



Paradoxical leadership: Understanding and managing conflicting tensions to foster volunteer engagement

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INTRODUCTION

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”

Martin Luther King Jr.

As many governments around the world reduce their spending and welfare activities in order to balance budgetary requirements, non-profit organizations (NPOs) have become more and more important for the effective functioning of our society. Although it is difficult to find a common description encompassing the many and various types of NPOs, they generally differ from private sector organizations in four ways. First, their core purpose is focused on implementing a (social) mission rather than on generating profit. This mission can be manifold and diverse, ranging from the provision of support for the elderly, disabled or children, to political undertakings such as the enforcement of human rights in developing countries. Second, they often rely on funding from third parties, such as government bodies or other individual donors, to carry out their activities. Third, NPOs have a complex network of stakeholders who influence the ways in which they operate. These include donors, beneficiaries, governments, the public and the NPO’s employees. Fourth, as NPOs operate in a resource-tight environment, they are reliant on the support of volunteers to ensure the full provision of their services.

Volunteering, in general, is a specific form of altruistic helping behavior. Penner describes volunteering as “. . . long-term, planned, prosocial behaviors that benefit strangers and occur within an organizational setting.” Volunteering, therefore, differs from other kinds of spontaneous helping activities (e.g. rendering first aid in the case of an accident), because of its planned nature. It also differs from

one-time pro-social behaviors (e.g. selling home-made lemonade to raise money for a school trip), because volunteering implies a longer-term commitment to serving others. And finally, volunteering is different from other informal helping behaviors that only occur in a private setting (e.g. pet sitting for a neighbor or giving free tutoring to a friend’s child).

Around the world, many individuals engage in volunteering activities. In Europe, for instance, 92–94 million people volunteer on a regular basis, which represents almost 25% of the population. In Australia, around 6.1 million citizens volunteer, and in the US it is estimated that around 63 million individuals volunteered 7.9 billion hours of volunteer service, worth \$184 billion, in 2014. Globally, the number of volunteers working in NPOs between 1995 and 2000, if taken together, would amount to the ninth biggest country in the world in terms of population size.

Despite the considerable amount of volunteer activities, one of the key tasks NPOs need to focus on is engaging and retaining their volunteers, which is a challenge for a number of reasons. First, the so-called “reliability problem” of volunteering suggests that volunteers are not bound by legal but rather psychological contracts and therefore do not receive payments for their services. Hence, it is very difficult to reward them for their work, as most mechanisms commonly applied in a paid context (e.g. career development or monetary rewards) cannot be transferred directly to volunteers. The lack of formal ties to the organization also makes it much easier for volunteers not to show up for their service or to quit the NPO compared to their paid counterparts.

Second, the problem of engaging volunteers is further aggravated by the very nature of volunteering. It is complex and characterized by different, sometimes contradictory demands and expectations between the NPO and the individual volunteer. For instance, while volunteers are

oftentimes driven by their identification with the NPO and its beneficiaries, and tend to enjoy the freedom, flexibility, and meaningfulness associated with their roles, it is also important to implement structures, clear role descriptions, and feedback procedures to ensure that volunteers carry out their roles in ways that enable the NPO to implement its objectives and achieve its mission effectively and efficiently. As a consequence, volunteers are often committed to carrying out specific tasks which they find personally meaningful. But they are less enthusiastic to take over other responsibilities that the NPO assigns to them that are important for the organization's overall functioning. This puts volunteer managers in a situation where they need to decide on how much control they can exert before volunteers lose enjoyment of their work.

