Dialogic communication with volunteers at Rocky Mountain National Park: A case study

by

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Abstract

This report uses a theoretical basis, dialogic communication theory, for analyzing Rocky Mountain National Park's relationship building efforts through public relations. In particular, this report analyzes how the park communicates dialogically with its internal volunteer public by utilizing a case study approach. Practical recommendations are posed for the park's volunteer supervisors, as well as theoretical implications related to dialogic communication and volunteer communication. Suggestions for future research and report limitations are also discussed.

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Preface

My journey with Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) began in the summer of 2015 when I became a volunteer communications intern for the park's volunteer office on the east side of the park. My duties included writing blog posts, hosting litter clean ups, event planning, photographing volunteers, and other administrative tasks. In the summer of 2016 I returned (to the west side this time) as a volunteer interpretation intern, where I worked at the Kawuneeche Visitor Center, led educational programs, and provided visitor services at trailheads and on the trails. That fall I was hired as a "GS-5 Park Ranger – Interpretation," which means I was an employee, finally able to wear the gold badge, green and gray uniform, and iconic flat hat. My duties mostly remained the same, although I was able to help with environmental education programs taught to school children and write social media posts. During the summer of 2018, I was doing less interpretive work and more volunteer coordination. I maintained records for, assisted in the training of, and communicated regularly with 70 volunteers, which was a great lesson in trust building and relationship management with a group of dedicated, unpaid workers.

My professional experiences at Rocky Mountain National Park have greatly influenced my academic interests, and I am fortunate to be able to combine the two for my final report, which will focus on how the park utilizes dialogic communication in its relationship building efforts with volunteers.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

"Within National Parks is room – glorious room – room in which to find ourselves, in which to

think and hope, to dream and plan, to rest and resolve." – Enos Mills

Enos Mills, a Kansas native, conservationist, and, most notably, a volunteer, was a key player in protecting what the federal government officially established as Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) in 1915. Since then, National Park Service (NPS) employees have been hired to uphold the park's mission, which is "To preserve the high-elevation ecosystems and wilderness characters of the southern Rocky Mountains within its borders and to provide the freest recreational use of and access to the park's scenic beauties, wildlife, natural features and processes, and cultural objects" (Park statistics, 2018).

However, it takes more than just NPS employees to ensure the park and its resources remained protected, and support the park's purpose. Volunteers-In-Parks, or "VIPs" as they are typically called, are passionate individuals who give their time – one of humankinds' most precious resources – without expecting anything in return. From cleaning horse stables to directing traffic at the NPS's highest-altitude visitor center, these folks are some of Rocky Mountain National Park's biggest advocates.

The aim of this report is to analyze communication efforts between the park and its volunteer public through a case study approach. A comprehensive literature review of dialogic public relations theory will aid in the discussion of the observations collected and experiences gained throughout the author's time volunteering and working at RMNP, as well as recommendations posed to the organization. This paper will have both theoretical and practical outcomes, as it will add to the scholarly work on volunteer communications, while also providing the volunteer supervisors at Rocky with ideas that can be implemented in the field.

About RMNP

Park Overview

Rocky Mountain National Park is one of 61 national parks and 418 National Park Service sites across the United States (National Park System, 2019). Nestled in a small area of the Rocky Mountain range, RMNP is about two hours northwest of Denver, CO; its neighboring towns, or "gateway communities," include Estes Park, CO, on the east side and Grand Lake, CO, on the west. The park saw a record number of visitors in 2018, with 4.59 million tourists visiting the site (Record visitation, 2019). In 2017, RMNP was the fourth most visited national park in the United States behind Great Smoky Mountains, Grand Canyon and Zion national parks (Top 10, 2018).

In 2017 the park had 149 permanent (year-round) and term employees, 244 seasonal and temporary employees, and 2,437 volunteers (Park statistics, 2018). The majority of park employees and volunteers are based on the east side of the park, where RMNP headquarters are located, along with division chiefs and the park's volunteer program manager. Trail Ridge Road (TRR), which is the only road in the park that connects the east and west sides, is closed to through traffic approximately seven months out of the year due to unsafe driving conditions caused by extreme winter weather. The middle section of the road typically opens for the summer season during the last week of May and closes in late October; the drive from headquarters to the west side offices takes around one and a half hours. To get from Estes Park to Grand Lake (and vice versa) during the winter season, the fastest route takes about three hours and 15 minutes. The impact of this will be discussed later on in this report.

Figure 1.1: Google Maps Screenshot of TRR Closure between Grand Lake and Estes Park
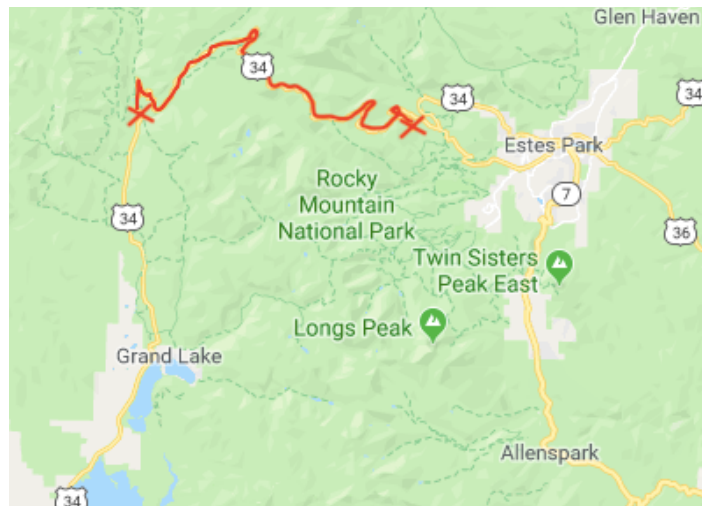
Organizational Hierarchy

In regard to the organizational hierarchy specific to volunteer relations, the top park official is the superintendent, who has been at RMNP since August 2016. As the "CEO" of the park, she works with community, legislative, media, and nonprofit partners, as well as the chiefs of every division. The superintendent and division chiefs make up the "leadership team." The volunteer program lies within the division of interpretation, which is overseen by the chief of interpretation. The Volunteers-In-Parks (VIP) program manager started at Rocky in the spring of 2012 and accepted a new job with another agency in April of 2019. Her main responsibilities include administrative tasks, like entering volunteer hours, running reports and submitting government forms, coordinating volunteer training and the end-of-season appreciation event, and providing support/communicating regularly with volunteer supervisors and volunteers. Volunteer supervisors include park rangers of different supervisory levels in all divisions, including maintenance, trails, and visitor resource protection (law enforcement). Supervising volunteers is considered a "collateral duty" to these park rangers' general scopes of work, which means it is an additional duty not originally in their job descriptions.

Although the volunteer program manager is in charge of all the volunteers in the park, the west district interpreter oversees the west side volunteers. In the fall, winter, and spring, the west district interpreter and year-round interpretation ranger communicate with the VIPs and recruit new volunteers for the summer season. The year-round interpretation ranger oversees the winter volunteers. The main point of contact for the volunteers switches to the volunteer program assistant during the summer season, which is typically mid-May through September.

