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Obtaining and Retaining Engagement in Nonprofit Organizations

Sierra Price
smprice@eiu.edu

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OBTAINING AND RETAINING ENGAGEMENT IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Directors/Management Manual
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Abstract

This project is a guide for directors to strategically communicate and display behavior that will influence volunteers to be engaged nonprofit settings. Engagement and motivation is influenced by communicative patterns from directors. Volunteer engagement can result to acceptance of leadership styles, clear understanding of vision, and building trust. Directors should minimize disengagement by fostering behavior that is correlated to working with volunteers in a partnership.
Introduction

In contemporary society, non-profits provide many needed resources and services. In addition, non-profits function within financial constraints. As such, many non-profits rely on donated labor. In other words, non-profits look to volunteers to fulfill organizational functions. As such, a key area of interest for such organizations is to maintain engagement of volunteers so they will continue their participation with the organization. Maximizing the relationship between volunteers and non-profit directors is essential to build volunteer engagement and continued commitment. The purpose of this study is to examine the communicative elements of director-volunteer relationships. Specifically, this study examines leadership styles, building vision/trust, and motivating leadership tactics among directors and volunteers at a local non-profit organization. This study culminates in an instructional manual outlining tactics to improve director and volunteer relationships.

Volunteers are vital to nonprofits for the work they produce. Volunteers assist in the day-to-day tasks that help the nonprofit function to provide people with resources to advance in society. Volunteers are undervalued, specifically, in the ways in which nonprofit leaders communicate with volunteers. Therefore, volunteers are important to nonprofits, and they should be treated in a way that reassures their role in the organization. Within nonprofits, social interactions between nonprofit leaders and volunteers are important to study because it helps nonprofit leaders understand ways to achieve and maintain engagement within volunteers. This project is designed to understand the ways in which social interactions in a nonprofit affect volunteers’ levels of engagement using internal communicative messages. Seeking ways to gain positive engagement is the first
step in understanding the effects that social interactions have on engagement levels within volunteers (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Volunteer engagement plays a significant role in strategically understanding behaviors that effect engagement. Understanding directors’ roles and communicative strategies to reassure and validate volunteers is the key focus of the study.

I took the creative route for my thesis. In conversation with academic literature and theory, I created a manual containing information, tips, and suggestions on how management should be more in tune with their volunteers’ levels of engagement within a nonprofit. The manual is a guide for how directors should ideally communicate with its volunteers for the sake of the organization. The manual shows the linkage between communicative strategies and psychological engagement. The manual shows how communication is essential to the overall engagement and leadership within a nonprofit.

**Literature Review**

The following section outlines the framework of academic literature relevant to this project. First, I examine the importance of volunteers and volunteer engagement for non-profit organizations. Secondly, I address how volunteer engagement is fundamentally a communicative phenomenon. Third, I link volunteer engagement to leadership as a process. Lastly, I pose the more specific framework of leader-member exchange theory to solidify the importance of director-volunteer relationships in increasing volunteer engagement and continued participation.

**Importance of Volunteer Engagement**

As I stated above, volunteer engagement is important to a nonprofit’s overall success since many non-profits rely heavily on volunteer participation. Volunteers who
make the choice to provide their services do so of their own volition. Their “work” is not an obligation and they can quit at will. They receive no economic remuneration, yet experience both the rewards and the costs present in organizational life (Vecina, Chacón, Sueiro, & Barrón, 2012). Similar to paid employees, volunteers undergo organizational processes such as socialization, identification, and engagement.

Engaging organizational members can be identified as a crucial way to maintain volunteer participation. Engagement is defined as the degree of connection (or disconnection) one experiences toward a group or community (Koster, De Raedt, Goeleven, Franck, & Crombez, 2005). Employee and/or volunteer engagement connotes that organizational members have increased involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Engagement is beyond simple satisfaction with the organization. Engagement, in contrast, is about passion and commitment; the willingness to invest oneself and expend one’s effort to help the organization succeed. It follows that organizations would strive to increase engagement to inspire quality work and commitment to the organization.

While engagement is both attitudinal and behavioral, it is also fundamentally communicative. Volunteer engagement does not simply appear out of thin air, nor is there a magic pill that creates engagement. Rather, the roots of engagement lie in communication processes. The following section outlines the communicative elements of organizational member engagement.

**Communication as the Foundation for Engagement**

Engagement levels among volunteers are affected by the social interaction that takes place between volunteers and directors in a nonprofit organizational setting. As
such, at its core, volunteer engagement is a communicative phenomenon (Gutermann, Lehmann-Willenbrock, Boer, Born, & Voelpel, 2017). Social interaction is the process by which we act and react to those around us. In a nutshell, social interaction includes those acts people perform toward each other and the responses they give in return (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008).

