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Leading and Following Volunteers: Implications for a Changing Society

JONE L. PEARCE

Individuals who work can be classified into two categories—those paid for their labor (employees) and those who do not receive monetary compensation (volunteers). The importance of employees is generally acknowledged, yet it is necessary to recall that volunteers also fight our fires, comfort our sick, educate, and provide innumerable counseling and support services. This paper will draw on a comparison of employees and volunteers to elucidate changing patterns of leadership and followership in U.S. society. Data from a comparison of volunteers and employees suggest that there are important differences in the organizational behavior of the two groups, and it will be suggested that employees will increasingly resemble volunteers.

Social trends such as the increasing professionalization of the work force and the increasing participation of

women in professional and managerial jobs all might be expected to alter the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers, supervisors and subordinates, in contemporary organizations. A means of gaining insight into the influence of such societal changes is offered by comparing employee-staffed with volunteer-staffed organizations. This comparison is useful for three reasons: first, volunteer leaders have rarely relied on either money or promotion as follower inducements, but instead offer opportunities for self-fulfillment. Second, voluntary organizations have had to operate with whatever work force was available; geographic transfers among volunteers is virtually unknown. Finally, women have always played important leadership roles in volunteer-staffed organizations. In other words, organizations staffed and managed by volunteers accomplish much work in

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our society without the "carrots and sticks" that have traditionally characterized employment.

In many sectors of the U.S. economy, it appears that employees are behaving more and more as if they were volunteers: they let their own standards and preferences dictate their work rather than organizational standards, "job hopping" is increasing, and vast resources are devoted to helping managers learn to "motivate" and "lead" their subordinates. The primary reason for this shift, it will be argued, is the lessening dependency of a number of employees on any one employer.

Data will be presented to support the contention that a lack of dependence is the primary reason volunteers behave as they do in their organizations. Further, it will be suggested that recent societal changes have reduced the dependency of some classes of employees, which may have important implications for leaders, followers, and society as a whole.

VOLUNTEERS AND EMPLOYEES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Volunteers and employees typically differ in their organizational behavior in several important ways. Two distinctions between volunteers and employees, unrelated to the central concept of noncompensated status, are particularly important here. First, volunteers are drawn disproportionately from higher socio-economic statuses (see Smith & Freedman, 1972, for a review). Second, volunteer work is virtually always a part-time occupation, while employees usually work full-time. Care must be taken to avoid focusing on behavioral differences be-

tween volunteers and employees that derive from socio-economic or part/full-time status. With these caveats in mind, evidence will be presented that indicates that two characteristics distinguish paid from unpaid workers—performance variability and relative leader-follower influence.

Multiple volunteer leader/follower relationships will be compared to a matched sample of employee leader/follower organizational relationships. In this manner the different relationships in these two organizational types can be separated from unique organizational and task effects.

METHOD

Sample

Organizations staffed predominately by volunteers and those staffed entirely by employees working on the same or similar tasks were paired. Four matched sets, or eight organizations, were sampled: two newspapers, two poverty relief agencies, two family planning clinics, two municipal fire departments.

A1. The volunteer-staffed newspaper is the student newspaper for a medium-sized private university located in a northeastern U.S. suburb. Each week 4,000 copies of the 10- to 12-page paper are distributed, free, on campus newsstands; it has been published (more or less) continuously for 30 years. The newspaper has a staff of approximately 30 volunteer male and female undergraduates.

A2. The employing newspaper is distributed, free, once a week in apartment-building lobbies and shops in an affluent residential neighborhood of a

large metropolitan city. Each week 50,000 copies of this community-news, 12-page paper are distributed. The paper is owned by the editor and publisher who hires the staff of 13 men and women; all employees are salaried, and the advertising salespeople receive additional commissions on sales.

B1. The voluntary poverty relief agency is a nondenominational Christian relief organization in a medium-sized northeastern city. Its primary task is the distribution of food to those who request it (13,245 deliveries in the previous year), but it occasionally provides transportation to medical appointments as well. If clients want food, they call a number monitored by an answering service; the answering service calls the telephone volunteer on duty (two shifts a day of about four hours each), and leaves the clients' names and phone numbers. The telephone volunteer then calls the driving volunteer or leaves a message at the central office. The organization has about 180 men and women volunteers who work a one-half day shift each month. They elect the governing committee, which hires the two part-time paid coordinators to staff the central office. The agency has been serving the community for over nine years.

