A Path-Goal Model of the Leader/Volunteer Relationship in Higher Education

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A Path-Goal Model of the Leader/Volunteer Relationship in Higher Education

By

Megan Baumgartner Mercier

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

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Advisors: Timothy Harper, Catherine Berheide

THE MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAM IN LIBERAL STUDIES
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ABSTRACT

Within the nonprofit sector, specifically higher education, volunteer work is critical to organizational success. Institutions of higher education benefit from an understanding of volunteer management practice and principles, specifically the relationships that develop between paid professional advancement staff members and volunteers. There are multiple factors that contribute to the leader/volunteer follower relationship and enhance the skills of both the leader and the volunteer, thereby increasing opportunities for successful organizational outcomes. Using leader-member exchange and transformational leadership theory as the foundation for this exploration, I will present a model based on Path-Goal Theory (House, 1971) that illustrates the interrelationship between leader behavior and volunteer behavior, speaks to the significance of that behavior over time related to the formation of an exemplar volunteer, and identifies how the volunteer leader/exemplar relationship may contribute positively to organizational outcomes. This paper will add to the body of knowledge in the field of nonprofit volunteer management, suggest opportunities for future research, and support the professionalism of the volunteer manager.
Within the nonprofit sector, volunteer work is critical to the success of higher education institutions. These organizations benefit from an understanding of volunteer management practice and principles, specifically the relationships that develop between paid professional staff members and volunteers. There are multiple factors that contribute to these leader/volunteer follower relationships and enhance the skills of both the leader and the volunteer. The nature of the leader/volunteer relationship can have a significant influence that contributes to more successful organizational outcomes through the work of the advancement office.

Using leader-member exchange (LMX) and transformational leadership (TFL) theory as the foundation for this exploration, I will present a model based on Path-Goal Theory (House, 1971) that illustrates the interrelationship between leader behavior and volunteer behavior, speaks to the significance of that behavior over time related to the formation of an exemplar volunteer, and identifies how the volunteer leader/exemplar relationship may contribute positively to organizational outcomes. This paper will examine the development of the leader and volunteer follower relationship in order to identify the process by which a volunteer becomes an exemplar. This paper will also add to the body of knowledge in the field of nonprofit volunteer management while also supporting the professionalization of the volunteer manager.
In this examination, the leader is the paid advancement professional volunteer manager of a nonprofit organization, and the exemplar is the ideal alumnus volunteer particular to the role they fulfill. Primary research within the context of nonprofit higher education as well as existing literature related to organizational theory and volunteer management will be presented in order to illustrate the importance of the leader/volunteer relationship for higher education. It will be suggested that the leadership role of effective paid professional volunteer managers is an important component to both developing and maintaining exemplary volunteers. Further, it will be posited that volunteer leaders benefit by developing close relationships with volunteers and that the development of those strong relationships increases the likelihood of cultivating volunteer exemplars.

To illustrate these points, the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development (see Appendix A) has been adapted from House’s path-goal theory to the higher education context. By applying for-profit business theory to the practice of nonprofit volunteer management we are better able to understand the leader/volunteer follower dynamic. Theories and models from the management and leadership literature inform the nonprofit sector and provide tools that allow volunteer managers to form successful relationships with their volunteers.

In order to better understand the translation of concepts from the for-profit literature to the nonprofit context, it will be helpful to provide several definitions.
There is no shortage of literature on leadership, and as many definitions of the term exist as there are studies on the topic (Burns, 1978, p. 2; Yukl, 2010, p. 6). Burns and Yukl, both preeminent scholars of leadership, agree that one of the key factors in defining effective leadership is that the outcome of the leadership process must be beneficial to both leaders and followers. Within the context of this paper, leadership is defined as a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization that represents the values and motivations of the organization in a way that is mutually beneficial to the leader, the follower, and ultimately the organization (Burns, p. 18; Yukl, p. 3).

As Yukl notes (2010, pp. 6-8), management and leadership have traditionally been handled as distinct terms, yet he goes on to state that to succeed in modern organizations, management involves leading. In this context, the leader is the volunteer manager paid by the institution to manage all, or some segment, of its human volunteer resources by providing guidance, support, and motivation. The volunteer manager is the organizational representative charged with developing primary relationships with the volunteers and engaging them in the mission of the institution.

Weerts, Cabrera, and Sanford (2010) cite L. A. Penner’s 2002 definition of volunteerism as “long-term, non-obligatory, planned pro-social behaviors that benefit strangers and usually occur in an organizational setting” (p. 349). A
volunteer exhibits organizational citizenship behaviors (a type of pro-social behavior) by providing service to the organization or institution “willingly and without pay” (B. Chambers, Executive Director of Volunteer Relations for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), personal communication, April 20, 2011). Within higher education the volunteer is typically a stakeholder of the institution (such as an alumnus, parent, or community member). In higher education, volunteers may be asked to provide a variety of types and levels of volunteer service depending on their engagement with the organization, professional expertise, and needs of the institution. Ideally, volunteer managers are able to develop relationships with volunteers over time, which increase the likelihood of cultivating an exemplar volunteer. An exemplar volunteer is a model volunteer follower who is trusted by the leader to perform volunteer tasks required of the volunteer role that reflect positively on the organization. The volunteer exemplar is the follower to whom the leader most often turns for counsel, communication, and peer-volunteer leadership.

In higher education, volunteer service contributed to an institution by alumni volunteers is typically managed by the institutional advancement division of the organization. Institutional advancement is primarily and fundamentally about developing relationships with institutional constituents and serves as a fertile ground on which to examine the influence of LMX on organization outcomes. Kozobarich (2000) explains that by having
one foot in the academic realm and one in the surrounding community, advancement professionals promote the mission of the institution. They raise money, communicate with various external constituencies, and link alumni to their alma mater ... the responsibilities for development, alumni relations, and communications ... lie in a cadre of professional staff. ... In the era of declining resources, the advancement team has moved from a peripheral to an essential role within both private and public institutions of higher education. (p. 25)

It is the relationship between volunteer and paid professional volunteer managers that is critical to the vibrancy of the institution. Relationships with students, prospective students, alumni, parents, employees, volunteers, donors, corporations, foundations, neighbors, and state and local government are the key to organizational effectiveness.