Figure 1.2: Hierarchy of Volunteer Relations at RMNP
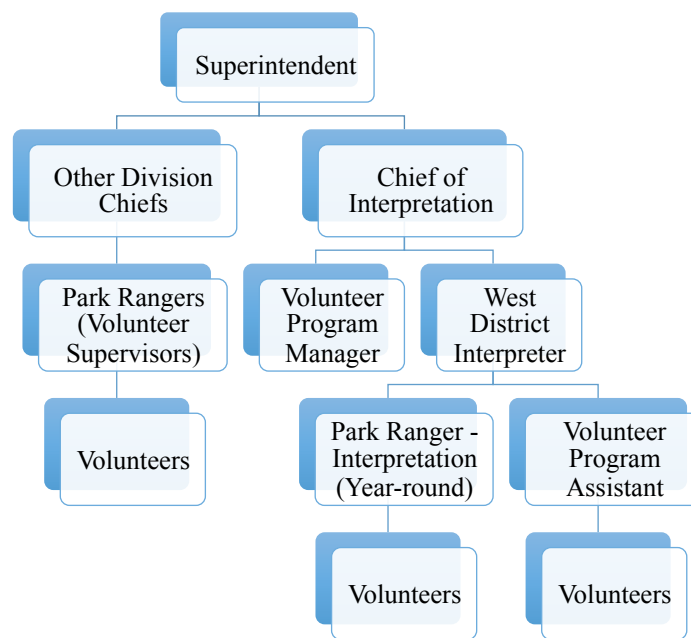
Volunteer Operations

Broadly speaking, the VIPs can be categorized into two groups: individual volunteers and group volunteers. Group volunteers typically visit the park for a one-day volunteer project, i.e. clearing trails, building piles for fire fuels mitigation, or removing invasive plants. These volunteers are from boy scout/girl scout troops, corporations, nonprofit groups, school groups, etc. and complete these projects on the east side of the park. Oppositely, individual volunteers are typically residents of Estes Park and Grand Lake (or other nearby communities) who commit to a full season of volunteering. This includes members of named groups like the "Bighorn

Brigade" and "Bear Lake Trail Masters" on the east side, and rovers and Holzwarth volunteers on the west. Interns and researchers are also "individual" volunteers but are not usually locals. Individual volunteers tend to hear about park volunteer opportunities through word of mouth communication or on volunteer.gov, which is an aggregate site for federal government agencies to post volunteer jobs. This report focuses specifically on the volunteers who fall into the "individual" category.

Generally, individual volunteers tend to be retirees who spend their summers in the towns adjacent to the park and then return to their primary residence during the fall/winter/spring. Many of the individual volunteers come from successful careers and backgrounds, including former federal employees, teachers, engineers, and business and healthcare professionals, who volunteer at the park to stay busy during their retirement. Some VIPs have volunteered at the park for more than 15 summers and have donated over 20,000 hours of their time to RMNP.

At Rocky, some volunteer opportunities come with housing (i.e. a cabin or RV parking space with water/electricity hook ups) in exchange for 32 hours of volunteer work per week. Especially on the east side, these openings are usually campground host positions that attract retirees who like to move around from one volunteer gig to another. However, on the west side of the park there were only two couples that were campground hosts in 2018. The rest of the housed volunteers (three couples and four single volunteers) worked at the visitor center, Holzwarth Historic Site, roving on trails, cleaning the horse stables, helping with education programs, conducting administrative tasks, and maintenance projects.

Housed volunteer opportunities are not the only differences between the east and west side VIP programs. From at least 2008, the east and west side volunteer programs have operated somewhat independently. The west district interpreter has ownership of training and

communicating with the west side VIPs with the help of the year-round interpretation ranger and a volunteer program assistant. For example, a separate database is used to enter hours specifically for west side volunteers and a separate end-of-season appreciation event is held. Similarly, the west district interpreter includes these volunteers in the two-week training given to interpretive rangers at the beginning of the summer season. On the east side, volunteers have a one-day training as a group and then job-specific training as needed. Much of the separateness can be attributed to the distance factor (i.e. the east and west side located an hour and a half apart from one another).

In May 2018, the west district interpreter left the park to pursue another career and an east side supervisory interpretation ranger filled the role on an interim basis. She brought a different perspective and experience from the east side with her, and her main focus in regard to the volunteer program was to make it more cohesive with east side operations. This change in leadership was anticipated for about nine months, so it did not come out of the blue. Implementation and reception of this change will be discussed later on in this report.

Report Overview

This report uses a theoretical basis, dialogic communication theory, for analyzing Rocky's relationship building efforts through public relations (PR). In particular, this report looks into how the park communicates with its internal volunteer public. After addressing direct observations and experiences, practical implications are addressed through recommendations for park volunteer supervisors. Theoretically, the study contributes to the bodies of knowledge surrounding volunteer communications and dialogic public relations. Finally, limitations and suggestions for future research are posed.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Before diving into dialogic communication theory, the author wanted to address a well-known public relations theory that has been widely used to study how public relations practitioners build relationships with publics. Most scholars and professionals in the PR realm are familiar with the work of Grunig and Hunt (1984), who created four models of public relations, which are press agentry/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical. Grunig and Grunig (1992) added to this four-model foundation with their excellence study. This brought about the Excellence theory, which is a normative theory describing best practices for public relations and factors that contribute to organizational success. One factor indicating excellence is that encompassing the skills public relations practitioners have in two-way communication. Two-way symmetrical communication, specifically, refers to a more balanced dialogue between an organization and its publics, and is the most similar to dialogic communication out of the four models. However, as Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) argue, one of the biggest criticisms of dialogic communication literature is the wrongful merging of symmetry and dialogue, or equating "any back and forth communication with dialogue" (p. 61). Theunissen and Noordin (2012) also argue that philosophical differences separate two-way symmetrical communication from dialogue.

The author's decision to focus on dialogic communication theory, rather than scholarly work related to the aforementioned work, is twofold. First, the excellence theory is more of a general theory of public relations compared to dialogic public relations theory. It encompasses the broader scope of public relations as a core function of an organization. Dialogic communication theory focuses more on the interpersonal aspects of communication. Second, there is a wider opportunity for growth within the dialogic public relations body of knowledge.

For comparison, Grunig and Hunt's (1984) piece has been cited more than 5,500 times according to Google Scholar, whereas Kent and Taylor's (2002) essay "Toward a Dialogic Theory of Public Relations," which will be explored in-depth in this review, has been cited a little more than 1,000 times, still a significant amount. Therefore, the predominant theoretical lens underpinning this case study is dialogic communication theory.

Dialogic Communication Theory

Dialogic communication, put simply, is an exchange of words between two or more people but, as evidenced next, is much more complex. According to Brunner (2019), the study of dialogic communication has roots in the fields of philosophy (Buber, 1958; Bakhtin, 1981; Habermas, 1981), psychology (Rogers, 1959), and interpersonal communication (Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Pearce & Pearce, 2000), amongst others. Dialogue's introduction into the public relations field, specifically, stemmed from Pearson's (1989) work on ethical PR, in which he conceptualized it as a respectful and practical communications approach. Botan (1997) also wrote about dialogue as a component of ethical public relations, stating that dialogic strategic communications campaigns, compared to monologic ones, have ethical and practical benefits that organizations should not overlook.

Principles of Dialogic Public Relations

A year later, Kent and Taylor's (1998) work about building relationships with publics through online dialogic communication, was published. In this article, the authors posit dialogue as a relational interaction in which an open negotiation of ideas occurs, and as being a "product rather than process" (p. 322). Furthermore, Kent and Taylor's (1998) piece was the first to lay groundwork for how practitioners could succeed in the digital age by communicating dialogically via the Internet, which was a new, up and coming tool at the time. Since then, the

study of dialogic communication as it relates to new media technologies, i.e. social media and websites, has taken off (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

In Kent and Taylor's (2002) essay "Toward a Dialogic Theory of Public Relations" the scholars discuss how dialogic communication can be used to serve not only organizations, but also their publics. The article contains five characteristics necessary for effective relationship building, which include mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. These components will be used to assess RMNP's relationship-building strategies with its volunteer public.