B2. The employing poverty-relief agency is a municipal department of a medium-sized New England city that is statutorily required to provide emergency relief to those who do not qualify for any of the state or federal relief programs. In practice, most of their clients are chronic, usually men with drug or alcohol-related problems. Clients must appear weekly to receive their checks from their social workers and must usually attend a work or counseling program. Fifty-three men

and women work a standard 35-hour week for this agency. This service has been provided by this city for over 300 years, but the present administrative structure was developed during the FDR administration.

C1. The voluntary family-planning clinic provides gynecological, contraceptive, and related counseling services to women in a New England town. The current patient load is 200 women, with pregnancy testing done once a week, and clinics held two evenings a month; the office is staffed during weekdays by the salaried secretary. The clinic is run by a core "group" of 14 female volunteers who work anywhere from 4 hours a month to about 40 hours a week; they elect their own governing body. This group has been providing these services for over 50 years.

C2. The employing family-planning clinic provides sex education, gynecological, contraceptive, and related counseling services to women in a large northeastern city. Clinics are held four days and one evening a week, and the case load is 4,000 women. This clinic is a component of a municipal health department. Twenty women and one man are the full-time employees; physicians are hired on an hourly basis to conduct examinations. The clinic has been serving the community for seven years.

D1. The volunteer fire department provides emergency medical technicians, fire prevention, and fighting services to a rural New England town of about 15,000. It responded to over 500 alarms in the previous year. In an emergency, the town dispatcher is called; she makes an announcement through the radio and blasts a horn so

others will get to their radios. The closest firefighter goes to the station to take the apparatus (engine, hook and ladder, or ambulance) to the destination while other volunteers proceed there directly in their own cars. The department is composed of four companies—three pump, and one hook and ladder. Each company elects a house administrative group and its officers; the department as a whole elects the chief and two assistant chiefs. The state allows each company 40 full members (all are men), and there is a waiting list for these positions.

D2. The employing fire department provides fire prevention and fighting services to a northeastern suburb of 26,000. The department answers an average of 200 calls a month. There is a central firehouse in which five firefighters and the battalion chief are stationed, and two outlying stations with two firefighters each. There are four shifts working an average 42-hour week (two shifts a day, three days on, three days off). The department is composed of 46 men and one woman secretary.

Procedures and measures

The data collection procedure followed the same pattern in each organization. Data collection included interviews with a random sample (with over-sampling of those in positions of leadership) of organizational members and questionnaires. Much of the data in the present report comes from informal interviews and researcher observation. The source of many quotations used in this report are the field notes in which all organizational contacts were recorded.

Both pairs of the four matched task sets were studied simultaneously to

ensure that the passage of time would not confound comparisons between volunteers and employees and to allow daily comparisons of their respective norms and practices. Since only one researcher collected data, the matched pairs were studied serially, in the order listed above. More detailed information about the sample, procedures, and measures used in this report are available in Pearce (Note 1).

Measures of performance variability rely on the perceptions of organizational members. Since none of the sampled volunteer organizations measured worker performance, kept absenteeism or turnover records, a comparison of these two organizational types on such "objective" measures is not possible.

Learning about influence relationships in these two types of organizations is even more difficult. In this paper influence is defined as the actual impact one person has on the actions or beliefs of another; influence incorporates legitimate position power and persuasion. First, although we know what "influence" is in the abstract, actual influence is difficult to discern from overt behaviors alone. Influence often is "potential," based on complex judgments (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). It is not dependent on any set of observable behaviors. For example, many authoritative "commands" are politely masked, as when an army general "suggests" the privates keep their barracks cleaner.

