Extension Education Methods

Sam's Dilemma: A Decision Case for Training Horticultural Volunteers

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SUMMARY. A decision case was developed and used to train volunteers at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. The case presents a real life dilemma for volunteers at public horticultural institutions, allowing volunteers to experience a realistic decision making process, applicable to their volunteer jobs. Volunteers are able to identify that the decisions they make in their volunteer position ultimately affect the institution as a whole including visitors and volunteers. The case is written as an active learning tool for use in a volunteer orientation or continuing education workshop. Volunteers benefit from an enhanced understanding of the importance of communication of changes in life commitment, including how these changes relate to their particular volunteer interests.

According to the Independent Sector's *Giving and Volunteering in the United States* 2001 report, 44% of adults volunteer. There are 83.9 million American adults volunteering, the equivalent of more than 9 million full-time employees, valued at \$239 billion (Independent Sector, 2001). With an average of 3.6 volunteer hours per week, American volunteers are making a significant contribution in their communities. Since the Independent Sector began conducting these biennial national surveys in 1987, the total value of volunteer time has increased from \$149 billion to \$239 billion. The likelihood is that this number will continue to increase, as will the nation's dependency on volunteers.

With flat or decreasing budgets at many U.S. gardens and arboreta, volunteers may be a key to maintaining programs and operations (Cnaan and Goldberger-Glen, 1991; Dailey, 1986; Laczko and Hanisch, 1999). Unfortunately, little documented research is available concerning volunteers in public horticulture institutional settings or in the larger realm of museums. As a result, many volunteer programs at botanical gardens and arboreta seek their own definition with no industry standard for volunteer management. Although volunteers require some additional resources, they are a means to increase the services an institution offers while complementing employees' workload (Cnaan and Goldberger-Glen, 1991; Dailey, 1986; Laczko and Hanisch, 1999).

In recognizing the tremendous value of volunteers in public horticultural institutions, training and retention of volunteers become key issues (Isley and Neimi, 1981). Volunteer

trainings can range from one-on-one meetings to on-going classroom experiences. At the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum (MLA), an informational orientation is held once a year for all new volunteers. Beyond this orientation, training for individual volunteer jobs takes place either on the job or in workshop settings. With a wide range of formats for volunteer trainings and orientations, there is a critical need to provide valuable learning experiences that provide practical skills for the volunteers.

A new method of teaching volunteers practical skills is through active learning opportunities such as decision cases. A longstanding teaching method in the fields of law, business, and medicine, decision cases are a relatively new addition to horticultural education (Anderson, 2001a, 2001b; Azarenko, 2000; Foulk and Hoover, 1997; Hanchek, 1994; Meyer and Allen, 1994; Spaw and Williams, 2004). Decision cases are interactive learning experiences based on real life dilemmas. The decision case could provide volunteers with an applicable experience relevant to their volunteer job(s) that require critical decision. Specifically the decision case allows participants to view a dilemma from the inside-out, personalizing the decisions that are made, rather than acting as external critics (Simmons et al., 1992). Research shows that decision cases are a "stimulating" means of educating for both the participants and the instructor (Davis, 1992; Hoover, 1993). The use of decision cases is also a means of identifying the participant's current knowledge base, along with areas that need strengthening (Anderson, 2001b). The objective of this paper is to present a decision case that can be used in volunteer trainings at horticultural institutions.

Materials and methods

Discussions with the MLA's volunteer coordinator highlighted typical dilemmas volunteers encounter. The criteria for the dilemmas were situations that hinder the volunteers from working towards the MLA's mission and organizational objectives as stated in the 2003 MLA Strategic Plan. Sam's Dilemma (Fig. 1) was developed from these discussions.

Sam's dilemma was first introduced at the MLA's Feb. 2004 volunteer orientation. The entire volunteer

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Fig. 1. The Decision Case: Sam's Dilemma

Sam is nearing his third year of volunteering with the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum (MLA) (Fig. 3). When he first started volunteering he was working fulltime. His work required a lot of travel, which meant that he could only volunteer sporadically. Sam really likes spending time at the MLA and even though he can only make a small commitment he makes a point to volunteer at least once per month.

Sam has now changed jobs and is finding that he has a lot more time on his hands. For a while Sam has contemplated giving more of his time to the MLA. Yet Sam is not convinced that there is a place for him at the MLA, especially since he made it very clear, when he started volunteering, that he could only offer a little of his time.

When Sam is at the MLA he sees another group of volunteers that are having a good time working on a project. Sam stands in awe realizing how friendly these volunteers are with one another and how the project they are working on looks like a lot of fun. Since Sam has never seen this particular project mentioned in the volunteer newsletter, Sam wonders how these volunteers found out about the project. Are they an elite group? These thoughts stay with Sam for the next couple of months. In the meantime Sam increasingly loses interest in the volunteer assignment he has had for the past 3 years. Sam is thinking more and more that there is not a place for him at the MLA and that he should find a new place to volunteer his time.

orientation was 4.5 h, with staff from across the organization explaining the mission and work of the MLA, including the various volunteer opportunities available.