Mutuality includes the ideas that collaborations must be humble exchanges between organizations and their publics, and that participants in these relationships must be treated equally; i.e. "the exercise of power or superiority should be avoided" (p. 25).

Second, propinquity includes three key features, which are "immediacy of presence," "temporal flow," and "engagement" (p. 26). Immediacy of presence means that publics need to be included in decisions before they are made, and that they are communicating in shared spaces. Temporal flow refers to the idea that organizations need to take the historical, current and future contexts of their relationships with publics into consideration as they work toward an equitable future for parties all involved. Lastly, engagement is important in dialogic propinquity because "when an organization is fully engaged in its community (local or global) it will have broader contexts and wider perspectives to draw upon in its decision-making" (p. 26). In order to do this, all parties must be willing to give their full selves to discussions in accessible manners.

Empathy is the third tenet of Kent and Taylor's (2002) discussion on the inclusion of dialogue in public relations theory. In order for empathetic communication to flourish, discussants need to be supportive of the ideas and desires of others, and organizations should

treat publics as colleagues during conversations. This collective orientation places importance on building relationships with both local and international publics. Further, the authors posit the necessity of acknowledging others' voices (the act of confirmation), even if their opinions are not in agreement with those of the organization. Without confirmation, publics may feel distrusting or ignored, and the authors state, "once public trust has been lost it is difficult, sometimes impossible to regain it" (p. 28).

Fourth, the potential for risk in dialogic relationships is discussed. Dialogue is inherently risky due to the nature of asking participants to be vulnerable in sharing their beliefs and desires with others, which is unscripted and can result in unpredictable outcomes. However, the authors suggest that this is how relationships grow and opinions change, especially if those exchanging in dialogue can recognize and accept the unique and individual qualities everyone brings to the table, also referred to as "recognition of strange otherness" (p. 28).

Lastly, commitment is the final tenet and umbrella term for three more features of dialogic engagements, which include "genuineness," "commitment to conversation," and "commitment to interpretation" (p. 29). Being truthful and putting the relationship before one's personal interests will result in the most effective dialogic encounters, according to the scholars. It is imperative that dialogic participants work to find common ground and understand differing perspectives.

Continued Research of Dialogic Public Relations

As Brunner (2019) posits, Petra Theunissen and Anne Lane are two scholars who have also contributed greatly to dialogic communication theory in the PR realm. Taking dialogic theory in public relations back to its philosophical roots, Theunissen and Noordin (2012) propose practitioners take an approach focused on debate and persuasion when communicating with

audiences. Using ideology from quantum physics, Theunissen (2015) introduced the "Per-Di Principle," where persuasion and dialogue are entangled, working together to build and maintain relationships, particularly on the social media side of organizational-public communications. The author suggests PR professionals should "know which style of communication to use when engaging in social media" and "cannot engage in either without being fluent in both" (p. 10).

Using Kent and Taylor's (2002) five principles as a framework, Lane and Bartlett (2016) recommend pragmatic ideas for how communications professionals can overcome barriers that keep them from incorporating dialogue into practice. After interviewing 17 practitioners about their experiences with dialogue, the authors found overall, PR professionals do not understand the concept of dialogue and face constraints out of their control that impede them from implementing dialogue in their work, including time restrictions and power relations. Therefore, they propose either that the concept of dialogue be reimagined to encompass more attainable ideals, or improvements should be made to provide PR professionals with training and education related to this concept. Also emphasizing the importance of educating PR practitioners to be more skilled in dialogic communication, Kent and Lane (2017) argue that the focus of this theory is on "the hidden, un-public part: the hard work, risk, self-disclosure, and time, that go into relationships" (p. 573).

Dialogic communication theory has been used to study communication in many different types of organizations, including nonprofit (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009), healthcare (Roundtree, 2018), government (Kang, Kim, & Cha, 2018), corporate (Cardwell, Williams, & Pyle, 2017), and higher education (McAllister-Spooner, 2012). Further, dialogic communication theory has been applied in studies focused on organizational relationships with publics, as well as used to assess dialogue's role in volunteer communications.

Organization-Public Relationships

Organization-public relationship (OPR) and dialogic communication research go hand-in-hand. To understand how dialogue is utilized, it is important to take into consideration the relationship an organization has with its publics, as a relationship must be present in order to "create the 'right' conditions for dialogue" (Kent & Theunissen, 2016, p. 4042). According to Ledingham and Bruning (1998), an OPR is "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well being of the other" (p. 62).

Social capital, in particular, is an outcome of healthy OPRs that has been discussed in dialogic communication research. According to Taylor and Kent (2014), social capital is generated through a network of relationships, which benefits those involved. Results from a case study examining relationships between organizations and individuals in a Jordanian town showed "rhetoric and public relations are essential to building and sustaining a fully functioning society because they create various types of social capital" (Taylor, 2011, p. 421). Aiming to define and clarify the concept of engagement in PR, Taylor and Kent (2014) suggest, "engagement is part of dialogue and through engagement, organizations and publics can make decisions that create social capital" (p. 384). Lemon (2017) contends, "employee engagement starts with dialogue" (p. 85). It is evident that social capital is a positive result of strong OPRs but how exactly do organizations build strong OPRs in the first place?

Unsurprisingly, dialogic communication is the recommended component. Bruning, Dials, and Shirka (2008) argue organizations should take a dialogic approach to help facilitate lasting relationships, as "programs and initiatives based upon key public member input, interaction, and participation" (p. 29) are significantly beneficial to organizations. Similarly, in a

study that utilized Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles to investigate employee satisfaction with opportunities to use their voice, Ruck, Welch, and Menara (2017) suggest organizations build "employee voice into internal corporate communication strategies and plans" (p. 904). Including stakeholders in decisions through dialogic communication efforts can create strong relationships. Using an 18-item scale to test organization-public dialogic communication, Yang, Kang, and Cha (2015) found "openness" had a strong effect on public trust/distrust of an organization (p. 189). In other words, trust is built when organizations are open with their publics.

Organizational Change

Openness is key, especially when OPRs are tested because the organization undergoes change. One can argue that at RMNP, volunteers experience change every year. Most volunteers are only at the park during the summer months, and if/when they arrive the next season they are introduced to at least a handful of new personnel. This is simply due to the nature of seasonal work having high turnover rates as employees and volunteers move around to different parks. Change was an integral part of the west side VIP experience in 2018, as discussed earlier with the interim district interpreter stepping in, but it will also be in the summer of 2019 due to park's volunteer program manager leaving. Therefore, dialogic communication research as it pertains to organizational change is included in this literature review.

Researchers argue that dialogic communication can aid in a smoother transition when an organization undergoes change, especially when it comes to internal public resistance. A case study analyzing change communication at a private corporation found when communication becomes more dialogic, resistance to change decreases (Matos Marques Simoes, & Esposito, 2013). Syahmi et al. (2018) also posit "dialogic communication may ease the resistance among affected stakeholders" (p. 93).