Further, Simon (1957) and Barnard (1938) both refer to a "zone of acceptance" or a "zone of indifference" to indicate those behaviors, or decisions about behaviors, the follower is willing to allocate to the leader. However, the parties often do not have a precise, shared agreement about this zone until

a disagreement forces clarification. This occurs partly because of the masking of blunt influence mentioned above, but additionally it is the nature of the organizational leader/follower relationship to be somewhat open ended. Williamson (1975) argues that hierarchies (or organizations) are most efficient when the terms of a contract cannot be spelled out, that is, if there is uncertainty about future events. The authority relationship exists when necessary future actions by leaders and followers cannot be specified in advance. Yet if organizational authority is by its very nature ambiguous, it is very difficult to study.

This complexity in the influence of leaders and followers in organizations is addressed in the present report by a theoretical assumption and a particular choice of the method.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) provides a useful perspective for viewing the influence relationship. Both leaders and followers bring resources to the relationship; examples which are exchanged include labor for wages and commitment for autonomy. This provides the theoretical anchor that allows us to focus on the rather more concrete inducements and contributions that form the leader/follower influence relationship.

Since influence relationships are ambiguous, reliance on any one method alone is insufficient. Direct observation alone would miss the actual influence behind the masking and the potentialities not yet reflected in overt behavior. Self-reports could not reflect that influence not fully understood or articulated; they are also particularly suspect for a topic as reactive as influence. The only alternative is a triangulation of methods.

ANALYSIS

Performance variability

It appears that volunteers are much more variable in their performance than are employees:

One interviewee summarized these beliefs about volunteers and employees by saying that volunteers are either much better or much worse than employees. By better, she means they are enthusiastic and do the extra things that need to be done. By worse, she means they cannot be relied upon to show up or perform at a minimum level. By implication, employees can be expected to come to work and perform at an acceptable level, but they are unlikely to approach the job with zeal. (Pearce, Note 1, p. 162)

This variability results because volunteers simply ignore their leaders. For example, in the voluntary food distribution agency, the leaders (board) decided that it was appropriate to provide longer term support to their clients who called for free food. Therefore, in addition to obtaining sufficient information to get the food to the caller, the volunteers were also instructed to inquire whether or not the caller was receiving support from a social service agency. The volunteers were given descriptions of the various agencies and were expected to provide this information to appropriate callers. However, the new information was rarely provided. Apparently many volunteers felt uncomfortable making these kinds of inquiries; other volunteers did not like the local welfare agency for some reason and did not want to refer callers to it.

One final indicator of the capacity of volunteers to ignore their organizational leaders is indicated by the following passage from an interview with

two volunteers in the sampled family-planning clinic:

They referred to the hassle they had had with the State Office in reopening their clinic. Since there was a hospital-run clinic in the area, they had to prove there was a need in order to get state funds. [The Chapter Chairwoman] laughed as she reported that the state people had said "Oh you people! You know if you were paid, we'd come down a lot harder on you." I asked them if they really thought that was true. They said "Oh yes, they require us to do things but we say we just don't have the time." [The Volunteer Chairwoman] then told me about an incident in which the State Office Head of Services had suggestions. . . . "She wanted us to be more professional; I took her idea about the smocks to my volunteers and they weren't interested. So I just told the State Office we didn't want to wear smocks." (Pearce, Note 1, p. 164)

In summary, volunteers in the organizations were much more likely to work when they wanted and in the manner they wanted. Employees were more likely to respond to the constraints of organizational policy and leader directive.

Comparative influence

These voluntary and employing organizations differed in their methods of allocating formal authority within their organizations, which in turn affected the relative influence of leaders. Both of these organizational types had members with authority over others, yet voluntary and employing organizations differed in the manner in which these leaders wielded their authority.

Voluntary and employing organizations differed in the ultimate sources of organizational authority. In these employing organizations all authority was invested in the employer—be it the

owner, government body, or private incorporated entity. In these employing organizations employers' authority may be bestowed on employees—the leadership, but it was a top-down process. In contrast, in these voluntary organizations the authority was invested in the membership as a whole. They allowed their representatives—leadership—to assume some of their authority; in this case it was a bottom-up process. This corresponds to the reported influence of followers in both types of organizations, which is reflected in questionnaire responses: volunteer followers reported significantly more personal influence than did employee followers.

