

WHY? SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because It Tells Us How to Create More Engaged Citizens

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Engaged citizens are not born. They are made. Leaders of voluntary civic associations play a critical role in this process. They offer people opportunities to exercise their voice on issues they care about. Individuals, in turn, develop a heightened sense of personal agency and a broadened set of skills that are vital for participating in civic life.

Although individuals joining together to make their voices heard is a fundamental pillar of democracy, it is often easier said than done. Leaders of civic associations face many challenges. Volunteer fatigue and turnover are recurring problems, and it can be difficult to translate initial interest into a commitment to action.

In early 2019 Jean Ritok was one of these leaders. Jean heads the Raleigh-Durham chapter of Citizens Climate Education (CCE), a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing voter engagement around climate change. CCE is a civic association with individual chapters in almost every congressional district across the country. They engage liberals and conservatives on the issue and seek bipartisan, workable pathways for climate action.

Since the 2016 election the Raleigh-Durham chapter has experienced a very large spike in membership. Hundreds of new people have joined the mailing list, and many have also attended chapter meetings. Jean was seeking evidence-based ways to increase their level of commitment.

That's where research4impact came in.

Connection to Research4impact

In early 2019 Jean responded to a research4impact advertisement. Research4Impact is a nonprofit organization that creates seamless connections between people with diverse forms of expertise, especially those working to understand and solve complex social problems. To achieve this goal, one of our major activities is to connect nonprofit practitioners and social scientists.

"Conversations [between social scientists and community leaders] can surface a wide range of new ideas and lead to more creative, effective decision-making."

Our model entails direct outreach to practitioners. We invite them to share challenges they are facing in their work in which they think research might be helpful. We then offer to match them with a social scientist for short, high-impact conversations. Conversations like these between people with diverse forms of knowledge can surface a wide range of new ideas and lead to more creative, effective decision-making. We also developed a matchmaking method rooted in research on organizational diversity to ensure we initiate new diverse relationships in the most effective way possible.

When Jean wanted to learn about social science research on how to boost volunteer commitment, we found a great match.

What Social Science Says About How to Create More Engaged Citizens

The social scientist and Jean had two conversations. The first focused on the very practical question of how to translate new members' interest into commitment.

Social science research on organizing finds that it is important to invest new volunteers with real responsibility for

organizational activities. The way to do that is to build relationships with them. The political process is long and uncertain, yet when leaders build relationships with new members (and, in turn, members build new relationships with each other), they are far more likely to take responsibility for organizational tasks that may be new and outside their comfort zone. Building relationships leads volunteers to become as much committed to others in the organization as the cause itself.

How should leaders build relationships with new members? Social science suggests several helpful procedures. They should invite new volunteers for a one-on-one conversation to learn more about them – for instance, why do they care about climate change and why have they chosen to get involved? These conversations often surface shared values and moral commitments. For the leader, the key is a large dose of listening and then ultimately making an ask that fits with the volunteer's skills and goals and, if possible, brings new volunteers into contact with each other.

Yet for Jean simply making sure that she was personally familiar with these new procedures was not enough. She wanted to invest in her chapter's ability to use this new knowledge. Indeed, social science research tells us that individual learning is distinct from organizational learning. The latter refers to whether new knowledge becomes institutionalized in the organization's procedures.

One way to institutionalize new knowledge is to make sure that everyone is aware of it. Writing it down and making the document widely available are critical. Another is to create formal communication channels so that people share relevant knowledge, coordinate action, and help solve problems together. One way to do that is to create a committee that meets regularly and has responsibility for implementing these new procedures.

Seeing Impact!

Jean applied all of these methods immediately. She formalized the procedures for one-on-one conversations into a "Volunteer Engagement Practices" document that she shared with everyone in the chapter. Then, to institutionalize these procedures, she ensured that a committee was responsible for new member engagement. By tying these procedures to a formal committee with a regular meeting time, she made sure there were regular opportunities to communicate on this topic (Who have you spoken with? How did it go?), share experiences, share challenges, and offer feedback.

The upshot is that members of the CCE chapter in Raleigh-Durham are more active and engaged than ever. New members are moving quickly into areas of action that are a fit for them, newly engaged volunteers are taking on significant responsibilities within the chapter (such as team leadership), and new team leaders are designing better ways of getting the work done well and quickly.

The overall chapter is growing beyond expectation since instituting the Volunteer Engagement Practices. Just in the past three months (July – Sept 2019) they've seen a 129% increase in activity relative to the three months prior, and a 161% increase relative to the same time last year.

A member of the volunteer engagement committee relayed some recent feedback: "a new person [at last Saturday's monthly meeting] specifically said she was impressed with how we reached out to her and communicated and welcomed. Different from other non-profits and volunteer organizations she had experienced before."

So, why social science? Because it tells us how to create more active and engaged citizens!



ADAM SETH LEVINE is an Associate Professor of Government at Cornell University. Many questions pique his interest and excitement. The top two are: "How do civic organizations motivate ordinary citizens to become engaged in civic life?" and "When is social science useful to nonprofits seeking social change?" He is also the president and co-founder of research4impact, a nonprofit that accelerates social impact by building relationships between researchers and practitioners. He applies the findings from his work on the usefulness of social science directly to research4impact along with publishing them in peer-reviewed journals.