

VOLUNTEER FOLLOWERSHIP IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Followership is an essential part of the leadership process. There would be no leaders without followers. A large portion of followers in nonprofit organizations are composed of volunteers. These voluntary followers play a critical role within the structure of nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations are one of the fastest growing types of organizations in the world today. These organizations are challenged with the task of recruiting, motivating, and retaining unpaid volunteers. The purpose of this literature review was to explore volunteerism within the context of followership in order to gain a better understanding of followers in volunteer roles within nonprofit organizations. The literature examined addressed various labels for the types of followers and the characteristics of effective followers. Additionally, the literature revealed that socially constructed perceptions followers have of themselves within the context of their organizations have an influence on their role as a follower. Research has not shown how these concepts apply to voluntary followers. However, the literature inspects both functional analysis and role identity theories in relation to volunteerism. In general, there is an overall lack of research that studies volunteerism in the context of followership. From this review of the literature it is suggested that further research should combine functional analysis theory and role identity theory within volunteerism with current followership research to reveal avenues for further study that will provide better insight into the role volunteer followers in nonprofit organizations.

Keywords: Volunteer, Followers, Followership, Nonprofit organizations, Volunteerism

INTRODUCTION

Followership has come to be recognized as an extremely significant part of understanding the process of leadership. Leaders do not define leadership, but rather followers are what define leadership (Meindl, 1995). Therefore, followers are not only vital to the leadership process, they are essential. The leadership process is more than just leadership as a concept, but rather it implies a relationship and exchange between leaders and followers (Northouse, 2010). In the absence of followers, there would be no one for leaders to lead. Leadership cannot exist without followership (Hollander, 1993; Kellerman, 2008). Leaders in nonprofit organizations will often time lead unpaid followers known as volunteers. Volunteers are an extremely valuable human resource within nonprofit organizations that many times work alongside paid employees (Worth, 2009). In 2011, 64.3 million people volunteered and worked the amount of time equal to that of 8.9 million full-time employees (Blackwood et al., 2012). However, there is not sufficient research that explores volunteers as followers. The purpose of this review of the literature is to explore volunteerism within the context of followership in order to understand the unique characteristics of followers in volunteer roles within nonprofit organizations.

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Nonprofits organizations play a significant role in the world today. There were approximately 2.3 million nonprofit organizations in operation within the United States in 2010 (Blackwood et al., 2012). The vast majority of nonprofit organizations currently operating today were established after 1950. Additionally, the concept of a united nonprofit sector became popular in the 1970s. Nonprofits are one of the fastest growing types of organizations in the world (Hall, 2005; Worth, 2009). These types of organizations are extremely difficult to generalize, because they vary tremendously in scope and scale. Nonprofits can range from informal grassroots organizations to multibillion dollar foundations consisting educational institutions, churches, healthcare facilities, service organizations, special interest and advocacy groups, fraternities and sororities, and self-help groups (Anheier, 2005; Van Til, 2005; Nahavandi, 2012). They also provide a wide assortment of services that include but are not limited to human services, credit and savings, environment and natural resources, local development and housing, humanitarian relief and international development, human rights, assistance to rural farmers, educational services, and religious services (Anheier, 2005; Worth, 2009). Well known nonprofit organizations include the American Cancer Society, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Mayo Clinic, Meals on Wheels, the Red Cross, AARP, Stanford University, the Salvation Army, and the Junior League just to name a few (Anheier, 2005; Nahavandi, 2012). These organizations have to do with almost every aspect of people's lives (Courtney, 2002). Simply defined nonprofits organizations are self-governing private organizations that do not make a profit for owners or members, but do provide some type of benefit to the public which they may or may not charge a fee for (Nahavandi, 2012; Worth, 2009).

Nonprofit organizations have characteristics that are unique to them. Although some nonprofits can be considered highly profitable, all money generated by these organizations is reinvested into the organization. Essential to the mission of nonprofits is to serve the public good; they must create and maintain public value or benefit (Weinberg, 2010; Worth, 2009). One of the ways nonprofit organizations are held accountable is by determining if they are adhering to their mission (Phipps and Burbach, 2010). Additionally, nonprofits are governed by a voluntary board of directors that are unpaid, but have a stake and/or interest in the organization and its mission (Axelrod, 2005; Nahavandi, 2012). Lastly, nonprofits are largely funded through contributions and grants (Hall, 2005; Nahavandi, 2012; Silk, 2005).

