

# The Conceptualization and Measurement of Volunteer Loyalty

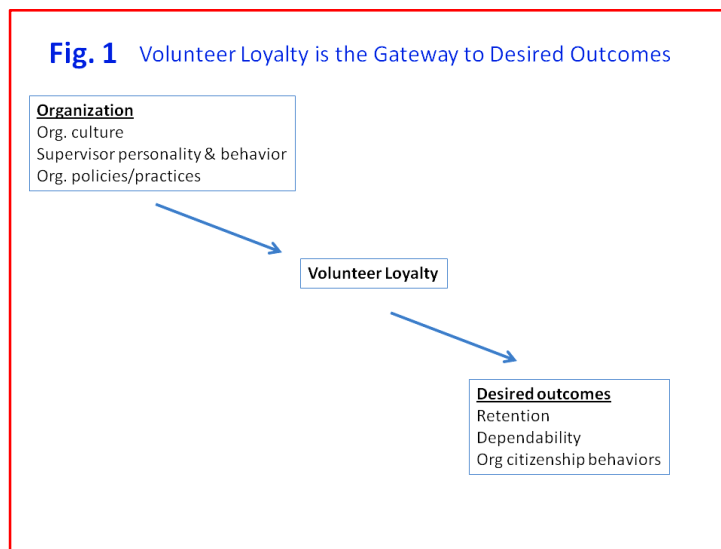
Walter Wymer<sup>i</sup>

## Introduction

Nonprofit managers want to retain their volunteers. Nonprofit managers want their volunteers to be dependable, to report for service when scheduled, and to perform their assigned tasks competently. Nonprofit managers want their volunteers to demonstrate good organizational citizenship behaviors (for example, participating effectively in groups, exhibiting a positive attitude, helping others). I will refer to these three variables (that is, retention, dependability, and organization citizenship behaviors) as “desired outcomes.”

Nonprofit managers understand that the organization’s culture has an influence on obtaining the desired outcomes of volunteers. They also understand that the quality of supervision volunteers experience has an influence on whether or not the organization achieves the desired outcomes from its volunteers. While there are influences on volunteers that are external to the organization (for example, volunteers’ families and jobs), my simple model will limit its scope to factors that are internal to the organization because these are factors over which managers have some level of control.

Figure 1 below illustrates the previous discussion, namely that there are organizational influences on obtaining desired outcomes from volunteers. There has been an addition, however. Figure 1 portrays volunteer loyalty as a mediator between organizational influences on volunteers and desired outcomes. Since this brief article cannot take the space to effectively make an argument to support volunteer loyalty as a mediator, let us assume this to be true for now. If we can make this assumption, then we can also argue for the following set of propositions:



P1: If volunteer loyalty increases, so do desired outcomes

P2: If volunteer loyalty decreases, so do desired outcomes

P3: Volunteer loyalty occurs prior to desired outcomes

P4: Volunteer loyalty has a causal effect on desired outcomes

If managers can increase the level of volunteer loyalty in their organizations, a consequence will be an increase in the level of desired outcomes. Because volunteer loyalty is a mediator variable and because volunteer loyalty has a causal effect on desired outcomes, managers need to: (1) understand more clearly what volunteer loyalty is, (2) understand how to measure volunteer loyalty, and (3) understand how to increase volunteer loyalty. The presentation will focus on the first two of these three important managerial needs.

### **Conceptualization of Volunteer loyalty**

There is a conceptual confusion between volunteer loyalty and volunteer retention. Retention simply refers to the most basic description of the state of the relationship between the volunteer and the organization. If a volunteer has simply not stopped volunteering then the volunteer is considered to be retained.

Loyalty, however, is something else entirely. Loyalty describes the feelings an individual has toward something or someone. The nature of loyalty, those feelings that a person has towards something (a place, a belief, and organization, an idea) or someone varies depending on what the target of that loyalty is. For example, there is consumer loyalty, in which a consumer may have a strong preference toward a particular brand. There is fan loyalty, in which a fan may attend all the games of a favorite sports team, wear the team's logo on his clothing, participate in online forums about the team, and choose to converse about the team with a religious zeal. There is loyalty between friends, in which friends accept an obligation to look out for each other's best interests. There is loyalty between lovers, in which partners meet each other's needs through intimacy and fidelity. There is loyalty that a parent feels towards her child, in which the parent willingly sacrifices her personal interests for the best interests of her child.