THE NONPROFIT SECTOR & INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT

In 1889, Andrew Carnegie published Wealth in which he espoused, in addition to philanthropy, the importance of volunteerism to a productive society. Carnegie believed that

If any man has seen fit to rear his [children] with a view to ... what is highly commendable, has instilled in them the sentiment that they are in a position to labor for public ends without reference to pecuniary considerations ... who ... still perform great services in the community. Such are the very salt of the earth. (Walton & Gasman, 2008, p. 16)
In more recent decades, the intersection of philanthropy and volunteerism in the nonprofit sector has received varying degrees of attention. Desruisseaux (1985) notes that “the nonprofit sector in the United States—until recently considered, according to one scholar, a ‘non-subject’ by American academics—has in recent years become the topic of an expanding body of knowledge being developed by a growing number of researchers” (p. 18). It was the rise in the number of nonprofit organizations through the latter half of the 1960s that caused the nonprofit sector to slowly gain ground as a subject worthy of scholarly research through the 1970s (Desruisseaux, p. 18; O’Neill, 1989, p. 170).

In the past 30 years the field of institutional advancement, or nonprofit fundraising, programming, and volunteer management, has gradually gained wider attention and professional acknowledgment. However, it was not until 1980, with the establishment of the Independent Sector—a leading forum for research, public policy, and support of the charitable and philanthropic sector (March 26, 2011, www.independentsector.org)—that interdisciplinary study and professionalization of the nonprofit philanthropic and voluntary sector gained scholarly attention (Walton & Gasman, 2008, p. xxiii). Scholars began to acknowledge that the nonprofit sector, sometimes referred to as the “third sector” or “invisible sector,” added value to the study of sociology and organizational behavior (Desruisseaux, 1985, p. 18; O’Neill, 1989, p. 169).
The classification of volunteer engagement as a “third sector” also has implications for professional staffing. Kozobarich (2000, p. 29) acknowledges that, most often, institutional advancement professionals were not at all deliberate about their pursuit of the profession and learned by hands-on experience, professional development opportunities, and on-the-job training. Pulling (1980, p. 14) notes that prior to the 1970s, the nonprofit sector rarely put commercial management practice into use. She goes on to state that “the nonprofit world has produced few management theories” and that the “management process of institutional development … refers only to fundraising when it should include (and would be more effective if it did) program content, volunteer recruitment and motivation, fundraising, and public relations” (p. 14). The lack of volunteer management training for leaders, then, can be a significant barrier in developing and stewarding volunteer exemplars. The benefits in personal and organizational outcomes could potentially far outweigh the cost of investing time at the outset of the relationship and underscores the need for investing in training for paid professionals charged with the responsibility of leading volunteers in the nonprofit sector.

It may be the lack of scholarly work in this field that has contributed to the delay in professional recognition, support, and development. The consideration of volunteer management as a professional skill has been characterized as occupying the “backwaters of society” (Connors, 1995, p. 11) without professional development opportunities. In other words, volunteer management has received very little
attention as an area of professional expertise and, as a result, professionals who lead
volunteers have been relegated to the margins of professional growth. A study by
Gay (2001) found that some volunteer managers, as recently as 10 years ago, still
struggled with the professionalization of volunteer management. Senior level
volunteer managers, however, acknowledge the benefits of industry standards,
professional credentials, and member organizations. More recently, B. Chambers
(personal communication, April 20, 2011) has affirmed that volunteer management
is a skill that is increasingly being included in formal job descriptions within
advancement. Several authors have called for continuing research and scholarship
within the context of the nonprofit sector (O’Neill, 1989; Pulling, 1980; Walton &
Gasman, 2008). This paper will support the ongoing professionalization of the
nonprofit sector by adding to the body of knowledge and highlighting the
importance of the leader/volunteer relationship.

Lagemann notes, in her forward, that fundraising and volunteerism have
been integral to the history and growth of higher education in the United States. She
asserts that it is “vital that all of us understand the ways in which the three have
been interconnected over almost 400 years of American history” (Walton & Gasman,
2008, xviii). Within the context of the nonprofit sector, higher education has long
been woven into the fabric of the American economy. O’Neill (1989) states that
“private higher education may well be the most influential part of the entire
nonprofit sector.” Higher education makes numerous contributions to the economy
through its faculty and alumni, in the form of labor and research, business, the economy, education, professional endeavors, politics, and advances in research (pp. 50-51). Despite higher education’s contributions to society, it was not until Walton and Gasman’s 2008 collaboration with the Association for the Study of Higher Education that experts compiled a comprehensive text on philanthropy, fundraising, and volunteerism in the field of higher education.

According to B. Chambers (personal communication, April 20, 2011), “higher education has always been recognized as a leader within the nonprofit sector.” In fact, contrary to Gay’s aforementioned study, higher education has been on the forefront of the professionalization of the nonprofit sector since 1974 (six years before the Independent Sector) with the establishment of CASE, “the professional association serving educational institutions and the advancement professionals who work on their behalf in alumni relations, communications, development, marketing, and allied areas” (www.case.org, April 2, 2011). The higher education segment of the nonprofit sector, therefore, serves as a good foundation for the examination of professional volunteer leaders and volunteer relationship development.

In an era characterized by diminishing human resources, diminished state funding, and a growing inability of families to pay for higher education, volunteer work is critical to organizational success if educational institutions are expected to maintain or have a greater impact on the stakeholders they serve (Connors, 1995, p. 37; Weerts et al., 2010, p. 346). As John Lippincott (2011), President of CASE, notes,
“alumni relations is the cornerstone of advancement. In this era of public scrutiny, global competition, and digital communities, a strong alumni relations program should be valued as critical to the success of educational institutions” (p. 8). A strong alumni program that increases attraction and retention leads to operating and scholarship support when alumni engagement is high.