The decision case was presented immediately following the morning break. The room was arranged with round tables with an experienced volunteer host at each table. Hosts had volunteered for more than a year and met for a prior training session where they read the case and discussed the questions in the teaching note (Fig. 2). At the orientation, volunteers were seated randomly among four tables, with approximately six new volunteers per table. Hosts distributed copies of Sam's Dilemma. After everyone had the opportunity to read the decision case, the hosts lead the tables in discussion, using the questions provided with the

Fig. 2. Interpretive or teaching note.

Sam's Dilemma is designed to illustrate a realistic decision making process, applicable to the volunteers' job(s). The objectives of the decision case are to: 1) allow the volunteers to identify that decisions they make in their volunteer position ultimately affect not only themselves, but the institution, including its visitors and other volunteers; 2) enable volunteers to partake in the decision case, a new teaching method, as an active learning tool; 3) enhance the volunteers' skill and understanding on how important it is to communicate changes in life commitments and their particular volunteer interests. Therefore, volunteers will be motivated to communicate their needs and interests as relevant to volunteer opportunities at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum (MLA).

The intended use of Sam's Dilemma is with volunteers at public gardens and arboreta. The case is designed to present a realistic scenario concerning the volunteer experience. Volunteers are meant to walk away feeling empowered to direct their volunteer experience, so that it is satisfying and fitting with the time they are able to give. Secondary audiences that would benefit from Sam's Dilemma include volunteer coordinators, employees of horticultural institutions, especially those who work with volunteers and University Extension Service Master Gardeners.

The case can be used in orientation or continuing education workshop settings. Participants are given a brief time to read the case. There are no "right or wrong" answers for the discussion questions. The answers are influenced by many factors, including the volunteers' personal experiences. By stressing that there are no "right or wrong" answers, participants may share personal responses and thoughts to Sam's Dilemma more freely (Anderson, 2001b; Davis, 1992; Foulk and Hoover, 1997; Meyer and Allen, 1994).

In preparing for the decision case, allow at least 0.5 h for the participants to read and discuss the case. Introduce the decision case to the participants explaining that a decision case is a short story surrounding a dilemma that provides a learning experience relevant to their job as a volunteer. Once the participants have read the dilemma have them discuss the discussion questions in small groups. Encourage the group to ask questions of one another beyond those provided with Sam's Dilemma.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO STIMULATE DISCUSSION INCLUDE:

- What choices does Sam have?
- How does Sam transition into something different?
- Whose responsibility is it to see that volunteers are effective and satisfied with their volunteer duties?
- How could Sam's fellow volunteers help this situation?
- How could the staff help this situation?
- What should Sam do to resolve this dilemma?
- What are some methods of improving communications?
- What are the most effective ways for volunteers to communicate with staff or fellow volunteers?

The discussion questions should **not** be provided on the handout given to the participants with the decision case narrative. By having the facilitator reveal the discussion questions one by one, the group is more likely to carry on an in-depth discussion, rather than coming up with quick answers that have required little thought process or interaction with other participants.

decision case. The discussion questions were not revealed to the group, but were introduced by the host one by one, in order to facilitate an in-depth discussion, rather than coming up with quick answers that have required little thought process or interaction with other participants. During the discussion, the volunteer hosts recorded the responses from participants. After 20 min of discussion, volunteer participants were asked to share their input on Sam's Dilemma and their conclusions with the entire group. At the comple-

tion of the orientation volunteers were asked to write on an index card three things they learned and three questions they still had at the completion of the orientation.

Results and discussion

The participants in the volunteer orientation had an interactive discussion about Sam's Dilemma. In the discussions, participants expressed the idea of not wanting to be a "Sam," a volunteer who does not communicate their interests, time availability, or

Fig. 3. A brief history of volunteerism at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

The Minnesota Landscape Arboretum's (MLA) volunteer program has its roots with Dr. Leon C. Snyder, the MLA's first director from 1970-76. Dr. Snyder used volunteers from the very beginning in making the MLA a reality. He helped form the MLA's Auxiliary, which is still in existence today. With approximately 300 dues-paying members in 2004, the Auxiliary continues to contribute valuable time and resources to the MLA.

The mission of the MLA (part of the Department of Horticultural Sciences, University of Minnesota) is to be a resource for horticultural and environmental information, research, and public education, and to inspire and delight visitors with quality plants in well designed and maintained displays, collections, model landscapes, and conservation areas.

In the early 1970s the MLA hired a staff person to train volunteers for school group and adult tours. Then in the 1980s the tour guide volunteer program was further strengthened by hiring a part-time employee to train the guides. Although there was a high volunteer presence at the MLA from the very beginning, there was no central volunteer coordinator until 1987. By 1988 official volunteer orientation, training, and interviews came into play. A general orientation is held every January, and a 3-week 12-h training was held every March. The training focused on the history of the MLA, along with the various gardens of the MLA. This training continued until 1993, when the focus switched to only the January/February orientation.