Relationships fostered through social interaction are cultivated through communication, indicating that social interaction is an important factor to study in organizational contexts. Social interaction in a nonprofit is important because it can cause volunteers and directors to have a positive or negative relationship and this relationship can in turn impact the continued engagement and participation of volunteers.

Within a non-profit organizational context, an extremely important dyadic relationship is that between director and volunteer. As such, the leadership style a director employs can potentially impact the engagement of a volunteer. The following sections examines more closely the intersection of leadership and engagement.

**Variables of Leadership and Engagement**

Leadership is a process of influence and meaning management among actors that advances a task or goal (Fairhurst, 2008). Thus, leadership is a dynamic way that individuals co-create organizational realities in a coordinated manner. A leader is defined as “one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (Winston &
Patterson, 2006, p. 7). This definition was chosen for two important reasons. First, having surveyed the leadership literature, Winston and Patterson (2006) provide a definition of leadership from a communication perspective. Second, it clearly demonstrates that leadership is not one-dimensional. In fact, it requires a deep understanding about how relationships play a role in the ultimate success of the mission and vision of the nonprofit. How leaders develop and grow will be critical to the effectiveness of the nonprofit; their development as leaders must be intentional for the nonprofit to reach its stated objectives and goals.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) are widely regarded as authorities on the study of leadership and have produced some of the most authoritative research on the subject of leadership effectiveness. Over more than thirty years of global research, they have arrived at five key attributes of effective leadership. These are; (i) to model the way, (ii) to inspire a shared vision, (iii) to challenge the process, (iv) to enable others to act, and (v) to encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Examining the attributes in more detail, first, to model the way means that the leader personally demonstrates the behavior they desire or expect to see in their followers (Brown & Posner, 2001). Second, to inspire a shared vision creates mutual context between leaders and followers, while clearly demonstrating what the organization values most (Kelly, 2000). Third, leaders who challenge the process ask the question, “Why do we do this?” (Galbreath & Rogers, 1999, p. 169). This type of leader will never be satisfied with a reply that suggests satisfaction with the status quo (Galbreath & Rogers, 1999). The fourth attribute, to enable others to act, means the leader does not seek dominant authority, rather the opposite, by giving away power and decision making ability to followers (Russell, 2001). Fifth, to encourage
the heart is to show an outpouring of sincere care and provide genuine celebration for achievements and success (Posner, 2015). There are variables that effect the way directors communicate with volunteers and how directors cognitively process how the messages effect volunteers behavior. Vision is a variable that effects volunteer engagement. The ways in which directors understand its organizations vision and mission can influence how volunteers see the organizations vision.

On the whole, vision and mission play a crucial role in both leadership and organizational development. Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, and Miesing (1995) insisted that a nonprofit’s mission can facilitate innovation, which has been shown to be a key mediating step towards achieving organizational engagement. Further, Kahn (1990) found that vision and engagement are correlated and that a clarified vision helps foster trust. A leader’s faith, leadership values, and the values of the corporate culture are the three basic factors affecting the creation of vision (Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, & Miesing, 1995). An organization’s vision is related to the beliefs and values of its leader and of the nonprofit. The visions adopted by nonprofits influence their strategic development and engagement. It is important to carefully explore how their visions affect organizations’ engagement. For example, in a leader-follower relationship, dynamic leaders should lead in a strategic way that makes followers feel they can trust that the leaders will view their working relationship as a partnership (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Followers seek partnership in decision-making in organizations so they feel a sense of value and inclusiveness. When followers feel included and valued they are more engaged in their work environment.
A positive leader-member relationship is important in a non-profit context. For example, followers respond well in organizational settings when they trust their leader and their leader trusts them. Trust is something that is obtained through leaders and followers over time (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). Being honest and transparent when communicating can make a difference in work productivity (action) due to followers feeling valued and motivated. Trust improves interactions between individuals and organizations, reduces uncertainty in negotiations and improves cooperation among partners (Esen, 2012). Supporting volunteers, focusing on solving problems, forming organizational structures consistent with climate help in developing and maintaining trust (Esen, 2012).

Focusing on the leader-member relationship dynamic is essential to volunteer engagement. Leader-Member Exchange Theory focuses on social interactions and behavior among directors and volunteers in the context of this study. Leader-Member Exchange Theory puts leadership styles, building vision and trust, and tips for engagement in context. The theory helps individuals understand engagement from the perspective of leaders and followers.