The benefit of well-managed volunteers to the nonprofit organization is the increased likelihood of financial support, which demonstrates the potential importance of volunteer engagement in the nonprofit sector. “Nearly 64 million individuals in the United States volunteered in 2009, an increase of 1.6 million over 2008 and the biggest jump in six years. .. The report, Volunteering in America 2010, also finds that volunteers gave more than 8.1 billion hours of volunteer service last year worth an estimated $169 billion” (CASE, 2010). Not only do volunteers offset personnel costs in the nonprofit sector, but a survey of both fundraising and nonfundraising volunteers revealed that their philanthropic support of the organizations they champion are also larger (Mercier, 2010a). But as Bonnicksen (2005) notes, “Volunteers do not blossom on their own. They must be mentored and helped in their growth as volunteers and donors” (p. 120).

A PATH-GOAL MODEL OF THE LEADER/VOLUNTEER RELATIONSHIP

Within the nonprofit world, and specifically within higher education, there is very little attention paid to the study and implementation of successful volunteer programs and little data available that explores volunteerism in organizations
In fact, volunteers are typically a source of frustration for many volunteer leaders because of the amount of time, energy, and resources necessary to foster volunteer relationships (Pulling, 1980, p. 16). Volunteer leaders who do not understand the importance of developing relationships with volunteers over time may inadvertently marginalize the volunteer and assume responsibilities that should be delegated to volunteer followers. Professional volunteer managers may actually regard their volunteers as unpaid employees, communicating, guiding, and supporting them just as they would their own paid staff, with the added complexity of not having traditional for-profit motivational tools (i.e., pay reward and punishment) at their disposal. In the absence of these extrinsic motivations, it is important for a volunteer manager to develop volunteer relationships, understand the unique motivations of each volunteer, and then assign tasks to maximize success and fulfillment. The volunteer leader must possess an understanding of the array of benefits provided by fostering strong volunteer relationships, understand the difference between managing volunteers and employees, and be equipped with the skill set to manage the relationship.

The Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development presented (see Figure 1 and Appendix A) provides volunteer managers in higher education with a representation of the leader/volunteer relationship development process and the key factors that influence the quality and nature of the relationship. Path-goal theory is a standard contingency theory that
combines goal-setting and leadership concepts, and it was adapted from the organizational management literature. It was selected as a basis for this discussion because it most clearly translates from the for-profit sector to a nonprofit context. House’s (1971) original theory stated that the manager’s job is to guide workers toward the best course of action to achieve personal and organizational goals.

**Figure 1: A Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development**

One of the key points of the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development that makes it particularly applicable to the nonprofit volunteer management context is that the theory takes into account the situational variables of each individual participant in the relationship. In other words, leader behavior can be shaped based on individual traits and characteristics of the volunteer within the context of dynamic situation. House’s theory also maintains
that it is the leader’s responsibility to ensure that followers achieve their goals, which should be compatible with those of the organization.

The Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development illustrates that the exchange between leader and volunteer is moderated by several variables, which may allow for the development of TFL. Within higher education advancement there are many unique contexts in which professional volunteer managers and volunteers may interact. Within these contexts, the exchange between leaders and volunteers influences the behavior of each individual. At the beginning of the relationship (T1), the leader’s behaviors, adjusted to volunteer needs, will influence the reciprocal behavior of the volunteer. As the relationship develops (T2) the leader/volunteer relationship is more reciprocal and is then moderated by several variables (organizational commitment, person/role fit, person/organization fit, length of relationship between leader/volunteer, the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the leader and volunteer). When these moderators positively influence LMX, TFL may occur. When TFL is present in the leader/volunteer relationship, both leader and volunteer are more effective, which ultimately leads to positive organizational outcomes.

Not only does the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development allow for difference, it also takes into account the dynamic nature of the leader/volunteer relationship. The model accounts for changes in the organizational context based on organizational need and
opportunities, the skill sets contributed by both the leader and the volunteer, and the development of both skills and relationships over time. It is posited that at the beginning of the relationship the leader provides direction to the volunteer (T1) and, over time, as the volunteer builds skill in a particular role, the volunteer is able to provide feedback to the leader (T2) in the form of positive feedback, constructive criticism, and innovation. The degree to which this LMX is present at T2 will indicate the likelihood of exemplar development. Capturing the dimension of time is consistent with the reality of volunteer management. Leaders must engage followers before LMX can take place.

**REVIEW OF CURRENT THEORY**

House’s Path-Goal Theory is derived from previous behavioral and motivational theory and most often is attributed to Evans’ 1970 foundational work (House, 1996, p. 324). House’s theory extends to the examination of the importance of leader behavior in initiating the structure within which the volunteer relationship will develop (House, 1971, pp. 321-322). Path-goal theory is considered a “widely recognized theoretical development from a contingency approach” (Luthans, 2008, p. 420) and has been used in this model because it “provides a rather complete framework for understanding motivation in organizational settings” (Evans, 1974, p. 172). The theory focuses on leader behaviors and the impact of those behaviors on the motivation and performance of subordinates. While the volunteer is not a subordinate, per se, a volunteer who may be new to a volunteer role will require the
same kind of training and supervision that a subordinate would require. Within the leader/volunteer relationship, it is important that the paid professional manage the volunteer relationship in a positive way that allows the volunteer every opportunity for success.

Path-goal theory suggests that a variety of leader styles may be used by the same leader in different contexts. Therefore, path-goal theory remains a subject of research because it can be applied to a variety of situations and expanded to incorporate newly developing theories such as LMX and TFL (Johns, 1978; Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2008). This theory is applicable to the study of volunteer management because volunteer leaders are typically charged with managing a variety of volunteers in a variety of situations.

In their meta-analysis of path-goal theory, Wofford and Liska (1993) found several deficiencies in existing research on path-goal models. For example, some models presented a definition of leader behavior that was too broad to accurately test the theory. Other deficiencies included inconsistent measurement of subordinate effectiveness and overall model complexity (p. 872). The authors suggested that future path-goal theory focus more specifically on the fruitfulness of short-term leader behaviors such as communication skills, environmental sensitivity, and adaptability (p. 875). Due to the short-term commitments of many volunteers in higher education, a short-term approach as presented in the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development is an appropriate application
of this model. Several authors, including the theory’s author, have suggested that existing studies only partially support the path-goal theory, which confirms the need for the continued testing and evolution of path-goal theory (House, 1996; Johns, 1978, p. 324; Wofford & Liska, p. 875). An application of path-goal theory to the leader/volunteer relationship within the nonprofit sector is just such an extension of current models.