Today volunteers are matched with departments and projects through a variety of avenues. One avenue is asking members if they would like to receive information on the volunteer program when starting a membership. Another avenue is when visitors inquire about volunteering during a visit to the MLA. This is often true of chaperones that come with school groups. Then volunteers are matched with the department and project that they express interest in. An additional avenue is when departments and projects approach existing volunteers who may or may not have any previous connection to the department to work on a project. Not all volunteers are matched with volunteer projects through the volunteer department. Due to budget constraints in the last several years the financial resources for the volunteer department have been significantly reduced. Currently there is one part-time staff person managing the volunteer program.

life changes effectively, thus hindering the ability of the institution to engage the volunteer in activities that are satisfying.

Sam's Dilemma was a new learning experience for volunteers and MLA staff. The discussions surrounding Sam's Dilemma enabled participants to learn new communication skills and analyze their personal values as a volunteer. At the same time, the MLA staff learned the needs and expectations of the volunteers.

The discussion question "What choices does Sam have?" prompted participants to strongly promote Sam's need to gather more information, while following his personal interests. Among the suggestions were for Sam to simply walk up and ask the volunteers about the jobs they are doing and how he could get involved. Other suggestions were to talk with the volunteer coordinator, to attend volunteer orientations, or ask the information desk. Of all the suggestions put forth by the participants, quitting was only mentioned by one of four groups discussing the decision case.

For Sam to move into a different volunteer job, participants encouraged Sam to be more assertive. Sam needs to talk with the volunteer coordinator and the staff person in charge of the volunteer group in which he is interested. Sam could gradually move into the new volunteer opportunity. If he is unsure of what new volunteer job he would like to assume, Sam could do a tour of the different volunteer jobs to find one that suited his interests and time availability.

Participants agreed during the decision case discussions, that the responsibility for seeing that the volunteers are effective and satisfied with their duties is a 50/50 split between staff and volunteers. Suggestions for fellow volunteers to help Sam in this situation were to talk to one another about their volunteer jobs. Without this element of communication, volunteers are often isolated from others who are having similar experiences. The participants suggested ways the staff could help in situations such as Sam's Dilemma, including conducting programs with this or a similar decision case exercise

at orientations and providing enhanced communication training. Another suggestion was to have staff offer shorter and more frequent orientations for specific volunteer jobs. In addition, participants suggested that staff check in with volunteers on a periodic basis by asking for feedback on the volunteer program. This could be accomplished by calling, sending an evaluation, or meeting in person. In fact, volunteers can even be engaged to help the staff check in with volunteers.

For Sam who was considering quitting his volunteer commitments at the MLA, the participants in the decision case provided a number of positive suggestions. Decision case participants suggestion quitting only once, where as Sam felt quitting was one of his few options. This shows that encouraging conversations about dilemmas experienced by volunteers and staff can provide more possible solutions than a single person will generate on his or her own.

Volunteers completed index cards at the end of the orientation; many commented on the wide variety of volunteer opportunities at the MLA. Specific comments pertinent to the decision case included: "I learned better ways to communicate with the volunteer department and other workers"; "as my needs change there will be a place at the Arboretum for me to move into"; "make your wishes known"; "you don't have to stick with one job"; and "there is a job for everyone—even if your time is limited." The main questions and concerns that volunteers still had at the end of the orientation were: "how can volunteers communicate with other volunteers"; "where will I best fit in"; "what skills/knowledge are needed for any area"; "would it be unfair to staff if a volunteer wanted to try working in many different areas (not concurrently), i.e., do staff depend on their volunteers showing up regularly?"

These questions reinforce the realization that an annual half-day orientation does not provide enough communication with volunteers. Even though some of these questions may have been covered in the orientation, the volunteers need to receive the information repeatedly; including having the information available in multiple formats: face-to-face, in a volunteer handbook, and posted in a volunteer common area.

Conclusions and recommendations

In summary, decision cases can be a valuable tool to actively engage and train volunteers at horticultural institutions by discussing realistic dilemmas that are relevant to the volunteers' experience. Sam's Dilemma provides a platform for open dialogue about the critical role of communication, the difficulty in finding suitable volunteer jobs, and the need for the volunteer to direct his or her own experience. The active learning opportunities of a decision case allow for a dynamic environment where new knowledge and skills can be acquired by individuals and the group as a whole (Azarenko, 2000; Johnson et al., 1991). Participants develop skills in critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making while assessing risks (Simmons et al., 1992). By engaging the volunteers in a decision case that is relevant and applicable to their volunteer work, volunteers will be more empowered to direct their volunteer experience insuring success for them and their institution.

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