**Leader-Member Exchange Theory**

I begin to pinpoint the underlying social processes that drive leader–follower engagement by highlighting the role of LMX as a leading variable in volunteer engagement. By establishing links to desirable outcomes of individual work engagement (i.e. motivating messages, and reduced turnover intentions), the study underscores the relevance of LMX and leader–follower engagement for organizational effectiveness. The first step to unpacking this idea of leader–follower engagement linkages, scholars draw
from crossover theory (e.g. Westman, 2001), which posits that psychological states can transfer from one person to another. Each director is different in how they socialize and make decisions. Engaged leaders are likely to aim for positive social relationships with their followers. Leader-Member Exchange Theory, also known as, LMX indicates such high-quality relationships, which, in turn, have important implications for volunteer engagement. Because humans are social in nature, good leader−follower relationships should (a) build on leaders’ engagement and (b) facilitate followers’ willingness to put energy and effort into their work (Gutermann, Lehmann-Willenbrock, Boer, Born, & Voelpel, 2017). Research to date has focused on engagement crossover between team members (Bakker, Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006), whereas the possibility of leader-to-follower crossover remains to be explored. Overall, Leader–Member Exchange theory can be considered a process approach, since it stresses the importance of the dynamic interaction between a leader and his or her subordinates (Van Breukelen, Schyns, & Le Blanc, 2006). This gave rise to the development of situational or contingency theories, stating that leaders – in order to be effective – have to adapt their behavior to situational characteristics (McCleskey, 2014). Directors have to know how and when to adapt their leadership strategies to different volunteers. Each volunteer is different, therefore, directors have to use different strategies when communicating with volunteers. For example, interviews are a form of communication that consist of different responses which reveals different expectations.
Field Work

Interviewing is about more than collecting data; it is a way of seeing social interactions and learning from strategic messaging (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Utilizing interviews can encourage directors to engage in social interactions using effective strategic messaging. Interviews can be self-reflexive to directors and volunteers. It will give them a new outlook on the linkage between strategic messaging and engagement. The interviews will be evidence that supports the claims from existing research and research questions I have discovered. There are three key questions guided the interview process of this study. During the interviews directors stated “they see themselves as leaders, who guide/influence volunteers to achieve goals to enhance the nonprofit.” Therefore, leadership styles were a variable that needed to be addressed in the manual. Volunteers discussed how “they want to trust their directors and feel they have good intentions and actions that reflect positive engagement.” Therefore, trust was addressed in the manual. Directors mentioned in their interviews how “they want to create a clear vision to its volunteers so they can perform effectively and be engaged.” Directors efforts to implement clear vision and mission is essential to addressing strategic ways to communicatively engage volunteers.

The three questions guiding this project were: (1) What leadership style contributes to continuous engagement within an organization? (2) What communicative strategies can help directors build vision and trust? (3) What interactions stimulate volunteer engagement? In the leader-member relationship, each side is unaware of interactions that stimulate volunteer engagement. The three key questions I have explored in this study will demonstrate the level of validity in communicative messages involving
volunteer engagement. These key questions stem from existing research and interviews with directors and volunteers at the YMCA. Each variable will cover important elements that influence engagement in nonprofits. Three key variables: leadership styles, building vision and trust, and implementing engagement and motivation.

The manual focuses upon my research within the YMCA and pulls upon academic literature to propose strategies of effective communication for non-profit leaders. The manual is a guide for how directors should ideally communicate with its volunteers for the sake of the organization. The manual shows the linkage between communicative channels and psychological engagement. The manual shows how communication is essential to the overall engagement and participation within a nonprofit. The population is volunteers and directors within one nonprofit. Director’s perspectives are different from the volunteer perspective. The way in which both perspectives play out in an organization can result to an increase in engagement, less turnover rates, and increasing membership rates, leading to a healthy work environment for everyone. This study is important because turnover and declining membership rates cause concern for organizations that rely heavily on volunteer engagement. Directors have to identify strategic ways to communicate with volunteers so they have a sense of passion to keep volunteering on daily basis. In the manual, there will be sections that provides strategies for communicative messages to avoid disengagement.
Findings and Discussion

Styles of leadership

**Literature**

The first question I explored in my field work addresses what leadership styles inspire continuous engagement. Starting with the broader notion of leadership, is leadership seen as an inner motor of leader and increasingly follower traits, states, emotions, and cognitive processing styles that as independent variables cause messages and behavior to be produced (Fairhurst, 2008). Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them as leadership is a process of influence and meaning management among actors that advances a task or goal (Fairhurst, 2008). “A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 7). Once directors understand what a leader is and what leadership consist of, they can self-reflect on how they practice leadership in nonprofits.

By establishing links to desirable outcomes of individual work engagement (i.e. motivating messages, and reduced turnover intentions), the study underscores the relevance of LMX and leader–follower engagement crossover for organizational effectiveness. Obviously, directors are considered to be leaders of a nonprofit, but this does not mean directors should lead a nonprofit in an autocratic leadership style;
controlling and one-sided in power. It is normal for people in leadership positions to utilize certain competencies within leadership styles. Leading is not linear, therefore leaders must be willing to self-reflect on how they lead. Understanding leadership styles can be a guide to give directors an idea as to what may work or not work in terms of engagement among followers. “A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 7). Once directors understand what a leader is and what leadership consist of, they can self-reflect on how they practice leadership in nonprofits.

