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Overcoming Road Blocks: Change Strategies for Arts/Museum Volunteer Programs

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(Editor-generated) Abstract:

The authors describe a planned change initiative implemented with a small town symphony that was led by the organization's volunteer resource manager functioning as a change agent. Seven stages of change are described: 1) shock; 2) disbelief; 3) guilt; 4) projection; 5) rationalization; 6) integration; and 7) acceptance. The authors conclude that volunteers can be encouraged to accept change by providing an environment where it is permissible to work through the stages of change. The volunteer program manager can be the catalyst to help volunteers process and accept change more quickly and in a supportive environment.

(Editor-generated) Key Words: volunteers, change, symphony, strategies

Volunteers in arts organizations face constant changes: paid staff change, the expectations for volunteers change, the leadership of trustees changes or the expectations of the community toward the organization shift. And just when the volunteer things change is done, a new form or procedure is introduced. Managing volunteers means helping them accept change.

By understanding the stages of change the volunteer program manager can orchestrate or plan for change. Because everyone deals with change on a daily basis, some predictable stages or steps have been identified. The movement of individuals through these stages can be quite haphazard. For example, when the volunteer manager at

a small town symphony knew that the conductor would be leaving, she recognized that each volunteer would react differently to the news. Since the leave-taking was not sought by the conductor, but forced by the trustees, it was expected that the fall-out would include lawsuits and adverse publicity. This would in turn cause musicians, staff, and volunteers to react to the change in ways that could hurt the symphony. The volunteer manager decided to plan for the change by becoming a change agent and helping her volunteers handle their various reactions in a way that would not hurt the symphony.

Stages of Change

A change agent begins by understanding that change has some predictable steps or increments. The stages of change according to Lippitt, Langseth, and Mossop (1986) are: 1) shock; 2) disbelief; 3) guilt; 4) projection; 5) rationalization; 6) integration; and 7) acceptance. Volunteers may not move through these stages in order, they may become stuck at one stage, refuse to move ahead, bypass a stage, or speed through all the steps in a minute or more (depending on the scope of the change). Volunteers dealing with the change of a new artistic leader (e.g., curator, conductor, or artistic director) might experience these typical reactions:

- * Shock: "This isn't happening!"
- * Disbelief: "I can't believe this is happening."
- * Guilt: "This is my fault! If only I had..."
- * Projection: "This is their fault. They caused this problem."
- * Rationalization: "Well if she leaves then maybe we will get someone who understands the volunteers." Or, "If *they* think this is a better way to do it, I suppose I better learn how."
- * Integration: "I'm having trouble remembering the way it used to be done." Or, "The new conductor has a certain flair."
- * Acceptance: "I want to show you how to do this, it's really easy and a valuable skill." Or, "We made this change at the museum and it might be worth trying at the church."

Volunteers can be encouraged to accept change by providing an environment where it is permissible to work through the stages of change. In fact, there must be acceptance of the pain of change and a willingness to

assist the individual in processing change. Every effort should be taken to reduce the likelihood of volunteers feeling forced into maintaining old positions or procedures to avoid the new change.

Change Strategy

Change in an arts organization usually is conducted with an intense media spotlight. Many people are affected by decision: patrons, artists, visiting professionals, critics, paid staff, volunteers, musicians, actors, and others. This scrutiny can make it difficult to bring about change without strong resistance. With adults it is virtually impossible to avoid all resistance, but it can be reduced through the use of a change strategy.

The change agent is a leader with insight and clarity of direction. This individual is not simply accepting of change, but actively strives to manage it. This is most effectively accomplished through the use of a planned change strategy.

Awareness

At this stage the volunteers are introduced or made aware of the idea or possible change. It is important to provide information, no matter how skimpy. Even if few details are known, the volunteers should be alerted long before the actual change is made. The volunteer coordinator or director needs to be positive about the change. For example if a new gift shop is being designed, volunteers should know about it as soon as possible. Rumors abound and it is better if even the most meager information comes from a reliable source. This is also the time to educate volunteers about the current financial situation and potential gains to be

expected from the new gift shop. It helps them understand the broader dynamic of change throughout the organization.