House’s original path-goal theory presented specific leader behaviors inherent in the model (directive, supportive, participative, achievement-oriented) that applied to both leader and follower. The Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development seems to best represent the intersection of the various inputs in a nonprofit context (volunteer, leader, environment) while also allowing for the illustration of relationship development through LMX theory. Leader-member exchange is a relationship-based approach to leadership that has progressed over the years into a formula for developing and maintaining effective and mature leadership relationships based on the valued exchange of resources offered by both leader and member (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 220; Wilson, Sin, & Conlon, 2010, p. 358). As Liden, Wayne, and Stillwell (1993) note, “research on LMX has supported the major propositions of the theory” (p. 662).

Most existing research regarding LMX theory focuses on the contributions of the leader to the leader/follower relationship (Wilson et al., 2010, p. 358), but Luthans (2008) notes that “followers/associates may actually affect leaders as much
as leaders affect followers/associates” (p. 417). The growth of this two-way exchange is represented by (T1) and (T2). The incorporation of LMX into the path-goal volunteer model allows for an examination of the influence that the leader exerts on the volunteer, as well as the development over time of the volunteer’s ability to eventually exert influence on the leader. As Burns (1978) asserts, “the essence of the leader-follower relation is the interaction of persons with different levels of motivations and of power potential, including skill, in pursuit of a common or at least joint purpose” (p. 19). Leader-member exchange illustrates an exchange of that influence and may allow for shared leadership. As Catano et al. (2001) note, “active participation by leaders and members is necessary for any organization to carry out its goals and services” (p.258).

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) have illustrated that the multifaceted nature of LMX “should account for more of the potential leadership contribution, and thus increase the predictive validity and practical usefulness” (p. 221) of an examination of the leader and member relationship. Taking the multidirectional relationship of the leader and the volunteer (at T2) into account allows for a better prediction of organizational outcome than taking any piece of the inputs alone. When both leader and volunteer are positively engaged in the relationship, positive organizational outcomes are more likely. Leader-member exchange then enhances the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development when considering the development of the relationship between the volunteer manager and the
volunteer. It is also possible that the presence of LMX may also affect volunteer exemplar development because, once developed, LMX has been shown to be stable over time. This scenario would also indicate the importance of including it in a volunteer path-goal model, such as the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development, which attempts to explain the development of leader/volunteer relationships over time (Liden et al., 1993, p. 669).

Consistently, research has shown that when LMX is high, and TFL is effective, the number of organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) in an organizational relationship is higher (Carter, Jones-Farmer, Armenakis, Field, & Svyantek, 2009; Tsai, Chen, & Cheng, 2009; Wang, Law, Hackett, Duanxu, & Chen, 2005). Managerial competency in volunteer management can be characterized as OCBs, or helping behaviors, because leaders who engage in OCBs are more likely to get OCBs from their volunteers. This reciprocity serves to enhance the relationship-building process between leader and volunteer. Luthans (2008, p. 426) has noted that TFL, when mediated by LMX, does have an effect on OCBs, and Asgari, Silong, Ahmad, and Samah (2008, p. 228) have also noted the positive correlation between TFL and OCB.

When leaders and volunteers develop relationships that contribute positively to organizational success, TFL is not only possible, but it is a key component toward a positive outcome. Bass (1990) defines TFL as “superior leadership performance … which occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees,
when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the
group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for
the good of the group” (p. 21). Transformational leaders use charisma, inspiration,
intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, p. 22) to develop
positive relationships with their followers based on the unique needs of the
follower. As Wang et al. (2005) note in their examination of the relationship between
LMX and TFL, several authors have called for a theoretical integration of the TFL
and LMX literature and state that “only three published studies have included
measures of both TFL and LMX” (pp. 420, 422). Asgari et al. (2008) and Rank,
Nelson, Allen, and Xu (2009) have both found that positive organizational outcomes
can be linked to TFL when LMX is high. When paid-professional volunteer leaders
develop positive relationships with volunteers— which enhance volunteer, leader,
and organizational effectiveness (high LMX) — TFL is present in the relationship and
leads to successful organizational outcomes.

When mediated by TFL, the leader/volunteer relationship may result in
leader effectiveness and volunteer effectiveness (Wang et al., 2005). When both
leaders and their volunteers are effective, the exchange relationship ensures
successful organizational outcomes. As defined earlier, leadership is a mutually
beneficial process, and it is this mutually beneficial process that allows leadership to
be transformational rather than transactional (Burns, 1978, p. 425). As nonprofit
organizations continue to thrive in today’s economic environment, external forces
that impact the organization become critical to organizational outcomes. From an
open-systems perspective, volunteer labor is a unique external input of nonprofit
organizations as compared to for-profit organizations. Luthans (2008, p. 62) believes
that an open-systems approach is becoming more relevant in today’s ever changing
environment, despite the decline in popularity of this approach and the lack of
research applying it to organizations. Higher education offers a prime example of
the systems approach, which Luthans illustrates as follows:

\[
\text{input} \Rightarrow \text{transformational process} \Rightarrow \text{output}
\]

\[
[\text{high leader/volunteer LMX}] \Rightarrow [TFL] \Rightarrow [\text{organizational success}]
\]

**Figure 2:** Illustration of an Open System Approach in Higher Education

As Johns (1978) notes, “The path-goal theory of leadership (House, 1971) proposes
that the degree of inherent structure in a task moderates the relationship between
perceived leader behavior and the attitudes and behavior of subordinates” (p. 319).
With this open flow in mind, path-goal theory provides a context within which to
understand the complexity of the input of volunteers and paid professional human
resources. The development of relationships between volunteers and paid
professional volunteer leaders is an open-systems process of transformation that can
be observed over time. Outputs in the form of leader, volunteer, and organizational
effectiveness are then reinvested as an input, thus maximizing the investment made
by the institution in staff time. Ideally, volunteer effectiveness cultivates volunteer exemplars.

