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Empowering Volunteers to Find Viable Solutions to Problems

Educators understand the value and importance of mobilizing volunteers to achieve goals beyond what one can do themselves. With proper leadership, an effective volunteer base is a valuable resource for classrooms, clubs, school committees and special interest groups. Keeping volunteers aligned with organizational expectations, philosophies and goals can be a challenge especially when conflict complicates this relationship. Among the challenges of working with volunteers, are solving interpersonal problems and conflict. How do educators empower volunteers to find viable solutions to problems while maintaining the philosophies of their groups? The ability to solve problems efficiently and effectively is extremely valuable. Positive management of problem situations can retain quality volunteers and increase volunteer ownership of their efforts. Many techniques can be used to manage conflict, but one in particular can be empowering to volunteers, adaptable and easily implemented by educators.

History and Basic Principles of the Solution Focused Therapy

Solution Focused Therapy (SFT) has its roots in clinical social work and was developed by Steve de Shazer (1940-2005), and Insoo Kim Berg (1934-2007) in the 1980's (De Shazer et al., 1986). The approach is goal-driven and focuses on strengths (what is good that is happening) rather than on weaknesses, such as problems (Wallerstedt and Higgins, 2000). While it is primarily utilized by therapists as a tool to guide clients, its foundations can also be easily adapted for use in other disciplines. The process empowers people to take ownership of a situation and outline their own steps in solving the conflict.

The Miracle Question: Probably the most well-known and popular intervention within the solution-focused approach is the miracle question (de Shazer, 1988). The miracle question is a method of framing questions to help a person presenting the problem to envision how the future will be different when the conflict/problem is no longer present. During this process of questions, goals can often be identified. Careful consideration to how the question is framed will help people move away from what the problem is and focus on how to begin solving the issue. For example:

"If you woke up tomorrow, and a miracle happened so that you no longer felt your club officers do not follow through with their responsibilities, what would you see differently? What would the first signs be that a change has occurred within the club? What would members be doing differently in the club?" "What would you be doing differently?"

The use of this question reframes the problem into positive discussion. Beyond that, the educator has engaged the member to identify, on their own, what changes need to occur to begin to move the club into effectiveness.

Scaling Questions Scaling questions can be used to identify useful differences for volunteers and may help to establish goals as well. Scaling questions also can help people incrementally set their own goals. When these questions are framed by educators, they enable people to focus on steps that can eventually lead to larger, overall change. Typically, a range from "the worst the problem has ever been" (zero or one) to "the best things could ever possibly be" (ten) is used. The person presenting the problem is asked to rate their current position on the scale, and questions are then used to help the person identify resources. For example: *"What's stopping our club meetings from slipping one point lower down the scale?"*

Scaling questions that seek exceptions to the problem may be framed like this:

"On a day when our club meeting is one point higher on the scale, what would tell you that it was a 'one point higher' meeting?"

Scaling questions that describe a preferred future may be framed like this:

"Where on the scale would be good enough? What would a club meeting at that point on the scale look like?"

Exception Seeking Questions The objective of this strategy is to refocus the person to search for times when the problem is less severe or absent. Exception seeking questions help people self-identify what has worked in the past and can be used to encourage clientele to repeat such behaviors. Simply asking the person to outline a time when the problem did not exist and then encourage them to describe what different circumstances existed in that case can expose significant behavioral changes that can be tried to resolve the issue.

For example: *"I understand you and Mary are having challenges working together on our committee. You and Mary have been serving for many years together. Can you think of times when you worked well together? Describe how that worked for you? When the problem did not exist, what were you doing then?"*

Discussion

At some point or another, the business of working with people will lend itself to mediating difficult interpersonal situations. Finding the right tools to solve these problems is of critical importance to a volunteer group's overall positive presence in communities. Generally, people have preconceived ideas of how things should work and when they do not take place in such a way, a problem occurs. Many of us have the propensity to focus on the problem and highlight what went wrong. One of the biggest hurdles initially in solving problems is repositioning focus from reliving the issue to thinking about steps that can be taken to solve the problem. By utilizing these solution focused techniques outlined above, educators can transition difficult problems into solutions efficiently.

References

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