Chasing Life

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Abstract

There are moments we all experience in work that we do not get paid for. They represent the quintessence of life that we cherish and can only experience in handfuls. These experiences that we all look back on are chance encounters that have shaped our lives and our growth in a way that we acknowledge in the present day. Each one of us have volunteered in small ways at the very least. In this text I describe instances that have shaped my growth and study of non-monetary value of work through Tuckman's stages of group development and through other work life themes of organization, particularly that of Erving Goffman in his book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. My volunteering in terms of non-monetary rewards in comparison to monetary rewards and non-monetary rewards in my jobs. Seeking non-monetary rewards can ultimately promote self-growth and a better work experience.
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It was not until I graduated high school that I realized what I had done. By my sophomore year, I managed to slowly creep out of my shell and adopt a more open, outgoing lifestyle. I learned that surrounding myself with others and being more outgoing was the way to go. This lesson was one that I would learn in waves throughout the trials and tribulations of my life after high school. I chose to follow the example of others in the way they have done meaningful things, which to my experience always came down to volunteering. Since that revelation, I began my volunteering days willingly and eagerly, though I wasn’t aware of what I was really doing. I approached everything without much afterthought and progressed through volunteering events in quick succession. Before I learned what volunteering could really provide me with, the only goal I had in mind was to spend time with friends and to “make my resume better,” a phrase uttered all too frequently among my peers. When I was involved in the various events, I didn’t stop to reflect on what was going on around me, or more drastically important, what was occurring within me. I just thought being there was good enough, and that that was the extent of one’s experience in that type of work.

On top of volunteering, I tried out being a delegate in the Filipino American Club in my high school. I was egged on by my friends to join them in camp. I heard many good things about the camp through my friends’ experiences and was willing to see what they were so ecstatic about. When the camp was finished, I finally got a taste of what it was to volunteer. Though I didn’t have an active role in the camp, I began to see how individuals only a couple years older than you could do so much, how it was as a high school student to look up to somebody in college was so inspiring to me. That notion of leadership stuck to me and it made me want to become a leader myself. It was not till I joined Sariling Gawa after graduating high school that I would gain a new understanding of what volunteering was, or rather, the true potential it had. SG, I learned, was an organization where college students are trained with leadership skills and work with high schoolers from around the island to help them build their own leadership skills and achieve a sense of identity. I was hesitant at first because the idea was so frightening, who did I think I was to teach and lead high schoolers when I have just gotten out of high school? It was too serious of a responsibility for somebody at that
age and most of all, my understanding of volunteering was still naive. My time as a high school delegate in the camp was only fun and games with a sense that my leaders just so happened to ask moving, open-ended questions and were able to facilitate a group of students just by their luck without considering the amount of training that they underwent. I realized that new role in my life at that point was one that I would simply have to jump into, so I leapt.

I fell into a pit surrounded by my peers. Surrounding me were my “coworkers” who were to struggle with me, some being more well-equipped than others; and other intimidating individuals, my “bosses,” or more accurately my advisors who stood above us on the surface to throw us the tools necessary to climb out of the pit and emerge as effective leaders. It was in that pit where I would face for the first time true humility, scrutiny, and growth as a leader. They made sure that the pit was deep and hard to get out of. They knew that the best way for us to learn was to just throw us in this space so that we could learn and experience for ourselves the challenge in emerging as a leader. It was very dark in that pit. My first year of training would be the scariest because I had no vision and no tools. I was a bare, scared and vulnerable specimen to be put through the trials and the moldings of a leader. I learned the basics of group development and the essence of what it was to be a leader and facilitator.