Transformational leaders embody the spirit of commitment to something other than themselves, and it is this altruistic nature associated with specific leader behavior that sets transformational leaders apart. In a nonprofit context, whereby volunteers are not motivated by monetary reward, transformational leaders are better equipped to appeal to intrinsic motivations (altruism, skill building, recognition, etc.). Leader effectiveness and exemplar effectiveness are enhanced by TFL.

When volunteer managers are not trained in a relationship-based approach to volunteer management, they will likely resort to transactional interactions with volunteers. This transactional interaction may also influence a volunteer’s perception of the nature of the work. Volunteer managers often focus on the task, or transaction, rather than the development of the leader/volunteer relationship. Bonnicksen (2005, p. 122) shares that the tendency to make the fundraising process staff-driven diminishes the pursuit of the gift to a sales transaction. It can be extrapolated, due to the close relationship between volunteerism and fundraising within higher education, that an entirely staff-driven volunteer program reduces the volunteer/organization relationship to merely a transaction seeking only the benefit of the organization. However, staff trained in relationship building and positive volunteer management can transform what has the potential to be a transactional
relationship into a transformational relationship. It is, therefore, TFL that may contribute to more successful organizational outcomes within higher education.

PRESENTING THE PATH-GOAL MODEL OF LEADER/VOLUNTEER FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT | PART I

Understanding the development of the relationship between leaders and volunteer followers is the first stage in explaining how TFL ultimately influences nonprofit organizational outcomes. Wang et al. (2005) assert that “it is the quality of the leader-follower relationship through which transformational leadership behaviors influence follower performance” (p. 420), arguing that LMX makes TFL “more personally meaningful” (p. 429). The Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development in its entirety is too complex to be discussed within the boundaries of this paper; however, by focusing on the first segment of the model, a foundation for future research can be established (see Figure 3). This discussion will focus on the development of the leader/volunteer relationship over time, and the interrelationships among leader behavior, volunteer behavior, and LMX theory.

Organizational culture is an important component of the context of the leader/volunteer follower relationship in higher education because the nature of primary relationships for advancement professionals is external. Ultimately, internal stakeholders (students) become external stakeholders (alumni and sometimes parents). The movement from internal to external stakeholder not only provides them with several organizational perspectives, but it also means that they develop
several types of emotional connections to the institution that inform their involvement. Volunteering for one’s alma mater may provide an alumnus with a continued emotional connection while also serving one’s postgraduate self-interest motivations to enhance career opportunities by providing networking connections and improving self-esteem through building skills (Weerts et al., 2010, p. 351).

Figure 3: A Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development | Part I

The relationship between leader/volunteer follower in higher education provides a unique perspective to examine relationship development for several
reasons. First, from a person and organization perspective, volunteers typically have a unique bond with, and affinity for, their alma mater, which serves as a motivation for providing helping behavior (OCB). Secondly, advancement operations typically have a variety of different types and levels of volunteer engagement opportunities so that person/role fit becomes a key evaluation strategy for leaders. And, lastly, and particularly important in the context of this model, higher education is typically open to developing new volunteer opportunities set forth by volunteers themselves. That is to say that volunteers, more specifically alumni, may have more of an impact on shaping the organizational context and advancement activities than they would at a national service organization and, in doing so, have a positive impact on the skill development of the leader.

As Kellerman (2008) notes, “the ways in which followers and leaders relate depend on the contexts within which they are embedded … context is critical” (p. 67). In determining the context of a particular institution, as a first step in the path-goal model, volunteer managers may benefit from conducting a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis to identify the level of organizational volunteer support and opportunities for volunteer engagement (both task opportunities and work-group types). This needs assessment will enable the volunteer manager to assess volunteer potential and select the appropriate behaviors necessary for managing particular projects and individual volunteers in order to facilitate positive relationship development. For example, a previous survey
of alumni volunteers’ open-ended responses provided good insight for a SWOT analysis of volunteer engagement (see Figure 4; Mercier, 2010a).

**Figure 4: Volunteer Support SWOT Analysis**

In general, alumni volunteers reported a positive volunteer experience, felt supported, felt communicated with (to a certain degree), and thought highly of the staff and the volunteer program. While relationships with volunteers appeared to be a strength, it should be noted that several of the leader behaviors, which contribute to maintaining positive relationships, appeared in the SWOT analysis as a weakness: namely, communication, follow-up and follow-through, and utilizing volunteers to their full potential.

As a leader, being open to developing a relationship with your volunteers is a key component in developing the leader/exemplar relationship. Communication,
clear expectations, and appreciation are key in developing that relationship (Bennett, 2009, p. 40; CASE, 2008; Coolman, 2011, p. 42). Maintaining the relationship over time becomes a challenge, particularly as the task opportunities wax and wane, and work-group type (committee, task force, advisory group) evolves. In order to establish a positive leader/volunteer follower relationship in the early stages of engagement, it is imperative that the leader communicate the institution’s needs and opportunities clearly so that alumni volunteers understand the context and scope of the volunteer task.

