

It's not all the same: Implemented and perceived HR practices in the volunteer context

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ABSTRACT

Being strategic and intentional in the management of volunteers is increasingly important to tackle volunteer retention and improve other volunteer outcomes. Drawing on strategic human resource management (SHRM), this inductive study utilizes qualitative data from interviews to explore how volunteers in a large youth organization perceive HR practices of training and recognition. Volunteer accounts are supplemented with focus group data from front-line staff to capture how HR practices are implemented. Findings indicate a disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices in some, but not all, areas. Inconsistent and unintentional communication was the main driver for negative volunteer perceptions.

Keywords: strategic human resource management, perceptions, HR practices, volunteers, communication

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Volunteering continues to be a backbone for service-providing nonprofits, with 24.9% of the population 16 years and older (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016a) spending a median of 52 hours of volunteering annually (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016b). Without them, nonprofits reliant on volunteers—about 80% of all charitable organizations—would not be able to provide the same level and/or quality of services (Hager & Brudney, 2008). It is therefore vital for nonprofits to devote attention to the question of how to retain their volunteer workforce, just as they would for paid employees.

To tackle volunteer retention and improve other volunteer outcomes such as satisfaction or engagement, researchers have increasingly advocated for the importance of a strategic approach towards human resource management (HRM) when managing volunteers (Hager & Brudney, 2015; Saksida et al., 2017). This line of research has focused on the design and intentions behind human resource (HR) practices and their impact on volunteer outcomes. Findings indicate that HR practices such as training or recognition increase volunteers' ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform (Rogers et al., 2016) and reduce problems with volunteer turnover while increasing retention (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Walk et al., 2019).

This work builds on strategic human resource management (SHRM), which focuses on “designing and implementing a set of internally consistent policies and practices that ensure a firm’s human capital contributes to the achievement of its business objectives” (Huselid et al., 1997, p. 172). Whereas it has long been clear that HR practices impact organizational performance, the process through which this happens is less straight-forward (Nishii & Wright, 2008). To further clarify this process, the SHRM process model distinguishes between intended, actual, and perceived HR practices (Nishii & Wright, 2008). Specifically, HR practices may not (or not always) impact organizational performance directly, because how HR practices were intended (e.g., planned/designed) may not be congruent with how they are implemented in practice and with how employees perceive these HR practices. Employees, then, perceive and react to the HR practices as implemented rather than how they were initially designed, which impacts their attitudes and behavior.

While scholars acknowledge that the volunteer experience matters (Wilson, 2012) and research on volunteer management and HR practices in the volunteer context is growing (e.g., Cuskelly et al., 2006; Rogers et al., 2016; Walk et al., 2019), little research has focused on volunteers perceptions of how they are managed. Similar to the context of paid employees

(Nishii & Wright, 2008), it is likely that volunteers' perceptions of HR practices impact their attitudes to volunteer work and behaviors when volunteering. Building on SHRM theory and literature, we therefore ask: How do volunteers perceive HR practices? To answer our research question, we draw on interviews with volunteers in a large youth-serving nonprofit to capture perceptions of HR practices. We supplement these with focus group data from staff to capture the implementation of HR practices.

Whereas there have been considerable efforts to adapt HRM to volunteers (e.g., Hager & Brudney, 2015; Saksida et al., 2017; Walk et al., 2019), SHRM research in the nonprofit context “is still very much in its infancy” (Baluch & Ridder, 2020, p. 5). Whether or not (and if so how) volunteer perceptions of HR practices matter is not well understood. Since volunteers and paid employees have different motivations and dispositions to work in the nonprofit sector (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013), we use an inductive approach and explore how volunteers perceive and react to HR practices. We specifically focus on organizational communication to unpack the disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices.

Strategic Human Resource Management & Perceptions of HR Practices

Strategic human resource management (SHRM), defined as “as the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals” (Wright & McMahan, 1992, p. 298), links the HR system to the organizational goals and mission of the organization. HR systems consist of HR policies and practices organizations utilize such as recruitment and selection, pay and benefits, training, recognition, or performance management. Those HR practices influence the skills and motivation of the workforce, thereby affecting their productivity and engagement at work ultimately leading to improved organizational performance (Becker & Huselid, 1998; Jiang et al., 2012). Through the specific set up of the HR system, organizations signal their long-term commitment and investment

towards their employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Shaw et al., 1998). Employees, who are on the receiving end of the HR system, interpret these signals and derive what kind of behaviors are expected, valued, and rewarded (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016).

In practice, however, how employees subjectively perceive HR practices is not necessarily congruent with how HR practices are implemented (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) or with how HR practices were intended (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Nishii et al., 2008; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). This potential disconnect between intended, implemented, and perceived HR practices is part of the reason “the process through which HR practices leads to enhanced organizational performance is not well understood” (Nishii & Wright, 2008, p. 227). Whereas HR policies tend to be designed on the organizational level by HR professionals (Khilji & Wang, 2006), HR practices derived from those policies are implemented by front-line managers who themselves interpret and subsequently implement HR practices (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Employees, then, perceive and react to the HR practices as implemented rather than to how they were initially designed. We focus on the disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices in this study.