Participant responses

During the interviews with volunteers and directors, they were asked what characteristics they look for in a leader. One of the directors responded with “talks the talk and walks the walk; ”do what you say and say what you mean.” One of the volunteers also looked for a leader who is “Good at building relationships through conversation. Not being afraid to have uncomfortable conservations, in a way that is positive that helps individuals improve and not belittle them.” Directors gave responses from a perspective of what they want to achieve in reality. Some directors admitted to the lack of building relationships with its volunteers. Some directors talked about wanting to find ways to be confident in conversations to build relationships.
Combining their responses with existing literature, certain responses corresponded with one of the seven leadership styles. As mentioned before, leadership is not one-dimensional. Therefore, the volunteers and directors chose the best leadership style for certain interactional scenarios in the nonprofit.

**Manual Strategy**

The first session of the manual addresses the definition of a leader and leadership, leadership styles, and leadership competencies. Leading is not linear, therefore leaders must be willing to self-reflect on how they lead. Understanding leadership styles can guide directors regarding what may or may not work in terms of engagement among followers. The manual includes information regarding leadership styles to show directors they should take responsibility in how they go about leading if they want to see positive engagement. Weaknesses make individuals human, learning how to find the good in your weakness is the real challenge. Leaders should keep in mind that leading is not solely about how much you know prior to a situation or position, but how a leader can learn something in challenging situations. Leaders should embrace their weaknesses with a positive attitude so that positivity can then influence followers to have positive engagement.

The manual provides a participant activity that poses questions regarding what leadership style a director or volunteer may recommend based on different scenarios. The activity is designed to recognize the best leadership style to implement when facing decision-making. Recognizing why each individual prefer one style over the other is important, because knowing the motive behind decision-making process can influence engagement.
Vision/Trust

**Literature**

The second question from my field work focuses on communicative strategies that can help directors build vision and trust. The leader’s faith, leadership values, and the values of the corporate culture were the three basic factors affecting the creation of visions (Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, & Miesing, 1995). An organization’s vision is related to the beliefs and values of its leader and of the nonprofit.

Vision plays a crucial role in an organization’s development, acting as a bright light directing the business towards its mission. Larwood, Falbe, Kriger, and Miesing (1995) insisted that understanding a nonprofit’s vision is shown to be a key mediating step towards achieving volunteer engagement. Kahn (1990) found that vision and engagement are correlated and that a clarified vision helps foster trust. The impression is the organization’s mission as displayed to others.

**Participant responses**

During the interviews, directors were asked how they demonstrated encouragement in difficult situations. Each director answered this question with similar responses relating to teamwork and partnerships within the leader-follower relationship in nonprofits. This way of leading can influence directors to actively create an environment that is not only democratic, but a trustworthy environment. The way that directors can be perceived as trustworthy is through open and supportive communication patterns. Directors gave examples of how they could demonstrate encouragement in their leadership tactics. Their responses were correlated with comments, such as “great job”, “I am proud to have you on my team”, “keep up the great work”, “do not hesitate to use me
and my resources to help you succeed.” Communication patterns that are competitive in nature were expressed as a pathway to disengagement. Therefore, all interview participants expressed how they want to have trust within the leader-follower relationship. Directors and volunteers wanted trust from each other to feel comfortable with one another. They talked about how the feeling of being able to trust each made them feel engaged. Directors and volunteers were talking from a perspective of retaining trust. As mentioned before, in order to gain trust directors should create an environment that is supportive, open, and partnership based through social interactions with volunteers. Having trust and a clear vision means having a work environment that functions as a partnership

**Manual Strategy**

The second session of the manual defines vision and explains how to build a shared vision among directors and volunteers. Leaders are to initiate these conversations by creating an environment that is a partnership and not dictatorship. Leaders initiating conversations to build a vision for an organization is important.

The activity for building vision and trust addresses the underlining cause of distrust can influence individuals to take action in gaining trust. The activity is structured for volunteers to reflect on how the behaviors of directors may affect trust that was already present or not yet established. There is a scenario that questions where volunteers are asked to reflect on a situation they have experienced in which staff exhibited distrust of their directors/supervisors or a situation in which they have lost trust in another person. Follow-up questions are in place with the reflection statement to get a sense of factors or behaviors that caused the distrust, and steps to take to re-establish trust.
Engagement and Motivation

