

THE WORK SCIENCE CENTER



The Work Science Center Podcast

Episode 11

Applying Industrial-Organizational Psychology to Non-Profits and Volunteers

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Keaton Fletcher: Welcome to the Work Science Center Podcast, brought to you by the Work Science Center of the Georgia Institute of Technology. I am your host for this episode, Keaton Fletcher. You can find more about our Center at our website www.WorkScienceCenter.GATech.edu. In today's podcast, I am joined by Dr. Steven Rogelberg Chancellor's Professor and Professor of Management in the Belk College of Business at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. We discuss applying the principles of I-O psychology to non-profit organizations to better employee and volunteer lives. We also discuss his new book on meetings and other ways that I-O psychologists can share our science with the people who will benefit most from it.

Thank you so much for talking with me today. Just to get started, how about you tell us a little bit about your background and how you started research, especially with volunteer work?

Steven Rogelberg: Sure. Well, this is Steven Rogelberg and I'm Chancellor's Professor of Psychology, Management, and Organizational Science at UNC Charlotte. So, my research tends to be extremely eclectic, and I very much like doing very applied type of research. And that is pretty much what brought me to the volunteer space. Namely, I had done research looking at the impact of extreme work responsibilities, such as animal euthanasia in shelters, and how that affects the stress, and health, and wellbeing of employees. And, clearly it does. But, what also emerged from that research is that healthy organizational practices were also critical. One of those pieces that very much tied into an employee's experience of work, was their interaction and connection with volunteers. And, so that is really what really kind of motivated me and got me excited to start looking at how we can make volunteer programs the best they can be. Not only would that be good for volunteers, that would be good for employees, and good for the organization as a whole.

KF: Basics-wise, what do we know about volunteer work? So, why do we volunteer? Who volunteers? Things along those lines.

SR: There is certainly a very robust literature on volunteerism, and I have been less involved in the research recently and more involved in the application of research, and I know we'll be talking about the Volunteer Program Assessment. I think that there is a host of reasons that people volunteer, from wanting to obviously give back, to trying to create a new community for them to be part of, then obviously fulfilling needs that they have, the fact that people in their environment, in their community volunteer, so kind of the norms around it. So there are lots of things that can drive someone to volunteer. And we know that meaningful volunteer experiences are a key predictor of life satisfaction. We also know that volunteer retention is tied to many of the same types of things that we know about employee retention. When volunteers feel appreciated, when volunteers experience good communication, when volunteers are given voice, volunteers have meaningful work assignments. These are all things that tend to promote engagement and retention.

KF: So, along those lines, what sorts of best practices are designed more for volunteers? How does that look different than it would be for paid employees to keep retention up?



SR: That's the beauty of it. There is really not that much of a difference. The one big psychological factor is the obvious one which is that volunteers can leave at any point, typically, without financial repercussions. So, really, volunteers are more empowered to act on their attitudes around a volunteer assignment. So, while employees might stay longer for necessity purposes, volunteers don't necessarily have that same type of connection. So, in general, I would say that volunteer attitudes towards the program, towards the work, are even more predictive of retention than you see with employees.

KF: That makes a lot of sense. So, looking more at the applied work that you've done. First, I would love to hear more about the Shelter Employee Engagement and Development System that you established in 2005. So, could you just tell us a little bit more about that.

SR: Sure. So, I am a really big believer in trying to put our science into practice. And, so that particular system was designed for animal shelters in response to animal euthanasia issues. So, the research suggested that a really positive employee experience helps mitigate the negative effects of doing euthanasia. We can't necessarily eliminate the problem of unwanted animals, but what we can do is create and help organizations create healthy practices so that they can promote just a terrific environment for employees for when they have to do such difficult tasks. So the system, which we call SEEDS, is designed to help animal shelters gain insights into what is going well and not so well from an employee perspective with the hope that these insights will better enable them to make positive changes to the work environments. So we provide them with feedback. We provide them with this great report that has norms for the industry because we've been doing this for over 20 years now. And then we also provide them with all kinds of potential actions to do better. And then, many of these shelters are reassessed every year. So, it's kind of bringing contemporary talent management practices around employee engagement into a sector that typically doesn't get to take advantage of them.

KF: Are you limited to shelters in the Charlotte area?

SR: No, for the SEEDS program, we work with shelters all around the country as well as Canada. So, it has been a really well embraced by the animal welfare community, for obvious reasons. It has been really very positively impactful. And, it's helped kind of elevate the whole employee experience in shelters.

KF: That's great. So, shifting perspectives rather than focusing on the employee, focusing more on the volunteers, can you tell us more about the other program you helped create, the Volunteer Program Assessment.

