because these professionals tend to have more targeted focus and scope leading to increased differentiation and purposeful activity, a greater understanding of what’s needed to move the organization forward, and the ability to respond quickly to challenges and capitalize on opportunities (Fowler & Savage, 2011). As efforts to professionalize the profession continue; strategic thinking should be recognized as a skill worth promoting and developing amongst professionals in the field of volunteer administration.

Developing Strategic Thinking Skills

The findings of researchers at the turn of the century, the observations revealed in the *2009/2010 Trends in Executive Development* study, and the results of the survey of professionals in the field conducted summer 2011, all clearly demonstrate how underdeveloped and underutilized strategic thinking really is. Fortunately, there are two things professionals in volunteer resource management can do immediately to begin to build this high-level decision making process: make time for trends and ask the right questions first.

The way a problem, or opportunity, is framed at the onset will determine whether or not the decisions made regarding the situation will be truly strategic. The first questions strategic thinkers ask focus on “what” and not “how.” Volunteer resource managers should practice first asking questions like “what must be done to align

volunteer needs for episodic and short term opportunities with the organization's new goals" and "what will the organization's new policy regarding teens mean for the future of the teen volunteer program." These types of questions should be asked before asking questions about how many websites to use in order to post the new information, or how many different colors should be used for the announcement flyer. Our thinking automatically becomes more strategic as we focus on the larger picture (Fowler & Savage, 2011).

A focus on the larger picture will only take an aspiring strategic thinker so far. To be a competent strategic thinker a person needs to be able to move beyond their anchor thoughts – gut feelings/actions - and base their decisions on all relevant information. They can do this by making sure they regularly follow, contemplate, and/or research the trends emerging within and affecting volunteerism. Volunteer resource managers who have ignored that many of their boomer aged volunteers are working at least part-time, due to the economy, are missing an opportunity to re-design volunteer positions to be mutually beneficial for the organization and the volunteer. It's imperative for volunteer resource managers to take the time to actually read and review their professional association's newsletters, the materials and notes they gather after attending conferences and workshops, the topics discussed on the professional listserv, and the trade journals they subscribe to. Professionals who are informed about the external environment are better-equipped to respond to the internal work environment (Savage & Fowler, 2011).

Additionally, professionals in the field of volunteer resource management can reexamine past decisions in order to develop their strategic thinking skills. "Ask 'What,' Not 'How'" (2011) encourages readers to

consider ten ways a situation could be approached differently and the various alternate outcomes that would have resulted. Volunteer resource managers can consider a time when they created a volunteer position to meet a new organizational need and the different ways the position could have been designed. Those struggling to identify ten alternatives should determine the additional information needed, find that information and start the exercise again (Fowler & Savage, 2011). This exercise, along with focusing on the big picture, and making time for trends are all realistic ways for professional volunteer resource managers to develop their strategic thinking skills.

Practical Applications for Strategic Thinking

At a recent strategic thinking workshop, an entry level volunteer resource manager expressed having just enough time in her work day to concentrate on "how" to implement the tactics associated with achieving goals for the volunteer program at her organization. She and workshop attendees viewed strategic thinking as a luxury reserved for those in management positions. These professionals were concerned with finding the time to consider all relevant information and determine the most advantageous course of action.

The truth of the matter is, nowadays, everyone strives to accomplish more with less. Professional volunteer resource managers, regardless of whether they work in a one-person or multi-person department within their organization will benefit from incorporating the use of strategic thinking as they address programmatic opportunities and threats, as well how they approach their own personal career objectives. Here are a few situations in which strategic thinking proves especially valuable (*Guide to Developing*, 2011):

- When developing staffing plans for departments – number of employees vs volunteers
- During strategic planning activities
- When competitively positioning your programs and services
- When leveraging your skills in preparation for future opportunities
- When determining which associations will maximize your networking experiences

This list reinforces the idea that developing and maintaining strategic thinking skills is very important and should serve as encouragement for more professionals in volunteer administration to integrate strategic thinking into their daily lives.

Conclusion

Successful management and administration of volunteer programs requires volunteer resource managers to keep up with current trends, seek feedback and new information, and challenge personal and organizational assumptions. Quite simply, they need to perfect their strategic thinking skills. As more volunteer resource managers improve their strategic thinking

skills the industry will notice that these professionals are well-positioned to strategically identify and capitalize on professional, programmatic, and organizational opportunities. Increasing strategic thinking amongst current professional volunteer administrators is an obvious compliment to the efforts focused on formalized training for the profession. Both efforts work together to elevate the profession.

References

- Fowler, J., & Savage, J. (2011). Ask 'what,' not 'how'. *HR Magazine*, 56(8), 85
- Gaber, A., & Wolfe, L. (2009). Wanted: Visionary leaders – Must have strategic thinking skills. *Pearson*. Retrieved from <http://www.talentlens.com/en/news/main.php?id=32>
- Linkow, P. (1999). What gifted strategic thinkers do. *Training & Development*, 53(7), 34.
- Savage Fowler Consulting. (2011). *Savage Fowler Consulting's guide to developing strategic thinking skills* (1st ed). Cleveland, OH: Author

About the Authors

Jeanette Savage, a partner at Savage Fowler Consulting, is a Certified Volunteer Administrator with a Master of Nonprofit Organizations from Case Western Reserve University. She currently manages Volunteer Services at Cleveland Botanical Garden and is a Trustee for the Forum of Volunteer Administrators. Jeanette is a zealous community volunteer whose professional career has focused on program, process, and strategy development for nonprofit organizations and small businesses.

For over 15 years, Jill Fowler's career has focused on program development and assessment, strategic initiatives, and service in the philanthropic and business communities. Also a partner at Savage Fowler Consulting, Jill is a Certified Volunteer Administrator and Senior Professional in Human Resources with a Master of Nonprofit Organizations and an MBA in Organizational Development & Leadership from Case Western Reserve University. She also serves on the board of Greater Cleveland Volunteers and is an avid volunteer.