Literature

The final question from my field work explored the interactions that stimulate volunteer engagement. Understanding internal and external motivation can help directors pinpoint where and why volunteers may be feeling disengaged from the organization and their daily task. External motivation for directors involves using motivators that come with a job—for example, pay, benefits, office space, and safety. Ways that directors could provide volunteers with external motivation is giving positive feedback and recognition, often constructive motivators. Internal motivation comes from within volunteers. It can be influenced by the feeling that a director cares about her or him as a person and by opportunities for growth, advancement, recognition, and responsibility. Everyone has many of the same internal motivators, but individuals may be more inspired by external motivators. Certain questions need to surface in order to understand what motivates an individual. There is an important question for directors that need to be addressed: Do you know what motivates each member of your work group? Once you get to know what motivates your volunteers and what motivates each of them, you can create a work climate that offers opportunities that will motivate them and encourage their performance. People often feel motivated for high performance by one of three primary motivators (or a mix of them): power (visibility and prestige); affiliation (having good relations); or achievement (pride in a job well done and greater responsibility) (Kim, 2002). For example, people motivated by power want positions of visible responsibility. People motivated by affiliation want to work in a group where the interpersonal relations are pleasant and supportive. People motivated by achievement want to see the results and
to know that their efforts contributed to those results. What motivates volunteers is correlated to behaviors that effect engagement.

**Participant responses**

During interviews with directors they addressed signs of low motivation or disengagement and possible complaints volunteers have when performing task. Directors were asked, in what ways is the YMCA committed to its volunteers? Directors responded with “implementing luncheons, Christmas parties, etc.” These incentives were specifically designed for the interest of the organization. The goal of these incentives is not to engage volunteers, but to show the organization in a good light. A follow-up question asked directors, how have volunteers responded to these incentives? Directors responded based on volunteers behavior and communication patterns to the incentives that were in place. Some directors noticed lack of attendance, complaints, and resistance to new processes and ideas. After gathering responses and utilizing existing literature, the reason for these signs and complaints stems from ignoring specific language in social interactions. Directors failed to follow-up with how volunteers felt prior to implementing these incentives. Volunteers were left out of the decision-making process. The incentives were in place to keep volunteers engaged. Therefore, the volunteers should have a voice when designing and positioning incentives for them.

**Manual Strategy**

The activity in the third session on the manual strategically implements incentives and recognition in a way that gives volunteers the opportunity to voice what they want from their directors. The activity will facilitate discussions of what recognition can do to improve volunteer engagement. As stated before, volunteers want to feel a sense of value
and belongingness from directors to boost engagement that is already in place. The reason for disengagement is due to something or someone threatening their passion they initially had for the nonprofit. Volunteers often engage in nonprofits they can connect with from aspects of leadership tactics, vision, and trust. Directors who communicate with its volunteers reassuring what they want and not just assuming will result in the ability to implement incentives and give appropriate recognition.

**Conclusion**

This study was designed as a guide for directors in nonprofit organizations. The purpose of this study was to strategically make directors aware of volunteer’s engagement levels. Directors should be actively implementing ways to motivate and engage volunteers for the sake of the nonprofit. Volunteers are the backbone to ground level operations. They work directly with members and the community. Directors should to make sure their volunteers are motivated in a positive way through the way directors carry themselves as leaders. Leading is more than giving instructions or order. Leadership is building vision & trust, and influencing positive attitudinal and behavioral engagement. It is important for directors to recognize they must be honest with themselves when evaluating their leadership tactics. Otherwise, they will not know how to effectively guide volunteers through their roles in the organization. The tips and suggestions in this study may not work for every director/leader in nonprofit settings, but it will be a guide as to where to start when understanding how to lead through positive and negative situations in nonprofits. This study acknowledges how directors’ efforts to increase engagement within volunteers may have backlash or resistance. Some volunteers are not receptive to leadership styles and social interactions. That’s normal in nonprofit
organizations. The real challenge occurs when you have to keep the volunteers who
genuinely try to engage in social interactions that lead to positive engagement, but there
is something or someone that is triggering disengagement. Directors should catch these
volunteers and recognize the signs before they lose those volunteers for good.
Appendix

Interview Questions

Leadership

❖ What is your definition of leadership?
❖ What is considered a good leader?
❖ What is considered a bad leader?
❖ What are characteristics you look for in a leader?
❖ How do you bring a value to the organization?
❖ As a director, how can you demonstrate encouragement in difficult situations?
❖ How can directors provide volunteers with non-monetary incentives?
❖ Do you believe all volunteers are capable of leading? If so, how?
❖ Do you believe all directors are capable of leading? If so, how?
❖ Describe your role in this organization.
❖ In what ways is the YMCA committed to its volunteers?
❖ In what ways is the YMCA committed to its directors?

Engagement

❖ What motivates you to come to work/volunteer every day at the YMCA?
❖ How are those motives influencing your emotions at work?
❖ Why is engagement such an important concept when working or volunteering for non-profits?
❖ How can non-physical incentives have an impact on volunteer’s/director’s engagement?

Dialogue

❖ When engaging in conversation with someone what things do you look for in people while they are listening?
❖ When engaging in conversation with someone what things do you look for in people while they are responding?
❖ If you could create your own strategy to achieve effective communication, what would it be? (step-by-step process)
❖ How important is two-way communication to you?
SIERRA PRICE

OBTAINING AND RETAINING ENGAGEMENT IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

DIRECTORS/MANAGEMENT MANUAL

An easy-to-follow guide on how directors can utilize strategic communication to engage volunteers to their work and nonprofit organizations.