In addition to the unique characteristics of nonprofit organizations, they also face very unique challenges. Many nonprofit organizations are challenged with how to recruit, motivate, and retain workers. These workers include individuals who are paid and many others who are volunteers (McCurley, 2005; Nahavandi, 2012; Skoglund, 2006; Worth, 2009). Therefore, it is essential that leaders are effective at motivating and inspiring followers to join their organizations (Nahavandi, 2012; Worth, 2009). It also is important to understand the motives individuals have for working for nonprofit organizations, especially on a volunteer basis which will be explored later on in this article (Clary et al., 1998).

UNDERSTANDING FOLLOWERSHIP

In order to understand volunteer followers in the nonprofit sector, it is important to first have a basic understanding of the concept of followership. It has been noted in the research that there are negative connotations associated with being a follower (Agho, 2009; Banutu-Gomez, 2004; Chaleff, 2008; Hertig, 2010; Kellerman, 2008). It has even been suggested that followership does not exist, since followers partake in the leadership process not a followership process (Rost, 2008). However, the idea of what it means to be a follower needs

to be altered. People are programmed from childhood to not be followers, but in reality effective followers play a more important and complex role than just following (Hertig, 2010; Kellerman, 2008). There are important skills that are necessary in order for an individual to be considered an effective follower, such as the capacity to think critically and independently, the ability to give and receive constructive criticism, and the capability to be innovative and creative (Banutu-Gomez, 2004; Kelley, 1988; Hertig, 2010). Furthermore, followers work with leaders to achieve a “common purpose” within an organization (Chaleff, 2003, p. 17). Consequently, there is much more involved in being an effective follower than just taking direction from the leadership.

Effective Followers

Kelley's (1988) seminal work expanded greatly on the idea of followership and forever changed the way followers are viewed in relation to leadership. Followers were classified into five types based on two different dimensions. The first dimension being the level at which the follower is able to think critically and independently, and second the level of active or passive involvement in the follower role. This concept was considered controversial at the time of its publication, because it challenged commonly held ideas about followers (Kelley, 2008). Additional researchers have also assigned their own labels to the types of followers (Chaleff, 2003, 2008; Kellerman, 2008).

Effective followers have essential qualities that make them effective (Banutu-Gomez, 2004; Chaleff, 2003; Kelley, 1988, 2008). The qualities considered essential for followers to possess in order to be effective are self-management, commitment, honesty, competence, focus, and courage. Many of the qualities that are essential to effective followers overlap with the qualities that make leaders effective (Agho, 2009; Kelley, 1988). Although effective followers are ideal employees to have, they do not always appear to be the most desirable employees to leaders. Leaders might be concerned that these types of followers will not stay challenged by their position in an organization, resulting in possible higher turnover. Also, ethically questionable organizations might worry that this type of follower could cause possible complications in their practices and ultimately become a whistleblower. This concern most likely is not issue for ethically sound companies. Generally, organizations with a high number of effective followers perform better than other organizations, because these followers do not rely on leadership to provide direction and motivation which results in lower costs to the organization (Kelley, 1988, 2008). Ultimately, effective followers complement and provide support to those in leadership positions (Howell and Mendez, 2008).

How Followers Perceive Followership

A subsequent area of followership that is important to take into consideration is the way in which follower's own perception of followership determines how they view their role as a follower. It is important to understand how followers perceive their roles within an organization in order to uncover the social construct of followership (Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien and Pillai, 2007). The follower role is one that is complex and multidimensional. Research has revealed three socially constructed meanings of followership which are passive, active, and proactive in nature. Evidence also suggests that individuals in follower roles embrace many meanings of followership. Followers' perception of the role of followership is influenced by the context that is created by the leadership of the organization. Therefore, a follower's ability to be passive, active, or proactive depends to an extent on the perception of followership by the leadership (Carsten et al., 2010). The social constructions of followership are a product of the context of the organization in which the followership exists (Meindl, 1995).

Volunteer Followership

Research on followership is often limited to understanding the role of follower as an employee. However, the role of followers extends beyond an individual's place of employment (Chaleff, 2003; Kellerman, 2008). Volunteers are a type of follower within a nonprofit organization. The role of volunteer is not exclusive to nonprofit organizations. Many individuals volunteer outside of nonprofit organizations or any type of organization all together (Finkelstein and Brannick, 2007). Although many nonprofits do employ paid workers, this section will focus on followership on a voluntary basis within the nonprofit sector. It is important to note that the term volunteer is sometimes used differently by some organizations. For example, recruits of the Teach for America program are often referred to as volunteers, even though they receive a full teacher salary with benefits and monetary funding for educational use in return for their service to the program (Fenzel and Flippen, 2006; Teach for America, 2012). The term volunteer in this context refers to someone who works without monetary compensation or tangible benefits.

