LDR 815: Transforming People Problems

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**Leadership Challenge: Retaining and Recruiting Volunteers in a Post-Pandemic Reality**

**Introduction**

The health of an entire community depends on its volunteers. While the COVID-19 pandemic may not be fully to blame for reduced volunteerism, community volunteer recruitment efforts face challenges in a post-pandemic world because individuals are hesitant to participate in-person, and organizations fear risk in utilizing volunteers despite the great need and benefits to all. In this paper, we will address the following research questions:

1) How can the perception of community volunteering be changed in order to increase the number of an organization’s volunteers?

2) What role do nonprofit leaders play in retaining and recruiting community volunteers?

In order to answer these research questions, we must explore why people volunteer and also why they leave or stay.

During the present *post*-pandemic era, our local hospital’s most dramatic public health crisis has subsided despite continued staff shortages. Yet the Foundation’s volunteer membership has not recovered. In order to continue helping our hospital with unfulfilled equipment needs, it is essential for membership numbers to increase.

As Vice President of the Foundation, I am taking it upon myself to analyze effective ways to grow our membership base. In this paper I examine several scholarly sources of current existing research on volunteer retention and the role of nonprofit leaders in maintaining a strong base of community volunteers. This strengthening is more critical in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Analysis of the Situation**

While the pandemic is certainly not fully to blame for reduced volunteerism, community volunteer recruitment efforts face challenges in a post-pandemic world because individuals have become hesitant to participate in-person, and organizations have become hesitant to utilize volunteers despite the need and benefits to all (Colibaba et al., 2022, p. 5). Community volunteers rely on nonprofit leaders to insure their safety while providing opportunities for meaningful engagement. One psychological factor that provides meaning to volunteers is “the sense of ownership one holds toward the organization” (Ainsworth, 2020, p. 2). With the feeling of ownership, one is less likely to abandon that which they own. While, as Ainsworth asserts, “the sense of ownership may be generated by those involved in volunteering” (p. 3), I maintain that the psychological perception of volunteers’ ownership must first be cultivated and overtly encouraged by a nonprofit organization’s *leadership*.

During the pandemic, nonprofit leaders who successfully retained volunteers did so by fostering a sense of psychological identity (Wakefield, et al., 2022, p. 909). Wakefield’s research demonstrated that a community’s perception of volunteering can be enhanced by those leaders who promote volunteer safety and identity. Leaders who failed to cultivate a culture of safety and identity risk diminished community perception of volunteering, thereby limiting their ability to retain and recruit volunteers (Wakefield, p. 917). Nonprofit leaders must embrace both safety and identity in order to successfully retain and recruit community volunteers in this post-pandemic era.

**Applying Leadership Theory in an Era of Uncertainty: Classic Leadership Theories**

**Leadership Grid Theory**

Robert Blake’s seminal Leadership Grid model (1991) identifies 5 leadership styles based on the leader’s concern for people versus concern for results. The Grid styles are: Team Leadership (9,9), Middle of the Road Leadership (5,5), Authority-Compliance Leadership (9,1), Country Club Leadership (1,9), and Improvised Leadership (1,1). In this paper I discuss the styles of the Leadership Grid by defining each of the five leadership styles identifying the leader’s concern for people versus concern for results, discussing when it is appropriate for a leader to use 9,9; 5,5; 9,1; and 1,9 supporting each style with a specific example, and reflecting on the value of the Leadership Grid to my leadership practice and identifying two or more important insights gained.

Blake further developed the Behavioral “Concern for Task” and “Concern for People” by creating a grid allowing leaders to evaluate their effectiveness. The grid highlights the importance of leader behavior on followers. Leaders can choose and apply the best behavior to the needs of the follower.

Behavior theories assert that the quality of interaction between a leader and the follower is the determining factor in effective leadership. But this has its limits: It doesn't take the work environment or external factors into consideration when evaluating leadership. However, Blake’s grid is a useful tool for better defining behavioral variables. Its five main components are:

1. Impoverished Management – Low Results/Low People

The Impoverished or "indifferent" manager is mostly ineffective. With a low regard for creating systems that get the job done, and with little interest in creating a satisfying or motivating team environment, this manager's results are inevitably disorganization, dissatisfaction and disharmony.

