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Chelsea Dibala

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Using Communication to Build and Retain a Strong Volunteer Base

Chelsea Dibala

Senior Capstone

Dr. Jeff Kerssen-Griep

CST 410: Communication Theory

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Abstract

This paper aims at utilizing my volunteer experience with Kaiser Permanente hospice volunteer department to help establish a strong volunteer base through the use of effective recruitment and retention strategies. The recommendations made are supported by previous research and suggestions for implementation have also been made. Areas that are addressed in this proposal are reaching and retaining volunteers by addressing individual needs, offering continuing education, advertising appropriately, offering effective persuasive appeals, maintaining nurturing work environments, and helping volunteers to learn to cope with anxiety and stress.

Using Communication to Build and Retain a Strong Volunteer Base

According to Independent Sector (2006) it is estimated that 84 million adults, which is about 1 in 2 adults, participate in volunteer service in some manner (Haski-Leventhal & Cnaan, 2009). Of those 84 million, 25 million volunteer five or more hours per week which generates \$239 million each year in services (Independent Sector, 2006; Haski-Leventhal & Cnaan, 2009). Fisher and Ackerman (1998) assert that without volunteers, non-profit organizations and human service agencies would not be able to offer many services or would be required to provide those services at higher costs, which are paid for by government, clients, and taxpayers.

In 2011 about 77 million baby boomers will turn 65 years of age (Older Americans, 2000). Wilson, Steele, Thompson, and D'heron (2002) claim that baby boomers will have a major impact on the future of senior service and volunteerism, because baby boomers are not attracted to customary tasks that volunteers are assigned to, such as making photocopies, preparing mailings, and answering phone calls, it is important for volunteer programs to connect with individuals in order to take complete advantage of human resources. Retiring professionals are looking for volunteer opportunities that allow them to participate in experiences that further develop and maintain their job skills as well as being just as prestigious as their career jobs (Tanz and Spencer, 2000).

Young adults also will have a major impact on the future senior service and volunteerism. In order to engage young adults in volunteer opportunities, it is essential to move away from traditional recruitment methods. American youth have been disconnecting from public life at a rate larger than any other age group for the past 30 years (Carpini, 2000). Young adults also appear to not be as trusting of their fellow citizens (Carpini, 2000). According to Rahn (1998) individuals under the age of 30 are considerably more apt to state that people cannot be relied on

and individuals are more likely to look out for themselves than to attempt to provide aid to others. Not only will the type of message that is sent to young adults need be change, but the ways that message is sent will also be changed. Traditionally, volunteer recruitment ads were placed in newspapers and volunteer appeals were made on the news. This change is necessary because 36% of 18 to 29 year olds monitor the news daily compared to 52% of 30 to 50 year olds and 67% older than 50 (Zukin, 1997). Fewer than 20% of young adults read the newspaper on any given date, young adult newspaper readership is below half of what it was in 1965 (Zukin, 1997).

Case Background

Volunteer Staffing Dilemmas

After spending the summer working for Kaiser Permanente Continuing Care Services, volunteering as a hospice respite volunteer, and spending several weeks as an intern for the hospice volunteer program I began to see firsthand the problems that Annette Shaff-Palmer and Na'ama Tubman, the volunteer coordinators for the Kaiser Permanente hospice volunteer program, had discussed so many times.

The first problem Annette and Na'ama talked about was the difficulty of recruiting individuals to volunteer their time to work with hospice patients. They offered several reasons for recruitment being so difficult. Many people seemed to have misconceptions about what hospice care truly entails. Annette and Na'ama believe that people think hospice is all about giving up hope because death is imminent. They also believe that recruitment techniques emphasizing need have been over used, so these methods are no longer effective. Limited financial budgets also constrain volunteer recruitment.

A second dilemma the volunteer coordinators highlighted involved coordinating a volunteer recognition program. Since they had a limited budget they were brainstorming ways to fund a recognition program. One option that came up was seeking out donations from businesses; however this was not feasible because Kaiser Permanente policy does not allow this.

A third issue that was discussed several times was volunteer retention. Volunteers are asked to make a one year commitment to the program, though many current volunteers do not fulfill their commitment. For example, in my September training class of volunteers, five Kaiser Permanente volunteers completed the training however only two volunteers (including myself) remain as active volunteers in the program.