Two factors influence the disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices: front line managers and communication. Front-line managers are “the deliverer of the HR practices” (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007, p. 16) and how they implement HR practices varies based on their own value systems and personal backgrounds (Wright & Nishii, 2013). Further, since HR practices are a form of communication from employer to employee in organizations (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), communication problems are often at the root of the disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices (Nishii & Wright, 2008; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). To increase the effective implementation of HR practices, communication about HR practices “must be internally consistent with other forms of

organizational communications in order to achieve maximum effect” (Nishii & Wright, 2008, p. 242).

Empirical studies have tested some of these aspects. For instance, Den Hartog and colleagues (2013) test the impact of communication by using the quality of managers’ communication as a moderator of the relationship between manager and employee perceptions of HR practices. Their findings show that in cases where the quality of managerial communication is high, employees have a better understanding of the rationale behind HR practices, which reduces the disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices. Similarly in a multi-case study among health and social service nonprofits, Piening and colleagues (2014) find that the flow of information as well as inconsistent messages impacts how nonprofit employees perceive HR practices. Since these studies focus on paid employees, we next review what is known in the context of volunteers.

Volunteer Perceptions of HR practices

Nonprofits have long adapted HR practices to more effectively and efficiently manage paid employees (Baluch & Ridder, 2020). More recently, efforts have been made to design and implement HR practices targeted to volunteers to better retain this crucial part of their workforce (e.g., Hager & Brudney, 2015; Saksida et al., 2017). To date, volunteer HRM research has predominantly focused on the design and intention behind HR practices and their impact on volunteer outcomes rather than on volunteers and their perceptions of HR practices. To the best of our knowledge, only three studies have investigated how volunteers perceive and react to HR practices. Specifically, Traeger and Alfes (2019) study volunteer perceptions of high-performance work practices—specific bundles of HR practices—on engagement. Aside from a direct effect, the researchers also show that bundles of HR practices are related to engagement via psychological empowerment and organizational identification. To be an effective tool,

Traeger & Alfes (2019) suggest that “HR practices must be known by volunteers” (p. 1031) and recommend nonprofits to use various forms of communication to disseminate information. Notably, these findings align well with how communication is seen as mechanism to help mitigate the disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Nishii & Wright, 2008). Yet, it is not fully clear how communication impacts volunteers’ perceptions of HR practices.

Further, Englert and colleagues (2020) study how volunteers perceive person-environment fit. Although perceptions of HR practices were not the focus, some of the findings capture how volunteers perceive HR practices. For instance, volunteers “perceive organizational development opportunities as personally enriching” (p. 345) and as tool to gain skills and professional competence, which positively impacted their feelings of well-being and ultimately resulting in improved work performance. Volunteers also perceived recognition activities to positively influence how they felt about their volunteer work. These findings suggest that it is not just the mere existence of HR practices that impact volunteer outcomes, but how volunteers evaluate these practices, pointing to a need to investigate how volunteers perceive the HR practices they experience in a more targeted fashion.

More specifically integrating the implementation aspect, Taylor and colleagues (2006) study perceptions of volunteer management practices of volunteer administrators and volunteers in the context of rugby sports organizations. Volunteers felt their expectations were not met while volunteer administrators were mostly unaware of those expectations. Taylor and colleagues (2006) noticed a disconnect between those who implemented and those who received volunteer management practices. Volunteer administrators in this study had a dual role as being responsible for volunteer management while also being volunteers themselves. It is unclear if a similar disconnect can be found when studying individuals who are professional volunteer

managers. Our study builds on those initial findings and intentionally explores how volunteers perceive and react to HR practices.

DATA & METHODS

We conducted an inductive exploratory study using qualitative methods to answer our research question of how volunteers perceive HR practices. Two related factors guided this decision. First, an inductive approach allows us to discover relationships rather than test theory, which is especially vital since paid employees differ from volunteers in motivation and with regards to other dispositions (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013). We therefore cannot assume that the relationships uncovered in the context of paid employees hold true among volunteers. Second, quantitative measurement of perceptions of HR practices shows “considerable idiosyncrasy” (Beijer et al., 2019, p. 6) and cannot be easily transferred. Specifically, HR practices can be distinguished into descriptive and evaluative perceptions (Beijer et al., 2019). Whereas descriptive perceptions capture whether or not HR practices are in place and the extent to which they are available, evaluative perceptions encompass a positive or negative assessment of said HR practices (Beijer et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). By using an inductive approach, we aim to capture how volunteers perceive HR practices without ascribing a specific connotation (e.g., evaluative, descriptive) or direction (e.g., positive, negative, neutral) as items do in survey research, for instance.

Data from this study come from a large Boy Scouts of America (BSA) Council located in the Midwest of the United States. BSA has about 7,000 active volunteers providing youth programming to 33,000 youth. We have established rapport with the organization through a preceding study that left open questions, especially with regards to HR practices of recognition and training (Walk et al., 2019). BSA organizational leaders invited us to conduct interviews with their staff and volunteers to uncover potential reasons for counterintuitive findings and to

understand how volunteers experience the training and recognition within the organization. Data from interviews capture how volunteers perceive HR practices and focus groups capture how staff members implement HR practices. Whereas training and recognition are only two HR practices, they are two of the most prevalent HR practices targeted towards volunteers as used in previous research (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Fallon & Rice, 2015; Hager & Brudney, 2008).