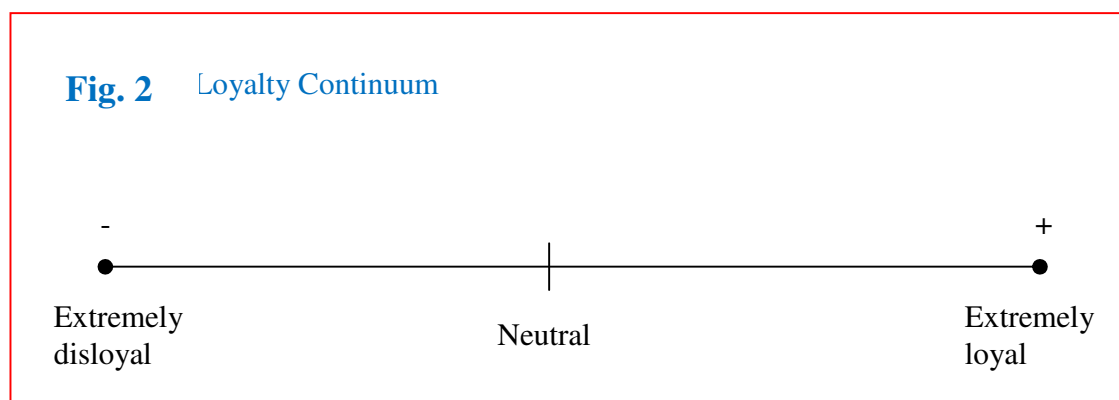
What loyalty means, then, is partly determined by the context within which it occurs. In the context of volunteer loyalty, I am referring to those feelings of allegiance that a volunteer has towards the organization and its mission, purpose, or cause. Volunteer loyalty begins with the individual's recognition that the organization and the individual share important core values. The recognition of shared values between organization and individual must progress to a shared purpose to evoke feelings of loyalty in a volunteer. Does supporting the organization allow volunteers to feel that they are making a difference to a cause of personal importance? Does supporting the organization allow volunteers to act in accord with their core values?

While volunteer loyalty is based on a shared purpose, initiated from recognition of shared values, it is dependent on trust. Loyalty is dependent upon trust. While it will take the manager time and effort to foster volunteer loyalty, one act of betrayal can destroy it. Because volunteer loyalty is based on what an individual feels toward an organization and its cause, those feelings can be changed quickly under the right circumstances. Behavior by the organization and its representatives which signals to volunteers that the organization does not really share the values volunteers believed it did or which signals to volunteers that the organization cannot be trusted destroys feelings of loyalty.

Feelings of volunteer loyalty exist along a continuum. Some people have no loyalty to a cause, whereas other people are extremely loyal to a cause. On a continuum (see Figure 2) you have two opposite extremes, a negative extreme and a positive extreme. On the negative extreme, you have disloyalty. A person who is disloyal to a cause would actively work against

the cause. For example, on the global warming issue, there are individuals who are contrarians, claiming that global warming does not exist, that global warming is a natural phenomenon that cannot be altered, or that global warming is a good trend that will provide economic opportunities to savvy entrepreneurs.

**Fig. 2** Loyalty Continuum



In the middle of the continuum, you have a neutral position. These are individuals who may not know about a cause, or who may not care about a cause because it does not appear to strike a harmonious chord with any of their core values. On the global warming issue, some people may not think much about it often if at all. Perhaps they believe they would not be personally affected. Perhaps they see themselves as powerless to influence the course of events.

At the positive extreme of the continuum, you find the most loyal supporters of a cause. As we have discussed, these individuals see the cause as personally important. The most loyal supporters identify with the cause. These would be global warming supporters who identify themselves as global warming activists--it is part of who they are.

The volunteer loyalty continuum teaches us several concepts. Loyalty is variable. Some people have extremely negative feelings (disloyalty). Some people may not care about an issue (neutral). Some people may care deeply about an issue (loyal). Feelings of loyalty vary in intensity. The farther from neutral, the more intense the feelings become. As the intensity of feelings (negative or positive) increase, motivations to act on those feelings also increase. Someone who does not care about a cause (neutral) will not take action. People who care deeply about a cause feel they *must* act.

