

Partnership behaviors, motivations, constraints, and training needs among NPS employees

AS WE PREPARE FOR THE NPS CENTENNIAL IN 2016, there has been renewed interest in developing innovative partnerships to usher in the next century of park preservation (Bomar 2007). Although some may view this partnership interest as new, the roots of forging “strategic alliances,” as our first director, Stephen Mather, called them, go deep into NPS history.

More recently, Karen Wade, former director of the NPS Intermountain Region, remarked at a partnership workshop, “The parks that are doing the best are those that have figured out how to collaborate and share. . . . It is my belief that building relationships creates opportunities.” Former NPS director Mary Bomar, in her 2006 nomination hearing, stated that “training for NPS personnel . . . will continue to build a culture of partnership in all fields and at all levels” (Bomar 2007). Former Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne further affirmed the commitment of the National Park Service to “sound partnership practices that are essential to the success of the centennial initiative and are accountable, efficient, and transparent” (Kempthorne 2007).

Implementing a monitoring and evaluation system to track training effectiveness and developing “an agile workforce that is capable of responding to changing organizational and personnel needs” require systematic research into issues such as employee retirement and succession (National Park Service 2003). Monitoring for potential “competency shortfalls” is logically a part of this research agenda. Therefore, the Service initiated a systematic research effort to monitor and evaluate the preparation of NPS personnel to address prescribed partnership competencies and the need for employee training and development programs. This study attempts to determine the impact of “partnership competency shortfalls” on the workforce and the ability of the Service to manage partnerships into the future. This article highlights the critical findings to enable managers to continue improving partnership training and enhance collaborative efforts.

Methods

Survey instrument

Based on a thorough review of the partnership literature and discussions with NPS managers, we developed a Web-based survey instrument. We took care to identify those variables found to influence partnership behavior in terms of both motivations and perceived constraints. Moreover, NPS staff developed an exhaustive list of employee competencies pertaining to partnerships, which our team of researchers, comprising NPS managers

and university researchers, reviewed and then incorporated into the instrument.

The survey consisted of four sections, totaling 118 items. The first section contained two identical batteries of 37 competencies depicting knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) vis-à-vis entering

into partnerships with external organizations. In the first battery, respondents were asked to rate the importance of each KSA in the conduct of their job using a seven-point rating scale ranging from (1) not important to (7) extremely important. The second battery of questions asked respondents to rate their level of preparedness to perform the same KSAs on a scale ranging from (1) unprepared to (7) fully competent. The third section included four questions about partnership experience with outside organizations, and asked respondents how many partnerships they had been involved with in the five preceding years. The fourth section asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with 21 statements regarding specific motivations and constraints to partnerships found in the literature (Gray 1989; Huxham 2003; Selin and Chavez 1995); the scale ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. The final section was composed of 21 questions that solicited information on agency characteristics and respondents' demographic information. The survey asked for position title, series, grade, and position description as well as number of full-time employees supervised and years of agency and federal service. Other agency-related questions concerned division, region, park classification, and number of permanent employees working at the site, along with more personal questions about gender, age, race and national origin, and education.

Data collection and response rates

The survey instrument was administered to all NPS employees ($n = 18,224$) via the Internet in fall 2006. We generated an e-mail list based on information in the Federal Payroll and Personnel System (FPPS). Employees received an invitation e-mail and a link to the questionnaire. They subsequently received two additional e-mails requesting completion of the survey. The invitation addressed concerns over confidentiality and Internet security and assured participants that all data would be reported only in aggregate, not individually. The survey was viewed by 7,041 employees, and a total of 5,398 usable surveys were downloaded. Out of the total population of 18,224 employees, 39% viewed the Internet survey while 29% completed it.

Data analyses

We analyzed the data by identifying the mean, frequency distribution, and standard deviation of the perceived levels of preparation and the perceived levels of importance for each of the 37 specific competencies. We then performed a gap analysis to identify "training gap scores" between preparation and importance for the agency as a whole (table 1). We identified gap scores for each individual by calculating the difference between preparation (P) and importance (I) scores for each competency. A negative gap score (P-I) indicated an area where employees felt unprepared relative to the importance of the competency. A positive gap score indicated the reverse; in this case, a respondent's perception of

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preparation exceeded the importance he or she assigned to a particular competency. These gap interpretations suggest areas within the NPS partnership competencies that have implications for future education and training of the NPS workforce.