Each volunteer must complete a twenty-eight hour training course that is taught by the Community Hospice Coalition. The Community Hospice Coalition consists of Portland Kaiser Permanente, Providence East, Providence West, Legacy Northwest, and Legacy Hopewell House hospice programs. Although these organizations split the responsibilities and costs for the class it is still expensive to train an individual. The cost to train each individual is \$100; this amount does not include the hiring costs for each individual. Each individual must be tested for Tuberculosis, offered a three part vaccination series for Hepatitis B, and be drug tested in addition to meeting other employee health regulations. Besides the expenses incurred for the training classes, preparing for training classes is time consuming. Volunteer coordinators must put together training materials, reserve facilities, make arrangements for food, contact potential volunteers, complete the volunteer screening process, advertise the class, and make arrangements for guest speakers for the class (such as social workers, physicians, nurses, chaplains, and volunteers.)

Volunteers' Duties

Although training volunteers can be costly and time consuming, it is imperative to have a strong volunteer team for various reasons. Volunteers play a vital role on the hospice interdisciplinary team. Since volunteers are able to spend more time in patients' homes than paid staff members they may be able to build strong relationships with the patients which may allow them to gain information about the patient that may assist the team in providing better care. In order for Medicare to pay for hospice services, Medicare requires that 5% of all agency staffed hospice visits be provided by volunteers. However, Kaiser Permanente's Director of Palliative Care for Portland Continuing Care Services, Pam Matthews, would like to see at least 8% of all staffed visits be done by volunteers because of benefits volunteers provide.

Kaiser hospice volunteers can provide companionship visits or respite visits. When a volunteer provides a companionship visit the individual spends between one to two hours visiting with a patient in a facility. Most often the companionship visits are for patients that have very few friends or family members that come visit them or if the patient appears to be lonely.

When a respite visit is provided the volunteer can spend up to four hours caring for the patient, so the caregiver can take a much needed break. For example a caregiver could go out to lunch with a friend, go grocery shopping, take a class, or just take a nap in the other room. The goal of the respite visit is to allow the caregiver to have time to take care of themselves since it is impossible to care for others if you are unable to care for yourself.

All hospice patients are eligible to have a volunteer as part of their care team. If there are not enough volunteers some patients may go without a volunteer, which may decrease the quality of care that is provided. If a hospice program cannot provide a volunteer to all patients that would like a volunteer as part of their care team or if the minimum percentage of staff hours is

not meet the hospice program can be heavily fined or even lose Medicare payments. Presently there are 45 volunteers and 300 patients in the Kaiser Permanente hospice program. To ensure that the highest quality of care is provided most volunteers are limited to volunteering four hours per week in the Kaiser Permanente Portland hospice program, which means that the average volunteer will see between one and three patients during the week. The following research-based proposal is intended to help address these issues.

Proposal

I propose a strategy that will allow the Kaiser Permanente hospice volunteer program to build a strong volunteer base through the use of communication. The proposal is broken down into recruitment and retention strategies. The recommendations made are supported by previous research and suggestions for implementation have also been made. Areas that are addressed are addressing individual needs, continuing education, reaching potential recruits, offering effective persuasive appeals, maintaining nurturing work environments, and helping volunteers to learn to cope with anxiety and stress,

Recruiting Volunteers

In order to take full advantage of all the available human resources it is imperative that individuals are engaged by the organization (Wilson et al., 2002). Approaches that traditionally have worked well to recruit volunteers that take a “one size fits all” approach to service need to be changed to effectively recruit volunteers, because individual needs have changed and “one size fits all” approaches no longer meet individual needs (Wilson et al., 2002). Caro and Bass (2007) claim that one common method to foster volunteerism is to focus on the identity of the organization instead of focusing on characteristics of individuals. Insubstantial recruitment and support organization structures restrict an organization’s ability to connect with individuals,

especially those of color and lower socioeconomic status (Estes & Mahakian, 2001; Tang, Morrow-Howell, & Hong, 2007).