There is a qualification to this description of source of authority in voluntary organizations. Legally, the authority in several of the voluntary organizations in this sample was not vested in the membership, but in an outside governing body (newspaper and family-planning clinic). However, leaders in these voluntary organizations behaved as if they were representatives of the membership rather than representatives of the governing body. In other words, the reactions of volunteer leaders to their positions of authority were quite different from the reactions of their employee counterparts.

For example, volunteers in the newspaper and family-planning clinic more or less formally chose their own leaders and made the recommendations to the governing body for its *pro forma* approval. The governing bodies were known to disapprove of some practices in these organizations yet they were never known to apply the sanctions at their command to the recalcitrant volunteers. For example, the student association

wanted the newspaper to more aggressively seek advertising so the association could reduce its subsidy, but the staff members saw themselves as journalists not salespeople, and ignored these requests. It was these volunteers' general opinion that their outside governing bodies' only function was to purge the organization if members were caught breaking the law (e.g., theft or medical malpractice).

There were a couple of characteristics that may have led to this tendency. First, these governing bodies were responsible for many other organizations, as well as certain tasks of their own. For example, the student association supervised dozens of student groups, and the family-planning governing board was responsible for 22 other clinics as well as state-wide fundraising and legislative activity. These boards simply did not have the time to become involved in the daily functioning of all of their subordinate organizations. Secondly, and most important to the present discussion, these organizations and their leaders are much more dependent on their volunteer subordinates than they are on their employee subordinates.

Comparative dependence

One of the most critical factors in the different behavior of volunteer and employee leaders was the greater relative dependence of leaders on their volunteers than on their employees. Although both volunteers and employees provide labor, commitment, and problem-solving skills, the leaders in these two types of organizations provide vastly different inducements in exchange.

Employers provided the salaries, and their designated leaders adminis-

tered this money, as well as other prerequisites such as promotions; most importantly, these leaders had the authority to make these payments contingent on employee performance.

The process in voluntary organizations was not quite so straightforward. Although the governing group and leaders often provided important resources (such as space, equipment, organization) volunteers brought a valuable resource to the relationship—their labor at no dollar cost. The leadership of these voluntary organizations, unlike unions or cooperatives, were always aware that their membership could abandon them at any time.

Leaders of voluntary organizations are probably more dependent on their volunteer followers than are leaders in any other type of organization. There is probably no other organization that is as costless to leave. The membership of political parties and churches can decline, but not overnight, no doubt because these members see few positive alternatives. Yet volunteers can find many alternative uses for their free time, with equal opportunities for personal growth and community service.

Volunteers may work according to their personal preferences because they have little to fear if they do not. Employees have a variety of preferences, too, and would no doubt follow them if they did not fear their actions could imperil their standards of living. These leaders found employees to be more responsive to their requests simply because the employees depend on their leaders' good wishes and the volunteers did not. Employers control income, as well as other rewards like promotion. Volunteer leaders are often themselves elected by the membership, so it is not surprising that their volun-

teers act more like constituents than subordinates.

DISCUSSION

The case for declining employee dependence

There are two broad social changes that, it will be argued, have the effect of reducing the dependence of affected employees. Furthermore, there is some evidence that these employees are responding to their greater freedom much as volunteers have responded to theirs. These changes have substantial implications for the leadership of those organizations relying on these freer employees, as well as the rest of society.

These societal changes are the increasing professionalization of, and the movement of greater numbers of women into the workforce, particularly at higher levels.

Workforce professionalization

Employees in this country are becoming increasingly professionalized. The percentage of professional and technical workers rose from 11.4% of the total workforce in 1960 to 15.5% in 1979, while during the same time the percentage of blue-collar and farm workers declined (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1980). Concomitantly, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in this country—from 186,500 in 1940, 392,440 degrees in 1960, to 839,730 in 1970—has increased over 400% (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 1980).

A good example of this trend is the rapid growth of professional management programs granting Masters in Business Administration (MBA) de-

grees, indicating the "professionalization" of business management. Just 20 years ago business managers were expected to spend their entire work careers with one organization. Commentators at that time deplored the conforming "organization man" (Whyte, 1956). Now they express concern for the high expectations and aloyal mobility of the "generalist" MBAs (The Money Chase: Business School Solutions May Be Part of the U.S. Problem," *Time*, May 4, 1981).