This complex and somewhat paradoxical nature of volunteering became especially evident in the European Refugee Crisis of 2015. Since the beginning of 2015, increasing numbers of refugees from civil war regions such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq have made the journey to the European Union to seek asylum, by traveling across the Mediterranean Sea or the Western Balkans to reach their destination. In Germany, for example, the government was faced with accommodating over 1 million refugees in 2015 alone. As the German government was overwhelmed by the challenges involved in such an undertaking, thousands of citizens started to engage in volunteer activities in reception camps and hostels for refugees. This trend was so strong that in some instances volunteers had to be turned away since there were no more tasks to be assigned. Initially, the sentiment was uplifting and was characterized by feelings of being able to make a positive impact on the lives of refugees and by working in a self-directed and autonomous way. However, although the volunteers were enthusiastic about being able to help the refugees, it became evident that there was a lack of clear direction and coordination. This quickly resulted in chaos, confusion, and disengagement among the volunteers. Many newspapers picked up on these cases in sensational, yet fitting, headlines such as *"Refugee Relief at the Limit"*, *"When Challenge Changes into Excessive Demand"*, and *"Helpers Who Need Help"*. Eventually, this lack of direction and coordination meant that many NPOs were not able to achieve their goals, such as providing basic necessities, shelter, and first aid to refugees. This led many volunteers to quit their activities, as they were overworked, frustrated, and thus disengaged.

This example illustrates a quandary that volunteer managers face with regard to leading the volunteers: finding the right balance between giving freedom to enhance volunteers' sense of meaning in their volunteer work and providing a clear structure to ensure effective service delivery and coordination of effort. In this article, we develop a framework to help volunteer managers to handle these seemingly contradictory demands, in order to raise the engagement of their volunteer workforce. Specifically, we draw on Smith and Lewis's "Theory of paradox" to demonstrate how volunteer managers can achieve this aim by using a "paradoxical leadership style," that can be described as seemingly competing, yet interrelated, leadership behaviors employed to meet competing follower demands simultaneously and over time.

To examine how paradoxical leadership can enhance volunteer engagement, we focus specifically on participative and directive leadership as two contrasting poles of leadership behaviors often found in NPOs. While participative leadership aims at giving volunteers a sense of autonomy over their work and involving them in decision-making processes, directive leadership aims at providing them with clear goals and instructions on how to execute their tasks. Both leadership styles have positive effects on volunteer engagement; however, as we demonstrate below, focusing on one style only can have detrimental effects in this regard, thereby making it necessary for volunteer managers to employ participative and directive forms of leadership simultaneously. We argue that a paradoxical leadership style is specifically relevant in a volunteering context, as it helps to address core tensions inherent in volunteer work and enables managers to foster volunteer engagement while making sure that the NPO provides its services in an efficient way.

THE ROLE OF ENGAGEMENT IN VOLUNTEERING

What is Volunteer Engagement?

Volunteer engagement is a relatively new concept in volunteering research, but it is increasingly garnering research attention. It is inspired by the work of Arnold Bakker and Wilmar Schaufeli who described it as a positive, fulfilling, and task-related psychological state that is characterized by a strong sense of (1) vigor toward, (2) dedication to, and (3) absorption in volunteering activities. Volunteers who are engaged in voluntary work are enthusiastic and proud of their activities and see it as one means to expressing themselves while working.

Vigor, as the first dimension of engagement, is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience. This means that volunteers who experience obstacles in their voluntary activities (e.g. being faced with a large crowd of people at the serving counter of a soup kitchen) see them as challenges rather than stressors. Because of the perceived challenge, they have fun in what they are doing and persistently work hard when providing their services.

Engaged volunteers also have high levels of dedication to their volunteering activities. They feel a sense of enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride, and they demonstrate a high level of commitment to the NPO and its beneficiaries. They therefore feel that their work is meaningful and benefits not only themselves, but especially also individuals, groups, or causes.

As the final dimension of volunteer engagement, absorption in work activities is characterized by high levels of concentration and engrossment in one's volunteering role. Engaged volunteers oftentimes experience feelings of flow at work, a mental state where time passes by rapidly—almost without being noticed—and volunteers are detached from everything apart from their volunteering activities, thereby enabling them to concentrate better.

Why does Volunteer Engagement Matter?

Originating as part of the positive psychology movement, engagement has been associated with a wide range of

positive organizational as well as individual outcomes. While research on engagement has been conducted mainly in the paid context, recent findings suggest that it is also a relevant concept in the public and non-profit sectors. From an organizational perspective, research has shown that the engagement of volunteers is associated with the intensity and amount of hours spent in volunteering as well as the performance and commitment of volunteers, and it significantly reduces volunteer turnover. Hence, engaged volunteers work more, perform better, and remain longer in their respective NPOs. Additionally, engagement is not only beneficial for NPOs, but has positive psychological effects on individual volunteers. For example, engaged volunteers show higher levels of overall well-being, including happiness and perceived social worth, and they are more satisfied with their work and their lives.