Mutual engagement between an organization and its publics plays a key role in decreasing resistance to change. Communicators should listen to all parties involved and pay special attention to stakeholders who express uncomfortable sentiments (Syahmi et al., 2018). Likewise, Mahoney (2006) recommends organizations bring in employee voices and opinions about organizational transformation before direction is set regarding the change. In other words, dialogically communicating change with employees should be the first step of the change process.

Focusing on managerial communication competencies in organizations that experience continuous change, Frahm and Brown (2007) found dialogic communication improves openness to change. Similarly, in a case study looking at change communication, "elaborate, informal, open and clear communication structure was attributed by many in the organization to the success of the change implementation process" (Arnaout & Esposito, 2018, p. 510). Turton (2015) also advises leaders to communicate in a "personal, engaging and collaborative" (p. 218) way to gain support for upcoming changes. It is evident that the theory of dialogic communication can be applied to the study of organizational change.

Volunteer Communication

Few studies analyzing organizational relationships with volunteers have used dialogic communication theory as a framework, which indicates a gap in the literature. Two authors who mention Kent and Taylor's (2002) foundation as it pertains to the volunteer sphere are Evett (2013) and Dutta-Bergman (2009). Looking specifically at United States Forest Service volunteer partnerships, Evett (2013) found cultivating "two-way communication may have a positive impact on the relationship" (p. 96). Employing the theory of unified responsibility and aspects of dialogic communication theory, Dutta-Bergman (2009) found most volunteers are

older, educated, women, and suggests organizations "create and maintain open lines of communication and present strong arguments to effectively communicate with the volunteering segment" (p. 366).

Much of the literature focused on volunteer communication aims to understand motivations of volunteers, as well as best practices including and engaging these individuals. Although they do not use dialogic communication theory to support their research, these studies do have practical implications related to organizational communication with volunteer publics.

Motivations

Clary et al. (1998) published one of the first studies identifying volunteer motivations. Using psychology's functionalist theory as a lens, the authors propose six motivational functions through volunteerism, which include "values," "understanding," "social," "career," "protective" and "enhancement" (pp. 1517-1518). In one of the experiments explained in the report, the researchers found advertisements that correspond with volunteers' motivations were ranked as more effective than those that do not. They also suggest volunteer coordinators work to provide opportunities that match individuals' motivations.

Conversely, in Al-Ubaydli and Lee's (2011) study of environmental volunteers, they found tailoring messages in newsletters to an individual's motivations generally does not have an effect on number of hours volunteered, except for new volunteers motivated by career interests. Looking at motivations of environmental volunteers in Australia, Weston, Fendley, Jewell, Satchell, and Tzaros (2003) found "communication to the volunteers in terms of goal setting, supervision and feedback were considered as important determining factors for volunteer involvement" (p. 211).

Exploring the motivations of potential environmental volunteers, Randle and Dolnicar (2015) found communication to this specific population should focus on "the environmental mission of the organization and the positive impact of its activities on the natural environment" (p. 13). However, altruistic ones are not always the primary motivations for volunteers. When Bussell and Forbes (2003) conducted focus groups with volunteers in northern England, they identified "social reasons, egotistical reasons, the desire for self-development and the wish to respond to family circumstances" (p. 74) as influencing motivations for volunteerism. The authors highlight the importance of dialogue when volunteers are deciding whether or not they want to donate their time to an organization, as it can help individuals determine if the organization's offerings fit their needs.

Inclusion and Engagement

Inclusivity is a key element in increasing a volunteer's trust in an organization. According to Kang (2016), nonprofit organizations can foster "volunteer-organization identification by engaging in effective communication and constant relationship cultivation" (p. 114). Involving volunteers in decision-making processes is one way to boost commitment levels and build relationships (Knoke, 1981; Waters & Bortree, 2010). Specifically in regard to retaining volunteers, Waters and Bortree (2012) found it is essential to give male volunteers in public library settings opportunities "to help discuss and influence decisions" (p. 102). In this same study, the authors found the opposite with female public library volunteers; including females in organizational decision-making had a negative effect on their relationships with the organization. Instead, these individuals place greater importance on the social dimension of their volunteerism and feel a stronger connection when they work with people throughout the organization. In regard to this social component of volunteer inclusion, putting on social events

outside of the workplace helps encourage friendships and relationship building, therefore increasing organizational commitment (Bortree and Waters, 2014; Bussell and Forbes, 2003).

Another tactic for engaging volunteers is keeping volunteers up-to-speed about goings on in the organization. Bortree and Waters (2014) posit, "keeping volunteers informed acknowledges their value within the organization, and it helps them perform their jobs better" (p. 229). A good way to do this is communicating with volunteers through different channels, including email, newsletters and face-to-face conversations (Bortree & Waters, 2014; Waters & Bortree, 2010). In fact, a study that surveyed volunteers helping at a professional golf sporting event showed these individuals desired to have more face-to-face interactions with event organizers (Pauline, 2011). Having "regular meetings with volunteers in which volunteers can discuss their needs and the degree to which their needs are being met" (p. 89) is a good way to increase volunteer retention, according to Silverberg, Marshall, and Ellis (2001).

In regard to specific messaging tactics, Steimel (2013) found "memorable messages about the significance or meaningfulness of the volunteer work are associated with statistically higher levels of volunteer identification than other types of messages" (p. 18). In other words, messages thanking volunteers, giving advice or defining rules do not correlate with as high of organizational identification as messages that highlight the meaningful impact volunteer work has. These memorable messages also tend to be most frequently communicated by an organization's boss or volunteer coordinator.

As demonstrated by the literature, there are many different ways to communicate and build relationships with volunteers. Understanding their motivations for volunteering, involving them in decision-making processes, and having open lines of communication are three strategies organizations that rely on volunteer publics should incorporate into communication efforts.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

According to Berg and Lune (2011), the case study approach is "an in-depth examination of a particular case (e.g., individual, program, project, work unit) or several cases" (p. 118). Thomas (2011) posits a case study has two parts: the subject of the case study and the object of the study (the analytical frame or theory) through which the subject is viewed. The focus of this study is on exploring the volunteer relationship building at Rocky Mountain National Park through a dialogic communication theoretical lens. According to Stake (1995), this case study would be considered an intrinsic one, as the intent is to better understand a unique situation, not necessarily apply the findings to a generic phenomenon.

Merriam (1985) posits prolonging the process of data gathering on site and engaging in peer consultation are ways to back generalizability, validity, and reliability of the case study method. Merriam (1985) also states "most writers suggest that qualitative research should be judged as credible and confirmable rather than using traditional canons of validity and reliability" (p. 212). Data gathering occurred over a period of four summer seasons, which helps enhance the credibility of findings. I consulted with colleagues and my report committee members throughout this process, which helps establish cause for validity.

This qualitative case study uses a multi-modal method; it includes observations from direct experiences, as well as documents obtained over a four-year timespan. Direct experiences include events, conversations, and personal observations. The documents analyzed include personal notes and organizational paper resources, like training materials and newsletters. The periods of data gathering are as follows:

- June – August 2015: I was a volunteer communications intern on the east side of the park, working directly with the volunteer program manager in the VIP office. In exchange for 32

hours of work per week, I received rent-free housing. I interacted with volunteers on a daily basis, either in-person, through e-mail, or over the phone.

- June – mid-October 2016: I was a volunteer interpretation intern on the west side of the park. I worked 40 hours a week and received a stipend from the Rocky Mountain Conservancy, as well as rent-free housing. I worked directly with volunteers one day a week at the Holzwarth Historic Site and two to three shifts a week at the visitor center desk.

