Volunteers in Leadership Roles: Successfully Engaging Advisory Councils

Harriett C. Edwards

Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist, Continuing Volunteer Education

Department of 4-H Youth Development and Family & Consumer Sciences

North Carolina State University

512 Brickhaven Drive, Campus Box 7606

Raleigh, NC, USA 27695-7606

Tel. 919.515.9548 * FAX 919.515.7812 * E-mail: harriett_edwards@ncsu.edu

Abstract

Today's volunteer-based organizations and programs face numerous challenges to continuously develop and deliver myriad contemporary services based upon current and emerging individual and community needs in an increasingly larger and more diverse society. Numerous contemporary authors have commented upon the increasing need to not only mobilize and engage volunteers but to simultaneously develop leadership capacities within them. By focusing efforts upon effectively engaging volunteers in leadership roles through advisory councils, volunteer resource managers are building organizational capacity and creating succession systems to allow volunteers to develop needed skills and knowledge to become and remain more fully engaged. The challenge is shifting from simply managing advisory councils, to positioning council members as leaders within the organization.

Keywords: volunteers, leadership, advisory, councils

Volunteers in Leadership Roles: Successfully Engaging Advisory Councils

Introduction

Today's volunteer-based organizations and programs face numerous challenges to continuously develop and deliver myriad contemporary programs and services based upon current and emerging individual and community needs in an increasingly larger and more diverse society. Volunteer resource managers (VRMs) often focus their personal training and professional development upon establishing effective day-to-day volunteer management systems and the competencies needed to sustain them (Ellis, 1986; Fisher & Cole, 1993; Safrit & Merrill, 2002; Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem & Gliem, 2005; Wilson, 1976). Less energy, then, is directed to strengthening the holistic efficiency of these systems through the development of leadership competencies and capacities among individual volunteers and/or volunteer groups and committees.

Numerous contemporary authors have commented upon the increasing need to not only mobilize and engage volunteers, but to also simultaneously develop leadership within them. As early as 1982, Pearce described changes in American society that he proposed would result in volunteers seeking expanded personal leadership roles and development from organizational affiliations. These changes included: the independent nature of volunteers who do not rely on money or other inducements of self-fulfillment; the reality of voluntary organizations of depending upon the available workforce while managing for any deficits in skill; the abundance of women serving in leadership roles in volunteer-staffed organizations; and the decreasing dependence of employees on a single employer, leading to more "job-hopping."

Now, more than two decades later, these projections have largely become reality. Brudney (1990) focused on expanded roles and increasing influences of volunteers in government agencies and programs "to the degree that public organizations come to depend on volunteers, the latter gain opportunity for influence in agency affairs" (p.87). Ilsley (1990) encouraged professional managers of volunteers to see themselves more as facilitators of learning for individual volunteers, and to solicit and champion different points of view from all organizational leaders (including administrators, paid staff, and volunteers) so as "to keep these three spheres of influence in balance so that no one predominates" (p. 129). Though Fisher and Cole (1993) did not directly address the concept of leadership development among individual volunteers, they did discuss the increasingly important role for holistic leadership development within volunteer organizations, noting that staff development programs in volunteer organizations contribute to personal development of volunteers. Lulewicz (1995) concluded that ". . . leadership development [provides] ideal mutually beneficial ways for any organization to keep its experienced volunteers challenged, interested, and committed to the organization's future" (p.98). Safrit and Merrill (1999) emphasized the volunteer administrator's emerging role in linking effective management to personal leadership both for the administrator and for the individual volunteer.

By focusing greater efforts upon effectively engaging volunteers in leadership roles through advisory councils, volunteer resource managers build an organization's capacity and create succession systems to allow volunteers to develop needed skills and knowledge to become and remain more fully engaged across extended periods of time.. Utilizing the higher level skills of delegation and empowerment to assign roles to capable

volunteers creates an environment that values each unique individual volunteer's input and increases the VRM's productivity by making collaborative leadership, planning and implementation integral components of the management system. Thus, the true challenge to VRM's is shifting from simply managing volunteer advisory councils, to accepting individual council members as leaders within the organization.