Recruitment and Sample

Data were collected in April and May 2018. A key informant served as facilitator for recruitment. Staff were invited through an email to participate in one of two focus groups offered in the Council offices during convenient times (our key informant suggested specific days and times when most of the staff members were working on-site). A similar email with information on the study and invitation to participate went to volunteers. Volunteers interested in participating were asked to coordinate time and day of the interview (either face-to-face or via phone) with the research team. As a token of appreciation all interviewees (staff and volunteers) received a \$10 gift card to Starbucks.

Focus Groups with Staff

Two focus groups were conducted in the BSA headquarters with 4 and 7 staff members respectively and two researchers present. Using a semi-structured interview guide following introductions of participants and researchers, participants were asked questions about the organization's approach to training and recognition. Much room was left for participants to steer the conversation in a direction staff felt pertinent to these areas of inquiry. Therefore, some topics may have been covered in one focus group but not the other. Focus groups lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. All of the 11 participating staff members were responsible for one particular district and served as the main liaison between the district and the headquarters with regards to volunteers. In this role as district

executive, they were responsible for planning and administering training and recognition as well as planning activities for local troops. Aside from these responsibilities, all participating staff members had other content-specific work responsibilities such as program development or outreach to community organizations.

Interviews with Volunteers

Thirty-two volunteers initially indicated interest in participating in the study, of which 31 were interviewed. First, we asked about the roles volunteers have held within the organization, the corresponding responsibilities, and how long they have been BSA volunteers. Next, we asked volunteers about their experiences with training and recognition: whether they have received either, what their experiences were (if applicable), and what suggestions they have for improvement (if anything). The interviewer continued to leave space during each series of questions on training and recognition for any additional information the participant feel had not yet been covered. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim before analysis. Interview length ranged from 9 to 71 minutes, with an average of 22.5 minutes. Of the 31 volunteers interviewed, 12 were female (38.7%) and 19 were male (61.3%). Tenure as a BSA volunteer ranged from new volunteers with three years or less (29%) to life-long volunteers of 10 or more years (41.9%, including some who were themselves youth served by the organization and continued volunteering as adults). Most volunteers (61.3%) had children in the organization (with 16 % not mentioning whether or not they had children). Many volunteers held more than one role over the course of their volunteer tenure. These roles ranged from informal volunteers, fundraising chairs, den leaders, to scoutmasters and committee chairs. Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics.

[insert table 1 about here]

Analysis

Coding proceeded in two main steps, following the approach of Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). We first gave voice to informants and adhered to the language they used to describe their experience, keeping at bay our theoretical interpretations of their language. Although our interviews were semi-structured to guide conversation around training and recognition, the first order codes were not gathered specifically for those purposes, but by simply considering how participants referred to their experience. In a next step, we created second order codes by consolidating first order codes while consciously including our voices as researchers. The first and second authors collaborated closely during this process. The second author coded all interviews independently, the first author coded five interviews independently. The overlapping interviews were compared, and any disagreements were resolved to ensure consistency between authors' interpretations of first order codes.

After all interviews were coded, both researchers iteratively refined the codes into themes to determine relationships between them, particularly focusing on their relationship to training and recognition as HR practices, and the communication strategies implemented or lacking. Focus groups were similarly coded by the first author; using the language of the participants to create first order codes, then using the second order codes to depict the language of the researcher as they find relationships regarding focus group sensemaking within first order codes. The third author supported refinement of codes into themes. We utilized Dedoose, a qualitative analysis platform to support coding and analysis of the data. Appendix 1 presents an overview of the second order codes and themes.

FINDINGS

Staff members and volunteers reflected on training and recognition as HR practices. Staff focused on describing how activities are executed, while volunteers additionally engaged in

critical reflection and evaluation of those practices. Since this distinction resembles perceptions of HR practices as descriptive and evaluative (Beijer et al., 2019), we first present the descriptive and then the evaluative findings for training and recognition respectively. Where appropriate, we focus on illustrating alignment and disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices. Abbreviations below refer to the focus group (G1 or G2) or interview participant (1-31) and also indicate the gender of the participant (F for female or M for male).

Training as HR Practice

Both staff members and volunteers described types of training, the implementation of training, and the importance of training.

Type of Training: Aside from mandatory youth protection training, volunteers have to participate in position-specific training (e.g., targeted towards the specific volunteer role) aiming to prepare the volunteers for their roles. Participation in position-specific training is voluntary with 58 - 68% volunteers participating. For instance, volunteers leading a Cub Scout (youth grades K-5) group have to complete a one-hour long training before the first meeting providing an overview of the aims and methods of Cub Scouting and before the first outdoor activity (app. 45 minutes time commitment) on outdoor preparation, such as hazardous weather training. When volunteers change their positions, they have to complete the respective position-specific training. Aside from position-specific training, there are other trainings that BSA offers (e.g., “teaching songs that can be sung around the campfire” (G1M2)).

Importance of Training: Staff, who are responsible for training implementation (not necessarily the design thereof), perceived position-specific training to be closely tied to mission achievement and, thus, a priority in their work. One staff member noted: “Most of us focus on position-specific training because that’s what feeds into our goals” (G1F2).

