

Succession planning for volunteers – does it work?

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Aim of the paper

Recognised as being important for “issues of sustainability and competitive advantage in relation to employees and volunteers” (Taylor, Doherty & McGraw 2008:226), succession planning is an integral part of human resource management. It is key to the successful retention of existing talent as well as the development of new talent to move organisational strategy forward.

This paper applies this ‘business’ concept to a specific case study of volunteer management. Often short-term and ad-hoc, volunteers are seldom seen as part of the voluntary organisation’s strategic strength and yet, as we will see from the data presented, there may be ways to utilise the abilities and knowledge of volunteers to provide competitive advantage and resource stability, if they are managed well.

Current volunteer management theory is beginning to demonstrate acceptance of the need for effective succession planning (see McKee & McKee (2008) for a ‘modern’ perspective). This presentation suggests that – for key roles at least – if it were to become a consistent part of the volunteer manager’s toolkit, it could save voluntary organisations heartache and overload, and enhance the volunteers experience.

Background and literature

CIPD (succession planning factsheet, June 2011) suggests that “There is no one model for succession planning, and there are no hard-and-fast rules. But what is indisputable is that all organisations need leaders and managers with a range of experience.” Within the field of volunteer management, the problem is often that volunteers stay for insufficient time and leave the burden with a small handful of ‘stalwarts’ (Cuskelly 2004), not allowing the problem of succession planning to become anything more than an ‘emergency planning’ exercise. Taylor & McGraw suggest that a ‘robust succession system ... ensures continuity in key positions through the retention and development of knowledge and human capital for the future’ (in eds. Robinson & Palmer 2011: 92) Best practice writing suggests that succession should link with talent management to encourage the ‘cream’ or the organisation to float to the top and be developed to take on senior or vital roles as vacancies become available. This presentation takes this literature basis and applies it to an organisation with many

volunteer ‘stalwarts’ to assess the situation with regard to succession and talent management in one particular case.

Methodology

A regional management role in one organisation was identified as being suitable for this study – it is a National role in the case study organisation, occupied exclusively by volunteers. There is a fully worked up role description and person specification and the role holders are selected on the basis of their ‘fit’ to the organisation, their knowledge of the work of the organisation and their ability to gain the trust and co-operation of the Groups they need to work with. This provides a close parallel to the ‘business’ comparators used in much of the HR literature.

A survey was constructed with the case study organisation which consisted of both open and closed questions, around the topics of attitudes to succession and to check subject’s understanding of the role. The survey was administered by email and invitations were sent out to all incumbents of the role (population size: 63).

33 Responses were received and these were coded for content by the first author. Patterns and themes which emerged are reported in this presentation.

Results

Data presented in this paper suggests that volunteers are in general happy to consider successors but loathe to hand-over responsibility for their roles. Power and affiliation motives are clearly at work. There is evidence of burn-out and over-commitment in this group of volunteers, which makes the findings more interesting – and concerning – and demonstrates a strong cultural norm within the case study organisation.

Also of interest are the volunteers’ conceptions of their own skills relevant to the role and those skills they would like to see in their potential successor. This provides suggestions for further research in the area.

This paper develops ideas presented at EASM 2011 by the first author.

References

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