Paper Presentation
Topic: Mobilization and Management of Volunteers

The Seven Habits of
Highly Effective Volunteer Administrators

Dr. R. Dale SAFRIT
North Carolina State University, USA
dale_safrit@ncsu.edu

Ms. Mary V. MERRILL
Merrill Associates, USA
marymerrill@merrillassociates.net

Abstract

Volunteer administration is a relatively young profession encompassing numerous discipline areas, housed in diverse community-based organizations, and addressing a myriad of individual and group needs and issues. Both professional competencies and personal capacities will be required of managers of volunteers in order to maintain the viability and relevance of ever-evolving community-based volunteer programs. The authors utilize Covey's (1995) seven habits of highly effective people to discuss the combined competencies and capacities that will be necessary for volunteer administrators to ensure the continued success of volunteerism and volunteer programs in our global community. The habits include: (1) be proactive; (2) begin with the end in mind; (3) put first things first; (4) think "win-win"; (5) synergize; (6) seek first to understand, then to be understood; and (7) sharpen the saw.

Introduction

Volunteer administration is a relatively young profession encompassing numerous discipline areas, housed in diverse community-based organizations, and addressing a myriad of individual and group needs and issues. As the profession has evolved during the past 30 years, mastery of new and modified volunteer management and leadership competencies is critical to volunteer programs meeting the continued and emerging needs of people in communities around the world. Numerous authors have investigated such professional competencies for contemporary volunteer administrators, including Harshfield (1995); Chizari, Lindner, and Karjoyan (1998); King and Safrit (1998); Hange, Seevers, and VanLeeuwen (2002); Boyd (2004); and Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, and Gliem (2005).

However, mastering such competencies is, in itself, no longer adequate for a manager of volunteers to be successful in today's dynamic social, economic and political environments. They must also develop the personal capacities to make the competencies relevant to their individual and unique realities. According to Safrit and Merrill (1999), "Personal competencies are knowledge and skills based, and serve as a critical intellectual foundation for any profession" (p. 29). Hedges (1995) defined a competency as ". . . an observable and measurable behavior that has a definite beginning and ending, can be performed within a limited amount of time, . . . and

leads to a product, service, or decision" (p. 13). While built upon a foundation of competence, personal capacities, however, involve the higher levels of cognitive learning including the abilities to analyze specific situations; synthesize new insights from existing knowledge and skills; and evaluate the broader, more abstract current or future situations (Bloom, 1956).

In today's ever-changing social, economic, and political environments, volunteer-based organizations and the professional managers and administrators who lead them must develop both professional competence as well as personal capacity in order for their programs and organizations to survive. Bridging our 46 combined years of experience in volunteer management with our scholarly and creative work regarding the volunteer administration profession, and borrowing from Stephen Covey's (1995) international best-seller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, we suggest seven habits of today's volunteer administrators that are critical to the continued success of volunteer programs.

Exploring the Seven Habits

While much work has focused upon training addressing volunteer management competencies, little (if any!) has focused upon helping managers of volunteers develop the capacities to apply these competencies to their specific organization or program contexts. We suggest that each of Covey's seven habits has direct relevance to today's volunteer program managers and administrators, regardless of nationality, focus, or organizational sponsor.

"Being proactive" encourages professional volunteer administrators to continually scan a volunteer program's dynamic internal and external environments to identify emerging needs that may be addressed through volunteerism before they become crises. Most volunteer programs are designed around identified needs or assets in a specific community, or among a targeted group of clientele, that may be addressed through organized formal volunteerism. This habit builds upon several fundamental volunteer management competencies identified by both our profession (Association for Volunteer Administration, 2005) and contemporary research (Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, & Gliem, 2005), including advocacy, needs assessment, strategic and operational planning, and professional development. However, Covey (1995) points out that proactivity ". . . means more than merely taking initiative. It means that as human beings, we are responsible for our own lives. Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. . . . We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen" (p. 71). Merrill (1995) also encouraged volunteer administrators to increase the effectiveness of programs and create a greater sense of shared leadership by going beyond what we are doing and how we are doing it to help the organization identify and understand what we stand for and what we believe in. It is this unique capacity to continuously and proactively develop shared leadership among paid staff, volunteer staff, and the clients we serve that will ensure the success of volunteer programs in times of rapid and unpredictable change.