The first tool I was thrown was Tuckman’s stages of group development. It was a mode of group development that Bruce Tuckman developed to assert that all groups will inevitably go through those stages in order to grow, acknowledge problems, face challenges, plan solutions, and to deliver results. The stages were in this order: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. These stages of group development have impacted the way I have worked in group settings even to this day. To write further on my experiences, I will use these stages to illustrate my experience of my first few months of training, which was about three months of meeting once a week for eight hours to learn the skills necessary to prepare us and to deem us worthy of working with high schoolers. These stages became known as “the process”. We were told that we will constantly be going through those stages not only in camp, but in life. For a team to reach a goal and to learn how to work together, there will always be sacrifices made,
miscommunications, and failures along the way. If a team acknowledges that process and progresses to the goal then they have trusted the process.

Forming is the primary stage in team building; the group members introduce themselves and an idea of a team is set in motion. Tuckman says that in this stage, people are driven to be accepted by others and thus avoid conflict. This is the most unorganized time in group development because group members are preoccupied with gathering information and impressions-the scope of the task, how to approach it, assigning tasks, when the meetings take place. It is not until all of those primary tasks are acknowledged that the group can actually learn the behaviors of fellow team members, learn how they respond to certain commands and pressures, and begin to build trust within the group. I learned that experiencing this stage, or rather every stage of group development, was different than experiencing it without being aware of the set procedures, modes, and expectations Tuckman developed. Becoming aware of these stages of group development has allowed me to become more comfortable in my future groups because I was aware of what to expect. There will always be challenges, problems, and hiccups when working within a group but one has to trust the process, so to speak, because as long as the group communicates, the cyclical nature of the group development will continue on.

The storming stage was something I experienced in that week that I hadn’t experienced before. The storming stage is known as the stage where the initial trust has been developed, which means group members are comfortable in agreeing and disagreeing with one another. Learning about the tolerance and patience of each member is something that Tuckman says most groups will need if they wish to advance to the next stage. This stage was the hardest for me in my training because it asked the most of everyone. It called for us to be comfortable, to resolve our differences while maintaining the motivation to participate.

"What if we go through with Dane’s plan to get the kids to sit in two rows across from one another?" John questioned.

"That plan seems like it would limit their interaction. A circle would be better." Amy answered.
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They nodded their heads and then moved on.

We had to remove our own barriers in order to encourage fellow team members to do the same, which was a lesson in humility that is constant when working with a group. Until that point in my life, I haven’t been involved with a group that had a similar motive and goal for that projected amount of time. We were all hoping to learn and better ourselves through leadership, though we had different aspects of ourselves we wished to build upon. We were in it for the long haul, for we were to accomplish something together in these three months of leadership boot camp that included constant evaluation, humility, trial, and error.

In the second week, my group experienced the norming stage. This is the stage in which the group manages to narrow the group’s aspirations to one goal. For this to happen, the other members of my group were required to give up their own ideas and agree with others in order to make the team function. The norming stage was especially hard for me at times because I would have an idea that would contribute to the group greatly, which lead to a feeling of accomplishment and recognition within the group, but other ideas would be later overshadowed by ideas presented by other members. In dropping my own ideas for the whole of the group, my mindset at this point was altered because I offered something that was looked past, and it took a lot for me to put my idea out there. Tuckman addresses this conflict because now that there is a realized goal, members can be hesitant to alter that goal and provide their own ideas if they find them to be controversial. There was an instance where Grace, our group member would outright voice her disagreement in the group. “I really don’t think that’s a good idea, we should do it this way” she snarled. “But it was already agreed upon that we need to have the students form their own materials first” Shayna explained. The argument would go on for a little while, which only lead to more confusion and added to the hesitancy and tension of the group. The group refused to speak to Grace after her outburst of anger that held us back as a group from accomplishing our goal. I brought up the issue to one of our advisors and they explained that there was nothing I could have done in that instance. Grace was a rare case and I would have liked to have
learned how to deal with those situations better but she stopped going to meetings after that. There were moments in the first week where I contributed something greatly to a group which was a “home run” as my advisors would say. I learned that I shouldn’t always go for the home runs because I ended up being fixated on only making large contributions when small contributions are just fine, and sometimes more effective in working within a group.