- Mid-November – mid-April 2017: I was hired as an interpretive park ranger on an intermittent basis. I worked three days total, in the visitor center and on one school field trip. My interactions with volunteers were extremely limited.

- Mid-April – mid-August 2017: I was a paid interpretation ranger, and was also responsible for checking in on the roving volunteers and coaching them as needed. I interacted with volunteers about three to four times a week.

- Mid-May – September 2018: I returned to the west side of RMNP as a paid volunteer program assistant, working and communicating with the west side volunteers on a daily basis.

From 2015 to 2018 I went from being an intern to running the west side volunteer program. To put this into perspective, the woman in the volunteer program assistant position in 2016 was my supervisor when I was an intern on the west side; I was hired to fill her role in 2018. As my professional expertise grew, so did my academic knowledgebase. My master's program overlapped with one season of work at RMNP (2018). Both before and after this season, my studies focused on dialogic communication, reading literature and including theories pertaining to it in class assignments. I also took a course through the communication studies department titled "Dialogue, Deliberation, and Public Engagement," which greatly contributed to

my understanding of the concept. The combination of firsthand experience with my academic studies established a strong foundation for analyzing RMNP's dialogic communication efforts with its volunteers.

Chapter 4 - Experiential Observations and Reporting

During this chapter, the author reflects upon direct observations and experiences had while volunteering and working at RMNP. Specific examples of organization-volunteer communication are discussed from a firsthand point of view, including face-to-face communication, and written and digital communication. Complex and unique situations that used a combination of mediums are also discussed.

Face-to-Face Communication

Training

As mentioned previously, training is an important and involved part of the volunteer program. On the east side, one day of all volunteer training plus job-specific training occurs in early June. In 2015 I began my summer season after the training on the east side occurred, so I cannot speak to exactly how this is run. However, I have participated in the west side training for the last three summers.

On the west side, two weeks of training are held at the beginning of the summer (early June). The first and second weeks are required for new volunteers (as well as division of interpretation staff), and returning volunteers join in for the second week. Providing volunteers with the same training as interpretive staff shows equal treatment of this public, which relates to the mutuality component of Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles of dialogic public relations. These weeks of training are educational and hands-on. Volunteers learn about the NPS and RMNP missions and history; hear from park employees, the leadership team, and community partners about research and other goings-on; get experience practicing duties; learn the professional standards for interpretation; go through anti-harassment training; and learn safety protocols and procedures, such as locations of first-aid kits and radio usage.

Training is planned and facilitated mostly by the west district interpreter, with help from the other permanent interpretation ranger, as well as returning seasonal staff. Volunteers are encouraged to ask questions, engage in the presentations, and help train the new VIPs. For example, returning volunteers have led small groups of new volunteers on "roves," which are one-mile or less hikes on park trails, to give an example of what visitor interactions look like. Returning Holzwarth Historic Site volunteers also help during the first week of training, giving examples of site tours and teaching operational procedures. Having veteran volunteers facilitate aspects of training for the novice VIPs is one instance of how superiority, specifically the organization telling the public what to do, is avoided. Rather, it is members of the internal public assisting other members of the same public.

Additional training for volunteers and employees on the west side occurs throughout the summer season. For example, ALICE (a presentation about how to handle active shooter situations), CPR/First Aid, and Leave No Trace trainings were held during the summer of 2018. Furthermore, 2018 was the first summer that a few interested east side VIPs came over to the west side as rovers. I held a short roving training for them and paired them with an experienced west side rover. In the three summers prior to this, only one VIP volunteered on both sides of the park.

Volunteer Leadership Council

In 2016, the volunteer program manager created the Volunteer Leadership Council (VLC), which is a group of ten volunteers who give input and provide feedback on the volunteer program. These leaders act as representatives for their fellow VIPs. The VLC members are selected based on an application and interview process. Seven of them volunteer on the east side, two volunteer on the west, and one is a partner from the Rocky Mountain Conservancy,

who speaks on behalf of the conservation corps members. Meetings are held once a month throughout the entirety of the year. The VLC has helped advocate the volunteer stance within the park and generated new ideas, such as holding "continuing education" (training) events for volunteers, creating more signage for high use areas in the park, and helping make decisions about the annual volunteer appreciation events.

The Volunteer Leadership Council (VLC) is a great example of including volunteers in decision-making processes, which is an aspect of Kent and Taylor's (2002) propinquity principle, as well as a suggestion recommended in the literature on OPRs (Yang, Kang, and Cha, 2015) and volunteer communication (Knoke, 1981; Waters & Bortree, 2010).

Appreciation Events

End of summer appreciation events are held to recognize the volunteers' annual accomplishments. An event is held on the east side for the east side volunteers and vice versa for the west side. During the events, dinner and dessert is served, and awards are given to VIPs who meet certain milestones (i.e. 500, 1,000, 2,000, and so on lifetime hours achieved). Awards consist of vests, jackets, gold nametags, and others. "Thank you" gifts such as tumblers, lunchboxes, picture frames, etc. are given to volunteers who serve at least 40 hours during the fiscal year.

Leadership team members, volunteer supervisors, and other staff who work closely with VIPs are invited to help facilitate the event and show their gratitude. Sometimes VIPs will help set up decorations and are asked to bring a side dish or dessert to share. Entertainment for the evening typically includes skits, videos, and PowerPoint presentations. In 2018, the west side event had a "Wild, Wild West Side" theme, which was chosen by me (as the volunteer program

assistant), and encouraged attendees to wear their best western gear. VIPs voted for the best dressed and the top three were recognized with small gifts.

Annual appreciation events show RMNP's willingness to engage with its volunteer public and recognize the individual qualities that VIPs bring to the organization. The humble exchange that occurs when members of the leadership team (and other paid staff) serve food and drinks to the volunteers is an example of Kent and Taylor's (2002) mutuality principle.

Team Meetings

During my time as a volunteer intern on the east side I was on a team of three. The volunteer program manager, her seasonal employee, and I were the only ones dedicated solely to the volunteer program. I was an integral part of the team, answering emails, phone calls, and in-person inquiries, creating digital outreach materials, and event planning. Therefore, I was involved in all of the team meetings.

The summer of 2016 I was a volunteer intern on the west side of the park, joining the interpretation division. While technically an intern, I had almost all the same responsibilities as a paid ranger, and was a part of the interpretation team meetings. During these we would discuss current happenings and brainstorm ideas for solving problems. Interns are the only VIPs who are included in these meetings, however.

The Holzwarth Historic Site VIPs are the only group on the west side that has team meetings, which are run by their supervisor, the permanent interpretation ranger. These meetings are optional and are generally facilitated discussions about how the season is going; i.e. what is going well and what is not. They are used as check-ins and a way for teambuilding. Turnout varies depending on day and time.

The leadership team holds an all west side employee/volunteer team meeting once a summer, usually around the end of the season. Updates are given about park projects and questions are answered. This is typically the only time division chiefs are physically present on the west side of the park, so employees and volunteers tend to take advantage of their time with them. For example, after the meeting in 2018, an older male volunteer talked with the public information officer for about 10 minutes regarding some ideas he wanted to implement.