2. Produce-or-Perish Management – High Results/Low People

Also known as "authoritarian" or "authority-compliance" managers, people in this category believe that their team members are simply a means to an end. The team's needs are always secondary to its productivity.

This type of manager is autocratic, has strict work rules, policies and procedures, and can view punishment as an effective way of motivating team members. This approach can drive impressive production results at first, but low team morale and motivation will ultimately affect people's performance, and this type of leader will struggle to retain high performers.

They probably adhere to the Theory X approach to motivation, which assumes that employees are naturally unmotivated and dislike working. A manager who believes people are self-motivated and happy to work is said to follow Theory Y

3. Middle-of-the-Road Management – Medium Results/Medium People

A Middle-of-the-Road or "status quo" manager tries to balance results and people, but this strategy is not as effective as it may sound. Through continual compromise, they fail to inspire high performance and also fail to meet people's needs fully. The result is that their team will likely deliver only mediocre performance.

4. Country Club Management – High People/Low Results

The Country Club or "accommodating" style of manager is most concerned about their team members' needs and feelings. They assume that, as long as their people are happy and secure, they'll work hard.

What tends to be the result is a work environment that is very relaxed and fun, but where productivity suffers because there is a lack of direction and control.

5. Team Management – High Production/High People

According to the Blake model, Team Management is the most effective leadership style. It reflects a leader who is passionate about their work and who does the best they can for the people they work with.

Team or "sound" managers commit to their organization's goals and mission, motivate the people who report to them, and work hard to get people to stretch themselves to deliver great results. But, at the same time, they're inspiring figures who look after their teams. Someone led by a Team manager feels respected and empowered, and is committed to achieving her goals.

Team managers prioritize both the organization's production needs and their people's needs. They do this by making sure that their team members understand the organization’s purpose, and by involving them in determining production needs.

When people are committed to, and have a stake in, the organization's success, their needs and production needs coincide. This creates an environment based on trust and respect, which leads to high satisfaction, motivation and excellent results. Team managers likely adopt the Theory Y approach to motivation.

In my organization, the Bear Valley Hospital Foundation, we function best using Middle of the Road (5,5) because we currently have only 8 active members and we can only do so much fundraising without burning out. Therefore, “Concern for People” (small group of 100% volunteers) must be evenly balanced with “Concern for Tasks” (fundraising goals and events). The Blake and Mouton grid is useful in this way.

**Situational Leadership Theory**

Blanchard and Hershey’s (1993) Situational Leadership model prescribes the appropriate leadership behavior based on the follower’s competence and commitment. The model assumes leaders can adapt their behavior to the styles of Directing (S1), Coaching (S2), Supporting (S3), and Delegating (S4) based on follower’s needs. I will be discussing the Situational Leadership model by defining and matching each of the four leadership styles with the follower’s developmental level, discussing when it is appropriate for a leader to use S,1; S,2; S,3; and S,4 supporting each with a specific example, and reflecting on the value of Situational Leadership to my leadership practice and identifying two or more important insights gained. The context includes the nature of those being led, the make-up of the leader and the tasks facing a group. Each situation is unique and the ideal leader-led situation will be unique, as well. Situational Leadership Theory is the first of the Contingency Theories we’ve learned about. Situational Leadership theory says that the same leadership style cannot be practiced in all situations, depending upon the circumstance and environmental context the leadership style also changes. A somewhat confusing aspect of the competency was this very brief notation of situational Leadership as “Telling, Selling, Participating, and Delegating.” At first I thought that these were four additional principles. However, I later discovered that they essentially align with the grid components.

Contextually, in our Hospital Foundation the situation changes frequently. This is because – with only 8 active members – we “wear many hats” and leadership roles shift. But in general, I would say that I mostly utilize Directing (S1) and Delegating (S4). For example, I must act as an elected Officer (co-Vice President), communications person, event set-up person, and liaison between the community and the Foundation and hospital staff. Thus I must jostle the situational behaviors. But I mostly utilize Directing (S1) and Delegating (S4).

