REDUCING THE MANAGEMENT LOAD THROUGH DEEPER KNOWING OF WHAT VOLUNTEERS KNOW AND CAN DO

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THE OPPORTUNITY

This paper is grounded in the premise that volunteers – by definition - are keen to contribute. Deeper knowing, by them and by others, of what they could contribute leads to enhanced satisfaction for all.

"Many hands make light work" – But there are factors to be considered, and managed, for the promise in this proverb to be realised and to avoid the dysfunction implied by “Too many cooks spoil the broth”. There is a win/win when a manager of volunteers supports deeper drawing upon what a volunteer knows and can do in a way which couples adding to volunteer satisfaction with reducing the management load and freeing up management energy for other things.

Of course, individual volunteers have their boundaries as to the manner and quantum of their contribution; and it follows that these boundaries must be respected by the volunteer-involving organisation. What will be welcomed by one volunteer as an expanded opportunity to contribute may be seen as an unwelcome imposition by another – respect and sensitivity is required in acting upon the opportunity to expand the engagement of a volunteer. Figure 1, derived from research into the retention of CFA volunteers (Hughes 2007a), is a representation of the dynamic relationships between volunteer expectations, the operational requirements of the volunteer-involving organisation and the nature of the community needs which are being served.

Figure 1 – Volunteer recruitment and drawing upon hierarchy nested within the dynamic needs and expectations of stakeholders.

Figure 1 is a representation of the environmental context in which there is potential for deeper knowing and drawing upon volunteer knowledge and skill. However, it is acknowledged that
volunteers are not homogenous in the way in which they seek to contribute and organisations are not homogenous in the way that they seek to draw upon volunteers; accordingly, this paper addresses the circumstance where the need (to do it), opportunity (permission to contribute) and encouragement (supportive motivation) exist.

The criticality of “need”, “opportunity”, and “encouragement”, when seeking to more deeply draw upon what people know and can do, is an important consideration (Hughes 2007a, p.85); and this was apparent in the course of the Volunteering Australia (VA) 2007 national consultation and research into Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for Volunteers (Hughes 2007b). It is evident that for many volunteers having their knowledge and skills deeply drawn upon and formally acknowledged is highly valued – even where this is not connected to career advancement. Also, volunteer-involving organisations, which are alert to the RPL possibilities, include the opportunity to thus overtly declare their valuing of the volunteer as a significant relationship building factor.

There is a compelling logic in the proposition that, when motivated, volunteers can contribute to reducing (or maybe better put as relieving) the management load through deeper drawing upon what they know and can do, in a manner which is targeted at this outcome. However, my research within the Country Fire Authority (CFA) points to a requirement that “You have really got to want to” (Hughes 2007a, Chapter 10); and the RPL for Volunteers research underscored this requirement. It won’t occur if management doesn’t pursue it; and it requires a mind-set that such an outcome is good for all and is not a threat to management status or control. Indeed, reducing the management load, through drawing upon volunteers, frees up management energy for higher level contribution and may be the difference between struggling to hang-on (survival) and acceleration of the management journeying in pursuit of the organisation’s vision.

It should be noted that the proposition – “There is much to be gained by reducing/relieving the management load through expanding the manner of drawing upon volunteers” - is asserted cognisant that volunteering is not to be a replacement for paid effort (albeit, a problematic issue) and, besides which, “management” might be volunteer in nature. With this rule in mind, there are expanded contributions such as –

