

TRANSFORMING VOLUNTEERS TO BECOME ENGAGED STEWARDS OF YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

By Nicole Pokorney

ABSTRACT

Youth workers who work alongside adult volunteers in their daily programming can be challenged to utilize volunteers more effectively in order to better meet the needs of young people. Fewer staff and resources are 2 issues facing youth workers and organizational leadership today. My intent for this paper is to identify and develop a volunteer system model that youth organizations can replicate to be optimally effective and efficient to better meet the needs of the young people they serve. This work is guided by the vision of Peter Block, his research on stewardship and service. and his book, *Stewardship, Choosing Service over Self-Interest*. I will also provide a facilitative process that will create and cultivate an environment of engagement and stewardship, which will allow volunteers systems to move beyond being token members of a committee to empowered volunteers that are an integral part in making transformational shifts that are necessary to increase the impact of youth organizations.

Key words: shooting sports, volunteer system structure, stewardship, volunteer roles

INTRODUCTION TO SERVICE AND STEWARDSHIP

I work with an engaged group of volunteers that serve through a variety of roles and responsibilities, which together move a large program with many youth and families. The concepts and strategies outlined in this paper are relevant and replicable to all youth workers that utilize volunteers. Volunteers have always been vital to non-profit organizations, and staff need to have the ability to optimize the use of volunteers in order to maximize their efforts to spread the work and their impact.

Traditionally, staff continue to guide the work and vision of an organization. However, for true transformational systems, staff and volunteers need to move the mission forward together. This means having a shared vision, along with energy and passion, to shift the volunteers to be engaged stewards of the organization. In turn, the result is enabled volunteers that are equipped to guide youth programs and make fundamental shifts to meet the evolving needs of an organization. Peter Block (1993) urges that we need to “quicken our efforts to reform our organizations so that our democracy thrives, our spirit is answered, and our ability to serve customers in the broadest sense is guaranteed” (p. 3).

FROM VOLUNTEER TO ENGAGED STEWARD

People volunteer for many reasons and are motivated by various aspects of the position. Schwertz (1978) found that volunteers' "job satisfaction is related to achievement, recognition for accomplishment, challenging work, increased responsibility, and individual growth and development" (p.27). When volunteers do not feel a sense of connection and purpose, they are left feeling unfulfilled, may no longer support the mission of the organization or discontinue their service. Staff in the youth development profession have the obligation to fully equip their volunteers to be well-trained and to develop an environment where volunteers feel the sense of engagement and empowerment.

Stewardship is a concept that can engage volunteers to a deeper level of service. Block (1993) describes stewardship as, "the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control of those around us" (p.xx). Deepening the commitment to service turns the commitment to the larger community rather than the self. Block describes stewardship as "the umbrella idea which promises the means of achieving fundamental change in the way we govern our institutions" (p.xx). He continues, "The practice of stewardship requires putting information, resources, and power in the hands of those people closest to making a product, designing a product or service and contacting a customer" (p. 33).

In our youth work programs, volunteers can be, and are already serving, in roles that are providing direct service to youth and families. Staff often find themselves doing the work with fewer resources and limited staff time, while administering programming to a larger customer base of youth and families with increasing needs and issues. To fully empower volunteers means that as staff, we share our ability to create the impact, thus being able to spread the impact to more youth.

In his call to building engaged stewards, Block (1993) advocates, "Empowerment embodies the belief that the answer to the latest crisis lies with each of us and therefore we all buckle up for the adventure (p. 9). Volunteers can ". . . commit to something outside of [themselves]. To be part of creating something we care about so we can endure the sacrifice, risk, and adventure that commitment entails. This is the deeper meaning of service" (p. 10).

There is power in the collaborative effort of voices joining together to define a vision and purpose of an organization. Volunteers can feel a sense of renewal and investment while providing value to an organization. As shared purpose and vision are created, individual volunteers see more clearly their roles and responsibilities and are energized to take on service to youth with meaning and passion. "Generative thinking acknowledges that multiple perspectives will generate a context, create better solutions, cultivate ownership, and enable broad participation in which reform efforts can be built" (Skuza et al., p. 3).

CHANGING MENTAL MODELS

A vital step in transforming volunteer systems is to create a change in mental models. Corrigan (2010) defines mental models as ". . . frames of reference that define our thinking and how we view the world." By creating a space for mental models to be questioned and explored, volunteers and staff can begin to develop shared vision and purpose of the organization. How decisions are made, qualities of volunteer roles, roles of young people, and areas of committee focus are a few of the areas that involve shifting frames of reference for change. Each person joins in defining the purpose and deciding what kind of culture the organization will become – this equalizes the distribution of power (Block, 1993, pp.xxi).

In any attempt to motivate change, volunteers may choose to not to be part of the process. There is a variety of reasons volunteers might be resistant: an inability to visualize the need for change, a lack of trust in the system, and unwillingness to let go of the past vision of the organization. Huff (2003) describes that volunteers who are resistant to the evolving needs of an organization because of their emotional or historical ties are called founders. These volunteers were, at some point, vital in the development of the organization, yet remain oppositional in progressing with new ideas, theories, and organizational change.

Through the transformation process, a core team of vested volunteers will create the environment of a shared vision and purpose and begin the steps toward change. “The sign of a vibrant change initiative is having people move in from the edges to the core team, coming closer to the core purpose of the initiative and taking more and more responsibility to seeing it through” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 10). Some volunteers, such as founders, may never join the initiative and choose to seek opportunities elsewhere for serving. However, the transition of power and leadership among other volunteers and stakeholders will continue to grow energetically and new leaders and members will emerge as mental shifts transpire.

THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

The role of staff definitely changes as volunteers are recruited, trained, and empowered to be stewards. From direct service provider to volunteer systems coordinator, staff also need to be empowered and equipped to delegate and let go of certain roles and responsibilities (Schwartz, 1978). Organizational leadership also needs to embrace and support the need to develop volunteers as stewards and create the environment for the transformational shift in governance for both staff and volunteers. Huff supports the “development of infrastructure to ensure that the organization can shift and change . . . [The infrastructure allows] the organization to grow and operate efficiently” (p. 10).

Through facilitative practices, staff can provide the necessary processes that create the space for developing shared purpose and deeper engagement in volunteer teams. Staff have a vital role in developing this atmosphere and culture for and with volunteers. As volunteers become engaged stewards of the organization, they reciprocate, creating the space for staff to experience freedom in order to modify their roles and responsibilities to better support the volunteers.

The following is a compilation of the research that outlines a general process for empowering volunteers to make the transformational shift:

1. Develop and engage a core team of existing volunteers.
 - a. Ensure young people and adults are in partnership.
 - b. Identify expectations and responsibilities.
2. Create the environment for open, honest dialog.
 - a. Practice listening.
 - b. Practice facilitative meeting methods to create safe environment.
3. Identify the business need for reform.
 - a. How will this change better the organization?
 - b. What is the measurable impact?
4. Create a shared vision and purpose of the organization, “. . .while honor[ing] the mandates of the larger institution” (Skuza et.al., p.2).
 - a. Identify institutional mission and purpose and how it impacts the new vision.

- b. Facilitate individual purpose statements and roles as they support the group mission and purpose.
- 5. Allow new leadership to emerge.
 - a. Show gratitude to those volunteers that choose to leave the process.
 - b. Create a welcoming environment to members that grow in the experience and engage in the process.
- 6. Continue to engage partners and form new partnerships.
 - a. Develop a feedback loop to bounce ideas off of stakeholders. “By naming issues, identifying solutions, and testing the soundness of recommended solutions, stakeholders help shape stewardship goals” (Skuzza et.al. p. 3).
 - b. As the shared vision and purpose emerges, identify new partners and begin to engage them in the process.

There are many activities and experiences staff can use to facilitate the process, such as World Café, round table visioning, surveys, small group discussions, and focus groups. The University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality’s leadership and civic engagement team has two resources, *Committees that Work* (2008)¹ and *Facilitation Resources* (1990),² as well as a training, *The Art of Hosting . . .and Harvesting Conversations that Matter*³ that offer practical, creative, and effective tools and resources for facilitating groups through the process of transformational shifts.

A CURRENT CASE STUDY

The Minnesota 4-H Shooting Sports & Wildlife (SS&W) Program volunteer structure is a unique and effective model for developing and fostering volunteer-led systems and engaged stewards. This organization has been in existence for over 25 years. The uniqueness in this model is the structure, which enables the work and the breadth of audience with limited staff resources. The volunteer group is led by a committee of 48 members, each in one of three roles and responsibilities. There are 18 elected members, with six being elected every 3 years. Elected members have the power to make and vote on motions; they have the responsibility to run the committee, and are stewards of the financial practices and risk management policies of the program. The remaining committee members comprise a group of volunteers specifically trained to educate county-level volunteers throughout the state in shooting sports and wildlife disciplines. These 30 volunteers serve as consultants and experts. Within this group of 30 experts are six lead instructors, who serve as the contact for county-level instructors to receive direct guidance and resources. Throughout the year, the committee will engage an additional 20-30 volunteers for various short-term tasks.

The SS&W Program has over 5500 youth and 1000 county-level volunteers. Dedicating only 50% of my time to the program, I am able to lead it as the only Extension Educator staff person, along with an event manager who serves sixteen hours a week. In addition, we engage four industry leaders who support the program as partners and stakeholders. Despite this limited staff support, the SS&W Program flourishes and continues to be a model for other committees, but only because of the shared leadership with the volunteers.

¹ More information about *Committees that Work* can be found at <https://bookstores.umn.edu/product/book/committees-work-common-traps-creative-solutions-u-lead-guidebook>

² More information about *Facilitation Resources* can be found at <https://bookstores.umn.edu/product/book/facilitation-resources-volumes-1-8>

³ Information about this course can be found at <https://extension.umn.edu/courses/art-hosting>

As staff, we have provided facilitative practices to strengthen the effectiveness of the committee, developing mission statements, position descriptions, transparency in budgets, and providing professional development. Even more intentional practices have been installed in the last few years to empower voice and engagement, such as round table discussions and volunteer-led subcommittee work.

CONTINUING THE WORK

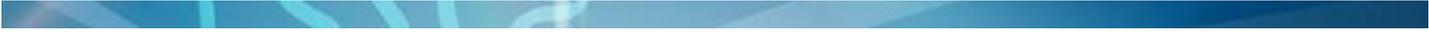
As I journeyed through this research, I have examined the work of the SS&W Committee and the advances we have made. With regard to the vision and work of Peter Block, I can identify several areas that I still want to improve:

1. Recruit and engage youth voice to serve alongside the adults.
2. Provide learning opportunities to form healthy, genuine youth-adult partnerships.
3. Ensure that the mission and vision of the committee is still relevant as the committee explores other areas of focus.
4. Develop a survey to gather the feedback of the volunteers on their perceived level of engagement, identification of purpose, and overall satisfaction of the experience of serving on the committee.

My plan is to share these findings with the committee and increase their knowledge and understanding of stewardship and service. I feel that by continuing to improve the effectiveness of the committee, the strength of the shared power, and the empowerment of the individual volunteers, we will be able to have a deeper level of impact on the youth that we serve.

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