A Qualitative Study of Sport Event Volunteer Management

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Volunteerism is defined as giving unpaid help to an organization to which an individual has no obligation (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Numerous studies exist on volunteer motivation, satisfaction and retention (Chelladurai, 1999, 2006; Costa, Chalip, Green & Simes, 2006; Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye & Darcy, 2006; Farrell, Johnston & Twynam, 1998; Kim, Chelladurai & Trail, 2007; Khoo & Engelhorn, 2011) and an impressive number of studies examine volunteer management (Cuskelly, McIntyre & Boag, 1998; Stern & Fullerton, 2009; Waters & Bortree, 2012). An area which is lacking research is the volunteer sport event manager. The volunteer manager takes on the responsibility to lead other volunteers through event coordination. The purpose of this qualitative study and the main research question was to examine what influences a person’s choice to volunteer for a management role at a sport event. The participants in this study volunteered for a 2015 regional senior games in western United States which has been recurring for thirty-eight years and is run for athletes age 50 and over. Participants in the study had at least one year of previous volunteer coordinator experience and many of the participants had several years of volunteer experience. The study included questions relating to the volunteer managers’ satisfaction with the organization within which they volunteer, with their interactions with subordinate volunteers, and with their satisfaction with the management experience.

To inform this study, the researcher examined previous studies on volunteerism. Conditions for volunteers that contribute to volunteer satisfaction and retention require an understanding of the motivation, perceptions, and behaviors of volunteers by management (Bang & Ross, 2009; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Waters & Bortree, 2012). Leaders who are inspirational generally have volunteers who are more satisfied (Bowers & Hamby, 2013; Nichols & Ojala, 2009). Clear instructions and training create empowered volunteers (Nichols & Ojala, 2009). Training should be designed for community building, sharing opinions and experiences among volunteers and staff (Costa et al., 2006; Kodama, Doherty & Popovic, 2013). Volunteer role preparedness and social connections may be essential to the success of the event (Kodama et al., 2013). Volunteer managers can have a difficult time working with volunteers who may not see them as having authority (Taylor, Darcy, Hoye & Cuskelly, 2006). Since the manager is also a volunteer, they may have limited authority and resources available. Reliability of volunteers is a concern of any sport event. Volunteer leadership consists of directing, coordinating and supervising of other volunteers (Cuskelly et al., 1998).

Qualitative research is limited on the topic of sport event volunteerism and a qualitative study would lead to a deeper understanding of the motives of volunteerism. Ethnography was chosen as a method of inquiry for this study as it is a combination of techniques used to collect data which include interviewing, documentary analysis, observing participants and creating researcher notes (Merriam, 1998). Through interviews, personal storytelling, and observations, the researcher sought to gain information on the volunteer manager’s experience within the sport they coordinate.

The participants of this study were fourteen coordinators and two officials who have volunteered for a 2015 regional senior sport event which takes place in western United States yearly and is a qualifying event for a national senior sport event on alternate years. The sample was based on purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) and the intent was to receive rich information from the participants (Merriam, 1998). The participants varied according to age, gender and years of volunteer experience. This allowed the researcher to compare and contrast the results to gain better insight into volunteer motivations.

Participants read and signed a consent form which outlined the study and interview process. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym in place of their name in order to safeguard confidentiality (Patton, 1990). Interviews and observations were the data collection methods for this qualitative study as suggested in literature where the researcher needs to consider the site, time, and people in the study (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). A one-on-one
interview was held with each participant which lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. A series of semi-structured and open-ended questions were used in this study to allow for flexibility in obtaining explanation and clarification of participants’ thoughts (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Background information was gathered on the volunteer coordinator as well as information on their experience and expectations for their future as a volunteer coordinator. A few participants were observed while managing their sport event during the course of this study. Observations can be a main source of data collection due to the observations taking place in the natural setting (Merriam, 1998). For this study, the researcher took on the role of observer as participant. The researcher was known to the volunteers being studied and participated in a volunteer role with the understanding of not wanting to disturb the natural setting.

The data analysis process consisted of examining the transcripts for meaningful statements made by the participants which led to the development of descriptions through codes which brought out the essence of the experience (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Through constructionism, the researcher took the participants’ view of their experience and attempted to construct meanings (Crotty, 1998). In order to enhance credibility, triangulation, peer examinations, and member checking was employed (Merriam, 1998). Triangulation was established by audio-recorded interviews, field notes, and by having colleagues and participants read over the transcriptions and coding (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Findings revealed several themes. Participants were motivated by commitment, achievement/successful event, control of event, and competency in sport management. The most prominent theme was commitment. Most participants were motivated by commitment to a particular sport while some participants were motivated to volunteer through a commitment to the organization. There was a sense of achievement felt by the participants when the event ran successfully although the participants varied on their version of what they considered a successful event. Some volunteers felt a sense of control over the event they managed but some volunteers did not feel in control as the rules are set forth for them. All participants stated they were competent in their sport management skills but there was a lack of expertise among some of the volunteers which the researcher observed.

While there is previous research on volunteer motivation (Bang & Chelladurai, 2009; Strigas & Jackson, 2003; Warner, Newland & Green, 2011; Williams, Dossa & Tompkins, 1995; Wollebæk, Skirstad & Hanstad, 2014; Wysong, & Maellaro, 2012), the researcher’s intention was to investigate deeper into the motivational factors which lead people to voluntarily lead others. Organizers should understand the underlying motives of volunteer managers in order to run events efficiently. Understanding volunteer motivation and satisfaction would augment planning and staffing of volunteers and would add to the literature on volunteer management.