Given the overall positive effects of engagement for NPOs and volunteers, it is evident that an engaged volunteer workforce is a driving factor for both short-term performance as well as the long-term viability of NPOs. As volunteer work and any enjoyment thereof are what drive volunteers to remain in an organization and put in their best effort, it is crucial for organizations to identify conditions that foster engagement. In the following sections, we describe how NPOs can develop a leadership approach that enables them to increase the engagement and retention of their volunteer workforce.

HOW CAN VOLUNTEER MANAGERS ENHANCE VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT?

Volunteer managers in NPOs, and their respective leadership behaviors, play a pivotal role in fostering and maintaining volunteer engagement. This is because volunteer managers oftentimes serve as a bridge between the NPO and the volunteer workforce in that they have a good overview of processes in the NPO as well as its mission and strategies, which in turn they disseminate to their volunteers. They are also responsible for assigning tasks and goals to their volunteers, and through their leadership, they directly influence how volunteers feel about their role, the service they deliver

on behalf of their respective organization, and their willingness to continue to do volunteer work.

Yet, up until now, we know very little about how to lead volunteers effectively, and the scant research findings remain segmented and inconclusive. This is because researchers have focused mainly on examining particular leadership styles that were thought to be most useful in this particular sector. For example, some behavioral scientists have found that co-determination and autonomy (i.e. participative leadership) are the key drivers of volunteer engagement, whereas others have highlighted the need for clear direction and a shared goal (i.e. directive leadership). However, managing volunteers often puts managers in paradoxical situations in which a simple choice between participative or directive leadership may not be the most effective way to lead. Instead, they are required to search for ways to satisfy conflicting demands at the same time. For example, volunteers demonstrate a strong commitment to their beneficiaries. They want to experience ownership and impact through their actions, making it necessary to give them leeway through participative leadership. But by the same token, they may not possess the necessary skills, experiences, or information required to carry out certain activities, thereby making it necessary to give them clear instructions and specific goals, by providing directive leadership.

In the following, we draw from current research on leadership to suggest that in a dynamic context such as volunteering, managers may need to embrace simultaneously *both* participative *and* directive leadership as two contrasting, yet interrelated, poles, rather than choosing between *either* participative *or* directive leadership behaviors. Fig. 1 illustrates these propositions.

In this framework, participative leadership behaviors aim at enhancing volunteer engagement by fostering their intrinsic motivation for and identification with their volunteering roles. Participative leadership involves joint decision-making or shared influence in decision-making, sharing information with others, holding volunteers accountable, and giving volunteers autonomy and flexibility in their work.

Psychologists have argued that by allowing volunteers to participate in decision-making processes, participative

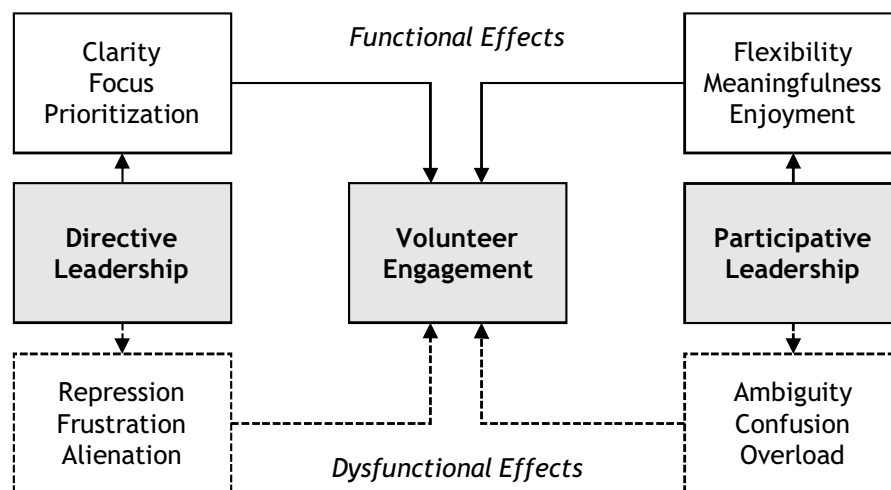


Figure 1 Providing Directive and Participative Leadership to Foster Volunteer Engagement.