Boards and Councils Defined

An important first step in success with volunteer advisory councils is to understand the roles and responsibilities of the organization's various types of volunteer committees. Typically, a volunteer board of directors has legal and fiduciary responsibility for the organization, including establishing policies and participating in the hiring of paid management staff for the organization (Grobman, 2004; Macduff, 1998). The board operates within bylaws and standard operating procedures that outline specifically the standing volunteer committees of the organization, term limits and guidelines for election of new board members, officer duties, and other specific operational information to keep the organization in compliance with legal standards.

A volunteer advisory group, board, committee or council is typically formed to give advice and counsel related to the operation of the organization and/or the planning of events and activities for programming, and contributes without legal authority (Macduff, 1998; Merrill, 2003). Volunteer advisory committees often involve community leaders, experts and representatives of other stakeholder groups whose work or interests are related to the mission of the organization. Members may include active organizational volunteers and current or former clients of the organization. Volunteer advisory councils may also feature numerous sub-committees or task forces assigned to implement and

oversee various specific program components to contribute more fully to the operational management of the organization's programs. Figure 1 summarizes the differences between volunteer advisory councils and boards of directors.

In spite of the differences between volunteer boards and advisory councils, program administrators and VRM's approach management of these various groups in similar ways. By addressing strategies for effectively engaging board and council members, VRM's and program administrators are assured of successfully involving volunteers who will contribute to organizational leadership. In fact, Lulewicz (1995) indicated that organizational advisory committee and board of director work could serve as an excellent learning laboratory for volunteers to gain leadership skills. Participating as an advisory council member provides a safe place for individual volunteers to practice and improve individual, personal skills as they accept expanded leadership roles to speak in public on behalf of the organization, chair task forces or sub-committees, serve in an elected office within the advisory council, or in any number of additional ways. In addition, these individual volunteers learn about the organization in a more holistic perspective so they become even more qualified to recruit and train new volunteers and new advisory council members for the organization. Lulewicz suggested that this could create a possible opportunity for succession planning to contribute to the sustained success of the organization.

Examples of advisory councils can be found in many different non-profit and volunteer settings. Cooperative Extension programs at the county, district and state levels are required to involve stakeholders and clients in a formal volunteer advisory council capacity. These advisory councils can be either related to the holistic overall

Figure 1. Comparing Functions of Volunteer Governing Boards and Advisory

Committees.

Function	Applies to Boards Only	Applies to Advisory Councils Only	May Apply to Either Boards or Councils
Policy-making authority for organization, including hiring, and/or termination of certain employees	✓		
Fiduciary responsibility for the organization	✓		
Appoints and oversees committees	✓		
Recommends courses of action for organization			✓
Executive Director responsible for executing all approved recommendations	✓		
Election of officers and terms of office established formally in constitution and/or bylaws			✓
Advocates for organization and/or its members			✓
Easily incorporates youth as full members with equal voice and equal legal and financial responsibility		✓	
Represents organization and/or its programs in the community			✓
Establishes and maintains corporate policies for organization	✓		
Evaluates organizational progress for sustainability and continuous renewal			✓
Legal responsibility to insure that program is meeting established standards	✓		

programming efforts or subject matter specific, like a 4-H youth program committee, a

livestock advisory committee, or an Extension advisory council. In faith-based

communities, there are often educational advisory committees which assist in creating

enrichment activities for individuals in the congregation. Another example is a high

school's athletic booster club, wherein interested parents and community members offer advice and council to the athletic director and coaching staff in addition to assisting with fundraising and event management. In all of these cases, the councils or committees are structures as advice giving, not policy-making, and in all of these situations the group includes volunteer representatives from within the programs or organization, as well as from external stakeholder groups.