The next stage was performing, the stage that Tuckman regards as a higher stage because it can be done only by teams who have found their own way to accomplish a task effectively and without unnecessary conflict or supervision. Each group member is comfortable with the other and capable of making decisions and even posing varying ideas because there has been an understanding that there will always be a differing opinion, but now they have come up with a way to channel them. Each person is also motivated and knowledgeable of the circumstances and dynamics of the group; though, at this stage, when a goal is altered or a change in circumstance occurs, Tuckman says that a group can revert back to the previous stages of its development. For example, a shift in leadership changes the dynamics of the group and thus the group is temporarily reverted to the storming stage, which is completely normal for many groups to undergo. In my first few weeks of training, I had not experienced this type of a high-performing established group. I found that it is a trial and error process and that a group needs to work together more deeply and intimately in order to reach this level.

Finally, the adjourning stage is the last stage in Tuckman’s group development. This is the last stage where members go their separate ways, hopefully feeling good about what was accomplished. An article from Businessballs.com discusses the adjourning stage further:

From an organizational perspective, recognition of and sensitivity to people’s vulnerabilities in Tuckman’s fifth stage is helpful, particularly if members of the group have been closely bonded and feel a sense of insecurity or threat from this change. Feelings of insecurity would be natural for people with high 'steadiness' attributes (as regards the ‘four temperaments' or DISC model) and with strong routine and empathy style (as regards the Benziger thinking styles model, right and left basal brain dominance).
After this stage, I viewed my fellow members in a way that was more progressive than before. After effectively working with a group and separating, I became aware of each member's strengths and weaknesses. As I became aware of those attributes, that knowledge developed into my responsibility to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses so that the overall integrity of the organization was always improving. My group members shared the same mentality. They looked out for me and told me what I was doing well or what I needed to improve. This created a culture of constructive feedback. Understanding that the cyclical process of group development is never-ending in our lives provided me with a strong foundation on group dynamics. The training period went on like this for months. It was constant practice and experiencing the stages of development but I never really fully got into the performing stage as deeply as I thought I would. It was constant switching between the storming and norming stages and just touching on the performing stages, though we were placed in groups and expected to perform so many times that I had developed my own process for understanding how I worked within a group because I had learned about my own flaws.

The training period ended and it was time to put our skills to use. We were supplied with the necessary skills to be effective leaders for the high schoolers as well as leaders for one another. With this open-minded view of group development I was more confident than ever to put these processes and skills to use. I had been practicing throughout the previous months, but putting them to use in a practical setting and to be in charge of a group of 12 high schoolers looking me in the eyes and expecting me to lead them was something overwhelmingly different. At this point, I had stepped out of my comfort zone so many times that the only way to go was forward. The training period was a succession of constant shedding of fear, insecurities, and even identity that would require me to constantly rebuild myself stronger and more willing to open myself up to others. Among all of these trials we were constantly told by the returning leaders and advisors that all of our hard work would be worth it because we would experience the “SG magic.” This “magic” is a non-monetary reward that you get while being involved in the organization and a reward that is a testament to why people keep coming back.
Volunteering evolved into what I was willing to give to others and what I allowed myself to be given. My following experience “on the field” to prove my skills in a practical setting would mark the evolution of my ideals and outlook on life.

There were 10 groups of leaders and around 100 kids my first year as a leader. All the newbies, or freshly-made hot and ready leaders, were to be placed with the experienced leaders so that there could be some balance within the team. I was placed in a group of three, which was very comforting as I knew that I would have two partners to look upon when I was stuck or did not know how to handle a situation with my group. Other newcomers had only one other supposedly very experienced partner, which was interesting. I was placed with an experienced leader, Angelica, and another newcomer, Dustin. A lot of the stress of being a leader was nullified knowing that I had two other people to fall back on. One thing that brought me back to a state of unease was how quickly I learned that Dustin and Angelica were very close friends. The group dynamic was always shifting with them or in favor of them. It seems as if they developed through most of Tuckman’s stages of group development prior to meeting with me as a group, so I was constantly trying to fit into their tightly-knit friendship. At times, they were goofing around and caused the group to have a sense that it was all fun and games so in return we did not get to the serious questions that needed to be asked in relation to the activities, so, our group had difficulty in reaching the performing stages. It was an extremely tough situation for me because I was so eager to use what I had learned in training that I did not know what to do. After bringing my concerns to my advisors, they told me not to worry about it too much, because if the kids were having fun and working as a group then I should focus on keeping that alive instead of focusing on the serious material, though I did need to bring it up eventually. I was told to trust the process of the group development and the process of how things work out eventually, so I did. I tried my best to learn from this lesson and it was my turn to lead the first few activities of my new group, many things went through my head.