Note: Solid lines = functional effects; dotted lines = dysfunctional effects

volunteer managers may enhance volunteers' acceptance of decisions and increase their willingness to carry them out accordingly. Indeed, research has shown that high levels of goal acceptance and identification are crucial drivers of volunteer engagement. Additionally, providing flexibility and autonomy in a role allows volunteers to experience a sense of psychological ownership of their tasks, that is, the feeling that one is responsible for the outcomes of volunteer work makes the tasks meaningful and intrinsically enjoyable, thereby increasing levels of engagement. Hence, participative leadership fosters a fulfilling and positive work-related state of mind (engagement) through intrinsically motivating factors such as personal identification, psychological ownership, feelings of self-control, and experienced meaningfulness.

However, participative leadership behaviors may also have unforeseen negative consequences for volunteer engagement. For instance, a hands-off style of leadership, as an extreme form of participative leadership with very little supervision, can lead to poorly defined roles and procedural uncertainty, in that volunteers might not understand their roles and are not able to carry out their tasks effectively. Delegating all powers, responsibilities, and tasks can therefore be perceived by volunteers as a *lack* of leadership and support by their managers, leading ultimately to frustration and lower overall engagement. Unclear guidance and coordination by volunteer managers can also lead to task- and process-related conflicts between volunteers which negatively impacts the working atmosphere.

It is therefore important that volunteer managers simultaneously provide clear directions and objectives via a directive leadership style, in order to ensure that work procedures are aligned with the organization's vision and objectives. By providing direction, they set and monitor specific milestones and provide clarity about roles. Furthermore, directive leadership behaviors enhance goal attainment by scrutinizing work and giving regular performance feedback to volunteers. Having a clear goal helps volunteers focus on their actual work and thereby fosters their overall engagement. In addition, they are also able to anticipate future outcomes of the services they provide and prioritize their tasks to achieve their goals. Put simply, providing direction through clear communication and detailed instructions can help volunteers understand *what* to do and *why* to do it, and thus to stay engaged with their volunteering tasks.

While directive leadership can be positive for volunteer engagement and the overall performance of the NPO, it can

also have unwanted consequences, in that it may be perceived as rigid and repressive, specifically in the case of micromanaging. For instance, providing too much direction can be perceived as stifling, as it inhibits the potential for self-development and personal growth. With too many rules and too little flexibility, volunteers are likely to feel reprimanded, marginalized, and ignored; moreover, this can evoke feelings of pressure and stress and therefore reduce their overall level of engagement.

Following the everyday wisdom that "*there are two sides to every coin*," we suggest that participative and directive leadership behaviors can be seen as complements rather than substitutes that need to be integrated in order to engage volunteers successfully. The extent to which volunteer managers draw from participative versus directive leadership styles in their day-to-day interactions depends on a range of contextual factors such as the type of NGO and its mission, the volunteering role, the specific situation in which a volunteer needs to be managed, and the skills, abilities, and motivations of the individual volunteer. Fig. 2 illustrates the tensions between participative and directive leadership behaviors faced by volunteer managers along three dimensions: (1) decision-making: participation versus centralization, (2) output control: trust versus monitoring, and (3) process control: flexibility versus instructions.

HOW TO EMBRACE PARADOXES IN ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE

In the following section, we discuss and demonstrate how the tensions between participative and directive leadership behaviors can be resolved by volunteer managers in NPOs. For this purpose, we refer back to the example of the refugee crisis in Europe and present vignettes in which both participative and directive leadership behaviors are combined:

Alex is a 45-year-old volunteer manager based in a non-profit refugee hostel in Berlin, Germany. Alex started working in the refugee hostel after the beginning of the refugee crisis in Europe and is now managing 51 volunteers. Alex has studied management and has already gained some experience as a volunteer manager in previous roles, working in a literacy center for people with immigrant backgrounds and as an organizer for excursions for senior citizens. In the refugee hostel, Alex's team of volunteers is responsible for facility management (e.g. waste disposal, cleaning, and maintenance), refugee