Address potential volunteers' individual needs. A person's individual connections can influence their choices on where to volunteer (Haski-Leventhal & Cnaan, 2009). Simon, Sturimer, and Steffens (2000) claims that the more an individual has a collective identification with other individuals, the more likely a person will volunteer for the in-group. The volunteer hospice department should implement a program where individuals contact other potential volunteers and invite them to volunteer. In addition, the volunteer coordinators should encourage volunteers to invite their friends to become volunteers. Implementing these changes would prove beneficial for the program because Penner (2004) found that would individuals are given a personal invitation to volunteer they are four times as likely to volunteer.

An organization also can engage volunteers who have transportation or mobility issues by providing them with work they can perform from home (Bradley, 1999-2000; Rochester & Hutchinson, 2002). Being accommodating in job assignments and scheduling is a way to engage a volunteer and is important for recruiting volunteers (Hong, Morrow-Howell, Tang, and Hinterlong, 2009). Another way to engage individuals is having current volunteers share their positive experiences with potential volunteers, Wittenberg-Lyles (2006) claims that narratives can act as an effective recruitment tool.

Help further volunteers' continuing education. People look for volunteer opportunities for various motives and keep an association with the organization if the organization helps them to meet their goals (Roesch et al., 2006). Continuing education classes are one way to engage a volunteer. Tanz and Spencer (2000) assert that retiring professionals are now looking for volunteer opportunities that are just as prestigious as their career jobs and allows them to

participate in experiences that further develop and maintain their job skills. In order to recruit younger volunteers it is essential to promote life-long learning (Wilson et al., 2002). According to a study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research associates, 37% of older adults state that furthering their education is extremely significant to them (Gardyn, 2000). Since so many individuals value furthering knowledge, offering education classes, seminars, and other educational opportunities may be beneficial in helping to recruit potential volunteers. A website that contains information about hospice, terminal illnesses, and caring for a loved one could be created to help create an atmosphere that promotes learning.

Reaching potential recruits. It is important to find new places to advertise to recruit younger volunteers. Traditionally recruitment ads have been placed in newspapers. Often press releases are sent out to local news channels asking to cover the organization's need for volunteers. It is important to find new places to recruitment ads because fewer young adults are reading the newspaper or watching the news. Zukin (1997) found that only 36% of 18 to 29 year olds monitor the news daily and less than 20% of young adults read the newspaper on any day. Advertising only in the newspaper or to local news stations misses a large portion of the entire population not just young adults. Only 52% of individuals between the ages of 30 to 50 years old and 67% of those older 50 follow the news every day (Zukin, 1997) On any given day it is estimated that 40% of people between the ages of 30-50 and 60% of those older than 50% will read the newspaper (Zukin, 1997). If the volunteer department would like to recruit younger volunteers recruitment ads could be placed on social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Recruitment ads could also be placed on local websites, such as Craigslist or Oregonlive. Advertising on Craigslist is free of charge and a large number of individuals visit Craigslist.

If the Kaiser Permanente hospice department was to develop a website, a section could be devoted to providing information about the volunteer program and upcoming trainings. Radio stations could be contacted to see if a radio show would be willing to talk about the need for hospice volunteers. Churches, neighborhood associations, and fraternal organizations, such as the Elks, Eagles, and Knights of Columbus, could be contacted and provided with information about the organization. Hopefully individuals from these groups would feel compelled to help individuals of their community. The main idea behind these ideas is to get the Kaiser Permanente volunteer hospice department out and known in the community. Many people have commented that they did not know that Kaiser Permanente had a hospice program. Frequently organizations rely too much on the assumption that their organization is fully understood and known (Wilson et al., 2002).

Offering effective persuasive appeals. Volunteer Coordinators should determine their target audience. Once the target audience is determined the recruitment strategy should be tailored to appeal to the target audience. For younger audiences the Volunteer Coordinators may consider a more technology savvy approach where as for an older audience they may consider a more traditional recruitment approach. The recruitment appeals should be customized to meet the needs and wants of the target audience. Black and Kovacs (1999) found that the most effective recruitment strategies are customized for the qualities of the intended group.