Holding team meetings and inviting volunteers to share their beliefs and opinions is a testament to RMNP's commitment and empathy, two tenets of Kent and Taylor's (2002) model. When volunteer supervisors acknowledge these voices and are supportive of ideas they may disagree with, it allows this relationship to grow. However, this does not happen frequently enough. Volunteers are welcomed at the beginning of the season with training that incorporates them with the interpretation staff, but once training is over, all of these stakeholders are never in the same room at the same time again. RMNP should consider having more all-employee/volunteer meetings throughout the summer or at least more opportunities for formal discussions with paid staff and volunteers, which can help increase retention (Silverberg, Marshall and Ellis, 2001). Different groupings of volunteers, like rovers and visitor center docents, should also have opportunities to attend team meetings and discuss things that are/are not going well or issues pertaining to the whole group that could be addressed in this setting.

Informal Discussions and Get-togethers

Both on the east and west sides, volunteers stop by the volunteer offices with questions, uniform requests, or just to chat. Historically, the volunteer program manager and volunteer program assistant could be found in their offices from 9am to 5pm Monday through Friday. However, in 2018 the volunteer program assistant position changed slightly. Instead of being

dedicated to volunteer duties 40 hours a week, around 16 hours of my time was spent leading

interpretive and educational programming outside of the office. Because of this, I established

office hours so the VIPs knew when they could find me. It took a few weeks for them to get

used to the new schedule, and I tried to never turn anyone away if they stopped in at a time

outside of my office hours. If an office hours model is going to continue, communication about

this needs to be open and clear. Volunteer supervisors should be genuine and vulnerable with

VIPs if they expect honesty and vulnerability in return. Kent and Taylor (2002) posit this risk is

essential for building quality relationships.

Many of the informal discussions happen in the spur of the moment; a volunteer stops in

to talk about a visitor they met on a hike, they have a question about the schedule, or they are

turning in their time sheet. Many of the VIPs are friends with the staff, so they spend time in the

break room talking with one another and swapping stories.

Informal get-togethers occur fairly frequently throughout the summer season. Group

hikes, campfires, and trivia nights have been going on since at least 2016. Generally, volunteers

are the ones to organize such events and typically only volunteers show up to them. In 2018, the

west district interpreter organized two outside-of-work events that brought together paid staff

from all divisions and volunteers. Holding events outside of the workplace shows an

organization's commitment to relationship building and should be continued (Bortree and

Waters, 2014; Bussell and Forbes, 2003).

Digital and Written Communication

Email

As far as digital communication, email is the most commonly used channel. RMNP does

not have an intranet site for the VIPs or special social media accounts just for volunteer

communication. Email was the easiest way for me to communicate with my supervisor as a volunteer (other than face-to-face) and the easiest way to communicate with VIPs as the volunteer program assistant. The schedule gets sent out via email every other week, and the volunteer program manager sends out volunteer updates every couple of weeks with information about current events.

As the volunteer program assistant, I communicated with VIPs through email every day I was in the office. In 2018 my days off were during the week (i.e. Wednesdays and Thursdays), which returning volunteers were not used to. At the beginning of the summer, it was a common occurrence that upon my return to work after my weekend, I would have emails that needed a response sooner than Friday. Eventually the VIPs got used to my schedule and would call or email the permanent interpretive ranger if they had a pressing question or something else to talk about.

One new email communication tactic that was implemented in 2018 was sending a monthly west side VIP newsletter. The "West Side Stories" newsletter had both informative and entertaining content pertinent to the west side volunteers. The volunteer office assistant and I encouraged VIPs to email us their photos to include in the newsletter and we gave them credit. For example, one newsletter included a photo that a volunteer took of a helicopter evacuation and a "thank you" note to the VIPs from an employee who was also working on the scene.

Another tactic I implemented was forwarding all official press releases to the west side volunteers. The public information officer emails out park press releases to all employees, but volunteers are not included on these communications. So, when I received those emails I would forward them directly to the VIPs; the response to this was positive. One older female volunteer

responded once saying, "I really have appreciated the Park emails you've forwarded this summer. Good information I like knowing. Thanks."

Email, by far, is the most commonly used channel for digital and written communications between volunteers and RMNP. Changing around my schedule impacted VIPs when they sent email communications to me. Although this change was communicated at the beginning of the season, I should have been more open and engaging about the change right off the bat, which helps with buy-in and acceptance (Turton, 2015). Also in regard to email communications, keeping the VIPs in the know by forwarding press releases and other pertinent information, as well as sending out newsletters, are good tactics that the park should continue. Asking the VIPs to submit photos to be featured in the newsletters encouraged their engagement with the organization and potentially increased their satisfaction levels with the park (Ruck, Welch and Menara, 2017).

Phone

As an intern on the east side I communicated via phone fairly frequently. Most incoming calls were from prospective volunteers interested in the program or from current volunteers wanting to speak to the volunteer program manager. As the volunteer program assistant in 2018, I rarely communicated via phone. One volunteer in particular, an older female, would call me rather than email me. Other than that, I mostly spoke on the phone with other employees or external publics. Communication by phone is not utilized very often. I do not believe volunteers are opposed to using this channel, but it is simply easier to send an email or stop in for a brief chat. However, if a volunteer supervisor realizes that a VIP never responds to emails and instead calls, the supervisor could make note of this, and communicate with the volunteer using their preferred method to meet them where they are at and help them feel included.

Written Notes

Written notes were the least common channels of communication. Rarely would I receive a note in my mailbox or on the white board on my door. One example of a paper note written by a middle-aged female volunteer said, "Thank you for taking on this unruly bunch! I will email through wetransfer.com the VIP photos I have. I am up here till Thursday."

Notes of appreciation are another form of written communication I sent and received during my time at RMNP. I was given "thank you" notes from my supervisors during both summer seasons as a volunteer. In 2018 I enlisted the seasonal interpretation staff to help me write letters to the west side VIPs. Each interpretive ranger wrote thank you cards with a personal message to at least five volunteers of their choosing. I later found out from an older female VIP that in the five seasons she volunteered there, this was the first thank you card she received from anyone other than the volunteer program assistant and permanent staff.

Writing notes of appreciation is another strategy to build relations amongst the park and its volunteer public. According to Steimel (2013), messages should focus on the meaningful impact of volunteer work. Although "thank yous" typically come from volunteer supervisors, in this case and in Steimel's (2013) research, having other paid staff members write appreciation notes is a way to create mutuality between the organization and its volunteers (Kent and Taylor, 2002).

Complex and Unique Situations

Letting Go of a Volunteer

In mid-July 2018, the volunteer program manager, west district interpreter, and permanent interpretive park ranger met with an older male volunteer (Volunteer A) to release him of his duties. I was not present at this meeting, but aided in the communication with VIPs

afterward about what happened. The west district interpreter, permanent interpretive park

ranger, and I originally decided not to announce his departure to all of the west side volunteers,

as we did not want to make a big deal out of it, causing unnecessary commotion. We did,

however, tell the Holzwarth VIPs, who knew and worked with Volunteer A, at a team meeting

about a week later. No one had any questions or comments about the situation during this

meeting, so we assumed it was not going to be a big deal. However, we should have

communicated this information to the volunteers right away.