Success Strategies: First Steps

Successful outcomes with and through volunteer advisory committees begin with thorough planning and preparation. Thinking carefully about the organization and its needs to appropriately name and describe the volunteer advisory structure becomes the foundation for future successes. The VRM should begin by having written descriptions of the volunteer advisory council's purpose and objectives in support of the overall volunteer organization's mission. Written position descriptions for each member of the council (including term limits); written descriptions of advisory committee officer responsibilities; and governing bylaws, guidelines and/or standard operating procedures should be in place as well. By clearly defining the role of the volunteer advisory committee as a whole and of each individual volunteer role within the group, individual volunteers may make informed decisions about their desire to serve and participate. When individual volunteer advisory council members understand the issues and objectives, they have a better sense of how they may contribute to identifying solutions or courses of action for the total organization (Twerdahl, 2006); having solid descriptions of the work expectations establishes limitations of authority for the group.

Typical volunteer advisory council work includes such tasks as: assisting with needs assessment or environmental scanning; soliciting resources (human, financial, etc.) to support the organization; helping to build partnerships with other agencies; and providing technical assistance to the staff in areas of expertise (Haltham, n.d.). Merrill (2003) noted that volunteer advisory council members serve as a "think tank" to specifically address challenges to the organization and to help with designing ideas and strategies to create solutions.

Recruiting the Right People

Once written position descriptions are prepared, the critical task begins of recruiting volunteer advisory council members who will remain committed to the organization and steadfast in their responsibilities throughout their term of service. Grobman (2004) suggested that nominating committees, often one of the standing committees of advisory councils, meet several times during the year rather than waiting until the time the nominations are due for the upcoming year's council appointments. He also indicated that other members of the council should be encouraged to nominate individuals for membership on the council. Contemporary leadership theories indicate that decisions about involving individuals in any organizational position are critical to the success of that agency, noting that the old adage that "people are your most important asset" is incorrect in that it should be stated that "the right people are" your most important asset (Collins, 2001, p. 51).

Membership on the volunteer advisory council should ideally reflect the community being served by the organization (Garmon, McKinney, Nesbitt, Revell, & West, 1977). Councils are strengthened by a diversity of individual volunteer members,

considering (though not limited to) aspects and demographics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, business/industry affiliations, other community agency involvement, and previous history within the organization. By including those less familiar with the organization, new ideas and energy are generated to continue building upon the existing successful programs within the agency.

Building the volunteer advisory council with a diverse representation of the communities being served contributes to the success of the organization. The volunteer organization will be strengthened by myriad ideas and energies brought to the group when an effective team of volunteers, with appropriate training and expertise, are empowered to lead.

Engaging the Advisory Council

With position descriptions and council objectives in place, and the right people recruited to fill the right positions, the real task of engaging the volunteer advisory council begins for the paid staff assigned to work directly with the members. The concepts are simple but critical if the council is to succeed within and for the organization. Some basic strategies for working effectively with volunteer advisory councils include:

- Prepare an agenda, with assistance from the council officers, and distribute it at least one week prior to every meeting. Remember that individuals whose names appear as contributors to the agenda are more likely to attend meetings, so be attentive to requesting committee reports or assigning tasks to individual council members. A prepared agenda can also be a tool to remind the council members to

think strategically about the long-term in addition to managing current challenges (Carver, 1997).

- Only meet when there is a reason for the volunteer advisory council to meet! Use technology to meet via teleconference or on-line interactive technologies(chats, webinars, Elluminate, etc.) to make best use of council members' time (Gamon, 1987). E-mail and mailed correspondence are also communication strategies that keep council members involved without meeting unnecessarily.

- Schedule meetings at times and locations most appropriate for council members, and establish a time limit for meetings (Sheffer, 2002). Respecting start and end times for meetings will allow council members to appropriately plan for their individual participation, and giving council members the opportunity to identify best meeting times provides a sense of ownership in the process. Varying meeting locations provides relief for council members who must travel greater distances to meet at the organization's ventral office or conference center. It is also an opportunity for individual volunteer council members to host colleagues and expose others to their workplace or agency, and to their volunteer commitment.

