



How Civic Associations Can Create Committed Leaders

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Civic associations provide an important way for citizens to voice concerns and influence their communities, states, and the nation as a whole. The critical work of many civic associations is carried out by volunteer leaders who will go the extra mile to achieve group goals. Because the vitality and influence of such associations hinges on the commitment of volunteer leaders, it is important to understand why some leaders become highly committed while others do much less.

Previous scholarship on participants in voluntary civic associations points to individual qualities as the most important factor. Characteristics like levels of education, motivation, or available free time are said to be of utmost importance. But of course associations also structure social relationships among members and leaders. Recently, we completed an innovative study of associational leaders and discovered how important those relationships can be in shaping committed leaders. The commitment of individual leaders is rooted in the ways members of leadership teams organize themselves and interact with one another.

A Study of Sierra Club Leaders and Chapters

Our study looked at the Sierra Club, a major national environmental association that also has state chapters and local groups. We collected data from 1,616 Sierra Club volunteer leaders and the 368 chapters and groups they led. We measured commitment by asking about the number of hours each of the leaders gave each month to their position. Some leaders spent less than an hour per month on Sierra Club work, while others devoted almost two hundred hours each month. To see what might explain very different levels of commitment, we measured many kinds of individual characteristics and many relational features of leadership teams.

Who Leaders Are Matters

Our findings support many of the conclusions from studies that have probed individual characteristics to explain commitment to associations and participation in civic life generally.

- **Leaders with more free time were more committed.** In the Sierra Club data, those leaders with available time – such as retirees, students, and the unemployed – did more than those who were employed full or part-time.
- **Personal concern for core issues made a difference.** Leaders who were more strongly motivated to make political change to protect the environment made greater efforts for the Sierra Club.

- **Having the right skills mattered.** Leaders who had participated in greater numbers of Sierra Club training sessions spent more time on leadership activities.

But How Leaders Work Together Matters More

Although individual characteristics are important, relationships among leaders are critical. Leaders are part of elected groups responsible for deciding what an association or chapter should do and how to go about doing it. Drawing insights from scholars like J. Richard Hackman who have studied teams in business settings, we examined how the Sierra Club leadership teams were structured and how they operated.

- Leadership teams ranged in size from four to 28 people, but the size did not make a difference for how much time particular team members contributed.
- Some teams reported that for any one leader to be successful, he or she had to depend on other leaders doing their work as well. We found that ***the more interdependent the members of a leadership team were, the more time each individual devoted to the work.***
- All teams divided work among the leaders. But on some teams most leaders devoted about the same amount of time, while in others certain members devoted huge amounts of time and others gave just a few hours. We found that ***leadership teams with a more equal division of labor had individual leaders who tended to give more time to club efforts.***
- Most of the leadership teams we studied held meetings to determine priorities, coordinate activities, and get updates on projects. Some teams devoted relatively small shares of their available time to such meetings, while others spent nearly half of their time in them. Our finding here is telling: ***the larger the share of collective time spent in leadership meetings, the less time each individual leader contributed to the group's efforts.***

Generating Committed Volunteer Leaders

Given that both individual and team characteristics influence the amount of time given by volunteer leaders, how did we determine that factors having to do with teamwork matter more? We used our statistical findings about individual and team characteristics to determine how various combinations of individual and team characteristics would affect leader commitment.

- A leader with the characteristics conducive to commitment (such as lots of free time and deep concern about environmental policy) working on a team with suboptimal features (where leaders function mostly independently, commit unequal time, and spend a lot of time meeting with each other) commits about eight hours per month to the Sierra Club.
- Remarkably, however, a leader with less favorable characteristics (employed full time, not so intensely motivated) working on a team with optimal interactions (interdependent, relatively equal workloads, and limited meeting time) commits about 44 hours per month!

Our research offers important insights to civic associations like the Sierra Club that hope to develop highly committed volunteer leaders. One approach is to try to recruit leaders who are highly motivated or have more time. An even better strategy is to form leadership teams where people learn to work together interdependently, fairly, and efficiently. Better functioning leadership teams encourage more commitment than even the best individual recruitment efforts.

Read more in Matthew Baggetta, Hahrie Han, and Kenneth T. Andrews, "Leading Associations: How Individual and Team Dynamics Generate Committed Leaders." *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 4 (2013): 544-573.