As previously mentioned, nonprofit organizations face challenges recruiting, motivating, and retaining volunteers (McCurley, 2005; Nahavandi, 2012; Skoglund, 2006; Worth, 2009). In order to further understand these challenges and to attempt to find solutions to them it is essential to take into consideration why volunteers decide to volunteer. It is important to note that volunteers generally seek out opportunities to help instead of encountering a situation where they can help by chance. Therefore, prospective volunteers have the chance to contemplate what type of volunteer work and amount involvement they want to commit themselves to before they volunteer. The individual's active role in choosing to serve and planning out their own course of action as a volunteer is a recurring theme in volunteerism (Omoto et al., 2010). As a result, it is beneficial to understand the motives individuals have to become volunteers.

Functional Analysis Theory

"The same volunteer work can serve different functions for different individuals, and the reasons for helping can change over time" (Finkelstein, 2008, p. 1354). The concept in which it is believed that individuals volunteer to serve their own psychological functions is referred to as the functional approach to motivation, or functional analysis (Clary et al., 1998; Finkelstein, 2008, 2010). The six motives for volunteering in the context of functional analysis are values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. The values motive is used to express values related to selflessness and compassion for others. The understanding motive is used to allow new learning experiences to occur and to utilize skills, knowledge, abilities that might otherwise go unutilized. The social motive is used to strengthen social relationships and engage in an activity that is viewed positively by others. The career motive is used to use volunteering as a means of advancing one's career, increasing job prospects, or to gain career related experience. The protective motive is used to reduce guilt and negative feelings about oneself and as a means of addressing one's own personal problems. Finally, the enhancement motive is used to increase self-esteem and to further psychological development and growth (Clary et al., 1998). It has been suggested that volunteers can uniquely combine motives to suit their needs as a volunteer (Gronlund, 2011). Individuals chose volunteer activities that they believe will help satisfy the motivations that are important to them and are more likely to continue volunteering if these motivations are being satisfied (Clary et al., 1998; Finkelstein, 2008, 2010; Finkelstein and Bannick, 2007).

Shye (2010) argues that instead of focusing on a set group of motives when understanding what motivates volunteers to volunteer, researchers should focus on finding out the degree at which the act of volunteering rewards the volunteer. Attention should be placed on the needs

individuals perceive to be satisfied through participating in volunteer work. In implementing this type of design, the scope of volunteer motivation research is significantly broadened. This highlights areas that have been previously overlooked by research pertaining to volunteerism. The first implication of this design is that it allows researchers to group volunteer motivations by if they relate to culture, social, physical, personality, and well being of the volunteer. Second, this design allows researchers to identify rewards that are not satisfied by volunteer work. Third, this design widens volunteer research to also take into consideration other activities that may compete with volunteering by fulfilling the same needs. Lastly, this design integrates many significant studies that have been conducted in the field of volunteerism (Shye, 2010).

ROLE IDENTITY THEORY

Individuals are made up of numerous social role identities that are developed from social interactions and the expectations of others. These developed social role identities are what consequently guide future behavior. In regards to volunteering, the longer amount of time one volunteers the more likely he or she is to develop a volunteer role identity. Once this occurs volunteering goes from being an activity to becoming part of one's identity (Finkelstein, 2008; Finkelstein and Bannick, 2007; Grube and Pilliavin, 2000). It has also been suggested that there are multiple role identities that can be satisfied through the action of volunteering, instead of the singular volunteer role (Gronlund, 2011). Role identity has, nevertheless, been identified as a major predictor of the amount of time worked and the total service duration of volunteers (Chacon et al., 2007; Grube and Pilliavin, 2000).

There are additional influences that contribute to the time spent volunteering. Farmer and Fedor's (2001) investigated factors that might influence the amount of volunteers' contributions of time, energy, and personal resources that are given to the organization. It was discovered that volunteers who felt that the organization's demands interfered with their career and family activities contributed less to the organization in both time and money. It was also revealed that social interaction with other volunteers led to increased contributions in both time and money to the organization. These findings provide insight into how to keep volunteers motivated and to contribute more to the organization they volunteer for (Farmer and Fedor, 2001).

Functional analysis and role identity theory can provide guidance about how to approach the challenges faced by many nonprofit organizations of effectively recruiting, motivating, and retaining volunteers. Recruitment and motivation can both be addressed by the motives identified through functional analysis and retention can be addressed through continued motive satisfaction and development of role identity. These two theories have been previously been examined jointly, but not within the context of followership (Finkelstein, 2008; Finkelstein and Bannick, 2007).