- Provide refreshments or meals depending upon the times for scheduled meetings. Giving council members opportunities to interact informally in a social setting can lead to stronger commitments to the group and to the organization. Build this expense into the budget.

- Expect that every volunteer advisory council member will participate, and insure that individuals are not allowed to dominate discussions (Sheffer, 2002). Work

with council officers to vary group processes so that everyone has opportunities to contribute.

- Recognize advisory council members for their contributions (Gamon, 1987). Provide nametags for members, submit news releases for publication, write acknowledgement letters to members' supervisors or employers, send personal thank you notes, present framed certificates, and/or print their names in programs or bulletins. Be sincere in expressing appreciation, and be specific about the council members' contributions to the organization to make the recognition meaningful.

- Implement advisory council recommendations in the organization, and let members know how their suggestions are being used and any impacts as a result of the changes enacted (Sheffer, 2002). It will be motivating to see their work put into action, and will contribute to their continued commitment to the organization.

This brief checklist represents only a few suggestions, though they are among the most basic and critical in creating a foundation for success in working with volunteer advisory councils.

Looking Ahead

As a contemporary adage suggests, the only constant is change, and so it is with volunteer advisory councils in contemporary volunteer organizations. Considering current trends in business and volunteer resource management, there are several current and emerging trends that may have direct impacts on how organizations successfully engage advisory councils into the future.

- Retiring baby boomers are seeking new opportunities to remain active and engaged in their communities, while also looking for flexible scheduling that respects their professional backgrounds (Merrill, 2005). These individuals are retiring at an earlier age and in better health than previous generations, and are expecting to contribute in some way. They are, however, interested in volunteer opportunities that don't restrict them to rigid schedules and that allow for fun and interaction with other volunteers. Recruiting volunteer advisory council or members will be challenging in that it is considered a long term (typically two or three years) commitment with very specific guidelines for contributing. The key will be in identifying the individual passions of these talented volunteers and appealing to their professional expertise and personal uniqueness.

- Young people are increasingly becoming civically engaged (Wheeler, 2001). Teenage youth as well as college students and young adults are exhibiting increasing interest in participating in meaningful ways as volunteer leaders in their communities, and they are defining "community" much more broadly than simplya defined geographic area. These young people want a voice in the decision-making processes within any volunteer organizations they contribute to, and they are interested in contributing as a leader now, not in training to be a leader someday. They are accustomed to instant gratification and immediate communication. The key will be to appropriately involve young people to build loyalty for the volunteer organization, while respecting that they have fresh ideas and boundless energies to contribute to the accomplishment of the organization's mission. Providing opportunities for teens to serve also helps to build a more

involved citizenry of future adult leaders who expect to remain engaged in their

communities (Edwards, 2007). Involving young people in key leadership roles

will require that some organization significantly shift their beliefs and

assumptions about youth and how they can contribute (Rennekamp, 1993)

- Utilizing online meeting technologies creates opportunities to involve volunteer

    advisory council members who are not physically in the same room, the same

    city, the same state, or even the same country (Gamon, 1987). This can provide a

    limitless resource for increased volunteer leader input, while also contributing by

    allowing council members greater flexibility in their participation with the total

    working group.

Volunteer advisory councils differ significantly from governing boards in terms of

their scopes of responsibility. Management strategies, however, are basically the same

for both groups, and by effectively engaging these critical volunteer leaders, volunteer

organizations and volunteer resource managers will be developing leaders and building

loyalty that will contribute to the organization's sustainability far into the future.

Effectively engaging individuals through the advisory system creates an opportunity to

strengthen community networks and to maintain critical linkages with stakeholder groups

impacted by the organization's outreach and mission. The extra efforts invested in

systematic involvement of advisory council members by the volunteer resource manager

will reap great rewards in years to come as the organization remains relevant and

successful.