Volunteers had a more functional view of the purpose of training and acknowledged its “vital [and] essential” (M31) role. Volunteers particularly appreciated that some trainings “are required

to do from a compliance standpoint” (F22) in order to ensure “the safety of the boys” (F26).

Especially when working with youth, volunteers may be unaware of rules and regulations. One volunteer elaborates:

From a volunteer training standpoint, I think most volunteers just don't know what they don't know. They don't understand youth work. They just think that you magically keep kids safe and put on a uniform and go do scouting for food, become an Eagle Scout, and magically we've made young people ethical and moral decision makers across their life time. And it's just not that simple in youth work. (M8)

Volunteers also perceived training to be important for their respective volunteer roles, in order to provide a good experience for the youth. Volunteers could not “imagine wanting to get in front of a bunch of boys and tell them why they need to do this, or why this is a good experience for them, [without having] had that training” (M31).

Training implementation: For training implementation, staff members work with local lead volunteers (named training chairs) to “coordinate and facilitate district trainings at their schedule, [...] recruit volunteers for training at the district level and then support volunteers who are conducting their training within their own units” (G1M2). Staff members also “promote trainings” (G2M2), “try to be responsive to what people say that they need” (G1F1), and provide materials such as a syllabus to support training facilitation. Training, both with regards to the specific content as well as when it is delivered, is targeted towards the specific needs of the district and individual units.

Whereas volunteers perceived training to enable them to do their volunteer work well, staff did not elaborate on functional aspects of training, rather they emphasized the ties of training to organizational mission and goals. Notably, this emphasis pertained to the importance of training but not the implementation of training.

Format of Training: Staff noted increasing challenges with attendance when offering training face-to-face. One staff member explains, “we mostly do weeknights about an hour, two hours long courses... although we’ve had some training on the weekend but usually... they want to keep their weekend” (G2F1). Since attending training requires an “investment of time” (G2M1), staff felt that volunteers, who are already limited with the time they can give, perceive training as a burden. Volunteers echo this indicating that “giving up a whole Saturday is tricky” (F5) given that they are “volunteering in so many different aspects of life, have full-time jobs, [...] and other activities” (F20). Traditionally most of the training has been face-to-face, but BSA has moved to more online training in light of those challenges resulting in “a lot of our main trainings [to be] hosted online” (G2M2). However, staff agreed that face-to-face trainings are more effective with regards to the retention of knowledge since ...

...a lot of people that are doing the online training [are] probably not really paying attention to it... It depends on the person, but I think overall the in-person training is the better option (G2M1).

Thus, staff members are left in a bind; while acknowledging the benefits of this delivery mode, they are aware of the time constraints face-to-face training poses on volunteers.

Descriptive perceptions shared by staff and volunteers had different connotations, especially with regards to the importance and the format of training. Staff emphasized a more strategic viewpoint of training as being important for mission achievement while volunteer perceptions focused on functional aspects. Staff members were cognizant about the benefits of face-to-face training while volunteers were mostly concerned with the scheduling.

Whereas descriptive perceptions focused on describing training practices in a neutral fashion, evaluative perceptions captured volunteers’ positive and negative assessments, their reflections on strategic intent (or lack thereof), and the need for specific training formats. Moreover, our

findings indicate that new volunteers differed in their evaluations of training when compared to those volunteers with longer tenure.

Positive and negative assessments: Volunteer perceptions of training were either very positive or very negative, with only a few volunteers expressing neutral views. Those who viewed trainings as positive indicated that they are “happy with it” (F29), had “a great experience” (M31) and “enjoyed [training] because it taught [them] some of the skills that [they] needed at the time” (M27). A few had more neutral views stating the training accomplished what it was intended to—“it gets the job done” (F2) and is “fine” (M11), whereas a large group shared negative views. Particularly, volunteers indicated that the position-specific trainings were “a waste of time” (F10) or outright “awful” (M8). Some offered more specific rationale for their perceptions stating training did not “actually cover some of the information [volunteers] would need to in [their] actual role” (M19), thus not being goal-oriented.

Lack of strategic intent: Going beyond the description of training and its implementation as illustrated above, volunteers reflected on how they evaluated the strategic intent (or lack thereof) of training opportunities. Some volunteers wished there was a better explanation of when they need to take which training and why, because “suggestions for training were pretty much nonexistent” (M23) and “people don’t really know other than [the mandatory] youth protection what they should take” (M9). Similarly, when considering training opportunities to develop specific skills needed to be successful in their role, volunteers noticed that relevant training opportunities were lacking. Volunteers criticized the length of training—“like hours and hours of modules” (F18)—but would “be happy to sit through 2 hour long sessions if [they] actually thought it was going to be functional” (F10) echoing the wish for goal-oriented training. When volunteers are unclear about the intentionality of the training and its structure, they do not feel

their time is valued, resulting in behavior changes such as some volunteers “never completed all [of the training]” (F18).

Need for Specific Format of Training: Volunteers noted a disconnect between their and the BSA’s needs with regards to training format. This was prevalent in how volunteers evaluated online training as compared to face-to-face training. Volunteers emphasized that training should be aligned with the organization, its mission, and goals.