Disloyal individuals work against the cause. Loyal individuals work to further the cause. This leads to the issue of protection. Loyalty to an organization or cause implies that loyal individuals will not behave in a manner that harms the cause. It also implies that loyal individuals will actively look after the interests of the organization. Loyal individuals want to *protect* their cause, their organization. Note that loyal individuals have adopted the cause as their own and they want to protect the cause.

Volunteer loyalty, then, is represented by feelings of allegiance and fidelity to an organization or its cause. The loyal volunteer believes that she and the organization share core values. Feelings of loyalty vary in intensity. The more intense the feelings, the more motivated the volunteer is to act. The loyal volunteer looks after the interests of the cause or organization. She feels the need to defend and protect the organization. Feelings of loyalty can be extinguished if the volunteer receives information that leads her to believe her core values are

not really shared by the organization, possibly through an untrustworthy act of perceived betrayal. I will define volunteer loyalty as an emotional state of bonding, a faith or belief in the importance and goodness of a cause, a perceived duty to support that cause.

### Measurement of Volunteer Loyalty

I have worked with a colleague on a series of studies to develop and refine a measure of loyalty. I presented a paper at a conference in Oslo, Norway, in July, 2009, which describes the psychometric development of the measure. As this paper is limited to 2,500 words, I will not describe the development of the measure. However, I want to make the point that the measure has undergone rigorous psychometric development to establish validity. Table 1 below lists the 30 items in the measure.

**Table 1: Volunteer Loyalty Scale Items**

1	My organization and I share important values.
2	I feel a sense of belonging with my organization.
3	I feel a need to protect my organization.
4	I am willing to defend my organization.
5	There is a bond between me and my organization.
6	Helping my organization provides me with a sense of purpose.
7	I feel a duty to my organization.
8	I will remain with my organization if it experiences bad times.
9	I am committed to my organization.
10	I am faithful to my organization.
11	I am devoted to my organization.
12	My organization takes an interest in me.
13	I feel connected to my organization.
14	I want to serve my organization.
15	My organization really cares about building a relationship with me.
16	I will support my organization in its time of need.
17	I respect my organization.
18	My relationship with my organization is rewarding.
19	I feel good about supporting my organization.
20	I can depend on my organization.
21	I would describe my relationship with my organization as a partnership.
22	I am dedicated to my organization.
23	My organization has my unconditional support.
24	My organization values me.
25	My organization cares about me.
26	My organization trusts me.
27	I trust my organization.
28	My organization is reliable.
29	My organization can depend on me.
30	I really care about my organization.

As others use this measure in their research and continue to refine the scale, briefer versions are likely to emerge. If practitioners are hesitant to use the full 30 item scale because they are concerned about the length of their questionnaire, they may be able to use a reduced version and still have an acceptable measure. Also, practitioners may want to customize the wording for their specific context. For example, Table 2 below was used in a survey of public

radio (WYPR) supporters in Maryland. The researcher felt strongly that the 30 item scale would be too long for his situation.

**Table 2: Supporter Loyalty Measure for WYPR**

1	WYPR and I share important values.
2	I feel a sense of belonging with WYPR.
3	I feel a need to protect WYPR.
4	There is a bond between me and WYPR.
5	I feel a duty to WYPR.
6	I am committed to WYPR.
7	I want to serve WYPR.
8	I will support WYPR in its time of need.
9	I trust WYPR.
10	I really care about WYPR.
11	I am devoted to WYPR.
12	I will remain with WYPR if it experiences bad times.

The scale is intended to be used in conjunction with a Likert answer format. Table 3 below provides the reader with an example.

**Table 3: Example of Likert scale item**

**Directions:** Please indicate which of the following choices best represents your level of agreement with the following statement.

My organization and I share important values.

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
---------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	------------------------

A mean is calculated for the summed items for each respondent. A mean can then be calculated for all respondents. The loyalty measure can be used in statistical analysis to investigate its relationship with other variables that are measured in the questionnaire. Sub-group comparisons can also be analyzed.

Practitioners are advised to measure the loyalty of their volunteers, and other supporters, annually to assess a trend. Is loyalty increasing, decreasing, or remaining stable. This will provide practitioners with a good idea of the overall morale of volunteers. If loyalty needs to be improved, managers can use exploratory methods (such as focus groups) to better understand areas needing improvement.

<sup>i</sup> Walter Wymer, Professor of Marketing, University of Lethbridge. [walter.wymer@uleth.ca](mailto:walter.wymer@uleth.ca)