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
Glossary

Key Ideas to Communicate

- **Leaders ability to empower** is someone who leads by example; is just a leader taking some of their own power and giving it to those around them. Leadership effectiveness is enhanced through the development of such communication skills as listening, critical and creative thinking, compliance gaining, encoding and decoding nonverbal messages, and public address (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017).

- **Leadership communication**: Is the notion that leadership competence is the product of communication competence (Hackman & Johnson, 1994).

- **Directors** in this manual are referred to as leaders. Directors oversee volunteers and staff in nonprofits. They are responsible for the implementation of the mission, strategy, and goals ("Nonprofit's Board of Directors - What is a Board?," 2014).

- **Volunteers** in this manual are referred to as followers. A volunteer’s role is to offer themselves for a service without obligation to do so, willingly, and without pay (Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996).

- **Organizational Vision** relates to motivating language theory (MLT) to clarify how top leaders can construct and transmit strategic vision communications and related values messages to improve organizational performance (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Sharbrough III, 2015).

- **Trust** is the knowledge that another person will not take advantage of you, which allows you to feel safe putting your self-esteem and position in that person’s hands.
  - **Respect** is a sense of expressing appreciation for colleagues; communicating respect can create healthy workplace relationships, which results in the nonprofit functioning better.
Co-production work climate define leadership as an influence relationship in which leaders and follower “partner” to produce effective leadership and its outcomes (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012, p.210)

Three Dimensions of Co-production Work Climate

- **Clarity**- Leaders should actively and willingly participate in information-sharing with followers.
- **Challenge**- Leadership is perceived as a title on a pedestal. More emphasis are put on the position in a nonprofit instead of actions. Keep in mind democratic leaders are okay with letting others lead depending on the context.
- **Support**- Directors should provide volunteers with encouragement to lead and to follow through self-assessments.
Session 1

Leadership Styles

Objectives

By the end of this session, the participants will be able to:

▪ Describe who people can call a leader and what qualities make him or her a leader
▪ Analyze different leadership styles
▪ List and describe leadership competencies

Discussion

▪ Definition of leader and leadership
▪ Leadership Styles (description, advantages, disadvantages)
▪ Leadership competencies

Participant Handout

What Leadership Style Would You Recommend?
Discussion

In this manual, directors should not be pressured to follow one set of leadership styles and its competencies. It is normal for people in leadership positions to utilize certain competencies within leadership styles. Leading is not linear, therefore leaders must be willing to self-reflect on how they lead. Understanding leadership styles can be a guide to give directors an idea as to what may work or not work in terms of engagement among followers. The manual includes leadership styles to show directors they should take responsibility in how they go about leading if they want to see positive engagement.

In the past, certain leadership styles and competencies is socially constructed and not practical or proven to not be true in all cases. For example, one volunteer feel as if they are not as intelligent as some of the other volunteers. In result they call themselves dumb and downplay their talent and intelligence. The volunteer is full of doubt and other volunteers inform that specific volunteer that they are not dumb just because they are not skilled in one area. There are many other areas that the volunteer thrive in. Weaknesses make individuals human, learning how to find the good in your weakness is the real challenge. Leaders should keep in mind that leading is not solely about how much you know prior to a situation or position, but how a leader can learn something in challenges and embrace them with a positive attitude so that positive can them influence followers to have positive engagement.
1. Democratic Leadership
Commonly Effective
Democratic leadership is exactly what it sounds like — the leader makes decisions based on the input of each team member. Although he or she makes the final call, each employee has an equal say on a project’s direction.

2. Transactional Leadership
Rarely Effective
These managers reward their employees for precisely the work they do. A marketing team that receives a scheduled bonus for helping generate a certain number of leads by the end of the quarter is a common example of transactional leadership. This leadership style can use incentive programs to motivate employees, but they should be consistent with the company’s goals and used in addition to unscheduled gestures of appreciation.

3. Laissez-Faire Leadership
Sometimes Effective
Although laissez-faire leadership can empower employees by trusting them to work however they’d like, it can limit their development and overlook critical company growth opportunities. Therefore, it’s important that this leadership style is kept in check.

4. Strategic Leadership
Commonly Effective
Strategic thinking supports multiple types of employees at once. However, leaders who operate this way can set a dangerous precedent with respect to how many people they can support at once, and what the best direction for the company really is if everyone is getting their way at all times.

5. Transformational Leadership
Sometimes Effective
Employees might have a basic set of tasks and goals that they complete every week or month, but the leader is constantly pushing them outside of their comfort zone. It motivates employees to see what they’re capable of. But transformational leaders can risk losing sight of everyone’s individual learning curves if direct reports don’t receive the right coaching to guide them through new responsibilities.
LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Competency

Master yourself

See the big picture

Create a shared vision

Clarify purpose and priorities

Communicate effectively

Motivate committed teams

Negotiate conflict

Application

Reflect on yourself and be aware of your impact on others, manage your emotions effectively, use your strengths, and work on your shortcomings.