Boy Scouting [...] is a very interactive process. It’s part fellowship, it’s part leadership, it’s part action, working with each other. Training on a computer to understand the interactions and how you fit everything together, you lose. You lose a very important part of what training’s about. I think some things are better left [for] ... in person training session. (M14)

BSA, an organization that heavily relies on face-to-face interaction by offering weekly programs for youth alongside outdoor camp experiences, conducts most of the main trainings online (see above *Format of Training*), which volunteers perceived a misfit with what the organization stands for. Further, volunteers noted an overemphasis on online training in favor of convenience and at risk of jeopardizing quality, suggesting that “there is a time where there has to be some face-to-face stuff” (F24). Some volunteers raised the implication for safety and the quality of programming when overly relying on online training. Specifically, volunteers criticized that face-to-face trainings are not designed based on best practices and implemented by volunteers implying a perceived lack of professionalism and intentional design, as captured by the following quote:

You look at all these human development and child development outcomes that people blaze all over their marketing material and they don’t know how to design program leader training to activate that program design. (M8)

Volunteers perceived that training, which is an essential function for preparing them for their roles, has been devalued for the sake of recruiting volunteers and easing the onboarding process.

One long-term volunteer elaborates:

We went through specific scout leader scenarios. [...] We don't do that anymore. We required our leaders in order to be leaders to have this. Early on it was instilled in me, 'Look you want to be a leader, you have to go through this'. Now it's kind of like, it's almost a change in perception, it's like 'We really need a leader, we can take care of the training later'. (M31)

Training, however, especially early on, is a tool to introduce new volunteers to the organization, its mission, and its values. From the description of staff, however, it seems that the focus on format is driven by a focus on convenience, whereas volunteers as indicated in their evaluative perceptions relate the focus more clearly to the organizational mission and purpose.

Training Perceptions of New Volunteers: BSA is a complex organization with volunteer-related jargon (e.g., volunteer roles have specific titles) and traditions that can be overwhelming to new volunteers. Indeed, of the new volunteers (3 year or less), a majority (6 of 9) had a general idea of their role but indicated a need for more specific information with regards to onboarding into their volunteer roles. It seems that training was not specifically targeted to accommodate new volunteers unfamiliar with the structure and terminology. One volunteer elaborated:

But people [...] who have never done any kind of leading before and their kids are wanting to do the program and they're willing to step up into that role, it can be really scary for a lot of people. And to me, that introductory training didn't really do anything to alleviate that, or give the confidence that I think people need at that juncture to really say 'yes I will totally do this and I can do it'." (F15).

Volunteers without previous scouting experience felt they did not belong, because they did not know the breath of the responsibilities, lack the confidence or specific knowledge about the organization. Volunteer turnover can be a likely outcome if volunteers do not feel they belong to the organization. To prevent turnover, one volunteer of three years shared their locally-driven, proactive initiative of introducing written guidelines to new volunteers explaining the responsibilities of the most important volunteer roles:

Like a piece of paper saying 'here's what your role is.' We've tried to do something like that to introduce, like "hey this is what a committee chair does, this is what a leader does" to better our adult leader retention. Because knowledge is everything when it comes to letting them know what they are going to be doing and not just going in blindly. A lot of it has to do with overall communication (F29).

Those experiences and perceptions did not go unnoticed by volunteers who had been with the organization for longer. Six volunteers (out of 22) specifically reflected on how new volunteers perceived and experienced training and provided suggestions to mitigate these negative perceptions and experiences. Particularly, volunteers noted that “the Boy Scouts is... it can be a really complex looking system when new families are joining and sometimes it takes up to 2 years for people to really figure all of the ins and outs” (M12), that new volunteers are “just thrown into the fray” (F26) and “it’s up to [them] to sink or swim” (M7). When those volunteers noticed that newer volunteers felt overwhelmed, they reached out and offered their help.

Volunteers suggested that the training format should be face-to-face for new volunteers, because the direct exchange of information and the ability to ask questions is vital; “You need to be with other people. You really can’t do this online because you’re getting so much information, sharing it back and forth” (F26). More specifically, and similar to earlier suggestions from newer volunteers, seasoned volunteers recommended ways to introduce

volunteers to the organization, such as a paid staff position to coordinate new families, offering monthly meetings specifically for new families, or a specific training to introduce volunteers to the organizational structure.

Whereas staff shared tendencies to move more training online mostly driven by considerations of convenience, these findings suggest that face-to-face training is especially vital for those new to their volunteer roles and the organization and may impact retention of new volunteers by increasing their commitment to the organization.

Recognition as HR practice

Staff members and volunteers described different types of recognition practices such as “thank you letters” (G1F1), “recognition dinners” (G2M1) or thanking volunteers publicly before meetings (G1M1), ranging from very informal verbal “atta boys, pats on the back [or simple] thank yous” (M1) to formal “certificates” (F20) or awards. We focus on awards for the remainder of the section, since both volunteers and staff emphasized awards as a main recognition activity.

Types of Awards: There are two main categories of awards available for volunteers. For one type, volunteers have to be nominated; it is “something you can’t earn, it has to be awarded to you which is a really big deal to volunteers” (M8) and “sort of a peak experience too because it’s a surprise until the very end” (M7). Given the similarity to existing literature on awards (Frey & Gallus, 2018; Gallus & Frey, 2016), we label those nomination-based awards discretionary awards. The second type of award, which we label confirmatory (Frey & Gallus, 2018; Gallus & Frey, 2016), is given out depending on volunteers’ tenure (i.e., tenure awards, where volunteers “get a different patch, [when they have] “volunteer[ed] for certain periods of time you” (M3) such as “5 year, 10 year anniversary trophies “(M27)) or following spelled-out benchmarks that volunteers have to reach (e.g., training awards). One example are awards received for completing additional training or earning a knot. Volunteers indicated they have “earned” (M17) or are “working on” (M31) achieving those awards.

