Chapter 8
Leadership Challenges in Public Private Partnerships in Emergency Management: A Real-World Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Despite the interest people have in volunteering, there are many challenges for leadership of volunteer organizations such as public private partnerships (Ferreira, Proenca, & Proenca, 2010). This chapter does not attempt to address all of them. Rather, this chapter looks at how leadership can craft a vision and use it to garner the support of volunteers, who can then use it as a guide in their daily activities for the organization. It explores challenges in recruiting volunteers and considers how regular engagement can be used to motivate and retain volunteers. It probes the relationship between leadership communication and organizational cohesion/volunteer commitment. Relevant literature is compared and contrasted with examples of real public private partnerships and community-based organizations. Although often seemingly critical of volunteer organizations and their leaders, this chapter intends to provide relevant, meaningful information with real examples to help mitigate leadership challenges in public private partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

The United States has long been known as a “nation of joiners” (Curtis, Grabb, & Baer, 1992). In 2010 63.4 million people volunteered 8.1 billion hours of time for the equivalent of about 169 billion dollars in the U.S. alone (Cavalcante, de Souza, Fernandes, & Barreto Cortez, 2013), which is based on an hourly rate of $20.85 and so likely a low estimate. In addition, recruiting, training, motivating, and retaining volunteers is “time-consuming and expensive” (McCurley & Lynch, 2005). That is, just because an organization is made up primarily or wholly of volunteers does not mean there is not a lot of money involved.

Organizations that rely heavily on volunteers need not be comprised entirely of volunteers. Many nonprofits have a relatively small cadre of
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regular employees providing administration of the organization and supervision of volunteers. Organizations that rely entirely or in very large part on volunteers to execute and achieve their mission are the type of organizations considered in this chapter. Because some of these organizations are relatively small, in some instances these organizations may also be referred to as “groups” in this chapter.

The relationship between public private partnerships (PPPs) and volunteer organizations is that PPPs are often pseudo volunteer organizations. That is, everyone participating in a PPP typically has a regular career, another job they normally go to. Participation in a PPP, particularly in emergency management, typically occurs in response to an incident through some sort of activation or declaration. In essence, everyone or nearly everyone participating in the PPP will have a job and responsibilities to that job and employer outside their participation in the PPP. The different missions, goals and objectives represented through the various individuals participating in the PPP can result in conflict. That, however, is a challenge that is outside the scope of this chapter.

Over time, leadership of volunteer or nonprofit organizations has been facing an increasingly complex set of challenges that must be addressed to successfully execute their mission. Nowhere is that more through that within the emergency management community. These challenges include crafting a message, i.e. a vision (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989), which can be communicated to a volunteer staff, that this cadre of volunteers will “buy into” and then use appropriately as a guide in their day-to-day activities (Elenkov, Judge, & Wright, 2005). In some cases an individual’s own values will already be aligned with an organization’s purpose, i.e. its vision and mission. In fact, research tends to support the supposition that most volunteer organizations are homogeneous in composition (Jain, 2012). However, if volunteers’ personal values and beliefs are not already aligned with the organizations and/or they do not buy into the organizations vision and mission, they will simply withdraw from participation. The resulting deficit of staff, talent, and capacity will undermine the organizations ability to fulfill its goals and objectives, i.e. to successfully achieve its mission.

Another challenge that leaders face specifically in non-profit and volunteer organizations is the recruitment of volunteers. If a potential volunteer’s values and beliefs are well aligned with the organizations the questions of a volunteer’s time available to dedicate to another activity, their financial ability to do so, and more may pose a barrier(s) to participation. And, even if a potential volunteer is genuinely interested, a good fit with the organization, and brings needed talent or resources to the table, there is always the question of “What’s in it for me?”, the volunteer’s benefits from participation.

Beyond the need for positional and technical training that may be required for new members to proactively participate lies the need to regularly engage volunteers in order to motivate and to retain them. The fact is, turnover is very high among volunteers, perhaps more than one volunteer leaves for every two that are retained (McCurley & Lynch, 2005). This ongoing, nearly continuous requirement can be a challenge. In addition to traditional training activities, the emergency management community has exercise programs that will help achieve this. Nearly all studies have concluded that regular contact and interaction with volunteers is required for their continued voluntary participation. Absent regular contact volunteers quickly become disenchanted and disenfranchised.

Leadership communication can be a challenge. Communication in the form of broadcast messages is only one type of interaction that can provide regular contact with volunteers. Storytelling that provides context as well as technical information between and among an organization’s volunteers can provide indoctrination and promote assimilation. Leadership communication must be consistent, even over time as one leader leaves and another takes the reigns. It should be
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