- volunteers becoming more confident and reliable leading to lessening of supervision need – including individuals growing into team leadership roles;
- volunteers discovering and acting (with appropriate guidance) upon new ways and means to contribute to achievement of the organisation’s mission – maybe through lifting of the organisation’s profile, as just one “soft” example;
- volunteers becoming more “leaderful” (Raelin 2003) in their roles – strengthening their positive influence upon others with respect to mission achievement;
- volunteers adding to fund-raising outcomes and thus relieving management anxieties in this regard; and
- volunteers more strongly contributing to recruitment and retention of volunteer colleagues as an outcome from higher valuing of themselves and others – lifting a volunteer’s self-perception of worth can have a profound, multi-dimensional, effect upon others.
From an organisational perspective, where management energies are freed-up from the mundane, there is a liberating of management entrepreneurial capacity which manifests as a multiplier. For example, where management energy of a low-profile community not-for-profit organisation is being dissipated by the quest for funds – maybe an immediately pressing survival imperative – there is the prospect of confidently delegating this activity to a group of volunteers who have a latent capacity in this regard as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

With reference to Figure 2, I make a distinction between “capacity” and “capability”. For me “capacity” is what a person can do by drawing upon their knowledge, using the tools (broadly defined) available to them and operating within the limits of empowerment and other boundaries which are imposed upon them. With respect to “capability”, I embrace the Stephenson 1998 view -

‘Capability is not just about skills and knowledge. Taking effective and appropriate action within unfamiliar and changing circumstances involves ethics, judgements, the self-confidence to take risks and a commitment to learn from the experience.’

(Stephenson 1988, cited in Stephenson & Cairns 1999, p.3)

In essence, by adding capability to capacity there is a **growing together** outcome. Figure 2 is a representation of transforming from latent capacity to awakened capability consequent upon management partnering with volunteers in addressing a new challenge.

![Figure 2 – Transition from latent capacity to awakened capability](image)

From the volunteer’s perspective there is an awakening (discovery) of a broader and deeper perspective of what they know and can do which, through application, expands the volunteer’s capability. The volunteer becomes a more engaged doer and learner and, through adding to knowledge, skill and confidence, becomes more capable in taking on new challenges in life. From the manager’s perspective, both personal and organisational capacity are expanded through embracing the challenge of creating an outcome where there are more people doing more things. This is a very powerful learning experience and results in the manager growing as a more capable manager. From the organisation’s perspective, more people doing more things – with greater leverage because they are more deeply drawing upon what they know and can do – is obviously advantageous. With these issues in mind, and as an example, Figure 3 is a representation of relieving some part of the management load with respect to the imperative of fund-raising.
The opportunity – as exampled in Figure 3 – will not be new to the reader. In practice, the issue is likely to be encapsulated in the reaction “Yes, I know this, but how can I get them to assist in this way”. Indeed, when I reflect upon my own past experience in striving to get more from volunteers, and feeling that I was doing everything, there were occasions when I was so overwhelmed it seemed easier to just do it myself. With the benefit of hindsight, and informed by my research (particularly within the CFA volunteering environment), there are ways and means, which are assisted by use of the LCM Model (Figure 4). Importantly, this requires the will to invest the time and energy required for this approach to be embedded within the organisation’s way of doing things.

Ideally, drawing upon the LCM Model should not be as a periodic project which is seen to be another job to be done and re-energisingly repeated as enthusiasm wains. LCM responsiveness should be an abiding influence upon the organisation’s way of doing things – i.e. the organisational environment overtly exhibits high regard for the LCM values and sustains consequent advantaging actions.

The LCM Model is an action informing tool. Organisational and personal advantage accrues by meshing [1] the valuing of learning and its outcomes with [2] valuing a “making the most of what you know and can do” culture and [3] with valuing the web of motivations leading to organisational achievement. When clearly evident, this composite valuing is the foundation upon which a person – acting alone or in a group – deeply draws upon what they know and can do.

Figure 3 – “Fund-raising” example of reduction (relieving) in management load

Note: Although Figure 3 is focussing upon fund-raising, this representation can be viewed generically. The latent volunteer capacity can be readily re-defined as is appropriate across the spectrum of reducing – in some aspects - the management load.
Arguably the LCM Model, of itself, is not a revelation. However, the clear logic is vulnerable to being relegated to the tacit realm and a false belief that these values are in play. As a consequence, the power of the model arises from its use in making the implicit explicit. The model serves to bring the L, C & M values to an abiding front of mind status and thus avoiding the abyss of complacency.