References

Brudney, J.L. (1990). *Fostering volunteer programs in the public sector.* San Francisco:

    Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Carver, J. (1997). *Boards that make a difference: A new design for leadership in*

    nonprofit and public organizations. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap and others don't.*

    New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Edwards, H.C. (2007). Episodic volunteering and teens: What message are we sending?

    Vrijwillige Inzet Onderzocht [Voluntary Effort Studied], 4, 1, 43-50.

Ellis, S.J. (1986). *From the top down: The executive role in volunteer program success.*

    Philadelphia, PA: Energize, Inc.

Ilsley, P.J. (1990). *Enhancing the volunteer experience.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

    Publishers.

Fisher, J., & Cole, K.M. (1993). *Leadership and management of volunteer programs.*

    San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Gamon, J.A. (1987). Advisory councils – real friends. *Journal of Extension, 25*(3).

    Retrieved March 26, 2008, from http://www.joe.org/joe/1987fall/f2.html

Garmon, W.M., McKinney, T.T., Nesbitt, M.C., Revell, H., & West, J.P. (1977). *4-H*

    and youth committee handbook. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Agricultural

    Extension Service, North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T

    State University.

Grobman, G.M. (2004). *An introduction to the nonprofit sector: A practical approach*

    for the twenty-first century. Harrisburg, PA: White Hat Communications.

Holtham, M. M. (n.d.). *Extension's blueprint for volunteer excellence*. Ithaca, NY:

Cornell Cooperative Extension, Cornell University.

Lulewicz, S.J. (1995). Training and development of volunteers. In T.D. Connors (Ed.),

The volunteer management handbook (pp.82-102). New York: John Wiley &

Sons, Inc.

Macduff, N. (1998). *Building effective volunteer committees, 2nd edition*. Walla Walla,

WA: Macduff/Bunt Associates, Inc.

Merrill, M. (2003). *Effective advisory committees*. Retrieved February 21, 2008, from

http://www.merrillassociates.com/topic/2003/02/developing-effective-advisory-

committees

Merrill, M. (2005). *New research on boomers and retirement*. Retrieved May 14, 2007,

from http://www.merrillassociates.com/topic/2005/06/continuing-research

Pearce, J.L. (1982). Leading and following volunteers: Implications for a changing

society. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *18*(3), 385-394.

Rennekamp, R.A. (1993). Double standard for youth involvement. *Journal of Extension,*

31(3). Retrieved March 17, 2008, from http://www.joe.org/joe/1993fall/f2.html

Safrit, R.D., & Merrill, M. (1999). Personal capacities for volunteer administrators:

Drawing upon the past as we move into the future. *The Journal of Volunteer*

Administration, *17*(4), 28-43.

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., Schmiesing, R.J., Gliem, J.A., & Gliem, R.R. (2005). Competencies for

contemporary volunteer administration: An empirical model bridging *theory with

professional best practice. The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 23(3), 5-15.

Sheffer, C. (2002). *Advisory committees: Making them work*. Retrieved March 26, 2008,

from http://srv36nysed.gov/libdev/outreach/advcomte.htm

Twerdahl, J.S. (2006). *Lack marketing depth? Form a marketing advisory board*.

Retreived March 17, 2008, from

http://www.brandchannel.com/print_page.asp?ar_id=1263&section=paper

Wheeler, K. (2001). *Recruiting the generations: Different strokes for different folks*.

Retrieved May 14, 2007, from

http://www.glresources.com/articles_view.php?id=109

Wilson, M. (1976). *The effective management of volunteer programs*. Boulder, CO:

Volunteer Management Associates.

About the Author

Harriett C. Edwards is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist in the Department
of 4-H Youth Development and Family & Consumer Sciences at North Carolina State
University. She provides leadership to Continuing Volunteer Education for more than
25,000 teen and adult volunteers annually through her educational work with county
Extension professionals. A former volunteer manager, Harriett's programmatic research
and teaching focus upon contemporary volunteer management and episodic volunteerism.