**Path-Goal Theory**

Path-Goal Theory (House, 1996) focuses on how leaders motivate followers to accomplish goals emphasizing the relationships between the leader’s style, and the characteristics of followers and tasks. By using the appropriate leadership style of directive, supportive, participative or achievement-oriented, leaders increase followers’ success and job satisfaction. I will discuss the Path Goal theory by responding to all the following: Defining and matching each of the four leadership styles with follower and task characteristics, discussing when it is appropriate for a leader to use the directive, supportive, participative or achievement-oriented style supporting each with a specific example, and reflecting on the value of Path Goal to my leadership practice by identifying two or more important insights gained.

Path-Goal theory is another type of Contingency Leadership theory. According to path-goal theory, a leader’s effectiveness depends on a variety of employee and environmental contingent factors and certain leadership styles. The function or purpose of the leaders is to help members in achieving goals by identifying a clear path and removing obstacles. This is done by providing information, support and other resources that are required by employees to complete the task. Leadership is not viewed as a position of power. Rather, leaders act as coaches and facilitators to their subordinates. Each leadership style will be effective in some situations but not in others. Therefore, the relationship between a leader’s style and effectiveness is dependent on several factors that need constant evaluation and assessment.

In our Hospital Foundation, although my role is often as delegator, I find myself playing more of a *Supportive Leadership* role overall. Yet we are a small group, so we are egalitarian. Which means that we collectively utilize the *Participatory Leadership* style in order to accomplish our overall goals.

**Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory**

LMX theory emphasizes the relationship and interaction between leaders and followers. I will discuss the LMX theory by comparing and contrasting the characteristics of in-groups versus out-groups discussing the leader’s role in determining who is in each group; supporting my response with specific examples, discuss the phases of stranger, acquaintance and partner that leaders and followers experience to develop high quality relationships, considering how roles, communication and outcomes change, and reflect on the value of LMX to my leadership practice by identifying two or more important insights gained.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory, or LMX (Graen, 1995) is another type of Contingency Leadership theory. Taking a different approach to cultivating a quality connection between leader and follower than Situational Theory, LMX views leadership as consisting of a number of dyadic relationships linking the leader with a follower. *Communication* is a medium through which leaders and subordinates develop, grow and maintain beneficial exchanges according to LMX. When this communication is accompanied by features such as mutual trust, respect and devotion, it leads to effective leadership. In-group followers tend to function as assistants or advisers and to have higher quality personalized exchanges with the leader than do out-group followers. These exchanges typically involve a leader’s emphasis on assignments to interesting tasks, delegation of important responsibilities, information sharing, and participation in the leader’s decisions, as well as special benefits, such as personal support and support and favorable work schedules. The quality of the relationship is reflected by the degree of mutual trust, loyalty, support, respect, and obligation.

In my work with the Foundation, we have had situations where in-groups and out-groups have formed when certain members felt the same passion for certain projects, while other members did not share that passion. We’ve also experienced our share of “politics” and power plays that created (thankfully temporary) “factions” that threatened our productivity toward goals. As LMX posits, communication has been the key to clearing up the division and returning us to our common passion: Helping our hospital obtain funds for needed equipment.

**Contemporary Leadership Theories**

Adaptive Leadership focuses on how leaders encourage people to adapt to change, and address organizational challenges whereas Transformational Leadership is a process of change and transformation.  Transactional Leadership is often compared to management as it describes the exchange that occurs between leaders and followers. Transactional leaders focus on the role of supervision, organization, and group performance. They are concerned about the status quo and day-to-day progress toward goals. Transactional leadership promotes compliance with existing organizational goals and performance expectations through supervision and the use of rewards and punishments. Transactional leaders are task-and-outcome oriented. Especially effective under strict time and resource constraints and in highly specified projects, this approach adheres to the status quo and employs a form of management that pays close attention to how employees perform their tasks.

Transformational leadership is described as including four factors:  Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Simulation, and Individual Consideration.  A Transformational leader can use these factors to develop and motivate followers.

Ron Heifetz (2009) argues that a common cause of leadership failure can be attributed to the treatment of adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. In a technical matter, both problem and solution are clear, and a solution is achieved by current knowledge, usually by authority or expert.