Setting clear expectations is a leader behavior that contributes positively to LMX because it allows volunteers to make a more realistic evaluation of their time contribution. Just as the nonprofit sector is referred to as the “third sector,” (Desruisseaux, 1985, p. 18) it is important for leaders to understand that volunteer work is a “third shift” for most volunteers. The first two “shifts” of paid-work and family-work often take time away from care-work, which includes volunteer work. As this demand for their time evolves, volunteers are still able and willing to do volunteer work despite the time bind facing them. A multigenerational study of five female volunteers for a small liberal arts college (Mercier, 2010b) identified that a unifying theme across all five conversations was the issue of time: the lack of it and the commitment necessary to spend it in service to meaningful organizations. As a long-time volunteer noted:
the balance is very hard to achieve. And I think it’s particularly hard—and I think this speaks to the future—I think it’s particularly hard for women that have a 9 to 5 job and then try to squeeze volunteer work in on their off hours. And it’s particularly true if you have a family. I mean it’s very, very difficult for them, and that’s one of the real, real problems … free time to volunteer. And it’s very difficult … And it’s more condensed and it’s more concise, the work that they do, because they just don’t have the hours. I mean their priority is their family first then certainly their professional jobs. And then volunteerism comes in third in priorities and it’s very difficult to give it a lot of time. (Volunteer A)

And a younger volunteer noted:

When there are not enough hours in the day it still happens. I think it might be logistically harder, I think, you know, if you’re married or have kids and a partner that’s going to support you and understand … but I think that that would be really interesting to look at. I think it probably, and we’ve talked about it [here], it ebbs and flows, but I think overall that that feeling is just like … women who are trying to do it all … volunteering is part of it. (Volunteer B)

What was clear in these conversations was that each of these women made a personal commitment to spend time engaged in volunteer work because they valued the personal and professional fulfillment they gained from it. Their time spent caring for others provided a means to also care for themselves, either by empowering them to spend time on their own terms or by giving them the opportunity to feel valued outside of their roles as family members and paid
workers. The more quickly volunteer managers acknowledge this balancing act the better.

As Pulling (1980) notes, “it is the non-profit staff’s job to give the volunteer appropriate work to do” (p. 16). Different opportunities will present different work-group types, and it is the leader’s job to determine the appropriate person/role fit and provide role clarity thoroughly. For example, a fundraising role may take more time, require a longer length of service, provide more constant exchange with the staff leader, and be quite a solitary endeavor. An event volunteer’s time may be more focused and provide a shorter length of service but provide an opportunity to serve as a member of a committee. Reunion might provide several months of concerted effort as part of a committee in shaping programming, whereas an advisory board position might be a multiyear commitment. Establishing the type of voluntary role and time commitment expectations early in the process will aid the leader in future interactions with the volunteer, particularly in the case of a performance issue. However, it may also mitigate the cause for a volunteer feeling as if they aren’t being utilized to their full potential.

Matching a volunteer’s skill and will to the volunteer role is not only an important component to the leader/volunteer relationship, but it also becomes critical to the cultivation of a volunteer exemplar. A volunteer leader may find the use of a skill/will matrix (see Figure 5) helpful in determining person/role fit.
Properly matching volunteer knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to the needs of the organization builds trust between leader and volunteer, which has been shown to enhance the transformational quality of the exchange relationship between leader and follower (Asgari et al., 2008, pp. 231, 235). Landsberg (2003) encapsulates the importance of matching skill and will to task opportunity:

All too often, we assign a task to someone and the job does not quite get done well enough. Why is this? One of the most likely reasons is that we have delegated the task to someone who is unwilling—or unable—to complete the job, and have then remained relatively “hands-off” or uninvolved. Alternatively, we may have been “hands-on” or directive with a capable person who was quite able to complete the assignment with little assistance from us; we just ended up demotivating her/him. (p. 54)
The skill/will assessment also takes into account the skills required by the leader to appropriately cultivate the relationship. For example, a volunteer who may have previous volunteer experience for another organization might need only a brief account of the task and current organizational goals, whereas a young alum who is new to postgraduate volunteer experiences may need quite a bit more education, training, and support.

The skill/will exercise allows a leader to quickly assess volunteer skill/will to determine appropriate leader behavior, present and required, to ensure a positive outcome for the leader, volunteer follower, and organization. In the matrix, an exemplar would possess high will and high skill, whereas a young alumni volunteer might possess low skill and low will. Leader behavior, particularly in the initial task assignment, may affect the degree to which an alumni volunteer develops the will and skill necessary to be considered an exemplar.

Over time, and with the proper leader behaviors, certain volunteers are more likely to become both high in will and skill, creating a volunteer who a leader can rely upon to fulfill the volunteer role without a high degree of leader input. At this point, the leader/volunteer follower develop a leader/exemplar relationship. The progression of the volunteer relationship to an exemplar is beneficial for the leader, in that the leader can focus more time and energy on other areas, and for the volunteer, in that the volunteer has gained more self-efficacy and engagement with the institution through the process of becoming an exemplar.
The Volunteer Skill/Will Matrix (see Figure 5) indicates that the greatest potential to develop a volunteer exemplar may be found in a volunteer with high will/low skill. Volunteers in the “training” quadrant possess intrinsic motivation that leaders may be unable to provide externally. Through training, the leader can effectively guide the volunteer to learn the skills necessary for any number of tasks, which may aid the development of LMX over time. In a higher-education context, an assumption can be made that the volunteer is capable of improving skills through training.

There may be situational exemplar potential for volunteers categorized by low will/high skill in the “motivate” quadrant, but their rise to exemplar status will depend on a variety of situational factors (time commitment, life cycle, task opportunity, work-group type, person/role fit, etc.). In a nonprofit volunteer context, a leader cannot motivate with pay incentives so the extrinsic rewards are limited. If volunteers with high skill and low will are intrinsically motivated in the right context, there is potential that when LMX is high a leader may be able to persuade this volunteer to provide some service, even in a limited capacity, which aligns with the volunteer’s KSAs. This volunteer is more likely to become a situational exemplar but less likely to become an exemplar in a general volunteer sense.

There is little exemplar potential for volunteers with low skill and low will in the “guide” quadrant, and a volunteer leader should be careful to build LMX before
approaching this volunteer with a long-term volunteer opportunity. It is in this quadrant that timing, and leader respect for volunteer time, may play a critical role in the development of volunteer relationships, which begin at this stage. At this stage, the potential volunteer’s talents may be better utilized, and will fostered, if redirected to other human resources at the institution (e.g., an academic department with which there is an affinity). As the relationship with the institution develops over time, the leader will be ready to accept a volunteer’s willingness to contribute time and skill to the institution when the timing is right for them. Griffard (2010) has also suggested a “thrill” component to the skill/will construct, which suggests that if the volunteer doesn’t experience the reward of their efforts being effective that will and skill will suffer as a result. The thrill argument also suggests that volunteers with potentially low skill and will could benefit from that “thrill” moment.

