The Accidental Leader: A Leadership Study Exploring Volunteer Activity during Covid-19

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Abstract

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Background/Rationale

The Covid-19 pandemic has tested every area of daily life for the world’s population. This narrative study will be of value and interest to an emerging body of empirical evidence that will explore the leadership of spontaneous volunteer activity during a global pandemic. The pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to communities in the UK, and as a result, vast numbers of spontaneous volunteers stepped forward to help. Covid-19 remains prevalent demonstrating the importance of this research in contributing to the developing big picture, and to inform the leadership community of lessons learned.

Focus of the Paper

Leaders can manage, and managers can lead but this paper takes the view that differences exist and seeks to explore the concept of accidental leadership, offering a definition that reflects the role within the context the pandemic provides, and the impact on those they lead. This research explores how a group of spontaneous volunteers came together to help their community, and the leadership that developed during the group’s existence.

Methods

This exploratory case study collects interview data from members of a spontaneous group that emerged to the respond to the challenges of Covid-19. The significance, and uniquely critical nature, of the environmental context, demands an approach that promotes the understanding of the reality of situation (Gilgun, 1994). This exploratory, case study seeks to retell the stories of the group through a narrative approach, valuing the lived experiences and shared stories of individuals and offering a way of understanding these experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The approach demonstrates the value placed on the knowledge shared by the participants and the contribution it makes to our understanding of these experience.

Findings

The research has found that spontaneous volunteering, in emerging groups, can be inspired, and positively influenced, by a transformative, authentic albeit accidental leader. The results indicate that creating a ‘community culture’, by a leader demonstrating authenticity, and sharing values with those in the group, is proven an effective approach to leadership in the context of this research. These findings build on the research offered by Amit (2002, p.18), who found that positive interactions exist in formed communities because people associate, and care about, others with whom they share experiences and history.

An unexpected, and valuable, insight of this research, was the wellbeing effects experienced by the volunteers, who reported positive emotions and a sense of belonging and purpose during their time with the group.

Key Words

Leadership, volunteer, Accidental Leader, authentic, pandemic

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