"Beginning with the end in mind" challenges managers of volunteers to focus upon

the ultimate impact upon a community's residents that we seek to achieve through volunteer programs in addition to day-to-day management considerations. Covey (1995) emphasizes the importance of a personal mission statement in bringing this habit to life, a mission statement that is centered upon core principles that we as individuals are unwilling to compromise upon. According to Harvey and Lucia (1995), "our current job descriptions identify the specific functions we perform. But it is our values that describe how we should perform those functions" (p. 115). Brinckerhoff (2000) argues that any not-for-profit organization in the 21st century must be mission-based in order to survive. We would argue that focusing upon a mission is not enough; volunteer administrators must focus upon a core mission while also striving towards a personal and organizational vision. This ultimate and ideal vision is the "end" that we must keep ever "in mind." We must embrace the personal capacity to envision a positive and uplifting future for our clientele and their communities, and then engage the organization's resources to work toward that vision. According to Safrit and Merrill (1999), "Vision does not imply an inherent gift of prophecy nor a genetically-determined sixth sense. We believe it is a fundamental contemporary organizational function that is best derived from the individual ideas and insights of all organizational stakeholders, both paid and unpaid" (p. 32). Russell and Thompson (2003) described how volunteer administrators in Minnesota utilized such a shared vision to transform their state's professional association. Vision is an ever-moving target focused upon the future. The issue is not whether we ever actually reach that target, but rather, that we constantly build upon our organization's mission to move ahead toward the target.

"Putting first things first" emphasizes the importance of managing resources effectively and efficiently in relation to priority setting. According to Covey (1995), "Effective management is *putting things first*. While leadership decides what 'first things' are, it is management that puts them first, day-by-day, moment-by-moment. Management is discipline, carrying it out" (p. 148). Priority setting in volunteer-based organizations is never a simple task. We are surrounded by a myriad of human and social needs that we recognize may be addressed effectively through volunteer-delivered services and programs. However, we must also recognize that even a large not-for-profit has the resources necessary to address all needs within its mission. Volunteer administrators must make difficult choices based largely upon the two previously discussed habits: the proactive identification of the most pressing needs ("being proactive") and the organization's focus upon both its core mission and ultimate vision ("beginning with the end in mind"). On an individual level, "putting first things first" also relates to how we as individual managers and administrators of volunteers establish personal priorities in both our private and professional lives, and respect the same challenge among the volunteers in our programs. Fox and Wheeler (2002) investigated how volunteers managed to balance the demands of home, work and volunteering. They concluded that "volunteer managers can design environments that better match the realities of life as we know it, thus increasing the individual volunteer's abilities to thrive. . . . [thus] building and developing resources and strategies to deal effectively with volunteers who balance multiple roles" (p. 33). As individuals and as professionals we must work diligently and constantly with our peers and volunteers to collaboratively identify where our programmatic efforts may

make the greatest impact for our clientele and their communities. As individuals, we must also focus our individual personal and professional energies as well upon those programs and tasks wherein we may maximize the use of very limited time and resources so as to accomplish the greatest good for ourselves and our programs.