I reflected on the intense training period that gave me a better understanding of what this organization was from the perspective of the performer which added onto my knowledge of the organization as the audience. These terms, from Erving Goffman’s
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book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* are what consist of the part of a performance “the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (Goffman 13). As a performer, I knew the ins and outs of everything the leaders did, particularly what happened in the “front” of the stage as well as what happened at the “back” of the stage:

> It was suggested earlier that when one’s activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed. It is clear that accentuated facts make their appearance in what we have called a front region; it should be just as clear that there may be another region—a back region or backstage—where the suppressed facts make an appearance.

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. There are, of course, many characteristic functions of such places. It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. (Goffman 69).

Before, as an observer or part of the audience, I was constantly baffled by the amount of leadership and experience the leaders had in my time being a delegate in the camp among other high schoolers. I was in awe as I witnessed the amount of teamwork, organization, and comfort that they had among a group of students. I continued to realize that those seemingly well-organized and their fluid-like execution of questions and follow up questions to ask us after each activity had in fact been some sort of performance. Our first activity was called “The Contract” and involved the kids meeting up for the first time and introducing themselves to one another. They would need to come up with a contract with a set of rules to adhere to as a group that lasted the entire camp. They included rules like “no put downs” or “have fun” and would have to sign their names when all of the rules are agreed upon. As a leader with preparation, I already had the questions I needed to ask in mind in the beginning of the activity: “Okay kids, what is a contract?” I asked.

and at the end of the activity:
“Why is a contract important?”
“Why is it important to have contracts?”

I found that what Goffman explained as occurring in the back area of a performance was indeed true. There were many illusions, impressions, and painstaking amounts of planning that occurred in the backstage, which would be anywhere the kids were not looking or listening, and the performing area would be whenever the kids were among us.

In the backstage of our performance as leaders there seemed to be more that went on outside of the kids view rather than within their view. There were so many things that occurred in the backstage for us, so much that I almost thought of it as cheating in a sense. Every time we would part from our group of kids, whether it was a five-minute break or at the end of the day, we would always meet amongst ourselves or amongst our advisors to debrief and review what was to come the following days. It seemed all too easy until we had an activity called “Support System,” where the group would get four pieces of yarn with each yarn representing a person that they look up to. We went around the circle and the kids explained who their support system was and what they did for them. It was not until a girl named Amanda shared with us that her mother that recently passed was her role model. That was the first time that I lost all grips of my training and something that I was not trained to handle. I looked at my partners with hesitation and I made it clear by merely nodding that I didn’t know what to say, so Angelica said

“That sounds like a really difficult time.”
“It was.” Amanda said looking down.

Jan was another kid that struck me who explained how he was working at McDonalds while going to school in order to send money back home to his family in the Philippines. These harrowing experiences these kids were explaining to us so freely, trustingly, and openly was part of the magic that I’ve heard so much about. The second part of that magic was seeing them grow, become more open with one another, and to smile regardless of the pain that they had exposed to us.
As a first time leader, I made so many mistakes that I would beat myself up for. I felt as if I didn’t speak up enough, did not involve myself enough, and did not get the kids to be as involved as they should have been. I later accepted these flaws of mine as the weeks passed, similar to that situation in which I had trouble with my partners; I told myself to trust the process. With all of the disappointments I had left over, I had a sense of victory as I did experience that “magic” that my advisors said I would. The kids in my group left a lasting impression on me and even one another. They added me on Facebook and even made their own group on the website to communicate how much they missed camp. They said that they were so excited to return to camp and to see one another. The inspiration I got from them was enough to last me the rest of the year until it was time for camp again.

