

Confessions of Three (over) Achievers, Programming for Affiliation-Motivated Volunteers

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We began conference planning with the best of intentions. With more than 80 years of combined service at six land-grant universities, we were, after all, a trio of the most highly tenured Extension volunteerism specialists in the country. We were motivated; okay, we were driven. Perhaps our zealous drive caused us to lose sight of our real purpose; developing volunteers through a regional conference.

We were “the good guys.” We wore white hats. We were knights in shining armor, riding white chargers. We were ready to do battle, slay a dragon, and rescue the damsel in distress. Unfortunately, we didn’t recognize the real dragon.

There were rumblings and concerns about the direction of the 50-year old conference. Four days in duration, the conference required a major time commitment. Volunteers were busy people. The average age of conference attendees continued to creep up. We were reaching the same traditional, aging audience. We needed to update with a new approach.

Achievers are, by nature, optimists. Thinking that we’d need to create a different battle plan to conquer another kingdom, we saddled our chargers and rode off to the conference, planning to develop a new, improved conference strategy, and conquer another kingdom. We would rescue the damsels in distress (our volunteers), expand our kingdom (an improved conference), then celebrate with a feast of wild boar and ale.

We started well, with the best of intentions. Strategizing as would any achievement oriented, experienced volunteerism specialists. We convened a focus group of volunteers. We brainstormed ways to create an innovative and contemporary event. We programmed for younger volunteers. We planned sessions, designed to build skills and develop competencies. We created a leaner, fresher look. We programmed for measurable impact at the expense of everything else.

We created a regional event, where individual states once had gathered. We fostered unity with one conference shirt and specific branding. Lunches became quick affairs, with randomized, assigned seating, to facilitate evaluation sessions. We offered educational workshops, presented intensive learning labs, and featured engaging keynote speakers.

We identified programmatic outcomes and evaluated the conference using a quantitative questionnaire; measuring knowledge gained and conference impact. We created new traditions, introducing story-telling, reflective journaling, graffiti walls, and illustrating scrapbook pages.

At our third “new” conference, a national leader remarked that there wasn’t another 4-H event that gathered as much data and evaluated as comprehensively as we did. We accepted that as a compliment. We were winning the battle! We were knights in shining armor. We had slain the dragon and rescued the damsel in distress, or so we thought.

Conference participation continued to decline steadily. Volunteers consistently told us that they missed the old traditions. They didn’t enjoy devoting their mealtimes to focus groups. They missed the social activities that we had eliminated, believing them unimportant.

The volunteers appreciated our well-intentioned, zealous drive to create a new conference. But they were so busy giving input, attending outcome-oriented, skill- and competency-building workshops, and participating in a host of evaluation activities, that they didn’t have time to network. They saw old friends but didn’t have time to talk with them. The informal sharing of ideas and exchange of information that had once been a hallmark of the conference was gone.

We reexamined our reams of data; we’d accomplished what we’d set out to do. We’d ensured that volunteers had input and voice, using the regional volunteer advisory group to

obtain volunteer perspective. We had identified the expected benefits, measured the outcomes, and shared the impact. We had met *our* goals. Had we truly met the volunteers' needs?

The light began to shine and reflect on our lances. We realized that volunteers liked activities that we believed were unimportant. We were a troika of specialists, motivated by achievement, programming for volunteers, largely motivated by affiliation. We'd been so busy preparing for battle that we'd overlooked the needs and wants of volunteers. We'd slain the wrong dragon.

We realized that social interaction, (belonging) drew volunteers to the conference. Both formal and informal opportunities allowed them to share ideas and exchange information. Activities that we saw as unimportant were networking opportunities in disguise. Volunteers shared and exchanged information while they decorated cabins, traded pins, ate meals, and crafted at "fun-shops." Volunteers wanted to relax, renew, and re-energize in a tranquil location, surrounded by people who shared similar experiences and would be glad to chat, visit, and share together.

We thought that they wanted prepackaged, ready-to-use lessons they could use the moment they returned home to their 4-H clubs. To an extent, they did. However, these are 4-H volunteers, motivated by affiliation (Culp, 1997; Culp & Schwartz, 1999). They affiliate with youth, the organization and its emblem. This group affiliated with conference attendees, the facility, and learned from interacting with others. The group didn't want handouts; they craved interaction.

Through an endless number of innovative, creative, qualitative methods, we had asked the volunteers what motivated conference attendance. We expected to hear that they wanted to learn, to gather information, gain new ideas that they could use back home in their volunteer

roles. We weren't disappointed; those were their exact responses. However, what we realized is that what they learned and how they wanted to learn were two different things. It wasn't the learning outcome but the learning process that mattered most to them.

This realization gave us hope and provided direction. The volunteer's voice that we had intentionally included rang more loudly; this time, we listened.

Participants indicated that focus on learning from experts, sharing through networking, and face-to-face interaction were critical conference components. While education is the hallmark of a successful volunteer development activity, there are many ways to engage adult learners. We began programming in ways that facilitated the exchange of information among and between volunteers. Our strategy began to change.

In short, we created opportunities for volunteers to engage in conversation informally. We suggested lunchtime table topics and encouraged presenters to include small group discussions in workshops. We scheduled 30-minute networking breaks, encouraging people to chat and share information. We redesigned learning opportunities. We intentionally designed programming around formal and non-formal interactions.

Everywhere volunteers gathered, and wherever lines formed, graffiti walls popped up. The volunteer advisory group was invaluable in suggesting graffiti wall questions. When the responses were grouped categorically by motivational categories (Culp & Schwartz, 1999; McClelland, 1955), affiliation motives were listed most frequently, followed by achievement.

Volunteers loved the graffiti walls and shared feedback that was insightful, honest, and frank. Every single person participated in designing scrapbook pages; each page told a personal story. The reflective journals were a gold mine. They took weeks to code and decipher using a method of three raters (Culp & Pilat, 1998) but contained the richest data.

The findings from reflective journals were illuminating. We learned volunteers came to the conference, not only to learn, but to relax, renew, and share. The reflective journals shared the volunteers' stories, stories written by affiliators.

Conference attendance rebounded. We realized that volunteers primarily motivated by affiliation might also be achievers who simply viewed achievement differently than did we. We saw achievement as *learning* new skills, competencies, and ideas. Conversely, volunteers experienced a sense of accomplishment when they *shared* ideas, networked, and succeeded in feeling refreshed and renewed.

The realization didn't stop there. While we experienced a sense of accomplishment from completing intentional tasks, the volunteers felt accomplished when they networked. To integrate more networking activities, we introduced an integrated educational approach, including curriculum sharing, service learning stations, and structured group activities.

We'd begun with the best of intentions. We had. We thought we were doing the right thing. We were dedicated, driven, experienced, achievement-motivated volunteerism specialists, intent on presenting a meaningful, high-quality, educational volunteer conference. We'd made revisions; created a successful battle plan. We were the good guys, knights in shining armor; we wore white hats.

Vindicated and satisfied, we saddled our chargers and rode to our ivory towers. We were the victors. We'd created a battle plan, slain the dragon, and conquered a new conference kingdom. We had rescued the damsels in distress (our volunteers), and expanded our kingdom (improved the conference). We removed our armor, celebrated the conference with a banquet of wild boar, and toasted with ale. But sometime, amid the feast, the boasts, and the toasts, a

thought emerged, “had we rescued the volunteers, or had the volunteers rescued us?” One thing we knew, we wore white hats.

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