With respect to “reducing the management load through deeper knowing of what volunteers know and can do, the following “framing of action” example questions illustrate the use of the LCM Model as a tool for auditing of possibilities and as a tool for consequential informing of action(s).

With respect to defining the sweet spot:
- In what way does reducing/relieving the management load free up management energy for other things?
- Where might the management load be reduced/relieved now or in the future?

With respect to the L Quality:
- Do volunteers, in this organisation, really know and value the full scope of what they know and can do which can be applied to reducing/relieving the management load?
- Does the organisation management really know and value the full scope of what volunteers know and can do which can be applied to reducing/relieving the management load?

With respect to the C Quality:
- Is the culture of the organisation – and the teams within it – conducive to motivating and supporting volunteers to draw upon what they know and can do in a manner which reduces/relieves the management load?
- Is the culture of the organisation – and the teams within it – conducive to motivating and supporting volunteers to add to what they know and can do in a manner which reduces/relieves the management load?
With respect to the M Quality:
- With reducing/relieving the management load in mind, are the volunteer motivations to contribute really recognised and valued or are they assumed?
- With reducing/relieving the management load in mind, do the volunteers really know and value the motivations of management?

With respect to enriching the sweet spot:
- Is there a will by management to identify and act upon enabling questions as exampled above?
- Is there a will by volunteers to contribute to the identification and acting upon enabling questions as exampled above?

Ideally, the undertaking of a project – such as reducing/relieving the management load through volunteer contribution – should contribute to further embedding the LCM responsiveness within the nature of the organisation. This enriches the environment in terms of people routinely drawing more deeply upon what they know and can do and within a rich learning environment – as manifested by volunteering.

The richness of the volunteering learning environment – volunteers bring much and get much from volunteering – is a circumstance in which there is strong connection between drawing upon the LCM Model and the offering of RPL to volunteers. By supporting RPL for Volunteers, the organisation is overtly signalling its valuing of what volunteers contribute, and the act of giving something back to volunteers is both motivational and nurturing the culture of mutual respect which is the foundation of the partnership between the organisation and its volunteers.

In my research into drawing upon the outcomes from lifelong learning of CFA volunteers (Hughes & Henry 2003; Hughes 2007a) there was mixed knowings of what volunteers bring to their volunteering; and this was also the case in the RPL for Volunteers research (Hughes 2007b). In both studies, there were instances of a high level of expressed confidence that both the organisation and the volunteer know what they appropriately bring, but in other instances there was uncertainty. Qualitative probing of this spectrum of beliefs indicates that expressed confidence does not always accord with the actuality; thus leading to the proposition that there is much to be gained by guarding against complacency through “due-diligence” sensitive, and empowering, sharing of views as to what is brought, and its value to both the organisation and the individual.

Extrapolated from Baker, Jensen and Kolb (2002), an ongoing conversational learning approach has value as a “due-diligence” foundation upon which to construct embedded application of the LCM Model; and, in a reciprocal manner, the model is a framing tool to support and guide “the conversation”. Also, an RPL orientated assessment of what is known and can be done has high value as a coupled activity.

With respect to RPL, even where a volunteer does not have interest in going forward to achieve a qualification, there is much value in exploring the “why” and “how” of making capability (expanding capacity and beyond competency) explicit. In this regard, I expect that the reader will
know of instances where volunteers have gained significant personal benefit from bringing the value of what they know and can do from the tacit into the explicit realm – by whatever means.

**FRAMING THE CONVERSATION – In this instance, focused upon reducing the management load**

The use of the LCM Model as a framing tool, with RPL as a key component of valuing lifelong learning, is illustrated in Figure 5. In this activity theory (Engestrom 1999) representation, the LCM Model is located as a tool/artefact in an activity network (see Hughes 2007a, Chapters 8-10 for a CFA volunteer application). The components of this activity network each, potentially, mediate the other as indicated by the connectors – change one and you influence others.

