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The Management of Volunteers

Volunteers can and should be an important part of every nonprofit organization. This is not only to save money — though it can do that — but because it is a right of people to have an active share in those institutions which are supported by their tax or philanthropic dollars. The volunteer portion of our society is undergoing some dramatic changes today which offer new challenges and many new opportunities to all organizations which are alert to what is happening. I don't know a great deal about the detailed operations of libraries (although I worked in one at one time), but the basic principles of volunteer participation and management, I am sure, apply to libraries as they do to hospitals, school systems, and social welfare agencies.

To understand these changes, we must look at what is happening to people today which has an effect on volunteering. First of all, people now are far better educated than earlier generations and very much better informed. Indeed, the mass media bring most of us an overload of information with an unfortunate emphasis on the tragic or sensational. However, one good result is that most people are aware — as earlier generations could not be — of needs and opportunities which exist in their community, the nation, and the world, and the normal human reaction to a need is, "I wish I could do something to help."

Second, people today have far more discretionary time than people of earlier days. (I have learned never to call this "leisure" time. Americans seem to have enough remnants of the old work ethic to be very defensive about leisure.) But compared with even a half-century ago, when the normal workweek was six days of ten to twelve hours (eighteen hours for farmers and housewives), all of us today have far more time to use as we may choose.

Third, an amazing number of people spend their working hours at routine, unfulfilling jobs. Studies have shown that the number of people who find their daily work very satisfying is shockingly small. Almost everyone has interests and potential talents which he or she has little or no opportunity to develop.

All of this means that every town and city has many, many people who are concerned about the community, have time available, and have a great

deal of untapped potential. Unfortunately, many of us are so hung up on old notions about volunteers and volunteer work that we are unaware of these facts. To most people, the word *volunteer* conjures up the mental image of a middle-aged, middle-class housewife, with no specific skills, but with a warm heart and quite a bit of free time. We think of her working as a volunteer a day or two each week in a hospital or welfare agency.

But, as we all realize, the middle-aged, middle-class housewife is an endangered species. Today's housewife is probably going to work or back to school, or is in demand by every agency in town. This is why so many people today are talking and writing about the decline in volunteering. There is no such decline. On the contrary, there is an explosion of volunteering which is unprecedented since the day of the early colonists, when everyone had to volunteer to provide housing, education, health care, and aid to those in trouble.

Much of the growth in voluntary activity is seen in the many "cause" groups which spring up to fight the freeway, secure better housing, or meet some other local problem. Volunteer bureaus and voluntary action centers in most towns and cities receive many calls from people who want to volunteer — and sometimes there are not enough jobs available. While there is still a good solid volunteer corps of traditional housewives, their ranks are being expanded by working men and women eager to give time and skill if it can be done after work or on weekends. Young people today are an excellent source of volunteers: they are aware of needs, eager to help, and often find volunteer work a way to gain experience and try out career possibilities.

Probably the richest source of new volunteer power, however, is the rapidly growing group of retirees. People today retire earlier, are healthier, and live longer than those in the past. For many, the greatest problem is boredom and feeling unwanted and unneeded. We are also discovering many competent volunteers among the physically disabled. There are plenty of volunteers. If we begin to accept and believe this, and undertake the recruitment of volunteers with a positive rather than negative approach, we will succeed.

There are a number of things we need to know, however, before we can launch a volunteer program or expand the one we have. First of all, we need to recognize that there are three basic types of volunteers, all of which can be very useful. There are the "policy-making" volunteers, those who are members of boards or committees. They need to be carefully chosen and helped to do a constructive and satisfying job. People today, for the most part, resent being used as "rubber stamps." They will be active and helpful if they are given a real chance to do so. This means that they should be told,

when asked to serve, that they will be expected to work. The board should have working committees, and every member should be involved in one. The board chairman may need help in learning to use committees well. When decisions must be made, the chairman and staff executive should be sure that everyone has the necessary information and that, as far as possible, several alternatives are offered for their discussion and decision. It is equally annoying to a board to be offered one course of action and told to vote "yes" or "no," as to be faced with a difficult problem with no possible solutions suggested.