"Thinking 'win-win' " and "synergizing" focus us upon the contemporary need to build strong teams of paid staff, volunteers, and donors all working together toward the ultimate impact we seek. Covey broadly discusses principles of interpersonal leadership through which ". . . cooperation in the workplace is as important to free enterprise as competition in the marketplace" (p. 230). Austin (2000) discussed in great detail the importance of forming strategic alliances between nonprofits and businesses that allow us "to partner effectively with each other for mutual benefit and social good" (p. xi). Safrit and Merrill (2002) noted that today's volunteers "tend to avoid authoritarian management and large bureaucratic institutions, and are seeking volunteer organizations that treat them professionally and include them in the planning and decision-making phases of the work" (p. 16). The once predominant free market competitive managerial paradigm of the 20th century has evolved into a "kinder, gentler" collaborative leadership approach of this first decade of the 21st century. At the organizational level, inter-agency competition is "out" while collaborative programs and initiatives are "in." At the professional level, interpersonal rivalries are passé while work teams are in vogue. And in volunteer-based programs, top-down hierarchical decision-making is being replaced by flattened collaborative structures and processes through which individuals from multiple roles and positions within the same organization share knowledge, insights and expertise in order to address successfully very complex organizational challenges and societal issues. As volunteer administrators, we must challenge ourselves to constantly strengthen those around us - both professional peers and volunteer colleagues - by sharing power, resources, and opportunities through which the whole gains more through the success of each composite individual.

"Seeking first to understand, then to be understood" challenges us to stay in constant and direct contact with the real and perceived needs and opinions of those around us, including professional colleagues, volunteers, and our programs' clientele. Covey (1995) describes this habit as ". . . listening with intent to *understand*. I mean *seeking first* to understand, to really understand. . . . Empathetic (from *empathy*) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, . . . you understand how they feel" (p. 240). Numerous authors have emphasized the critical importance of volunteer administrators working constantly to better understand and connect with individual volunteers' motivations that bring them to our volunteer programs (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992; Ostwald & Runge, 2004; Smith, 2004; Safrit, Gliem, & Gliem, 2004). Volunteer efforts that are centered around and built upon the overlapping needs of individual volunteers, organizational opportunities, and clientele needs lead to positive impact upon the recipients of the volunteer efforts, increased volunteer retention, the efficient and effective use of limited organizational resources, and a more positive and rewarding experience for volunteer and paid staff alike. Understanding first and being understood secondarily fosters the "win-win" synergy discussed previously.

Finally, "sharpening the saw" emphasizes the critical importance of coming together as peers and colleagues to share resources and ideas, to dialogue regarding the future of our programs, and to celebrate our mutual successes. According to Covey (1995), "It's preserving and enhancing the greatest asset you have – you. It's renewing the four dimensions of your nature – physical, spiritual, mental, and social/emotional" (p. 288). In our busy and hectic personal and professional lives, we find it ever more challenging to make (note: we did not say "find") the time to pause and reflect upon and learn from the day-to-day challenges and experiences that bombard us. However, to truly develop to our fullest potential as individuals and peers, we must emphatically embrace and model the relatively new emphases in volunteer administration upon continuous professional development, ethics, and mutual advocacy. While the historical core competencies of our profession will continue to be the managerial foundations upon which we function, it is this seventh habit and emerging core capacity to constantly "sharpen the saw" that will empower us as individuals, our programs and our organizations to not only survive but to thrive.

Conclusions

As Safrit and Merrill stated (1999), "many of the basic tenets of personal capacities have been fundamental to volunteer administration throughout. . . . let us not forget the more personalized, affective, emotional aspects of what it means to be a manager or administrator of volunteers" (p. 41). Bridging competence with capacity will help to ensure the continued success of volunteerism and volunteer programs, and enhance the professional status of volunteer administrators.

References

Association for Volunteer Administration. (2005). *The CVA credential: A mark of excellence! Core competencies and content outline (Updated in 2004).* Retrieved September 29, 2005, from http://www.avaintl.org/credential/index.html
Austin, J.E. (2000). *The collaboration challenge: How nonprofits and businesses succeed through strategic alliances.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
Bloom, B. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive domain.* New York: McKay.
Boyd, B. (2004). Extension agents as administrators of volunteers: Competencies needed for the future. *The Journal of Extension, 42*(2). Retrieved March 3, 2005, from http://www.joe.org/joe/2004april/ a4.shtml
Boutall, T., & Pollet, S. (2003). A standards framework for managing volunteers. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 21*(3), 5-12.
Brinckerhoff, P.C. (2000). *Mission-based management (Second edition): Leading your not-for-profit in the 21st century.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
Chizari, M., Lindner, J.R., & Karjoyan, S. (1999). Factors affecting involvement of volunteers in extension educational activities in Talesh Township, Iran. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 40*(3), 61-68.
Clary, E.G., Synder, M., & Ridge, R. (1992). Volunteers' motivations: A functional strategy for the recruitment, placement and retention of volunteers. *Non-profit Management and Leadership, 2*, 333-350.

