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What do managers do? Revisiting the debate in the context of the voluntary sector

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Abstract

Volunteering in the UK is a significant activity. Regular formal volunteering, described as ‘giving unpaid help through a group, club or organisation at least once a month’, involves one in five adults in the UK, which equates to an estimated 9.2 million people (NCVO, 2022). Despite this, there is relatively little research within the field of HRM which focuses on the management of volunteers. Focusing on the management of volunteers, then, this paper revisits one of the most erudite questions of our discipline but one which has, more recently, fallen out of fashion. ‘What, why and with what effects, do managers do what they do?’. In asking this question, we attempt to illuminate a hitherto unresearched area of the management of volunteers in a bid to challenge the uncritical transplantation of traditional for-profit HRM policies and practices into the third sector.

Drawing on qualitative research in two UK heritage conservation organisations, we shine a light on what managers of volunteers do and how this may require a different skill set to those managers who are employed in the management of paid staff. In so doing, we conclude that whilst there are significant differences required of those managing volunteers there is much the for-profit sector might and should want to learn. Thus, we conclude that rather than the voluntary sector looking to the tropes established in for-profit HRM as a source of best practice, the reverse may be more informative.

Introduction

The latest estimate of the size of the UK voluntary sector is that it includes over 165, 000 organisations, ranging from large household name charities to tiny associations, each of which will use volunteers to differing extents, some being completely volunteer-run, others having a mix of paid staff and volunteers (NCVO, 2022). The voluntary sector is also arguably growing in significance, against the backdrop of

severe spending cuts, where several services which were once provided by public sector organisations, or through public funds, are now being transferred to voluntary organisations (Fenwick and Gibbon, 2016; McCabe and Phillimore, 2012; Alcock, 2012; Kane and Allen, 2011).

Despite this, there is relatively little research within the field of HRM which focuses on the management of volunteers. O'Toole and Grey (2015: 56) argue that the narrow focus on paid work within the field has both empirical and theoretical limitations, constrained as it is by the compulsion of the wage-labour relation. In contrast, volunteers provide an interesting context in which to study the practice of human resource management exactly because that wage-labour relationship is removed.

The question of 'what do managers do' has generated a huge body of research work from the late 1950s onwards, arguably peaking in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. The review articles by Colin Hales (1986, 1999, 2001) are particularly useful here in surveying the field. These reviews indicate that research has sought to develop classifications of elements and dimensions of managerial work; theories of what factors and forces shape and determine managerial tasks and roles; and theoretical questioning of the ontological status of management and managerial work. The names of authors of this body of work will be very familiar to those of us teaching and researching in the broad management area- Drucker, Mintzberg, Stewart, Child, Burawoy, Dalton, Watson, Willmott, Legge, Reed, Grint amongst others (see Hales, 1999).

However, as Hales argues, while 'after half a century of research, we have a fair idea of what managers do' (Hales, 2001: 50), he also identifies many unanswered questions that relate to the 'why' and 'how' of managerial work. As a summary, across his various reviews, Hales criticises the extant literature for the dominance of attention on description and correlation rather than explanatory theory. A lacuna is identified between research evidence that has focused on variations rather than commonalities in managerial work: i.e. there is little that looks at what makes managerial work distinctive; and extant theories of management are viewed as having inferred from rather than engaged with evidence on particular managerial practices and therefore offer no explanation of why managers do what they do (Hales, 1999: 347; see also Hales, 2001:51). There is also a lack of understanding of the significance of managerial work, particularly from the perspective of those being managed: 'does what managers do matter in terms of its effects... and if so how?' (Hales, 2001: 50)

To address some of these criticisms, Hales (1999) proposed the outline of an explanatory framework, reproduced here in Figure 1, which sets out how:

...the defining characteristic of managing – responsibility- is shaped by the resources, cognitive rules and moral rules of the social systems in which managers are located and the way in which

managers both draw upon and reproduce these resources and rules in their work practices (Hales, 1999: 347).

A call is made for empirical research which examines these linkages, showing 'how managers make 'managing' what it is' (ibid). Further, in his 2001 review, Hales extends upon this by determining a need for research which addresses the question of 'whether it matters what managers do, and if so, how?', which has not to date been satisfactorily investigated.

What is interesting to note has been the lack of engagement with Hales' call to action since then. Indeed, since the late 1990s, this kind of research subject appears to have fallen significantly out of popularity, even within the area of that hitherto criticised research at a more descriptive level which aims to identify what constitutes managerial work in different settings. However, the question of what managers do and with what effects, still seems very relevant almost two decades later, specifically for our purposes, for organisational practitioners in the voluntary sector. Indeed, this was the exact empirical question that was established as part of a co-production event that we convened in the summer of 2013, and which led to the development of an overarching research question which practitioners needed empirical answers to, namely 'To what extent is the management of volunteers similar or different to the management of paid staff?'. This then led subsequently to the funding and conducting of qualitative research to investigate this.

The contribution of this paper is in revisiting and extending some of those older and arguably unfashionable research questions by drawing on empirical case studies of the management of volunteers within two conservation organisations in the UK voluntary sector. First, we provide a summary of extant literature on the nature of managerial work, and importantly the factors that influence and determine the way in which managerial work is carried out within different contexts. We then move on to discuss the ways in which the task of managing a volunteer workforce has been conceptualised, focusing on a) the trend for the transference of management practice from the for-profit to the non-profit sector, and b) the implications of the lack of formal employment contract for the increasing importance of emotional labour within the task of managing volunteers. The context and methodology of the research is then discussed, highlighting the ways in which our research approach was constructed to specifically take on board Hales' call to action for critical research that takes an explanatory approach and looks at the effects on those being managed. A description of the research findings is then presented, establishing.... In making our contribution, the article answers X research questions....

