Systems Leadership

Leaders are necessary to foster experimentation, to help create connections across the organization, to feed the system with rich information from multiple source - all while helping everyone stay clear on what we agreed we wanted to accomplish and who we wanted to be.

Margaret Wheatley

Introduction

Systems leadership competencies involve understanding the agency’s organizational system, and sharing leadership and power within the organization through delegation and collaboration. It also involves understanding others and the ability to build and sustain teams to more effectively address problems. Sharing power and leadership responsibilities involves delegating important tasks to volunteers that both aid in their personal development and extend the capabilities of the volunteer administrator.

What is a system?
A system can be thought of as “a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole.” There are five characteristics of systems that go hand-in-hand with this definition.

1. A system’s parts must all be present for the system to carry out its purpose.
2. A system’s parts must be arranged in a specific way for the system to carry out its purpose.
3. Systems have specific purposes within larger systems.
4. Systems maintain their stability through fluctuations and adjustments.
5. Systems have feedback.

(Systems Thinking Basics book, Anderson and Johnson.)

You can think of the volunteer program as a system that has its purpose within a larger system, to extend the abilities of the nonprofit or governmental agency. The volunteer system consists of a volunteer administrator (VA) and the volunteers, but it also may consist of some paid staff that supervise volunteers in their work area as well as secretarial staff who support the volunteer program. It may involve middle management volunteers who assist the volunteer administrator in directing the work of other volunteers or in training new volunteers. The volunteer program is part of a larger system that answers to the organization’s director or a board of directors. In
some systems, leadership of the volunteer program may be the VA’s full-time job or it may only be part of their overall responsibilities.

For the volunteer program to be effective, you must understand the system in which you work. How does your system work? Who makes decisions? How are decisions made? Who controls resources? What are the unwritten norms and procedures for getting things accomplished?