DISCUSSION

Followership is a complex process that is essential not only in the study of leadership, but also in the study of organizations. Followers play a necessary and vital role in organizations (Kellerman, 2008; Kelley, 1988). Therefore, it is evident that followers would play just as significant a role as volunteers in nonprofits organizations. The number of nonprofits organizations is currently growing. Thus, the need for volunteers who make up a large portion of the workforce is also growing (Hall, 2005; Worth, 2009). However, volunteer followers pose unique challenges to organizations, because they are less dependent on the organization than paid employees (Brudney, 2005). It is important for nonprofit organizations

to understand these valuable and unique followers in order to improve recruitment, motivation, and retention.

Although there are negative connotations associated with the term follower, they play a multifaceted and critical role within organizations (Hertig, 2010; Kellerman, 2008). Followers work with leaders to achieve a common goal within organizations (Chaleff, 2008). Researchers have categorized followers into different types based on their qualities (Chaleff, 2003, 2008; Kelley, 1988, 2008; Kellerman, 2008). Categories such as these that pertain to the qualities of followers are not addressed within the volunteer literature, nor has it been examined if the same types of categories apply to volunteers. Furthermore, specific qualities have been identified that distinguish effective followers. Many of the qualities of effective followers are the same as those that are essential for effective leaders (Agho, 2009; Kelley, 1988). The overlap in these qualities helps explain the why effective relationships between followers and leaders are ones that are complementary in nature (Howell and Mendez, 2008). The literature has also revealed that followers' self perception is influenced by how followership is perceived by within a given organization with importance placed on how the leaders view the followership (Carsten, et al., 2010).

Volunteers are unique followers in organizations, because they provide service without compensation. Also, they typically seek out opportunities to provide such service (Omoto et al., 2010). Therefore, recognizing the motivations individuals have for seeking out volunteer opportunities is important to understanding volunteer followers. Research has recognized that volunteers' motives to volunteer can be attributed to fulfilling personal needs (Clary et al., 1998; Finkelstein, 2008, 2010; Shye, 2010). Furthermore, the literature suggests that volunteers continue to contribute their time in order to satisfy their identity as a volunteer (Grube and Pilliavin, 2000; Finkelstein, 2008; Finkelstein and Bannick, 2007). The knowledge of what motivates volunteers to volunteer in the first place and how much time they contribute to organizations is important to understanding volunteer followership. However, there is not enough research available that explores the quality of the contribution made by volunteers and what makes volunteer followers effective. These areas are important because nonprofits need volunteers that are effective and are able to make a valuable contribution to the organization.

The current literature on volunteerism can be utilized to offer possible solutions to help mitigate the major challenges of recruiting, motivating, and retaining volunteers faced by nonprofit organizations. A major portion of the existing research examines functional analysis and role identity theories in relation to volunteering (Clary et al., 1998; Finkelstein, 2008, 2010; Finkelstein and Bannick, 2007; Gronlund, 2011; Grube and Pilliavin, 2000; Shye, 2010). Yet, further research would be extremely helpful in providing further insight on the topic of volunteer followership. A better understanding of volunteers would benefit those who work in the nonprofit sector, especially in a leadership capacity. It would be advantageous because volunteers provide a substantial economic value to nonprofit organizations. Even though volunteers provide free service, there are still costs associated with maintaining a volunteer program (Worth, 2009). Many of the expenditures related to volunteers are related to the funds spent on the orientation and training of new volunteers (Brudney, 2005). Therefore, if organizations were better able to retain the volunteers they have it would provide a financial savings to the organization and the funds could be distributed elsewhere.

Specifically, additional research that explores volunteers in the framework of followership is needed. There is currently an extremely limited amount of research in existence that examines volunteerism in this context. Furthermore, the central focus of the research is on the

role of leadership and its relation to voluntary followers (Rowold and Rohmann, 2008). Further research would aid in the understanding of how to increase effectiveness in managing volunteers. Combining the concept of followership with volunteerism might be able to offer those in the nonprofit sector better insight into the unique type of followers who volunteer for nonprofit organizations.

CONCLUSION

Nonprofit organizations depend greatly on volunteers and understanding these volunteers in the context of followership is critical. Future research should explore volunteers within the context of follower types, such as those presented in the works of Kelley (1988, 2008), Chaleff (2003, 2008), and Kellerman (2008). In particular, researchers should examine if the motives one has for volunteering have any relation to the type of follower the individual is within the nonprofit organization. Additionally, the social constructs of followership should be studied in conjunction with identity theory in volunteerism to determine if one's identity as a volunteer is influenced by one's socially constructed perception of oneself within the organization. Research such as this will provide the nonprofit sector with an increased understanding of the follower role volunteers play within nonprofit organizations.

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