Interest

As volunteers become more aware of the impending change their attitudes about the change can be positively influenced. This is done by increasing the flow of information about the change. It is especially important to present this information as it relates to the volunteers. For example, if a museum is changing access for security reasons, it is wise to relate the changes to the need for security of both volunteers and things. Everyone wants the collection to be safe, but if it will take five minutes longer to get into the building from the parking lot, the reasons for the change are best explained in personal terms. As the volunteers' interest increases, they begin to see the impact.

Evaluation

This is a process of visualization. Here the volunteer can be asked to evaluate the change by thinking or sharing all the pro's and con's related to the change. They might be encouraged to "imagine" the change as it relates directly to them. It is important to allow the volunteers to express anxiety about their own ability to make the change. Many adults have a fear of failing in new situations and, rather than explore those new situations, they retreat (and not always quietly). The effective change agent creates an environment where it is "o.k." to mentally experiment with the change. Suppose volunteers are talking about the change in museum access for volunteers and staff mentioned earlier. The volunteer director/coordinator might

say: "What new things will you see coming into the building that way?" "Are there things you will miss coming in the old way?" "What will it be like for visitors seeing volunteers arriving at that door?" This sounds like mental gymnastics, but it gives the volunteer the opportunity to express anxiety and practice dealing with the new change mentally before it becomes a physical reality.

Trial

This is where the volunteers try out the change on a small scale or practice level. An ideal way to deal with this step is to train a core group of volunteers to carry out the change and have them teach other volunteers. This strategy increases the number of change agents in the organization. This technique is especially effective in dealing with new internal systems: new forms, new check-in procedures, new ways to sign up for complimentary tickets or events, etc. It is at this step that volunteers make the decision to make the change or reject it and sometimes leave the organization. A successful transition in this phase leaves volunteers proud of skills and more willing to tackle the next change. Arts volunteers can be heard to say things such as, "Well, if we mastered the new computer security system, we can adapt to anything."

Adoption

An effective leader who plans for change and gives the opportunity for volunteers to express their shock and disbelief is rewarded. This step occurs when the change has been implemented and volunteers handily accept and integrate the new "thing" into their exiting jobs. The surest indicator of

adoption is when a volunteer becomes the best advocate for the change when talking with other volunteers or staff. For example, a symphony orchestra fired its conductor of 11 years in the glare of a media spotlight. A part-time volunteer coordinator began a systematic process to help volunteers deal with the loss and get them ready for the arrival of a new conductor. In the six months prior to the arrival a new conductor there was ample opportunity to deal with shock and disbelief. The volunteers who stayed worked through their anger to express their support for the orchestra. This happened not by accident but through a systematic plan to make volunteers aware of the change build their interest and commitment to change, think about the effects of the change, practice the reaction to the change by greeting visiting conductors, and adopt the new persons coming to lead the orchestra.

Conclusion

Helping volunteers arrive at the adoption stage occurs more easily if volunteer concerns have been considered in the entire process. Volunteers cannot be forced through the five steps. Instead, they need to be an integral part of the change process by having the opportunity to air their concerns and suggest options and alternatives.

The stages of change are natural and occur without any assistance from the outside. The severity of reaction to change can be mitigated. The volunteer program manager can be the catalyst to help volunteers process and accept change more quickly and in a supportive environment.

Reference

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About the Authors

Heller An Shapiro has worked in nonprofit and volunteer management since 1984. From 1997 until 2007, she served as Executive Director of the Osteogenesis Imperfecta Foundation in Gaithersburg, MD. While serving as Director of Volunteers at the Friends of the Kennedy Center, her program received a President's Volunteer Action Award. She chaired the National Summit on Trends in Volunteer Leadership Development and served as a member of the boards of the Association for Volunteer Administration and the National Health Council. Heller founded Managers of Volunteer Programs in the Arts, a networking and education group, served as a columnist for *Volunteer Today*, and is the author of the *Christmas in April*USA Board Building Manual* and a chapter in *Managing Volunteer Diversity*.

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Appendix A
Stages of Learning Work Plan Sheet

What will you do about change? What will volunteers do?

Awareness of need or problem		
Active interest, information gathering, self-inquiry		
Evaluation		
Trial, practice of new behavior and emotional insight		
New learned behavior		