A second — and very important — type of volunteer is the "management" volunteer. If eight volunteers are needed to do a particular task, look first for a capable person to act as chairperson, "captain," or manager of that particular work force, and then, with his or her help, round up the others. Spend enough time with the chairperson to make sure that he or she thoroughly understands what is to be done. Then assign that person the task of training, scheduling, and supervising the others.

Many overworked staff people, in any kind of agency, tend to resist the idea of using volunteers because they imagine being faced with eight or ten eager people asking, "What do you want me to do?" The idea of finding specific jobs for them, showing them how to do the jobs, answering their questions, listening to their complaints, and finally checking on their work is so overwhelming that the staff person usually decides to wait until later. Here the administrative volunteer is the solution. He or she needs to be carefully selected and must be a responsible and reasonably well organized person. You may have a friend who fits this category, or you may know someone who has recently retired, or there may be a good candidate on some of your boards or committees. Most communities have housewives or retired people who have been librarians or have had library training. You might set up a small committee of volunteers on your board who would help find the right person.

There are a surprising number of potential volunteers who want to work with people rather than with things — like books or file cards. Enlisting, training, helping, and supervising a group of volunteers would appeal to such a person. Voluntary groups in your community, such as a volunteer bureau, voluntary action center, the Red Cross, the Junior League, church groups, or service clubs, would help you locate such a person, or perhaps two people. In a couple of hours you could explain your needs, introduce them to the library and its program and, you hope, get their commitment to help.

Such a chairman of volunteers would be responsible for recruiting, training, assigning, assisting, and evaluating the work of volunteers. As a staff

person, you would be in the background to answer questions, but the day-to-day work can be done by volunteers. You should be able to get the help you need, with a minimum of additional work on your part.

The third echelon of volunteers is the "service volunteer," the one who does the actual job. You may need help with cataloging and shelving books, or at the reception or check-out desk. You may want someone to be responsible for periodicals or a reading room. You might want a volunteer to conduct story-hours for children or a program of reading to the blind. If you get a group of volunteers involved, they will themselves come up with new and imaginative ideas for services which the library might offer.

To make volunteer work attractive and satisfying to people today, there are several things which need to be done. First, the board and other staff must really want volunteers. They must understand that volunteers can help expand services, make the library better known and more appreciated in the community, and help win greater support.

Second, with the help of at least one experienced volunteer, you need to decide what you want done, and then design the various tasks to be done by part-time workers because most volunteers can only provide part-time help. This means job descriptions — simple and nontechnical, but specific and clear (again, a large voluntary organization like the Red Cross would be happy to share samples of volunteer job descriptions). There is nothing which gives a potential volunteer a better feeling for a place than the realization that staff know what they want, and can express it clearly in writing. Remember that most volunteers today have had business experience and are accustomed to things like job descriptions.

It is a good idea to enter into a simple "contract" with the volunteer whereby he or she agrees to give a specific amount of time and to do the specified job. You, in turn, agree to provide the needed training and supervision, and inform the volunteer about where to go for help. It is wise if you or the volunteer chairman, after a certain period of time — a month or three months — sit down with the volunteer and assess how things are working out. This gives you a normal, nonthreatening chance to suggest needed improvements in the volunteer's performance, and gives the volunteer the opportunity to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction, to make suggestions, or to ask for an additional or different assignment.

For most volunteers, an interesting job providing needed help is enough reward. But some planned recognition can be meaningful, not only to the volunteer, but as a device for recruiting more volunteers. Most volunteers say that the best recognition is a sincere "thank you" from staff, or a spontaneous "I don't know what we would do without you." But, perhaps once a year, some formal recognition is excellent public relations. It might

be a luncheon, tea, or dinner with certificates of appreciation to the volunteers. Or it might be an "open house" at the library, with special exhibits and a brief recognition ceremony.

A full-blown volunteer program doesn't appear overnight. It is far better to move slowly, taking on just one or two volunteers at a time. But over a period of two or three years the benefits can be great. More and better service can be provided. Public relations can be greatly improved. Indeed, it is often possible to find a volunteer with public relations skill and experience who can plan and carry out a program of ongoing information and interpretation of the work and the services which the library offers. As citizens of the community become personally involved in the library, they begin to realize that it really is *theirs*. And all of us will work to support, strengthen, and expand that which really belongs to us.