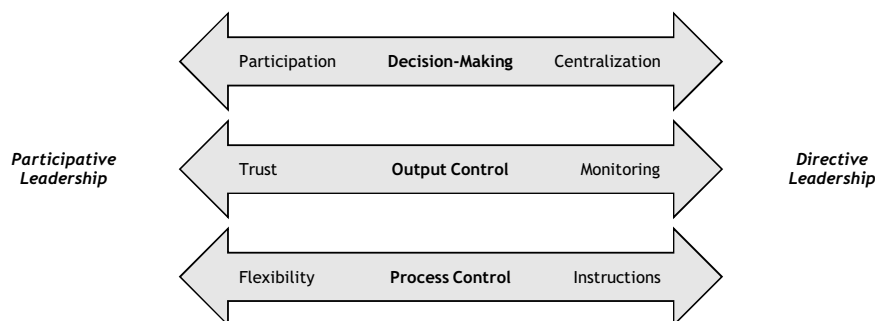


Figure 2 Tensions Between Participative and Directive Leadership Behaviors

accommodation (e.g. meal preparation and allocation), general administration (e.g. helping refugees with administrative work or doctors' appointments), and providing family support (e.g. childcare or organizing leisure activities for adolescents) for over 200 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans, and Africa.

Most of the now active volunteers joined the refugee hostel after hearing on the news about the problematic conditions for refugees and the relatively slow response of governmental organizations. Many of the volunteers are students, women with part-time jobs, or senior citizens, the majority of whom do not have related professional experience and do not speak languages other than German and English. There is one aspect, though, that unites all of them: They want to help people who have had traumatic experiences in their home countries, by supporting them to find their way around in an unfamiliar culture and country. For most volunteers, it is their first time interacting with refugees, and Alex is one of the few individuals who has experienced the difficulties inherent in providing support for people with a very different upbringing, value set, and mentality. Alex is familiar with the processes and structures of the refugee hostel as well as the legal procedures that need to be adhered to and where to get help in cases of emergency. In prior work experiences, Alex also learned to deal with—and mediate between—people from different cultural backgrounds. This makes Alex an important intermediary in the refugee hostel in cases of communication problems.

Being faced with this situation, Alex recognizes two things: First, the volunteers are intrinsically motivated and need to be given appropriate autonomy to engage them in their work. For example, the other day, Julia explained she wants to make an impact on people's lives. She enjoys the flexibility of her role and the opportunity to help children who have been traumatized by the events in their home countries.

Second, Alex also realizes that delegating work without providing guidance will reduce volunteer engagement, as they sometimes have difficulties in understanding how to carry out certain tasks. A recent incident involved Thomas, who joined the refugee hostel two weeks ago. In the last team meeting, Thomas volunteered to manage the distribution of toys throughout the refugee hostel. When he started working, however, Thomas was not aware of certain rules, for example, that children had to be accompanied by a parent or custodian, who in turn had to sign a registration form, in order for the refugee hostel to know how many toys had been borrowed and returned. When the first children came unaccompanied to borrow toys, Thomas handed them out without prior registration. At the end of the day, many of the toys had not been returned.

Decision-making: Participation versus Centralization

The first tension arises in decision-making. On the one hand, volunteer managers can involve volunteers in participative

decision-making processes and give them opportunities to voice their opinions, in an attempt to improve the status quo. Research in the paid context suggests that voice is a crucial factor in enhancing individual levels of engagement. Giving volunteers opportunities to engage in participative decision-making may foster feelings of not only significance and impact, but also the perception of fairness. This is an important notion. Volunteers who feel that they are treated fairly and that they can have an impact and influence on the goals and directions of an organization have been found consistently to show high levels of engagement. Furthermore, participative decision-making enhances the decision quality by taking into account a broader variety of opinions and experiences and conveys a feeling of being valued and involved, thus leading to higher levels of engagement. However, not all forms of participation are useful in every context. For instance, decision-making is often seen as a managerial task, which also implies a responsibility to ensure certain outcomes. Transferring too much decision-making authority (and responsibility) can therefore also lead to negative effects and feelings of being overloaded and exploited. This is especially relevant when involving inexperienced volunteers who are unfamiliar with the context of their work and cannot fully anticipate the outcomes of their decisions.