Those with advanced and professional training are not as dependent on any one organization or supervisor as are those with organization-specific careers. Although certainly not as independent as volunteers, many of today's employees have employment freedom unknown to most of their parents.

Working women

Women are moving into the workforce and into professional occupations in rapidly increasing numbers. In 1960 only 33.1% of women 25–44 years of age and living with their husbands worked for a living, but in 1979 the number had increased to 58.4%; in 1960 women constituted 37.8% of the total workforce, but in 1979 women constituted the majority of wage earners at 51.1% of the workforce (*Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, 1980).

Women are also gaining in the professions. From 1972 to 1979 women moved from 21.7% of accountants to 32.9%, from 3.8% of all lawyers and judges to 11.9%, and from 19.0% to 31.6% of bank officers and financial managers (*Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, 1980).

Women earning substantial salaries provide a greater independence not

only for themselves, but for their husbands as well. A wife's income can free a husband from the constant pressure to support dependents. He can use his freedom to attend school full-time to attain professional credentials, and so increase his independence. He might also be more willing to change jobs, or even vote to go on strike, if his family is not completely dependent on a paycheck from his current employer.

More voluntary employees?

Even if some employees are becoming less dependent on their employing organizations, they may not necessarily take on volunteer characteristics. For one thing, these social changes may reduce employee dependence, but they do not eradicate it. Volunteers are still much more independent than any but the wealthiest employee. Yet it seems that these less dependent employees are taking advantage of their freedom.

Certainly professionals have always been expected to rely on their own internalized professional standards rather than on organizational directives; organizations are not expected to develop policy in those domains for which professionals are responsible. As more and more occupations are "professionalized," we would expect their incumbents to claim this independence as part of their professional status. When an organization's workforce becomes dominated by professionals, each working according to personal standards, we would expect to see their supervisors face the same coordination problems volunteer leaders face.

Employees whose services are in demand, such as engineers, are "job hopping" in greater numbers. Employers have been raising starting

salaries more rapidly than the salaries of continuing employees. It does not take such employees long to discover that if they change jobs every year or two, their salaries will be considerably higher than if they remain with one employer. These employees are finding it as easy to leave an organization as volunteers have found it.

Implications

If employee independence is in fact increasing, we can speculate about the implications for the employees, for the leaders of these employees' organizations, and for those of us who use these organizations' services.

Implications for employees

Of course, virtually all of us would prefer to be an independent rather than a dependent employee. Reduced dependence on any one employer means less likelihood of being "trapped" in a boring job. An employee who feels freer may take more risks, sponsoring creative and innovative ideas. If employees spend more time working on the tasks they choose, we could expect greater enthusiasm and commitment to the work. It also means the freedom to pursue such "unproductive" activities as long lunches and taking care of one's personal business "on company time." This lessening dependence is no doubt a positive change for these employees.

Implications for leadership

Less dependent employees are expected to be more difficult to supervise. Their supervisors would have to pay closer attention to their own leadership skills. There is some indication that this has been recognized in many organizations. Consultants specializing

in training supervisors in such skills as "motivating," "influencing," "listening," and "developing subordinates," continue to proliferate. There is probably not a graduate school of business in this country that has not found it has an increasing demand for its programs for practicing managers, programs that usually contain large leadership skills components.

As supervision becomes more demanding, we might expect more employees to avoid these positions, much as volunteers do now. Organizations may find they must work harder to make their leadership positions attractive, a potentially costly undertaking.

Implications for society

As organizations find it more difficult to closely control their members, we may find the quality and consistency of their services declining. Organizations cannot operate efficiently unless they can predict with reasonable accuracy. As their employees work with more independent employees, performance becomes less predictable. When social services were wholly delivered by volunteers, the quality of the service received depended on the particular volunteer one happened to see. A major reason for the conversion to a paid staff of social workers was to ensure that minimum standards of service were provided (Levine & Levine, 1970). With less dependence these

minimum standards may be more difficult to enforce, and as consumers we might learn to expect more inefficiency and less consistent service.

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