Implementation of Awards: Staff members acknowledged the challenges when recognizing volunteers due to the large number of volunteers that they each serve. One staff member, responsible for 440 volunteers, elaborates, “I can’t know all of their needs, so I just don’t know them all and I don’t know when they are doing a good job because I am not at their meetings every week” (G1F1).

Although awards are an HR practice utilized by BSA, the difficulty in implementing this practice indicates a need for a more streamlined and strategic awards process. This is reiterated by volunteers through their evaluative perceptions of awards implementation. Volunteers shared their positive and negative assessments about awards and their evaluation of the strategic intent of awards.

Positive and Negative Assessments: Volunteers generally indicated it “felt really good to be recognized and have [their] achievements validated” (M12), “especially for things you put your heart and soul into” (M7). Whereas some volunteers appreciated being recognized, others perceived awards as “not super important” (M31), were “ambivalent about awards” (M23) or simply did “not care” (F20). Volunteers’ evaluative perceptions of awards were dependent on their motivations. For instance, some volunteers mentioned that “you volunteer to help not to get praise for” (M3) and that they “don’t need plaques and knots [... they] just want to help somebody” (F20). Volunteers mentioned they “learn from the kids as much as they learn from [them]” (M9), which is “the stuff that really makes a difference and none of us, in our troop at least, are doing this for anything other than our own, our boys” (F10). Volunteers noted that the “pay off as a leader will come years later” (M31) once the children look back at their experience. Another volunteer elaborates:

Five years down the road, when these kids come up and say, “you know when you were trying to teach us accountability, thank you very much!” That would mean more to me

than having someone from here giving me a certificate saying “thank you for volunteering for 5 years. (M21)

Rather than formal recognition through the organization, those volunteers were driven by and rewarded through the volunteer work itself. Similar to volunteer perceptions of training, staff were not aware of those perceptions of awards and focused on challenges related to awards as recognition strategy in their discussion of awards (see above).

Strategic Intent and Implementation: Volunteers generally had positive perceptions of the intent behind awards. Volunteers appreciated that “[t]he leadership is very grateful to volunteers in any capacity [thinking] that that is super important” (F15) and felt that “[staff] did a really good job of making everybody kinda feel important” (F22), especially when awards were handed out publicly. Whereas volunteer perceptions about the intent were positive, they were dissatisfied with how awards were implemented. Volunteers perceived the process to earn confirmatory awards as burdensome. Volunteers noted “if you don’t report it then you don’t earn that” (F29) and reporting was “just a little bit too much trouble for me to mess with, for something I probably have earned” (F4). While some did not know about awards and others felt the process to be burdensome, another group did not report their achievements because “for once I think I shouldn’t have to ask to be recognized. [...] it’s nice to be recognized but why should you have to toot your own horn?” (M13). Similarly, not all volunteers were aware of the nomination process for discretionary awards leading to the same people nominating and receiving awards.

It depends on if you’re working with other adults who are going to do the nominations...

Unless everybody is made aware of it, and “hey you should nominate...” And I don’t know if they communicate that very well (M30).

Volunteer perceptions of awards, especially with regards to how awards were implemented, allude to the role of communication, which we discuss next.

Communication

Volunteers noted challenges with communication, especially pertaining to training and awards but also related to general information sharing. Staff members, on the other hand, were aware of general communication challenges, but did not discuss how communication impacts how volunteers perceive training and recognition practices.

Communication regarding HR practices: Volunteers specifically pointed out communication issues pertaining to training and recognition. For instance, volunteers stated “that there could be a lot more communication [...] about some of the opportunities for training out there” (M3), because “a lot of people don’t know all the stuff that is available. You have to kind of go hunting for it” (M9). The lack of clarity about training opportunities due to insufficient communication is apparent, because “it’s not like super clear to [the volunteer] if [they are] supposed to have had additional training” (F15). This lack of, or variation in, communication had volunteers in the dark about their training responsibilities, which impacted how they perceived training as an HR practice.

Communication also factored into the familiarity with awards. One new volunteer of 3 years only “learned this year through the dinner that took place that there is a way to recognize your fellow leaders. [...] Because of that, [the volunteer] missed the deadline for that” (F29). Others, even after years with the organization, were unaware of the availability of formal awards indicating they “don't really know a lot about that” (F28). Volunteers also criticized difficulties in access, particularly “where to find them, where to figure out how to get them” (F26).

Lacking clear avenues of communication and resource sharing leads to negative perceptions or misperceptions of the HR practices. Whereas various volunteers elaborate on the communication issues with regards to awards and training, staff members did not explicitly state that communication was problematic in this area.