Literature Review

Extant literature has revealed the management challenges that result from the absence of control and compliance tools associated with a conventional employment contract (Brosnan and Cuskelly, 2001; Harris, 1998). The key distinguishing feature of volunteer work is that it is characterised by 'uncoerced activity and work without pay' (Harris, 1998: 54). The distinct nature of the psychological contract between a manager and a volunteer is often emphasised-it is deemed to be mostly or even wholly implicit (Hartenian, 2008: 54; other refs xxxx). This makes the management of volunteers more difficult 'because the manager has to rely almost entirely on persuasion and moral commitment' (Brosnan and Cuskelly, 2001: 68). The very fact that volunteering is an act of free will or choice, means that volunteers are viewed as 'not biddable' and have the right to be 'mavericks' (Kearney, 2001/2007 cited in Rochester et al, 2012: 18; see also Whithear, 1999). O'Toole and Grey (2015: 68) recognise the importance of emotion within the management-volunteer relationship in their analysis of volunteer resistance to managerial control within the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI): 'Emotion played a role where volunteers' sense of injustice was injured... the perceived ideological encroachment'. The volunteer management task thus specifically involves the 'affective domain' (Wilmott, 1993: 517 cited in O'Toole and Grey, 2015: 57). Murray (2008: 240) too, sees the 'culture of volunteering' beyond the formal statements, mission, and processes as more important to understanding the volunteer management challenge. Despite this, Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002) indicate the way that research into volunteers has tended to focus on the individual psychology of volunteers and downplayed the relational and emotional dimensions that lie within voluntary organisations.

All of this makes the management of volunteers a challenging task, indeed Harris (1998) sets out five propositions of voluntary associations that make them distinctive from conventional business organisations, of which one is that 'being a volunteer limits the extent to which they can be directed or managed' (ibid: 150). The particular management challenges that follow from this are 1) lack of sanctions open to management, 2) little expectation of being managed by volunteers, and 3) management monitoring being seen as a breach of trust upon which the volunteers' contribution is feely given. However, getting underneath this management challenge is difficult. Much existing research has focused on an individualistic and often psychological identification of the implicit/intrinsic motivations of volunteers and the associated complexity of trying to 'manage' this diversity of motivations (see Hustinx et al, 2010; Rogelberg et al, 2010). Along with this, a body of prescriptive practitioner literature has developed, which presents good practice guides and examples of best practice around volunteer management (for example Connors, 1999; McCurley et al, 2012). Indeed, voluntary sector organisations, especially larger charities like the National Trust, have been developing more extensive policies towards the management of volunteers. While austerity rhetoric may say the

use of volunteers are cost-neutral, Bach (2012) contends that the energies put into their management dictates this may not be the case, leaving him to conclude that 'it is hard to avoid the conclusion that volunteers are being treated as staff members, with the important caveat that they are not being paid' (p409). This tends to support the assumption within the sector, stated at the start of this article, that the management of volunteers can be and should be the same as managing paid staff.

Notably however, there is a paucity of studies focusing on the interactions between managers of volunteers and the volunteers themselves (exceptions include Liao-Troth & Dunn, 1999). Indeed Murray (2008) outlines that within existing studies of volunteer management:

'One of the pieces of the puzzle still missing is the effect of day-to-day interpersonal relationships between volunteers and paid staff, volunteers and volunteer managers and between volunteers themselves... the micro-relationships... tone of voice, choice of words, body language, frequency of communication, underlying moods and stress, humor etc... to date we lack the observational case studies that record and analyse behaviors at this level' (245-6)

It is within this empirical and theoretical space that our research resides.

Methods and Analysis

Two organisations were involved in the research, the National Trust, and City of London Open Spaces, both broadly within the conservation voluntary sector. A range of qualitative methods were used to gather information about the nature of the work that was undertaken and expected of those who manage volunteers. These included, a participant-produced photography exercise (Shortt, 2018); the completion of Activity Involvement Records (AiRs), in-depth interviewing and participant observations. An ethnographically informed approach was taken to allow the researchers an up close and personal take on how the management of volunteers was embodied and received on a micro basis.

The Activity Involvement Records were designed to replicate the work undertaken by Rosemary Stewart in 1982, who had used a similar approach to map 'what managers do.' Ethics approval was sought and granted by the University at which both authors were employed. Data analysis involved the use of NVivo, verbatim transcriptions of focus groups, interviews and detailed observation notes within days of the events taking place.

Findings

Managers of volunteers are unable to motivate and control their direct reports using traditional HRM polices and practices such as PDDs, pay and reward, disciplinaries. Instead, they are reliant on cultivating high-touch relationships with their volunteers such that they can influence volunteer

behaviours, knowledges, and skills to ensure they perform effectively. There are no 'carrots and sticks' in the traditional sense and so an exorbitant amount of time and energy is invested in these relationships.

We structure our findings around ways in which managing volunteers is different to managing paid staff.

Discussion and Conclusion

We conclude that whilst there are significant differences required of those managing volunteers there is much the for-profit sector might want to learn. Thus, we conclude that rather than the voluntary sector looking to the tropes established in for-profit HRM, as a source of best practice, the reverse may be more informative.

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