On the other hand, centralized decisions in the form of a clear vision and overarching goals have also been identified as a major motivational factor and crucial component in keeping volunteers engaged in their work. By providing goals and communicating how to achieve them effectively, volunteer managers can enable volunteers to envision the successful completion of tasks and to work persistently to achieve them, thereby increasing levels of engagement. Predetermined goals might also resolve potential role ambiguity and conflict. However, centralized decision-making may also have negative consequences for volunteer engagement. Having no part in decision-making processes, nor opportunities to voice opinions openly, can alienate individuals and lead ultimately to lower engagement and higher intentions to leave an NGO.

How to combine participative and centralized decision-making in practice. To combine both participative and centralized decision processes, volunteer managers can outline the objectives of the NPO during the induction process and demonstrate clearly to volunteers how their role contributes to the non-profit mission. It is important for each volunteer to be aware of the different tasks they are required to carry out (i.e. making phone calls to campaign, selling goods at a fundraising event, or teaching languages to refugees). Notwithstanding, volunteer managers can simultaneously ask for suggestions regarding which projects to fund or how to improve and streamline administration processes for arriving refugees. They can also ask volunteers to provide suggestions about how to improve the volunteering experience, and the way that associated tasks should be carried out. For instance, they can invite volunteers to attend weekly team meetings to improve communication and collaboration. Thus, managers may want to welcome and involve volunteers into the decision-making process and simultaneously maintain final decision control in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts and confusion.

To deal with the tension between participative and centralized decision-making, Alex encourages volunteers to participate in decision-making processes but varies the degree of participation, depending on the scope and importance of the decision. For less important decisions, Alex delegates full decision authority to the volunteers, in order to create a feeling of choice and co-determination. For instance, Julia is responsible for entertaining and playing with the children. For this task, she has a variety of toys and games available and can decide by herself how to use them in the most child-centric way. For more important decisions, such as choosing a supplier for the refugee hostel or how to allocate scarce resources, Alex asks for constructive suggestions and input but maintains final decision control.

Output Control: Trust versus Monitoring

The second form of tension volunteer managers tend to experience revolves around how to control the output of their volunteering activities. Interpersonal trust is an essential part of volunteering, and studies have shown that good relations between volunteer managers and their volunteers, as well as high levels of mutual trust, are crucial for engagement. High-quality relationships are a type of job resource, as they provide a sense of psychological safety where volunteers can display their full personality without the fear of negative consequences. Trust enhances loyalty and creates a form of psychological contract between volunteer managers and volunteers in that volunteers are eager to reciprocate the trust that has been put in them; however, not monitoring tasks can also have negative consequences, such as when volunteers face hurdles in their work. In such cases, a high degree of trust can increase social pressure on volunteers and frustrate them, since they are not able to meet the expectations set for them. Also, dysfunctional forms of trust without monitoring or feedback can lessen the perceived importance of volunteers' work and, hence, their overall engagement.

Through monitoring and coordinating activities, however, volunteer managers can determine whether volunteers have made desired progress or, if not, whether they need further assistance. Monitoring is especially relevant in a volunteering context, since many volunteers do not have a professional background and relevant experience to execute their tasks. By intervening in the way that volunteers carry out their activities, and by offering guidance and support, managers can prevent confusion and disengagement. Conversely, excessive monitoring can lead to a feeling of being micro-managed and result in lower psychological ownership; moreover, it can erode trust in and loyalty toward the NPO and thereby reduce overall engagement.

How to combine building trust and monitoring in practice. A crucial skill for volunteer managers is knowing ways to convey a feeling of trust. However, they also need to recognize when they have to intervene in how volunteers carry out their roles. This is especially relevant when volunteers are faced with inconsistent demands from different stakeholders such as donors, customers, and beneficiaries. By coordinating activities in ambiguous or chaotic situations, managers can resolve these inconsistencies, support their

volunteers in focusing on activities relevant to their goals, and thus foster their engagement with their work. Managers, however, should understand that monitoring does not equate to micromanaging or acting as a "big brother"; rather, it involves caring about the well-being of their volunteers, which leads to keeping them engaged.