The next day, another older male volunteer (Volunteer B) caught me in my office and

asked if he could talk to me. This is an individual who I built rapport with over the two previous

summers, as we volunteered at Holzwarth together and went on a few group hikes on days we

did not work. He asked me why Volunteer A was let go. I told Volunteer B there were instances

of unprofessional communication with staff and it did not seem like it was a good fit for him this

season. He seemed sad, but understood and thanked me. The day after that, another older male

VIP (Volunteer C) approached me and asked what happened. (He is also a VIP I had built

rapport with in 2016 and 2017, as we both attended group activities like campfires and trivia

nights.) I told him the same thing I told Volunteer B and he expressed shock. Volunteer C told

me he was going out to lunch with Volunteer A in a few days and wanted to know our side of the

story. I thanked him for asking me and did not divulge any specific details.

Because of the rapport I had built with Volunteer B and Volunteer C in previous

summers, they felt comfortable enough to come talk to me about the situation, and after that is

when I realized we needed to be transparent and notify the whole group of VIPs about what

happened. If two volunteers sought me out to ask about what happened, then surely there had to

be more people with similar curiosities. I called the volunteer program manager and she

recommended I send out an email to the west side volunteers right away, so that is what I did. I included a short statement about what happened and ended with "Please don't hesitate to come talk with me, [permanent interpretive ranger], or [west district interpreter] if you are confused or have any questions." I did not have any VIPs ask me about the situation after I sent the email. Dialogic public relations theory best practice shows truthful and genuine communication displays commitment between an organization and its publics, which is a principle of Kent and Taylor's (2002) theoretical building block.

Fire Evacuation

On the afternoon of June 28, 2018, the "Golf Course Fire" (as it was officially named by first responders) ignited south of the park boundary, just a few miles from the park's west side offices and Kawuneeche Visitor Center (KVC) housing area. When the cloud of smoke became visible, park employees began to wonder how much of a threat the fire was. The west district interpreter decided that she needed to pre-warn housed employees, and asked me to notify the volunteers, to make them aware of the nearby fire and prepare in case of an evacuation. The contact information I had for the volunteers was saved on my computer so I printed off the list and began calling. I was able to get a hold of most of the volunteers, and told them I did not have much information but that I would keep them updated in case we were ordered to evacuate. From a volunteer perspective, they were thankful for the heads up, but they were also confused and frightened. The VIPs did not know what to do other than pack up and wait, and I did not know what to tell them other than exactly that.

About an hour later the power in the main offices went out. We still had not heard any official word about how threatening the fire was or if we should evacuate, but I assumed the fire had to be close if it burned up the power lines. (We later found out that the electric company can

remotely turn off the electricity to certain areas that are under threat of being burned as a safety precaution for first responders.) I am lucky the power did not get turned off before I was able to print out a list of the housed volunteers' phone numbers. Having a hard copy of personnel contact information is something I will always do from here on out.

Even though the power was out, staff and volunteers were still operating the visitor center desk like normal. Community residents and visitors came in asking where the fire was, how close it was, if they should evacuate, etc., and we did not know what to tell them because we did not have any information. This was frustrating for the staff and VIPs at the front desk because they are used to giving out accurate information and advice, but they were literally left in the dark. This shows just how important of a role communication has in maintaining social capital. Both community members and volunteers were relying on the park to give them information and guidance, but the lack of communication reflected poorly on the park, ultimately affecting multiple organization-public relationships.

Not too long after the loss of power, those signed up for Grand County's "CodeRED" emergency notification system received a text message with evacuation orders for residents in a specific zone, which included the KVC housing area. Once we received this, I began calling the VIPs to tell them to evacuate. Although we received this notice from the county, we still had not received communication from the park. It just so happened that on that day, the visitor resource protection (law enforcement) west district ranger was out on a backcountry patrol and did not have access to RMNP's internal "Send Word Now" channel that sends out alert text messages. On top of that, other members of her team were responding to a smaller fire within park boundaries. Therefore, the lines of communication and emergency situations were unusually complex that day.

Shortly after the CodeRED alert was sent, we received a text from "Send Word Now" asking all personnel housed in the KVC area to evacuate. Those of us still at work ran home (across the street), packed our bags, and drove to the evacuation point in town. I kept in touch with the volunteers on my cell phone and told them to sign up for CodeRED if they had not already. Although VIPs and staff are encouraged to sign up for this free service, not everyone does. This should be emphasized more toward the beginning of every summer season. I was also receiving messages from VIPs who were not affected by the evacuation order offering up space in their homes to those displaced by the fire. Thankfully, we only had to wait less than two hours before we were cleared to return home.

The next day was spent decompressing and assessing what happened the day prior. The west district interpreter created an emergency response plan in case an event like this occurred in the future, which is something that should have already been put in place. She gathered input from the interpretive staff and sent everyone a final version, as well as posted it in the hallway. The visitor resource protection west district ranger set up a debrief meeting for the next week to discuss what did and did not go well. The chief of visitor resource protection joined in via phone, and west side employees and volunteers attended to give their input. It was determined that the "Send Word Now" platform was not the most reliable option and radio communication would be the most effective. Allowing volunteers and employees to come together afterward to discuss what did and did not go well showed the organization's willingness to hear ideas from all parties. Taking the opportunity to engage with internal publics about the situation and take in their opinions is a good example of Kent and Taylor's (2002) propinquity principle.

A New Boss

As explained in the section pertaining to organizational hierarchy, for at least the last 10 years (2008 - early 2018), one person held the west district interpreter position. Also discussed earlier in this report is how the Trail Ridge Road closure separates the east side headquarters (and consequently the volunteer program office) from the west side for the majority of the year. Because of these components, the west district interpreter allotted a significant amount of time to the west side volunteer program and worked to make it her own. The volunteers saw this as a sign of commitment and dedication to the program, which made them feel included.

There is some animosity surrounding the separateness, as many employees and volunteers who are based on the west side feel like they do not get as much attention or as many resources as the east side of the park. For example, west side employees and VIPs are commonly overheard saying phrases like "West side, best side" and "The wetter, better side" (in reference to the higher amount of rainfall on the west side of the park), which perpetuates the separateness. So, when the announcement was made that the west district interpreter was leaving and a supervisor from the east side was filling her shoes on an interim basis, there was some resistance and hesitation from both employees and volunteers. From a volunteer perspective, they had gotten used to the former west district interpreter sticking up for them and including them in park operations. The VIPs were worried that an "east-sider" would not do the same. One volunteer said the interim selectee had to work to gain the VIP's stamp of approval and acceptance because no one knew how long she was actually going to be in the temporary position.

On the first day of the second week of training, when new and returning VIPs were all present, the interim west district interpreter told everyone a personal story about her and her

husband. Her display of vulnerability right off the bat was admirable. She also opened up the

floor for questions posed by volunteers and staff, who asked about the change and what she

hoped to accomplish that summer. She was open and honest, and encouraged them to come to

her office any time to talk. Her strength in dialogic communication was evident from the start,

especially in terms of commitment, empathy and mutuality (Kent and Taylor, 2002).

Two volunteers (that I know of) took advantage of this and talked with her for more than

an hour each in one sitting. Both of these VIPs are older males who have, for at least three

summers, presented special interpretive programs to visitors. However, they were not being held

to the same standards as paid employees who also give public presentations. One of the changes

the interim west district interpreter implemented was coaching (providing formal feedback) to

these volunteers. At first this was met with opposition, as they never had to be coached before.

However, after their conversations with the interim west district interpreter, they found out that

she only wanted to make sure they were meeting interpretive standards; that it was not a test

allowing her to decide whether or not to let them continue giving the programs. Allowing

volunteers to converse with her for hours on end allowed them to build strong relationships with

her.