Look beyond a narrow focus to take into account conditions outside your immediate areas of work.

Work with others to envision a better future and use this vision to focus all your efforts.

Know your own values and what is most important to accomplish.

Hold conversations focused on outcomes; balance advocacy with inquiry; and clarify assumptions, beliefs, and feelings within yourself and others.

Create the clarity, trust, and recognition necessary to lead to high performance that can be sustained over time.

Reach agreements from which both sides can benefit.
Participant Handout: What Leadership Style Would You Recommend?

*Group exercise*

For each of the following situations, what leadership style would be best for decision making? Why?

1. A director from one of the YMCA locations is about to leave on a trip to the capital city for an important meeting with other directors from other YMCA facilities. However, the deadline for a decision on what types of community involvement programs for winter season and quantities of volunteer participation is due, and the director has no time to review the information already gathered (surveys from community members, proposals from the executive board, information on volunteer involvement, and the budget for the programs). Community Programs Director, Lead Facility Supervisor, and Executive Assistant are available at the nonprofit. What leadership style should the director use? Why?

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2. There has been a serious sporting injury with a member. Among those who have stopped to help is a volunteer. Others are in a panic and shouting suggestions about what to do. What leadership style should the director adopt? Why?

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3. The YMCA has received a request for a proposal. To prepare and submit the proposal on time, the staff will have to drop all current projects and work overtime and on weekends. There is no guarantee that this particular nonprofit will win the contract, but an all-out effort of all concerned will be needed to develop a document of very high quality. The Chief Operating Officer must make a decision on whether to make a bid for the contract. What leadership style should the C.O.O use? Why?
Session 2

Building Vision and Trust

Objectives

▪ Define a vision
▪ Explain how to build the shared vision
▪ Describe what behaviors help to foster trust

Discussion

▪ What is Vision? (co-production)
▪ What is Trust?
▪ How to Build Trust

Participant Handout

Building Your Vision

Building Trust
Discussion

When building a vision for a nonprofit, individuals in leadership positions must facilitate communication involved in the process. Leaders are to initiate these conversations by creating an environment that is a partnership (co-production) and not dictatorship. Leaders initiating conversations to build a vision for an organization is important. Leaders have to recognize they have a team of followers that may have great ideas to contribute. Therefore, leaders should build vision in a partnership based structure. Trust is not easily obtained between a leader and a follower. Most individuals believe that trust is establish in the beginning stages of working for an organization. In fact, trust is gained through social interactions; disclosing information and upholding confidentiality in certain context over time.

Participant Handout: Building Your Vision

A vision:

- Reflects a high standard of engagement
- Provides clarity in communicative interactions within the nonprofit
- A sense of co-production (partnership)
- Represents leader’s and follower’s organizational expectations for future development

Instructions:

- Share your visions with each other.
- Create one shared vision.

1) Write down your shared VISION for your pair that you would share with your team.
Participant Handout: Building Trust

1. Think of a situation you have experienced in which staff exhibited distrust of their directors/supervisors or a situation in which you have lost trust in another person.

2. What factors/behaviors may have caused the distrust?

3. What actions could have been taken to reestablish trust?
**Tips: How to Build Trust**

**Create and maintain a nonthreatening environment**
In group meetings, maintain confidentiality, treat all staff with respect, treat all staff as equals, and use facilitation skills to make sure all staff treat each other with respect and equality, regardless of rank. Pay attention to the physical environment, including seating arrangement during meetings.

**Pay careful attention to communication**
The free flow of information is important. When people are kept informed, they feel valued and an integral part of the team; when there is secrecy, they feel threatened. Communication should be as complete as possible and should transmit positive messages of trust. Always provide feedback in a constructive way.

**Model correct behavior by showing trust in others and being reliable yourself**
You are a role model for staff and your actions are as important—or perhaps more important—than your words. Make sure there is consistency between your words and actions: If you say that your next supervision visit will take place in one month, make sure that you respect that commitment. If you cannot make a promised visit, communicate the reasons and set up another appointment. If you promise to arrange training, do not fail to do so. Show your trust in others by delegating responsibility to them as often as possible and by acknowledging and praising their successes.

**Practice appropriate self-disclosure**
When you share with others what you are thinking and what you want, people are more likely to trust you because they understand you. However, revealing too much can be problematic—particularly in cultures in which it is not common to share one’s feelings or inner thoughts. Keep cultural constraints in mind when practicing self-disclosure.