To deal with the tension between trust and monitoring, Alex uses close and active (e.g. looking over their shoulder and offering advice) monitoring for volunteers who are new to his team. Once Alex feels that they have understood their tasks and that they can be trusted in how they interpret their roles, he uses a more distant and passive form of monitoring (e.g. having a short feedback discussion at the end of the day).

Process Control: Flexibility versus Instructions

A third type of tension revolves around the questions of *how* to execute tasks and whether volunteer managers should allow flexibility or provide explicit instructions. By allowing flexibility, they can enhance volunteers' internal locus of control and their engagement, as it gives them the opportunity to shape their roles and environments. Indeed, there is extensive research to suggest that individuals with high perceptions of autonomy and flexibility also feel more responsible for the quality of their work, put in extra effort, and show higher levels of engagement. Research also shows that volunteers who are given flexibility and discretion at work are more enthusiastic when carrying out their tasks. However, giving too much autonomy can also be perceived by volunteers as non-supportive. Giving instructions and explaining to new members of an organization how things work is often seen as one of the most pivotal leadership tasks.

Providing clear instructions and clarifying work methods is especially relevant when volunteers carry out activities that require a skillset they do not possess, or when they are faced with high workloads and emotionally challenging assignments. While high workloads have the potential to enhance the meaningfulness of the task and can be perceived as a positive challenge, they can also overwhelm volunteers and lead to feelings of fear, anxiety, or anger. By providing clear instructions, managers can convey expertise and explain the methods used to deal with volunteer work-related challenges, thereby increasing levels of engagement.

How to combine flexibility and instructions in practice. To provide clear instruction, volunteer managers could start with induction training, in which volunteers receive information about the organization and their volunteering roles and have the opportunity to meet their peers. This could be complemented by additional training opportunities conducted throughout a volunteer's tenure with the organization. In order to increase autonomy, managers can foster cooperation among volunteers and provide the opportunity to interact with one another to share experiences, thereby reducing any dependence on their respective volunteer managers. This enables more experienced volunteers to discuss situations which they felt were rewarding or where they were able to make a difference to the lives of beneficiaries. They can also share volunteering experiences they

felt were difficult to handle and situations which impacted on them psychologically and emotionally.

The volunteers in the refugee hostel are faced with desperate and highly distressed refugees in their day-to-day interactions. Before volunteers start working in the refugee hostel, they receive an introductory seminar from Alex, in which important legal, organizational, and cultural aspects are discussed. When assigning tasks, Alex makes fundamental elements of the task clear to the volunteers and provides a certain amount of leeway—within boundaries—rather than giving step-by instructions. Volunteers therefore experience autonomy and efficacy in carrying out their roles.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Volunteering is crucial to the effective functioning of our society. Many organizations are reliant on volunteers for the full provision of their services. However, managers in NPOs are faced with conflicting, seemingly paradoxical, tensions and demands when leading their volunteers. On the one hand, volunteers are driven by self-determination and a value motive and want to experience flexibility, enjoyment,

and meaning through volunteer work. On the other hand, as the volunteering environment is often characterized by unclear job standards and evaluation criteria, unskilled work, and infrequent or non-existent performance standards, managers have to coordinate activities and set specific goals to provide direction so as to help their volunteers be effective and achieve desired organizational outcomes. Thus, identifying and managing these conflicting tensions is a key challenge for managers seeking to keep volunteers engaged in their activities.

We have attempted to shed light on how NPO managers can effectively foster volunteer engagement and develop a framework of “paradoxical leadership” which is distinguishable from, and yet still in concert with, established leadership approaches. A one-sided focus on either participative or directive leadership behavior may not be effective for fostering volunteer engagement. Instead, it is more advantageous for managers to incorporate both participative and directive behaviors in their leadership style, in order to manage conflicting tensions. By illustrating an example related to the refugee crisis in Europe, we have highlighted what volunteer managers can organize in practice to increase levels of engagement among their volunteering workforce.



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