Clary, E.G., Synder, M., & Stukas, A. (1994). Volunteers' motivations: Findings from a national survey. *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 25*, 485-505.

Covey, S.R. (1995). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Fox, J., & Wheeler, D. (2002). Add volunteering to the mix of balancing work and family: The findings and implications for volunteer administrators. . *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 20*(4), 27-34.

Hange, J.S., Seevers, B.S., & VanLeeuwen, D. (2002, December). 4-H Youth Development Extension agent's attitudes towards volunteer management competencies. *Proceedings of the National Agricultural Education Research Conference. Las Vegas, NV.*

Harshfield, J.B. (1995). *The perceived importance of selected components of volunteer management in public schools in the western United States*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nevada, Reno, NV.

Harvey, E., & Lucia, A. (1995). *Walk the talk and get the results you want.* Dallas, TX: Performance Publishing.

Hedges, L.E. (1995). *Developing your curriculum guide: From competencies to student performance.* Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, Department of Agricultural Education.

King, J., & Safrit, R.D. (1998). Extension agents' perceptions of volunteer management. The Journal of Extension, 36 (3). Available: http://www.joe.org/joe/1998june/a2.txt

Merrill, M.V. (1995). The paradigm organizational effectiveness series #3: Combining inspiring leadership and effective management: The underpinnings of a strategic volunteer program. Washington, D.C.: The Points of Light Foundation.

Merrill, M., & Safrit, R.D. (2003). International megatrends in volunteerism. *The Journal of the Institute of Volunteering Research: Voluntary Action, V*(2), 63-69.

Otswald, S.K., & Runge, A. (2004). Volunteers speak out: Motivations for volunteering. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 22*(1), 5-11.

Russell, J., & Thompson, C. (2003). Vision to reality: A new future for volunteer administration in Minnesota. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 21*(4), 33-37.

Safrit, R.D. (2002). Developing effective teen-adult partnerships through volunteerism: Strengthening empathy, engagement, empowerment, and enjoyment. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 20*(4), 21-27.

Safrit, R.D., Gliem, R.R., & Gliem, J.A. (2004). Reasons for and barriers to participating in volunteerism and service: A comparison of Ohio youth in grades 5-8 and 9-12. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 22*(2), 35-42.

Safrit, R.D., & Merrill, M. V. (2002). Management implications of contemporary trends in volunteerism in the United States and Canada. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 20*(2), 12-23.

Safrit, R.D., & Merrill, M. (2000). Personal capacities for volunteer administrators: Drawing upon the past as we move into the future. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration (Special Millennial Issue), XVIII*(1), 35-43.

Safrit, R.D., & Merrill, M. (1999). Personal capacities for volunteer administrators: Balancing necessary knowledge and skills with critical affection and emotion. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration (Special Millennial Issue), XVII*(4), 28-34.

Safrit, R.D., & Merrill, M. (1998). Assessing the impact of volunteer programs. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, XVI* (4), 5-10.

Safrit, R.D., Schmiesing, R.J., Gliem, J.A., & Gliem, R.R. (2005). Core competencies for volunteer administration: An empirical model bridging theory with professional best practice. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 23*(3), 5-15.

Safrit, R.D., Wykle, C.J., & Gliem, J.A. (2004). Leadership practices of Ohio AmeriCorps program directors and coordinators. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 22*(4), 10-16.

Smith, J.T. (2004). What they really want: Assessing the psychological contracts of volunteers. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 22*(1), 22-26.