

Are You a “Manager” or a “Leader” of Volunteers?

by Wanda Lee Bailey and Sherri Petro

At a recent meeting of volunteer resource managers, a speaker was challenging the group to think about the “big picture” and to “build capacity in [their] organizations to effectively engage volunteers.” Uneasy, someone in the audience whispered in a concerned tone: “He doesn’t sound like a volunteer manager. He sounds like an executive director!”

Now that brings up some interesting questions. Should there be a significant difference in leadership ability between the executive director and the volunteer manager in an organization? What would the field of volunteer management and the culture of volunteerism be like if we, as volunteer managers, could “sound like executive directors,” and not only spoke the language, but could see ourselves as leaders? How do we, as volunteer managers, see ourselves now and how can we see ourselves in the future?

Should there be a significant difference in leadership ability between the head of the organization and the head of the volunteer program? While there may be differences in authority, leadership is not restricted to the executive director or chair of the board, nor should it be for the sustainability of the organization. What happens when the executive director is not around? Leadership happens at all levels within an organization. Everyone, including volunteer managers, has the capacity of becoming a leader. We all have skills which can be enhanced and abilities which can be cultivated.

Some volunteer program managers may not yet perceive themselves as leaders in their organization, but they can be. What would the field look like if we saw ourselves as leaders? By demonstrating focus and conducting ourselves differently, successful volunteer leadership could be more than filling volunteer slots and helping volunteers have a satisfying experience. We could provide the vision of how volunteerism can be an integral part of the overall operation of the organization. We could establish direction and create initiatives that address our areas of responsibility. We could choose to connect the dots between volunteers and the organization's mission – and trumpet our success.

As directors of volunteer programs, we have a choice. We can choose to see ourselves differently. We can simply be someone with a function who follows directives from above or we can be an integral contributor in driving our organization to success. We can choose to have an attitude of being someone with influence or not. We can choose to think more broadly of how volunteerism can help the whole organization structurally move to the next level of success versus thinking only of our one program.

With the beginning of a new year, we have an opportunity to consider our goals for our professional and personal growth. If you choose to become a LEADER of volunteers, begin by looking at three questions:

1. What is leadership?
2. How is leadership different than management?
3. What are some practical ways that we can cultivate our leadership skills?

What Is Leadership?

Leadership is formulating a direction or vision and taking responsibility to lead all concerned in accomplishing objectives. Leadership is about principles of conduct versus practice of management. Leadership is a frame of mind. It's a way of thinking and an attitude. Surely, we all have that going for us!

Great leadership is a function of habit and practice. Much has been said and written about the practice of leadership. For example, Kouzes and Posner pose "five practices of exemplary leaders."¹ Leaders:

1. *Model the way.*
Leaders clarify their personal values and align their actions with those values.
2. *Inspire a shared vision.*
Leaders envision the future by imagining all sorts of possibilities and enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.
3. *Challenge the process.*
Leaders seek for innovative ways to change, grow, and improve. They are willing to experiment and take risks by generating small wins and learning from mistakes.
4. *Enable others to act.*
Leaders foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals, building trust, and sharing power.
5. *Encourage the heart.*
Leaders appreciate and recognize individual contributions. Leaders also celebrate values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

The Australian Public Service Commission has a similar list of leadership practices.² Leaders:

1. Achieve results.
2. Shape strategic thinking.
3. Cultivate productive working relationships.
4. Communicate with influence.
5. Exemplify personal drive and integrity.

Leadership is really about the deployment of one's self. According to Kevin Cashman, "Leadership is authentic self-expression that creates value."³ What beliefs should we have to express ourselves authentically?

Top Ten Leadership Beliefs

1. I am a role model.
2. I maintain integrity.
3. I take care of myself.
4. I set goals and live by them.
5. I am service oriented.
6. I allow others to have success.
7. I take responsibility.
8. I believe in other people.
9. I radiate positive energy.
10. I strive for balance in my life.

“Technical competence” is not listed as a belief. Often, as volunteer managers, we believe that success is contingent on technical competence. We focus on improving areas such as volunteer recruitment, retention, and recognition. Although important, these concepts have more to do with volunteer management behaviors and do not address the important matter of our beliefs in being *leaders* of volunteers.

How Is Leadership Different than Management?

Simply put: leaders direct, managers execute.

It is vital to differentiate between leadership and management. One serves the function of finding a new direction, the other the function of getting us there efficiently. Volunteer managers who think they are leading when they are only managing can block the leadership of others, thus limiting the innovation the organization needs to survive. As leaders of volunteers, we can identify areas for change and have the courage to champion them to show leadership. We cannot call ourselves a leader simply because we are a good manager. We need to show leadership ability. Our role is changing from “doer” to one who empowers individuals and our organization to effectively engage volunteers by building commitment, capacity, and competency.