Results and discussion

Survey respondent characteristics

Participants were divided almost equally between male (49%) and female (51%). The majority were white (83%) and had a college degree (76%). They ranged in age from 18 to 81 (average 46 years). Average number of years of NPS employment was 14, and federal employment 16 years. Respondents represented all NPS divisions, including interpretation (19.9%), administration (17.3%), facility management (15.4%), resource management (13.0%), and visitor and resource protection (12.8%). They also represented all NPS regions, centers, and the Washington office. Almost half of the respondents (49%) held a full performance-level position, while 18% held management positions, 16% supervisor positions, and 16% entry-level or developmental-level positions.

Partnership training gaps

The largest gap respondents reported was the "ability to collaborate with philanthropic and grant-making entities to leverage funds toward achieving NPS goals" (-1.32) (see table 1). Other reported gaps were understanding partnership construction requirements (-1.29); ability to establish organizational structures that nurture and manage partnerships and ensure accountability between partners and the National Park Service (-1.23); ability to effectively plan for the commitments needed to build a successful partnership (-1.15); knowledge of techniques used to resolve conflicts, grievances, and confrontations (-1.03); and ability to work effectively with the Department of the Interior's Office of the Solicitor to develop and manage agreements (-1.01).

Table 1. Partnership competencies with the greatest P–I* gaps

Competencies	Mean		
	Importance ¹	Preparation ²	P–I Gap
Ability to collaborate with various philanthropic and grant-making entities to leverage funds toward achieving NPS goals.	4.58	3.26	–1.32
Ability to ensure that all partnership construction projects meet agency requirements.	4.50	3.21	–1.29
Knowledge of the partnership construction process.	4.36	3.13	–1.23
Ability to establish and implement organizational structures that nurture and manage partnerships and ensure accountability between partners and the NPS.	5.45	4.23	–1.22
Ability to establish and sustain viable partnerships with foundations and other non-profit organizations.	4.69	3.52	–1.17
Ability to effectively plan for the commitments needed to build a successful partnership (e.g., staff time and skills, possible financial commitments, and other resources).	5.48	4.33	–1.15
Ability to develop solutions that cut across traditional department or park boundaries, which foster Service-wide consistency and cooperation.	5.57	4.49	–1.08
Knowledge of the concepts, policies, and practices related to donations and fund-raising partnerships in the NPS.	4.25	3.19	–1.06
Knowledge of the techniques used to resolve conflicts, grievances, confrontations, and disagreements in a constructive manner.	5.18	4.15	–1.03
Ability to align and integrate efforts, core processes, activities, and resources to maximize the effectiveness of developing partnerships.	5.49	4.47	–1.02
Ability to work effectively with the Solicitor's Office to develop and manage agreements.	4.76	3.75	–1.01
Effective communication, listening, and interpersonal skills.	6.62	5.62	–1.00
*Note: The P–I (preparation minus importance) gap is a diagnostic statistic based on the function between the importance of a competency and the preparation to perform that competency. Caution must be used in interpreting this statistic since a large gap could conceivably include a measure that is not high in importance and therefore not worthy of training resources.			
¹ where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.			
² where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.			

Past, present, and future partnership behaviors and intent

Almost two-thirds of respondents reported that their past experiences working with partnerships were rewarding and productive (61.2%); however, another 16% reported that their experience had been difficult, frustrating, and not very productive. Almost one-quarter of respondents (23%) had no experience working with partnerships. More than 60% reported currently being engaged in one or more partnerships. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated they intended to be involved in partnerships in the future because they believed either (1) this would be the primary way the National Park Service would conduct business (53%), or (2) this was a better way to conduct business (35%). Respondents reported being involved in an average of seven partnerships over the past five years.