It is possible for a volunteer to move into different quadrants at different life stages. A previous study (Mercier, 2010b) indicates that timing and life stage play a critical role in volunteer motivation. One volunteer noted that “it was a good time in my life so far to be doing that work” (Volunteer B). Another volunteer noted:

I actually didn’t start volunteering until about that point in my life … because I, first of all, I worked and I had little kids. … We didn’t really settle down until we got to Connecticut and never really became a part of where we were living. … And then, and then I had kids and they were little and I was working, and there was no time in my life. But one of the reasons I went to reunion was that I needed something for myself that wasn’t my family, that wasn’t my work, and that was just mine because I felt as if I was being
submerged in this. And, so that’s really what happened, and it was, [the college] happened to ask me at a time I was receptive. (Volunteer C)

As the above viewpoints suggest, leaders can contribute to positive LMX with volunteers by simply acknowledging the amount of time an alumnus can contribute to volunteer service at any given moment. A leader should be aware not to spend too much time trying to train or motivate these volunteers who are in the “guide” quadrant for fear that volunteers legitimately in the most productive quadrants (train and direct) will be ignored, thereby decreasing LMX. However, the guide quadrant may provide a source for the greatest number of potential volunteers, and effort should be maintained to cultivate volunteers from this pool over time.

Time is valued in American culture as a measurement of commitment, either to family, a job, a community, or an organization. As Gerson and Jacobs (2004) note, “like money, time is a valuable resource that constantly provokes questions about how it should be allocated and spent [however] the overall supply of time cannot be expanded … thus it is not surprising that the starting point for understanding work and family change centers on the issue of time” (p. 2). Putnam (2000) notes that full-time workers with an advanced education feel the busiest and most rushed among us. However, he also notes that “education is by far the best predictor of engagement in civic life” (p. 18). This predicament is particularly applicable when examining the role of alumni volunteers and engagement with their alma maters. Leaders who understand that the lack of time is most often cited by Americans for their failure to participate in extracurricular endeavors (p. 189) can better equip
themselves with the skills necessary to engage with volunteers who are likely feeling time pressures. When volunteers perceive that they do not have enough time, coupled with a feeling of obligation to put in enough paid time and family time, unpaid time suffers and, as a result, community engagement and volunteer service suffer, which negatively affects LMX.

Higher education is not alone in the challenge it faces to strengthen and maintain a volunteer cultivation plan in the face of the time pressures facing its volunteer base. Putnam (2000) goes on to explain that those who report the heaviest time pressures (i.e., educated and employed) are indeed more likely to participate and be actively engaged in civic life (p. 191). In higher education, the volunteer population is drawn from alumni who have graduated from the institution; therefore, this statistic would seem to bode well for future volunteer engagement at colleges and universities. Weerts (2007) asserts that it is the role of higher education to reclaim its contributions to civic life (p. 84). It is, therefore, possible that alumni who engage in volunteer service to their alma maters perceive their contributions as both fulfilling personal needs, and a contribution to society, to the extent that they are motivated by the altruistic nature of education. As Hochschild (1997) notes, “in each phase of a career in any occupation, there will be an actual economy of time and energy devoted to its several component activities ... [and] an idealized economy of time and energy [and] a ranking ... by value and prestige” (p. 134).
The development of the leader/volunteer follower relationship over time, and its effect on exemplar development, can be attributed to the strength of the LMX inherent in the relationship. Several authors have hoped to gain an understanding of how time effects leader-member exchange, specifically with regard to the development of the relationship over time and the duration of the relationship (Liden et al., 1993; Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Ilies, 2009; Sin, Nahrgang, Morgeson, 2009). Liden et al. note that an important gap in LMX research has been little inquiry regarding the development process for an LMX relationship (p. 662).

**EXEMPLAR DEVELOPMENT**

An exemplar volunteer may be a leader among peer volunteers. An exemplar is likely to possess a high level of commitment to the institution, and research has illustrated that peer leaders are more committed to their group than were ordinary members (Bonnicksen, 2005, p. 113; Catano et al., 2001, p. 260; Mercier, 2010a). That commitment can be measured in both time and financial contribution, which are both key indicators of volunteer commitment to an organization. “Communities and organizations have leaders at multiple levels and being a leader need not be related to formal position” (Pratt, 2007, p. 59). That is to say that leadership not only flows in a top down direction from volunteer manager to volunteer, but also laterally from volunteer exemplar to volunteer manager and to peer volunteers.

Once skills have been learned through proper training, the existence of a volunteer’s will implies that it is more likely that as an exemplar volunteer he or she
can also learn new and additional skills as the organization/leader requests or requires. The diversity of potential relationships and situations increases the likelihood that some volunteers will become exemplars at some point. It also allows for what House (1996) calls shared leadership. Leaders may share the leader role so that the volunteer exemplar may fulfill the role of leader in a mutually beneficial relationship, particularly among peers. As the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development notes, this outcome is a measure of volunteer effectiveness. Leaders are also learners, and leadership can be learned by both the paid professional and the volunteer (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 17). The relationship between leader and exemplar serves to enhance the skills of both parties, which, in turn, has personal and professional benefits for the individuals and the organization. House’s revised path-goal theory (1996, p. 346) supports the importance of leaders setting the example, which allows for peer leadership by exemplar volunteers.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Within higher education, as within all nonprofits, volunteers allow the organization to accomplish tasks that staff alone could not do. They relieve staff workload, provide access for fundraising and programming, and contribute professional expertise and perspective that may be lacking in the organization (Bennett, 2009, p. 40). Several surveys conducted with alumni and volunteers support the belief that alumni who feel most connected to their alma mater give
more annual dollars than those who feel less connection (Coolman, 2011, p. 38; Mercier, 2010a, pp. 2-4). Those who feel most connected are, more likely than not, volunteers for their alma mater in some capacity. "All [higher education] volunteers have three things in common: they care about the cause or institution, they want to enjoy their experience, and they need to know they are valued" (CASE, 2008).