In one of her “Topics of the Month,” Mary Merrill stated the following on the difference between leadership and management:

Volunteer program directors should serve as the focal point for leadership, but management functions should be dispersed through the organization among all levels of management. For many, this is a change from their traditional "manager" role. Managers that move to shared leadership and team concepts change their role to one of facilitator, systems manager, strategist, resource coordinator, and collaborator. In organizations that foster and support shared leadership, the volunteer program director moves from being a hands-on manager of people to a manager of the systems and relationships that surround and support volunteer efforts.

As organizations move toward shared leadership, volunteer program directors may find the need to develop new skills and processes to facilitate the smooth integration of volunteers into management and service delivery systems. They may find themselves as advocates, influencers, change agents, and internal consultants. Barriers to volunteer engagement will be identified and addressed at all levels. Volunteer program directors will not solve problems, but rather will bring together the people within the organization and facilitate the solution of problems.⁴

Diane Kessel, of Kessel Performance Consulting⁵ in Loveland, Colorado, recommends thinking about the following questions:

- Are you a manager or a leader?
- Are you carrying out the vision (manager) or *creating the vision* (leader)?
- Are you thinking about the immediate needs of the agency (manager) or *concerned about the long-term future* (leader)?

What Are Some Practical Ways that We Can Cultivate Our Leadership Skills?

If you were not satisfied with your answers to the prior questions regarding your role as a leader of volunteers, it is time to do some personal reflection and create a personal development plan. Development comes through knowing what you want to learn or change, what you need to do to achieve that, and how you will know when you have arrived.

Personal Reflection

- What are your unique qualities?
- What is your point of view?
- What is your driving force?
- What is your mission?
- Where is your heart?
- Where is your vulnerability?

These questions will help you to better understand yourself, your motivations, and why you are where you are. However, at some point we need to “cut to the chase” and ask ourselves: “Do I want to know *why*, or do I want to *develop*?” If we want to develop, we need to take the next step and create a plan.

Development Plan

A development plan involves structured preparation, groundwork, and scheduling. It's not very glamorous and easy to avoid! This is the “nitty gritty” of booking that course, making an appointment to meet with a coach or a mentor, or completing some other task that will improve the quality of your leadership skills.

There are three basic steps to creating your development plan:

1. Set personal/professional goals.

Helpful questions to ask yourself as you set these goals are:

- What professional growth (skills development) do I need?
- Where am I now in this focus area?
- Where would I like to be?
- How will I know when I arrive?
- What activities will I need to undertake to get there?
- What resources do I need?
- What is my timeline?
- How will I reward myself?
- What barriers and issues might I face in attempting to achieve the above?
- What strategies will I use to surmount the challenges and barriers I face?
- Who will be a good mentor, guide, coach to assist me on this “journey”?
- How will I begin to initiate these changes? What is my first step?

2. Get feedback.

Two heads are always better than one. Once you develop your plan, discuss it with a trusted colleague or friend and see if you have forgotten something important or have been unrealistic in any way.

3. Solicit support.

Change can be difficult. Your chances of success are increased dramatically if you solicit support. Again, ask a colleague or a friend if you can check in with him or her on a regular basis. Accountability to someone else is a great motivator. Consider hiring a coach to assist you. Take advantage of local resources in your community that can help you develop your leadership skills. For instance, your community may have a local

nonprofit, member-oriented organization dedicated to developing a diverse group of leaders. Other great resources include: the chamber of commerce, your local community foundation, and your local nonprofit management support organization.

As you consider ways that you need to develop in the area of leadership, remember to be gentle with yourself (none of us is perfect!) and choose one to three areas to focus on first. Leadership development is a life-long process.

Here is a [self-assessment tool](#) to help you choose the areas that you want to work on first.

Conclusion

In December 2006, an exciting gathering took place in Denver, Colorado. The Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations (COVAA) was the first-ever convening of official representatives of existing associations of volunteer program managers throughout the United States. During the event, important discussion and dialogue took place regarding the state of the profession of volunteer management and the future of the profession. One of the issues brought up was the need to increase the recognition and respect for the profession of volunteer management. One of the attendees made the bold statement, "It's time to stop whining about not being respected. We're not victims. It's time to command respect."

We are leaders. We can choose to speak the language to influence others and strengthen our organizations' programs – if we effectively participate in management teams, work with boards of directors, participate in strategic planning for the entire organization, and be compelling activists in our communities. As we grow in our leadership ability, we can advocate more effectively on behalf of our profession and automatically command the respect we deserve. Lead on!

Footnotes

¹Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

²Australian Public Service, www.apsc.gov.au/ils/index.html.

³Kevin Cashman, www.leadersource.com.

⁴Mary Merrill, "March 2000 Topic of the Month: Leadership versus Management," Merrill Associates Web Site, www.merrillassociates.net/topic/2000/03/leadership-versus-management/.

⁵Kessel Performance Consulting, www.dkleadership.com/

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