For readers who are new to the concept of Activity Theory, the example of primitive hunters has been used as an illustration (Leont’ev 1981). In this example, the hunters are the subject and the animal (quarry) is the object being hunted for survival purposes. There is a division of labour in which some of the hunters chase the animal up a gully and toward others who will throw a rock (the tool) down upon the animal. There are rules as to who plays what role and how the products of the animal are distributed within the totality of the community of the tribe. What might happen if a rifle became available? Or what might happen if there were other changes within the network?

In developing the LCM Model, Activity Theory (Engestrom 1999) was employed as a prism through which to view the data. It then emerged that Activity Theory is a powerful informing of reflection and action device as illustrated above. Consequently, the coupling of the LCM Model
with Activity Theory is very helpful in engaging volunteers and management in a learning orientated conversation focussed upon enrichment of the sweet spot – that which informs understanding is also a foundation for action. I refer the reader to Chapter Eight of Hughes (2007a) – Exploration of the efficacy of the LCM Model - for an illustration of the utility of this coupling.

CURRENT ACTING UPON THE OPPORTUNITY – from “latent capacity” to “enhanced capability”

At the time of writing this paper (July 2008), I am two months into exploring the need and opportunity relating to reducing/relieving the management load within a somewhat embryonic community emergency relief service. This is focussed upon stronger forms of volunteer assistance with respect to fund-raising. I am also exploring a more generic reducing/relieving of the management load in mature, highly structured, volunteer-involving organisations where the perception may be that all that can – appropriately - be achieved by drawing upon what volunteers know and can do, is in fact in place.

These comparative lines of inquiry are framed by two connected matrices (Figures 6a and 6b) which are presently somewhat hypothetical, but informed by experience.

![Figure 6a – Volunteer-involving organisational matrix](image)

![Figure 6b – Volunteer matrix](image)

The hypothesis which gives rise to the Figure 6a matrix – for exploration – is that some mature organisations are at risk of complacency with respect to their sophistication of drawing upon what volunteers know and can do. And this exploration is connected to the spectrum (matrix) across which volunteers know and choose to draw upon what they know and can do. Experience suggests that there are multiple permutations relating to lifting from only latent capacities to enhanced capabilities for both the organisation and the volunteer; and, possibly for mature volunteer-involving organisations, resonating with the consequences of blindly approaching the crest of the Sigmoid Curve (Handy 1995, pp.49-64)
As a strategic approach to stronger partnering with volunteers, the quest to reduce/relieve the management load through deeper knowing of what volunteers know and can do is drawing upon the LCM Model as a tool to release volunteer latent capacity and to enhance both the individual volunteer’s and the organisation’s capability.

The application of learning outcome advantage which accrues through drawing upon the LCM Model is analogous to the mechanical advantage achieved by extending the length of a lever. The outcome from a volunteer-involving organisation more deeply drawing upon what a volunteer knows and can do is illustrated in Figure 7.

CONCLUDING PROPOSITION

I posit that the degree of volunteer assistance to management is proportional to the degree of “knowing” what a volunteer brings and progressively acquires. The more that a manager knows regarding a volunteer’s capacity to contribute by drawing upon their breadth of competencies, the more can be drawn upon in pursuit of the organisation’s goals. Being able to do more with the composite of volunteer competencies suggests a reduction of the load upon management under conditions of “willing volunteers” – i.e. more capacity, being willingly applied, frees up management goal achievement effort for other things. Accordingly, this paper is offered as a reflective device for consideration by the reader.

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References


Hughes, L. (2007b), RPL: A pathway to valuing and applauding what volunteers know and can do, Volunteering Australia, Melbourne (unpublished at the time of writing this paper)