A couple years went on and by my third year of becoming a leader, I found training to go more smoothly as Tuckman’s stages of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning were already built into my head. I found myself being able to meet with groups more smoothly, analyze group members’ strengths and weaknesses, and how to move past obstacles more effectively. By the time I was to participate in my third year as a leader, I was more of an “experienced leader” in the eyes of my advisor and was paired with only one other partner that was a newcomer.

It was my first time being a leader with only one other partner. I was lucky though, as my partner was Amanda, who was in my group as a high school delegate the first time I was a leader. It was definitely nostalgic, special, and extremely inspiring to see her growth as a leader and I would be the one to see her in action leading a group that she was once a student in. With Amanda, I was already comfortable with her due to our past experiences; thus, our group dynamic went smoothly. We were even able to reach the performing stage that I have never fully experienced before within a group. We were so in sync as partners that we did not have trouble posing varying ideas, we were knowledgeable of our group, had the same motivation for our group, and we knew how to handle a situation effectively. We would give one another visual cues and suggest the most effective ways to go about handling a situation.
My time with Amanda would be my last time being a leader. I’m not sure if I will return to the organization in the future as a leader. I did, however, return this year as somebody in the support staff where I was involved only in the backstage of the performance of the leaders. I took this different role that did not allow me to be a direct part of the students’ camp experience as I had hoped to be in, though I had to step down because I could not attend the meetings early in the year due to issues with work and school. In the primarily backstage role I had, I moved from group to group as a floater and analyzed each group’s actions. I watched the newcomers and how they handled their roles and inserted myself into their group in order to give advice or help with any concerns. My good friend since high school, Dane, was one of the newcomers this year and he frequently came up to me:

“Hey Ben, this kid in my group is just not participating, it’s the second day of camp and he is the same as the first day.” Dane explained.

“Don’t worry, try to see what his strengths are and use his strengths in the activities so that he can feel more involved, or give him roles in activities that would make him more comfortable within the group.” I said.

“Ok thanks. I tried the first option so I’ll try the second option this time. What if that one doesn’t work?” Dane replied.

“Then just trust the process, maybe he will open up more or maybe he won’t. If all fails just try to pull him aside and kindly ask him if there is anything wrong and why he isn’t participating.”

Instances like those were the extent of the “magic” I experienced this year. Watching firsthand the growth of each leader and their respective group and seeing them break out of their comfort zones, I craved the same experience so much that I found myself asking about every detail of their experience during their breaks just to get a sense of what I was missing.

My experiences as a leader were priceless and were a hard-pressed journey that I will never forget. This “magic” that I experienced in my times volunteering consisted of moments that took me by surprise and moments that I found myself speechless. To this day I still hold on to those moments dearly and they are a good reminder for me to
become a better person and to realize that my problems are not really problems in the big scheme of things. The non-monetary benefits I experienced in volunteering outweigh all of the benefits of my current job as a nursing assistant. Currently, I find myself “chasing” experiences that will give me the same type of fulfillment. My experiences as a leader in the past few years were so profound that I used to believe that I needed to become a leader every year in the same camp in order to be supplied with the inspiration that would fuel the rest of my year. Not being a leader this year has been so much different. This year I have been living my entire life in the backstage, getting these non-monetary rewards out of the jobs I perform. I have my skills that have accumulated over time to apply to everything I do. There is no proof that being involved in a volunteer organization will promote self-growth and supply a version of that “magic” that I have experienced, but once you experience that magic yourself, you will acknowledge its existence. You will find yourself chasing that existence and you will remember it for the rest of your life.

Works Cited