By the end of the summer, she was a regular part of the team. She could have easily

come into the operation with a closed mindset, wanting to overhaul the program to be more like

the east side, however, she took her time getting to know how the program operated and heard

out volunteers' ideas throughout the summer. When the position opened for applicants that fall,

one volunteer told me she wrote a letter to the leadership team in support of hiring the interim

west district interpreter for the job; she did end up getting selected as the permanent west district

interpreter. Although resistance to change was evident at first, the VIPs accepted her. Matos

Marques Simoes, & Esposito, (2013) and Syahmi et al. (2018) would attribute this to her dialogic approach. Outcomes from this scenario will be important to keep in mind when the new volunteer program manager is hired.

Chapter 5 - Practical Applications and Discussion

In this section, practical applications are posed for park volunteer supervisors in the form of implementable recommendations. Theoretical implications, limitations, and ideas for future research are included in the discussion.

Practical Applications

Based on the literature and observations assessed in this case study report, the park does a fairly good job at involving volunteers in decision-making processes. The creation of the Volunteer Leadership Council was a great step in encouraging voices to be heard and strengthening relationships between the park and its volunteer public. To increase the frequency of this, some examples of practical action-items are:

- Utilize paper or electronic surveys to include VIPs in decisions like choosing the west side appreciation event theme or voting on topics for informational bulletin boards

- Include VIPs in decisions with greater impact, like voting for the next VLC members or having a say in the hiring process for the new volunteer program manager

- Create an electronic or tangible suggestion box where volunteers can submit ideas; follow up on these every week

- Hold team meetings for the different volunteer groups to check in and hear about what is working and what is not; problem solve through brainstorming sessions rather than coming to them with a solution

In regard to communicating about organizational change, which volunteers face in differing amounts every year, but will face even more so during the summer of 2019, volunteer supervisors should be open and honest about upcoming changes. Communicating about known changes right away will allow for clear and accurate information to spread, rather than letting rumors germinate. Some practical ways to do this include:

- Continue utilizing multiple communication channels to relay information, including email, face-to-face, and paper handouts in VIP mailboxes

- Hold informal or formal discussions with volunteers to get a sense of what they do/do not know and where they are at with the change(s)

- Encourage conversation by having established office hours so that VIPs know when and where to find supervisors if they want to talk in person

Along these lines, another recommendation is keeping the volunteers "in-the-know" by utilizing different communication channels. Keeping them engaged will lead to a stronger organization-public relationship and sense of community amongst the volunteers. Some steps to take into consideration are:

- Hold more face-to-face meetings where supervisors, employees, volunteers, and members of the leadership team are all present

- Inform volunteers in a timely manner about newsworthy events by distributing press releases through email

- Make all operating procedures, including crisis response plans, available to VIPs in digital and paper format

- Utilize the "off season" (fall/winter/spring) for continued relationship building by sending out monthly newsletters and calling volunteers to check in with them; could also plan special events like a Christmas cookie exchange or a day at a local ski resort

- Continue holding events outside of work, like campfires, group hikes, and yoga classes, that volunteers are invited to attend

Lastly, understanding these volunteers' motivations for giving back to Rocky is important to make sure communications and opportunities for inclusion are successful. Do VIPs at RMNP volunteer for egotistical reasons or altruistic ones? Is it the combination of having "insider knowledge" and helping conserve the park's ecosystems that entices them to volunteer? Distributing a survey or asking VIPs during one-on-one conversations at the beginning of the season can help supervisors understand the best ways to communicate with them.

By following these recommendations, RMNP can strengthen its organization-public relationship with volunteers, consequently increasing social capital. Investing in communicating dialogically with this group will have favorable outcomes for Rocky, as VIPs will feel more connected to the park and their work, and hopefully return year after year.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

In addition to the valuable practical applications, this case study report adds to the body of knowledge related to dialogic communication and public relations, as well that surrounding volunteer communication. Results from this study suggest that Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic public relations principles, which have not been extensively used to research volunteer communications, can be applied to a volunteer communication context, particularly in the government sector. After pairing this relevant theory to experiences and observations, findings

indicate RMNP is not reaching its full dialogic potential in relationship-building efforts with its volunteer public. Overall, aspects of Kent and Taylor's (2002) mutuality principle are the most prevalent, whereas risk is the least.

Another interesting theoretical implication is that although dialogic communication theory has not been greatly developed in volunteer communication literature, characteristics of the theory appear in scholarly work pertaining to volunteer communication. For example, the idea of organizations including stakeholders in decision-making processes, or Kent and Taylor's propinquity tenet, is also a conclusion volunteer communication scholars have come to (Knoke, 1981; Waters & Bortree, 2010; Waters & Bortree 2012). Pairing these two bodies of literature, specifically showing that dialogic communication should be a part of volunteer inclusion and engagement strategies, is important for the future of theory building.

Lastly, this case study is an important building block in dialogic public relations and volunteer communications literature because it provides rich qualitative data and descriptions. Where most of the dialogic communication literature has focused on outcomes of digital technologies (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018), this study highlights the interpersonal applications of the theory, particularly the emotional and psychological aspects of volunteering and supervising volunteers.

Limitations

One limitation of this case study is that is focuses only on individual volunteers at RMNP and does not include an analysis of dialogic communication with group volunteers (i.e. boy scout/girl scout troops, corporations, nonprofit groups, school groups, etc.). This is mainly due to the fact that group volunteers typically only spend one day at the park. However, to get an

idea of the program's dialogic public relations efforts as a whole, looking at the group volunteers is needed.

Similarly, the author spent three out of four summer seasons working on the west side of RMNP, which is where most of the observations and direct experiences were gathered. Findings may not be as representative of communication efforts with east side VIPs because of this.

Another limitation is that this report only examined communication efforts that occur during the summer season. The park has VIPs who volunteer during the off-season (October – May), but the majority of them give back during the summer months. A year-round analysis would assist in making the findings more well rounded.

Future Research

The most obvious suggestion for future research conducted on this specific organization-public relationship is to conduct focus groups, asking volunteers about their opinions of RMNP's communication efforts with them and the resulting relationship strength. After themes from the focus groups are identified, and terms are defined, a survey could be conducted with volunteers asking for their communication preferences and attitudes toward the organization. A focus should be placed on comparing the answers between new and returning VIPs, as sentiments may differ between the two groups. Additionally, a pre-season and post-season survey could be conducted to identify changes in attitude toward the organization after VIPs complete a full summer season of volunteering, including how much they felt like they were an integral stakeholder to the park.

Another study that would add to dialogic public relations theory and volunteer communication literature could focus on volunteer supervisors' opinions and attitudes about working/communicating with volunteers. Researchers could conduct focus groups or in-depth

interviews to find out how supervisors feel about relations with volunteers, as well as if VIP

supervisors feel equipped with the tools to communicate effectively and dialogically with their

volunteers.

If sufficient time and funding is available, further research could include conducting case

studies of volunteer programs at other NPS sites to compare/contrast national parks with

historical sites, monuments, memorials, battlefield parks and other units.

Conclusion

Overall, this report is of value because it provides an exploratory analysis of the

relationship between Rocky Mountain National Park and its volunteer public. RMNP takes a

somewhat dialogic approach in its public relations efforts with its volunteers but could include

even more dialogic characteristics to strengthen its relationship with this internal public.

Combining dialogic communication theory with real-world observations allows this work to

bridge the gap between academia and employees in the field, providing practical

recommendations for volunteer supervisors and communicators at RMNP.

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