Kaiser Permanente's hospice volunteer department also might consider adding the phrase "even a few minutes would help" to its recruitment materials. Takada and Levine (2007) found that using this strategy was more successful in getting an individual to volunteer than was a direct request. However, it was most influential on those who scored high with empathetic concern. Empathetic concern can be defined as having a broad respect and concern for other's

well being (Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim, & Sleight, 1988; Takada & Levine, 2007). Perspective taking causes empathetic concern, which induces prosocial behavior, which includes volunteerism (Takada & Levine, 2007). This recruitment method is thought to be successful for numerous reasons, such as making creating excuses more difficult and gaining compliance due to impression management concerns (Cialdini & Schroder, 1976; Reeves, Marcolini & Martin, 1987; Takada & Levine, 2007) Research done on the addition of a similar phrase, “even a penny will help,” increased the number of donations by a significant amount and did not decrease the size of donation (Cialdini & Schroder, 1976; Takada & Levine, 2007).

Retaining Volunteers

Maintain work environments that nurture volunteers' needs. People keep their associations with an organization if the atmosphere created by the organization helps them to achieve their needs (Roesch et al., 2006). Individuals that are socially motivated may have their needs met just by belonging to an organization where as individuals that are altruistically (having an unselfish will to assist others) and materially (seeking career advancement) motivated rely on the organization structure to help meet their needs (Roesch et al., 2006). Materially motivated individuals need an organization structure that promotes continuing education (Roesch et al., 2006) Educational classes and seminars suggested earlier to help aid in recruitment will also help meet the needs of materially motivated individuals. Altruistically motivated individuals need to be able to help fulfill the needs of others (Roesch et al., 2006). It may prove beneficial for the organization, patients, and volunteer if altruistically individuals are assigned to cases where more assistance is needed, so they may feel as if they are contributing more to help fulfill the needs of others. Companionship only visits may not be a good fit for these individuals because they may feel as if they are not helping others. By understanding what motivates an individual,

organizations can better match volunteers to assignments that fit their individual and organization needs (Roesch et al., 2006).

Since Kaiser Permanente already interviews potential volunteers, the interview questions should be adjusted so that the interviewer can better understand the motives of the interviewee to ensure that they are given an assignment that best fulfills their needs as well as making sure the organization can meet the needs of the interviewee. If the interviewee's needs cannot be met by the organization the volunteer coordinators should refer them to an organization that can meet their needs. If the volunteer's needs are not being met they are very likely to leave the organization to find an organization that can meet their needs. Motivation may push the volunteer to get involved initially, but the organization's atmosphere is what keeps the individual involved in the organization (Roesch et al., 2006). Referring an individual to other organizations if they seem to not be a proper fit saves the organization training money, the time invested in an individual, and the time needed to find a replacement. It also opens up spots for individuals that fit the organization better. Kaiser Permanente only has twelve spots per training class and each training class occurs four times per year, which means that only 36 volunteers can be trained a year so the potential gain in volunteers is limited so it is essential to be able. If possible, the number of spots should not be limited to ensure that all potential volunteers who seem good fits for the organizations can be trained, so that a large volunteer base can be maintained.

Help volunteers learn to cope with anxiety and stress. According to Littlewood (1993) the presence of a dying individual can be extremely intimidating on social and individual levels (Wittenberg-Lyles, 2006). Consequently, many individuals face communication anxiety when interacting with an individual they perceived to be dying (Hayslip, 1987-1988). Hospice volunteers are a distinctive part of the population that must be willing to be placed in an

atmosphere plagued with death and dying (Wittenberg-Lyles, 2006). During the interview process there should be at least one question gauged at seeing how comfortable an individual may feel in an environment that deals with death and dying. If the individual appears to be not comfortable with being placed in this difficult environment but would be comfortable once training is complete then the volunteer should be sent through training if they appear to be a good fit for the organization in all other aspects. If the potential volunteer does not appear to be ready to be placed in this environment and probably will not be ready after completing training the volunteer coordinators should refer to other organizations that will fulfill their needs but will not place them in a situation they are not comfortable with. The volunteer coordinators could also offer to send the volunteer through the training and assign them to a job in the office if they are not sure if the potential volunteer would be comfortable with the dying environment.