Partnership attitudes

Partnership motivation statements with the highest agreement (1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree) are presented in table 2 (next page) and include the following: partnerships give others a better understanding of my park, the National Park Service, or its mission (5.17); partnerships promote more con-

structive and less adversarial relationships with stakeholders (4.96); partnerships result in better coordination of policies and practices (4.76); partnerships save time and money for all partners (4.75); partnerships allow the agency to concentrate resources on areas of most critical need (4.74); and partnerships lead to better management decisions (4.73).

Partnership-constraint statements with the highest-level agreement are also summarized in table 2 and were mostly bureaucratic: the lack of reward structure for partnering (4.42); the accountability requirements for partnerships are complex and difficult to carry out (4.41); budgeting practices among stakeholders inhibit partnerships (4.27); and challenges of finding flexibility within rules and regulations for partnering (4.11).

Implications and conclusions

The National Park Service embraces a significant partnership culture. The overwhelming majority of survey respondents (87%) had past experience working with partnerships, whether frustrating or rewarding. Moreover, 60% of respondents were engaged

in one or more partnerships at the time of the survey, while only 22.8% had no experience with partnerships.

Statements depicting consequential beliefs (the attitude construct) were segmented into those about motivations to partner and, in contrast, those reflecting constraints to partnerships (i.e., negative aspects of partnerships). Interesting patterns emerged. The lowest mean reported among all motivation beliefs was higher than the highest mean reported for a constraint belief. Therefore, we conclude there is a generally positive disposition toward partnerships held by NPS employees. Specifically, respondents

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Table 2. Strength of selected partnership motivations and constraints

Partnership motivations	Percentage of Respondents per Score (7 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree)							Mean score
	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	
Partnerships give others a better understanding of my site/park and the NPS and its mission.	26.1	26.9	15.5	15.0	6.6	5.7	4.2	5.17
Leaders in the NPS should promote and support partnerships as a means of accomplishing mission-oriented goals.	26.6	22.6	17.0	18.5	6.0	4.8	4.6	5.12
Partnerships result in more constructive, less adversarial attitudes among stakeholders.	18.5	25.6	19.5	19.1	8.5	5.3	3.5	4.96
Partnerships result in better coordination of policies/practices of multiple stakeholders.	13.5	20.0	22.7	27.6	8.4	4.3	3.5	4.76
Partnerships allow the pooling of resources, thus saving time and money for each partner.	16.8	20.7	19.4	23.0	8.9	6.2	5.0	4.75
Partnerships allow the agency to capitalize on the strengths of other organizations while concentrating NPS resources in the areas of most critical need.	13.4	23.6	21.6	22.2	7.7	6.4	4.9	4.74
Partnership constraints	Percentage of Respondents per Score (7 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree)							Mean score
	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	
The reward structure of this agency provides little incentive to partner with others.	13.5	15.9	15.1	29.7	11.1	9.4	5.3	4.42
As accountability requirements within the agency increase, it makes partnering with others increasingly complex and difficult.	10.0	17.5	20.3	25.3	13.9	8.3	4.7	4.41
Different budgeting processes and regulations inhibit our ability to partner.	9.5	16.7	18.2	24.9	14.0	11.2	5.6	4.27
Partnering is difficult because most organizations we would potentially collaborate with have conflicting missions, approaches, or objectives.	8.4	14.1	18.3	23.2	17.2	12.6	6.1	4.11
I am frequently challenged to find flexibility within the rules to support or participate in partnerships with other organizations.	10.3	14.2	14.8	26.8	11.9	11.8	10.1	4.08

believed that partnerships offer others a better understanding of their parks and the National Park Service while accomplishing mission-oriented goals, and that they resulted in more constructive, less adversarial attitudes among stakeholders. Conversely, the majority of constraints were organizational barriers, including lack of reward structure, increased accountability requirements within the agency, differing budget processes and regulations, and inflexible rules that were seen as disincentives to partnering. In particular, NPS employees who reported being engaged in partnerships expressed concern over requirements set forth by the Office of the Solicitor.

In conclusion, descriptive findings revealed that employees generally hold positive views about partnering, yet indicated constraints of bureaucratic and organizational barriers. This information will enable the National Park Service to target training to specific groups to increase employees' propensity to partner. A greater understanding of the partnership phenomenon may enhance park and protected area managers' ability to obtain support, services, and funds to protect resources while providing educational and visitor opportunities.

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