Both groups noticed communication challenges above and beyond communication about HR practices. Many volunteers noted “it’s really hard to get information, [because] there are so many different places where we have to look for information - Facebook or [...] the Council website- that if things were a little more streamlined, it might be easier to get some of those tools” (M3). Lack of access to information and consistent communication was a frequently discussed issue among volunteers. Particularly, “communication about stuff tends to be cluttered or not there, and we’re clawing and scratching and fighting for the information we get and not everybody knows stuff” (F20). Staff members shared similar concerns; data on volunteers is collected depending on the content-specific focus of the respective staff member, but not through an integrated system that would allow them “to track interaction” (G1M1). This leads to situations where staff members “interact with the same volunteers on various different things” (G1M1) such as “I’m asking about money and he is asking about manpower and he is talking about membership” (G1F1). Naturally, volunteers react surprised asking “what are you people doing?” (G1F1), when learning that staff members are not aware of this parallel communication. Indeed, staff acknowledged the shortcomings of their current system “the challenges we have is sort of parallel data, so that our membership database is over here but then our volunteer database is over there and the two don’t talk” (G1M2). This disconnect is reflected in volunteer perceptions of communication:

So we kind of see a disconnect there. The thing is, we still stay involved because we are not in it to serve the Council, it’s for the boys. And we understand the necessity of the Council. There’s got to be a higher authority to answer to, I’m good with that. I just wish there was more of a two way street there. (M31)

The perceptions of volunteers regarding communication issues and strategic intent reveal major disconnects compared to those of staff members, which could be overcome using SHRM applied to this volunteer context.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how volunteers perceive HR practices, specifically training and recognition. Volunteer accounts were supplemented by staff member reflections of the same practices to capture how HR practices were implemented. Beyond inquiring about the availability of training and recognition (two HR practices the organization employs for their volunteers), we encouraged participants to reflect on and evaluate those practices to arrive at nuanced accounts of their perceptions.

First, our findings indicate that volunteers both describe and evaluate the HR practices that are available to them, a distinction previously discovered in the context of paid employees (Beijer et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). This finding points to a striking similarity to how employees perceive HR practices, despite the fact that volunteers and paid employees differ in their motivations and dispositions (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013). Given the similarity and the emerging nature of this research stream, we suggest to investigate descriptive and evaluative perceptions in future studies. Specifically, we encourage research to quantitatively investigate volunteer perceptions and test if (and to what extent) relationships to work-related outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, or turnover are similar or different from the paid employee context. We do, however, caution against the simultaneous use of descriptive and evaluative items on the same measure when using quantitative methods (Beijer et al., 2019).

Second, our findings indicate that communication about HR practices matters in the volunteer context; HR practices of training and recognition, aside from their intended purpose to train, develop, or recognize individuals, were a means of communication between the

organization and the volunteers. Communication has previously been identified as important; thus this study supports previous literature focusing on paid employees (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016) and extends the discussion started in the volunteer context (Traeger & Alfes, 2019). Moreover, our findings reveal a congruency in the descriptions of HR practices; both volunteers and staff members used very similar language to objectively describe trainings and recognition. This speaks to the knowledge of the kind of HR practices that exist in the organization. When examining the evaluation of the HR practices, however, volunteer and staff accounts diverged. Whereas volunteers' evaluative perceptions captured their positive and negative assessments of HR practices and the perceived lack of strategic intent, staff members were mostly unaware of those perceptions. Further, whereas staff emphasized the importance of training for the mission, volunteers saw the mission focus lacking in the choice of training format, an aspect where staff prioritized convenience in training implementation. The organizational mission was important for both groups but mattered in different areas. This disconnect is notable and important; when staff members are not aware how volunteers perceive HR practices, they cannot adapt their practices to prevent a negative impact on volunteer outcomes.

Our analysis uncovered that specific communication about HR practices impacted volunteer perceptions of HR practices. As such, our findings mirror the paid employee context in which the disconnect between implemented and perceived HR practices is caused by communication problems (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Communication in volunteer management has long puzzled researchers since more communication has consistently led to lower retention rates (Hager & Brudney, 2008, 2015). Our findings are similar to Hager and Brudney's (2008, 2015) indicating that more is not always better. Rather communication has to be coherent, consistent, and intentional, otherwise volunteers perceive HR practices differently, leading some to change how they perceive the organization, alter their behavior while volunteering, or increase their

intentions to leave. Whereas we saw some indication of how communication about HR practices (or lack thereof) impacted volunteer perceptions and behaviors, future research should test those initial findings. Moreover, we speculate that good communication will only matter if HR practices are designed intentionally. It seems that communication is a necessary but not a sufficient condition while well-designed and implemented HR practices are both necessary and sufficient in order to positively influence volunteer outcomes. Future research could test potential moderating effects of quality of communication between perceptions of HR practices and volunteer outcomes.

Further, specific communication about HR practices has to be consistent with other forms of organizational communication (Nishii & Wright, 2008), which was not the case in our findings, suggesting that this inconsistency further contributed to negative volunteer perceptions. Future research should consider integrating how volunteers perceive general and specific communication and test to what extent they (individually and in interaction) impact volunteer perceptions of HR practices using quantitative data.