From an institutional perspective, alumni volunteers are not only donors, but they provide high-value service such as mentoring, recruiting, advocacy, planning, and advisory service to their alma maters, which is incredibly valuable (Lippincott, 2011, p. 8; Weerts et al., 2010, pp. 346-347). As such, "alumni relations programs have become a top priority for institutions across the country ... spending significant resources on cultivating alumni involvement" (Weerts et al., p. 347). Not only can colleges and universities improve the quality of the student experience through engaging alumni volunteers in the academic and programmatic goals of the institution, they can also strengthen their financial holdings.

The relationship between alumni volunteer service and financial support cannot be ignored as the two are significantly related. Current academic research suggests a positive correlation between volunteering and giving. "Brown and Lankford (1992) established that volunteer time not only complements cash donations, but those who make donations are twice as likely as others to volunteer time, illustrating the important relationship between the two" (Mercier, 2010a, p. 9). In a best-case scenario, volunteers view their gifts of monetary support and time as
complementary and will often give both at a level appropriate for their engagement. Weerts et al. (2010) stated that “social exchange theory suggests that the costs of serving ... are weighed against the benefits the alum has received from the [institution] in the past or present” (p. 352). Therefore, the more engaged a volunteer stakeholder becomes in the life of the institution, as a student and an alumnus, generally the greater the gifts of time and money.

The leader/volunteer relationship within higher education provides an opportunity to examine a variety of organizational management theories, including LMX, TFL, and path-goal theory. Institutions of higher education are learning communities that provide a supportive environment where leaders and volunteers can learn to enhance their skills and build a relationship toward the altruistic pursuit of access to education. Indeed, Weerts (2007) has asserted that deeper, two-way, more authentic engagement of external stakeholders (alumni, donors, etc.) is imperative to the survival of higher education as we know it. Weerts stops short of discussing the role that the engagement of alumni volunteers plays in the health and survival of such institutions, but he makes the competition for financial resources clear. He goes on to assert that small, liberal arts institutions are at a considerable disadvantage in obtaining major gifts from graduates because they are less likely to produce wealthy graduates as compared to prestigious national research universities with an array of professional programs (p. 83). It is partially for this reason that the engagement of a large number of strong volunteers at a typical, private liberal arts institution is critical to success. Positive relationships with
volunteers increase the likelihood of consistent giving in the absence of major
giving.

In the nonprofit sector, LMX among volunteer leaders and volunteers may
play a key role in organizational effectiveness when the organization is one that
relies on the time and energy of volunteers. Leader-member exchange is a
contributing factor for the development of general leader/volunteer relationships,
but also for the cultivation and maintenance of exemplar volunteers in a nonprofit
context. Time, both the length of relationship development and as a factor for
volunteer decision making, significantly influences the nature of LMX and the
quality of the LMX relationship.

Volunteers give their time to organizations and causes for which they believe
in, and leaders who understand the critical role that time, and timing, play in
volunteer service may contribute positively to LMX. The degree to which leaders
take volunteer time into consideration is important for both leaders and volunteers.
Hochschild (1997) notes that people tend to spend more time on the things they
value, and on what they are most valued for (p. 198). To the extent that volunteers
remain a valued and valuable segment of American culture, people will continue to
find the time to pursue volunteer service.

This paper has only theoretically examined the beginning of the Path-Goal
Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development. Previous
connections between LMX and TFL (Carter et al., 2009; Howell & Hall-Merenda,
1999) indicate that TFL is an important bridge between relationship development and leader/volunteer effectiveness. Transformational leadership then becomes an important contributor to organizational effectiveness. A more in-depth look at the next segment of the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development, which includes TFL, would be a valuable extension of this discussion.

Further research on this topic might focus on empirical study of volunteer LMX relationship development in the nonprofit sector. Case studies, volunteer interviews, surveys, and studies may add to our understanding of the complex nature of volunteer management and relationship development. Nonprofit organizations of all types would benefit from a clearer understanding of the links between volunteers, volunteer leaders, and organizational effectiveness. These data would also provide a foundation upon which to build appropriate leader and volunteer training.

This paper has focused on the discussion of volunteer management in a higher education context, which limits the conversation to a very small and unique population within the nonprofit sector. Furthermore, even within the higher education segment there are varying sizes and types of institutions for which a volunteer program would differ greatly from institution to institution. Future research should, both theoretically and empirically, examine volunteer programs not only at different institutions (i.e., large-public, small-public, large-private, small-private colleges and universities and community colleges), but also at other types of...
institutions within the nonprofit sector (i.e., national service organizations, religious organizations, local community organizations, etc.).

The relationship between the leader and the volunteer that develops over time serves to enhance the skills of both parties, which, in turn, has personal and professional benefits for the individuals and the organization. Positive LMX is a key component of the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development, which leads to leader, volunteer/exemplar, and organizational effectiveness. Leaders who understand the critical role that time plays in the management of volunteers are better equipped to foster positive LMX and are, therefore, more likely to cultivate and maintain exemplar volunteers. Future research involving the volunteer contribution to the formation of professional staff exemplars would also extend the usefulness of this discussion.

CONCLUSION

Within the nonprofit sector, volunteer work is critical to the success of higher education institutions. These organizations benefit from an understanding of volunteer management practice and principles, specifically the relationships that develop between paid professional staff members and volunteers. There are multiple factors that contribute to these leader/volunteer follower relationships that enhance the skills of both the leader and the volunteer. The nature of the leader/volunteer relationship can have a significant influence, contributing to more successful organizational outcomes through the work of the advancement office.
Using LMX and TFL theory as the foundation for this exploration, I have presented the Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development based on Path-Goal Theory (House, 1971), which illustrates the interrelationship between leader behavior and volunteer behavior, speaks to the significance of that behavior over time related to the formation of an exemplar volunteer, and identifies how the volunteer leader/exemplar relationship may contribute positively to organizational outcomes. This paper has examined the development of the leader and volunteer follower relationship in order to identify the process by which a volunteer becomes an exemplar. This paper has also added to the body of knowledge in the field of nonprofit volunteer management while supporting the professionalization of the volunteer manager.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix A: A Path-Goal Model of Leader/Volunteer Follower Relationship Development