SR: Yeah, so this is another attempt to impact the greater system. This isn't designed just for animal welfare organizations; this is designed for all non-profits that have a volunteer program. We titled this program, Helping Those Who Help Others. Our vision is that nonprofits' ability to positively enact their mission, depends, in good part, to how effective their volunteer program is. So what we wanted to do was take what we know about volunteer retention and engagement, partner it with the types of interventions that you typically find in Industrial-Organizational Psychology, and create this outreach program where basically volunteers complete an assessment, then all of the volunteer data is aggregated together, a report is created, there is a



consult, feedback, norms, and basically the volunteer manager is able to get this terrific insight into what is working well about the volunteer program and what is working not so well. The incredible thing is that we, as a collective, because this program has actually spread to seven different universities, have helped well over 1,000 nonprofits. And it is all free. And it's just a super exciting application of I-O psychology to volunteers.

KF: I was fortunate enough to be able to volunteer for this while I was in graduate school and I personally was impacted and then also being able to see the impact that you have on volunteer programs. It's a really cool program.

With these two more applied-oriented, particularly with volunteer or non-profits, with animal shelters, has that informed your perspective of I-O as a field?

SR: I think how it has informed my perspective of I-O as a field is just, just how much good that we can do. And, I think sometimes when you are part of a field, you can focus on what's missing and maybe the negatives and forget, I think, all the good that we can do by making our science available to organizations. And, so I have found this work to be very energizing because of that connection. In terms of how this affects my research, it really doesn't because of the fact that when it comes to this particular space I'm more interested in application. Most of my research, these days, is really in the meetings space and the teams space.

KF: So excited to ask you about that. You just published book. What inspired you to start researching meetings and teams?

SR: I like to do research on things that people find incredibly frustrating, and meetings definitely fit that bill.

KF: Definitely

SR: And I want to do this research in hopes that I might be able to figure out some potential mechanisms to not only better understand that experience but also ways to make it better. Meetings are just such an ideal candidate in that with 55 million meetings a day in the U.S. alone and the fact that meetings tend to be the most complained about work activity there is clearly a tremendous opportunity here. That really drove me to be studying these things.

Throughout this process I was doing a host of talks on the topic. And then given all the science I was doing, given the talks, then I became motivated to write a book about it: *The Surprising Science Of Meetings*. And the book released on January 2, and then January 3, Washington Post named it the number one leadership book to watch for in 2019. Which blew my mind. I had no idea that this was coming. I had no idea that a book about meetings could engender this type of excitement. And, since then the book has just been gaining lots of love in the market and by the media. It's been a really fun ride to be able to talk about my science and the science of others, and I think it's really nice story for our field, in that I think it's just a good example of how the market place, I think, really is interested in what we are doing. And, it just comes down to our willingness to put it out there and obviously how we package it.



KF: Absolutely. And so that's actually something I wanted to pick your brain about. We are a very applied science, but I feel like a lot of us struggle with communicating our science, and our results, and our knowledge, to people who aren't also I-O psychologists. So, from your massive amount of both applied experience, and from this book tour, and being able to do all these talks, do you have some best practices or tips for I-O psychologists who struggle communicating their science?

SR: Sure. I think first, and foremost, look for opportunities to give talks. The more you are talking to people who are not like you, the better your abilities get, your skills for translation get. And then, two, read HBR, read Harvard Business Review. HBR is obviously one of the most read business periodicals, and they have a lot of folks talking about science in it. There is a lot of academics. Not as many I-O psychologists, but a lot of management scholars. I think there is a lot of really good examples. So, I published my first HBR article this year and it was an incredible growth experience. I really had to refine my skills and figure out how to engage in this different kind of writing. But since then I have another one that I've published. And, it's really fun to write things where you stay true to the science and then they get read. The reach of a periodical like that is pretty remarkable. So, I think that those two paths are great ways of building your skills, and then just going for it. Submit something to HBR. Submit something to MIT Sloan Management Review, and go through the process. Editors really will provide a lot of feedback that will allow you to just get better and better at it.

KF: Great advice. Well, I want to be mindful of our time. So, as we wind down and wrap up, is there anything that we missed? Anything that you feel the field needs to hear either about volunteer work, or the applied side, or meetings?

SR: No. I mean really, your questions were great. I think the overall message is that I think our field of organizational psychology really is in a special space and a space that I think we can really feel proud of. And, I think there are so many other fields that don't try to balance the science and practice like we do. And, I encourage us to keep embracing that identity, and keep embracing that there is the tension between these two areas, means that we are doing something right, not something wrong. That we are trying to take on the vexing challenge of bringing science and practice together and just to feel good about being in this profession. And, I commend you for doing this type of a podcast because that is another effort to help[connect science and practice and general audiences together.

KF: Thanks. And, before we go, where can people find you? What sort of socials do you want share? And also, VPA and SEEDS?

SR: Yeah, so great way to see what I am doing, in particular around the book is to go to stevenrogelberg.com, easy enough. So, stevenrogelberg.com. And then, I also have my university website, so just Google me, really easy to find. VPA, just put in vpa.uncc.edu and it will pop up for you.

KF: Easy enough. Well, thank you so much, Steven, for your time, and have a great rest of your day.



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