The third contribution captures the link between volunteer perceptions of HR practices and SHRM. Staff and volunteer perceptions did not hint that HR practices have a strategic importance or are integrated into SHRM. Rather, HR practices seem to be happening organically without strong integration, which is similar to previous studies on SHRM in the nonprofit context (Guo et al., 2011; Walk et al., 2014). Specifically, volunteers perceived training and recognition as two seemingly unrelated HR practices without ascribing much strategic intent to them. Individual HR practices though, should be integrated into HR bundles or an SHRM system that consists of well-aligned HR practices designed to improve organizational performance (Becker & Huselid, 1998; Macduffie, 1995). Specifically, for training, volunteers did not perceive training to be intentionally designed and implemented. In contrast, their accounts

captured a lack of guidance on and poor implementation of training, and, more generally, a misfit to the organization, its goals, and mission. Similar to the paid employee context (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Shaw et al., 1998), HR practices also send signals about the investment and commitment to the volunteers, signals which volunteers interpret and adjust their behaviors leading some to either not complete all the training, do other things while being trained, and think less of training as a tool altogether. This was especially the case for newer volunteers; training was not specifically targeted towards those unfamiliar with the organization. Since volunteers are not paid for their time, training that is not perceived as directly useful to their volunteer role may be more detrimental to volunteers and may impact their commitment and retention.

With regards to recognition and similar to Taylor and colleagues (2006), volunteers emphasized that recognition was appreciated, but not expected. Some volunteers hinted that they were volunteering because they found meaning in working with youth by supporting their growth and development. Having an impact on youth was a reward in itself and more important than official recognition. Volunteers do not have uniform motivations towards volunteer work (Clary & Snyder, 1999) and are more inclined to do certain tasks based on their motivations (Willems & Walk, 2013). Volunteer motives are also differently related to volunteer outcomes such as volunteer satisfaction (Dwyer et al., 2013). A potential avenue for future research is therefore to explore the relationship between volunteer motivation and perceptions of HR practices.

The study of awards is relatively new in the volunteer context (Frey & Gallus, 2018), but may be an important avenue for future research on HR perceptions. In a recent study Walk et al. (2019) show that receiving discretionary awards—awards given out by the discretion of the giver to recognize exceptional behavior—was negatively related to volunteer turnover whereas

confirmatory awards—awards given out following clearly defined criteria—was not related to turnover. Our qualitative data point to the fact that volunteers know the difference between discretionary and confirmatory awards, but it is unclear if their evaluative perceptions of the two award types are similar or not. We recommend future studies to be mindful about the type of awards and their relationship to volunteer outcomes.

This study also has implications for practice. Given that volunteers criticized the lack of strategic intent behind HR practices and lack of communication, one way for mitigation is to focus on sending unambiguous and to some extent redundant messages about the culture, values, and organizational mission to employees and volunteers (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Nishii & Wright, 2008). We further recommend paying attention to the role of volunteer managers in the communication of HR practices. Given the similarity to front-line managers in the for-profit context, volunteer managers through their interactions and communications send signals to the volunteers “about the responses and behaviors that are expected, rewarded and valued” (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016, p. 197), which then may influence volunteers’ perceptions of HR practices and, ultimately, volunteer outcomes. Aside from having the infrastructure in place for effective communication such as linked data bases and a customer management system that tracks interactions, training for those managers is important.

This study is not without limitations. First, the nature of qualitative data and an exploratory inquiry prohibits us to make generalizations to other organizations or populations, yet these findings may be transferable to other volunteer contexts. Second, our findings are limited as we were only able to focus on two HR practices instead of a more comprehensive list of HR practices including performance management or recruitment.

CONCLUSION

The process that links SHRM to organizational performance is no longer a black box, because the differentiation between intended, implemented, and perceived HR practices has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how HR practices contribute to organizational performance. In the volunteer context, however, this box is still very much a dark shade of gray. This study has drawn attention to volunteer perceptions of HR practices indicating that the HR practices themselves matter. But this study also shows that volunteer perceptions depend on who implements these HR practices (i.e., the volunteer managers or front-line staff) and how they are communicated. Whereas these findings are an important first step, further questions are still left unanswered: What are the theoretical constructs to which HR perceptions are related (i.e., HR perceptions as antecedents)? What predicts HR perceptions (i.e., HR perceptions as outcomes)? And can HR perceptions impact other relationships (i.e., HR perceptions as mediator)? We believe that research and practice will benefit from future findings on volunteer perceptions of HR practices and we hope this study sparks more research in this area.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Interview Participants

ID	Gender	Children	Tenure
M1	M	Yes	1
F2	F	Yes	6
M3	M	Yes	8
F4	F	Not mentioned	7
F5	F	Yes	2
M6	M	Yes	1
M7	M	Yes	Life-long
M8	M	Yes	25
M9	M	Yes	10
F10	F	Yes	5
M11	M	Not mentioned	30
M12	M	Not mentioned	5
M13	M	Not mentioned	Life-long
M14	M	Yes	Life-long
F15	F	Yes	2
M16	M	Not mentioned	Life-long
M17	M	Yes	6
F18	F	Yes	1
M19	M	Yes	4
F20	F	Yes	2
M21	M	Yes	3
F22	F	Yes	7
M23	M	No	Life-long
F24	F	Yes	15
M25	M	Yes	58
F26	F	Yes	12
M27	M	Yes	30
F28	F	Yes	5
F29	F	Yes	3
M30	M	Yes	1.5
M31	M	Yes	Life-long

Appendix 1. Illustration of the emerging second order codes and themes