Session 3

Engagement and Motivation: Tips for Leading Volunteers

Objectives

By the end of this session, the participants will be able to:

- Describe what motivates volunteers
- Describe what engagement is
- Describe what external motivation and internal motivation are
- List at least five best ways to motivate volunteers
- List at least 3–4 indications/signs of low motivation and engagement
- Define work climate and explain its influence on volunteer engagement
- Three Key Dimensions of Work Climate
- Explain how directors can influence a volunteer’s work climate
- Explain tips for leading volunteers

Discussion

- What is motivation? (internal/external)
- What is engagement?
- What is work climate?

Participant Handout

Recognition
Discussion

What is motivation?

Energy to do something. Each person has motives, needs, and pools of energy that represent potential behaviors.

External Motivation

Ways that directors could provide volunteers with external motivation is giving positive feedback and recognition, often constructive motivators. It can be influenced by the feeling that a director cares about her or him as a person and by opportunities for growth, advancement, recognition, and responsibility. Everyone has many of the same internal motivators, but individuals may be more inspired by external motivators. People often feel motivated for high performance by one of three primary motivators (or a mix of them): power (visibility and prestige); affiliation (having good relations); or achievement (pride in a job well done and greater responsibility) (Kim, 2002). For example, people motivated by power want positions of visible responsibility. People motivated by affiliation want to work in a group where the interpersonal relations are pleasant and supportive. People motivated by achievement want to see the results and to know that their efforts contributed to those results.
Three Key Dimensions of Work Climate

**Clarity**
- There are clear job expectations, roles, and responsibilities.
- Staff are aware of clients’ rights and needs and build/maintain a culture that reinforces clients’ rights and needs.
- Staff are aware of clinical standards.

**Support**
- There are adequate resources, supplies, equipment, and infrastructure.
- Managers and supervisors are supportive.
- Recognition and motivation are provided, as well as appreciation and reward for both individual and group successes.

**Challenge**
- There are opportunities to stretch and to grow, to increase responsibility.
- Staff work in groups and feel a sense of pride.
- All are committed to shared goals, purposes, and activities.
Tips to Engagement

1. Leaders should listen to followers
   - Gain insight/ideas from followers that leaders missed

2. Facilitate discussions of accountability
   - Will you take the success and failure of your idea?

3. Putting the mission first
   - Why are we here? How can we collaborate on task to achieve the ultimate goal?

4. Be clear in vision and/or mission for the nonprofit
   - i.e. A nonprofit that operates out of a church
   - Church- values, mission, vision VS. Nonprofit- values, mission, vision

5. Seek out target audience
   - Recruit volunteers based on personal experience and how they can connect experience to volunteering.
INDICATORS OF LOW MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE

Signs
Volunteers may show specific signs of low motivation or disengagement, such as:

- Lack of attendance
- Doing bare minimum work
- No interest in building relationships
- Failure of a work group to meet specific performance targets
- Frequent or unresolved conflict among staff
- Poor communication among group members and with the supervisor
- Resistance to new processes and ideas

Complaints
Volunteers may also complain. The following are some of the common complaints that directors/leaders have heard:

“This place is so disorganized. We don’t know what direction we are going in. Today, one task has high priority, but tomorrow a different task has priority.”

“We are asked to produce results, but we don’t have support or necessary resources.”

“No one appreciates our work. No one says thank you.”

“We get plenty of criticism when things go wrong, but rarely any positive feedback.”

“Things are tense and unpleasant. Our boss just barks at us. Sometimes I wish I didn’t have to go to work.”
 Participant Handout: Recognition

1. A facilitative leader publicly praises and recognizes those who contribute to quality improvement. Think of a time when you did something for which you wish you had been recognized. How did the lack of recognition make you feel?

2. Think of something good that a volunteer has done for which he or she deserves recognition. Suggest a way, without spending money, to reward that person.
Additional Notes

- People volunteer and work for the nonprofit for:
  - member development
  - personal experience
- Guidelines and rules serve a purpose
- Directors/leaders have to use their better judgement to exercise creativity.
- Lead in a way that is beneficial for both leaders and followers.
- Leaders and members should co-exist. The relationship should be a partnership in the decision-making process.
- Leaders should inform members that if they want a voice in situations, they must be willing to handle the responsibility and accountability that comes with new ideas and decisions.

Short Biography

Sierra has earned her bachelor’s degree in Communication Studies and master’s degree in Strategic Communication from Eastern Illinois University. She has an interest in nonprofit organizations from her personal experience interning and volunteering for a nonprofit in her area. During her experience working and volunteering for a nonprofit she adopted an interest in the relationship dynamic between directors and volunteers (leader-member relationship). In this relationship dynamic she realized the effects disengagement can have on an organization and the people within an organization. It is important to Sierra to find strategic ways to empowerment and engage people in organizational settings. Building relationships is key to achieving empowerment and engagement. It can determine the success or failure of an organization. Sierra’s academic research in her undergraduate and graduate experience and her working experience has given her the credibility in the topics discussed in this thesis.
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Reference