Hospice organizations may benefit from training individuals how to use narratives because they can be used to develop another means of understanding in addition to offering a new method to gather information (Sunwolf, 1999; Wittenberg-Lyles, 2006). In order for an individual to be able to make sense of death they must be able to understand and interpret the dying process (Wittenberg-Lyles, 2006). Having the ability to share a reflection with others requires that an individual understand the phenomena that are taking place. An essential characteristic of a hospice volunteer is their ability to listen (Leete, 1994; Stolick, 2002) which allows them to have the ability just to sit and be silent with the patient (Stolick, 2002). According to Wittenberg-Lyles (2006) training individuals how to tell stories can bring to their attention the importance of being able to understand and interpret the dying process; knowing how just to sit and be silent; and having strong listening skills. Narratives can also be an effective recruitment tool (Wittenberg-Lyles, 2006). When volunteers share their positive antidotes potential

volunteers gain a sense of connection to the organization, which may encourage the volunteer to take the final step and make a commitment to volunteer.

Kaiser Permanente currently trains volunteers in a group along with all the other hospice organizations that form the Community Hospice Coalition. During the hospice training a cohesive unit often forms, but once the training is complete, individuals only work with other volunteers from their organization. Volunteers are only required to attend one meeting a year once they have completed the initial program even though every month there are volunteer meetings on a monthly basis. On average only about 15 volunteers attend the monthly meetings. There is no real volunteer peer group that has been established because Kaiser Permanente's hospice program volunteers very rarely interact with each other. It is important to have a volunteer peer group to help aid in establishing satisfaction, commitment, and helping to socialize new volunteers (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Simmel, 1950).

Facilitate skilled transitions out of the volunteer role. There are times when volunteers decide they wish to leave the hospice program. When the volunteer notifies the program that they want to leave the hospice program Claxton-Oldfield and Claxton-Oldfield (2008) suggest that the Volunteer Coordinator take the following steps. The first thing that the coordinator should do is schedule a face-to-face meeting with the volunteer wanting to leave the program, this allows the coordinator to carefully examine the reasons why the volunteer is planning to leave (Claxton-Oldfield & Claxton-Oldfield, 2008). If it is determined that the volunteer is leaving due to something about the program, even though only a small number of individuals stops volunteering in a program due to reasons that are within the control of the program, the coordinators has a chance to come up with a solution that might prevent a loss of the volunteer (Claxton-Oldfield & Claxton-Oldfield, 2008).

Conclusion

The goal of this proposal is develop a strategy that builds and maintains a volunteer base that meets all the needs of the Kaiser Permanente hospice volunteer program. Although many nonprofit organizations could take advantage of an aging potential volunteer population, few organizations have put themselves in position to do so (Hong et al., 2009). This proposal's suggestions aim to help the Kaiser Permanente hospice volunteer program put themselves in position to tap that population and also recruit younger volunteers. Since potential volunteers represent a diverse population, the strategies utilized in this proposal use a wide array of strategies and tactics that can be adapted to fit the attitudes and trends that develop in this environment (Wilson et al., 2002). By and large, the strategies suggested here are inexpensive and easy to implement, so it should be feasible to implement and test these strategies before 2011.

These strategies will benefit the organization the most if they are implemented soon. Wilson et al. (2002) believe that innovative recruitment and retention strategies should be tested and implemented before the first 77 million baby boomers begin to turn 65 years of age, because baby boomers will have a major impact on the future of volunteerism. Non-profit organizations must effectively manage limited resources such as money and human capital, especially during difficult economic times like the present. Since the suggestions made earlier in this proposal are easy to implement and cost effective, some of the resources currently spent on volunteer recruitment and retention may be redirected to other needful areas of the hospice department.

If the proposal suggestions are not taken there may be several consequences for the Kaiser Permanente. When a volunteer departs from the hospice department it loses a valuable resource, the time devoted to the volunteer, and the time it takes to find a replacement (Roesch et al., 2006). If the volunteer program fails to meet its minimum volunteer recruitment the hospice

program may be fined or lose their Medicare subsidies. It is important to keep meet Medicare requirements since most of the patients in the program pay for the program through Medicare benefits. Even if the minimum Medicare requirements are met by the program there may be insufficient volunteers to provide a volunteer to every patient that needs a volunteer, which would significantly decrease the patient's quality of care.

The purpose of this proposal is to give the Kaiser Permanente hospice volunteer department tools to develop a recruitment and retention model that builds and maintains a strong volunteer base. It is not expected that all proposals to be implemented but instead that the parts of proposals that can be sustained with the resources, funds, and tools available be adopted. I hope the interested parties find these recommendations useful for consideration.

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