Adaptive problems are not clear, thus new learning will be required to identify the problem. An authority or expertise will not suffice, and stakeholders will do the work.

That said, I feel that effective leaders can be both transformational and transactional.  For example, a hospital administrator can simultaneously implement electronic ordering and dispensing of medications in hospitals to reduce errors and drug interactions *and* encourage nurses and pharmacists to question and even challenge illegible or dangerous prescriptions by physicians.

In our Hospital Foundation, we have had to utilize Adaptive Leadership from 2020 through the present because of the lockdowns that kept us from gathering in person, as well as cancellation of all in-person fundraisers in addition to losing most of our members. There are only 8 of us active members left – this requires nonstop adaptation! We are also in a very small, very impoverished rural mountain community with the smallest hospital in all of California.

Our group cannot afford the luxury of “technical” pattern-based leadership because all of that was taken away from us. We don’t have a singular authority who can hand down the rules, so to speak. Other than the hospital’s CEO, there is no “authority” thus, no one who can solve our fundraising problems with the wave of a magic wand.

Although our members would be receptive to technical solutions, this approach is impossible in our predicament. Instead, we are fully adaptive because that’s all we do: adapt. It’s the nature of our organization and the community that we serve.

**Authentic Leadership**

Authentic Leadership is a philosophy that identifies that the character of a person is the most important factor in determining leader success. It posits that to be effective, a leader first and foremost must be authentic-with self and then with others. It is important to note here that authenticity is about truth-telling...not relative truth, not half-truth, and not being bossy. Being authentic is about being honest because you care.

Becoming authentic is a developmental state that enables leaders to progress through multiple roles, as they learn and grow from their experiences. Authentic leaders are real and genuine. Authentic leaders are also constantly growing and learning from their leadership experiences.

According to George (2007), Authentic Leadership is character. It is not just a superficial question of style. It has to do with who we are as human beings and the forces that shaped us (p. 85).

**Servant Leadership**

Servant Leadership, in contrast, is about focusing on other peoples' needs – not their feelings. Nonetheless, a servant leader shouldn’t avoid making unpopular decisions or giving team members negative feedback when this is needed.

Servant leadership is a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organizations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world. ​​Leading and serving and inextricably linked. Thus, in order to lead effectively, one must master service. Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) redefined the way that we think about management and leadership. His idea was dubbed “Servant Leadership” and flips the traditional mode of management thinking and organizational structure completely upside down (1977/2002).

**Conclusion**

In our post-pandemic world, it is essential for nonprofit leaders to protect, promote, and empower their volunteers in order to maximize retention and pave the way for greater recruitment of new volunteers. As I contextualize the research findings above and connect them to the volunteer retention/recruitment shortcomings at our Hospital Foundation (and the vital role that we play in raising funds for needed equipment), it affirms my statement that the health of an entire community depends on its volunteers. Our organization’s leadership plays a vital role in community health. If our leadership fosters nurturance of existing volunteers while recruiting new volunteers strategically from groups with aligned interests, I am reassured that we can change the perception of volunteering with our important cause and am confident that – by building upon the evidenced successes of others – our Hospital Foundation can build back better.

For my leadership roles in our Hospital Foundation, I can utilize the Leadership Grid Theory/Model’s Middle of the Road (5,5) to maintain balance, the Situational Theory Directing (S1) and Delegating (S4) for most routine leadership responsibilities, the Path-Goal *Supportive* and *Participatory* leadership roles when focusing on the human aspects of leading, and the *communication* emphasis form the LMX perspective.

Authentic and Servant Leadership add value to my leadership practice. A few insights gained are: A leader first and foremost must be authentic-with self and then with others.Being authentic is about being honest because you care.

Authentic leaders are real and genuine.Becoming authentic is a developmental state that enables leaders to progress through multiple roles, as they learn and grow from their experiences.

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and wellbeing of people and the communities to which they belong.Servant leaders are intentional about filling people up with specific and authentic praise and acknowledgement.

From the above selected theories, I feel confident that their application will help our Hospital Foundation to sustain and rebuild itself into a greater and stronger organization than it was in the pre-pandemic world.

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