



## ASSURING TEAMWORK BETWEEN VOLUNTEERS AND SALARIED STAFF: The Vital Key To Success

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When budgets get cut but human service needs increase, agencies classically seek ways to "do more with less." The recruitment of volunteers is one solution and can be a successful way to extend an organization's ability to provide services. However, the subject of volunteers is too often approached simplistically, without thorough planning and preparation. The executive director has a key role to play in determining exactly what the function of volunteers will be, defining policy to support that function, and providing the necessary resources to make it all happen.

One area of potential tension is the interrelationship of the salaried staff to, and with, volunteer staff. Building teamwork requires attention. The biggest mistake that can be made is to assume everyone will work happily together because you are all "human service providers". In fact, *it is frequently social workers and other counseling professionals who are the worst offenders when it comes to working with volunteers!* This is because of prevalent attitudes about "professionalism", "confidentiality", and other client-related issues—and because of stereotypes about who volunteers and why. Few receive training to work with volunteers. That gap in education implies the subject is too easy or obvious to warrant much attention.

The following is a list of "food-for-thought" questions and statements about volunteer/salaried staff relations. As you read the list, recognize how many of the items relate to the need for a *philosophy* of voluntarism for each agency:

- Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean there isn't someone out to get you.
- In a political/economic climate of budget cutbacks, is it paranoia to be afraid that a successful volunteer might replace a paid staff member?
- When salaried staff are threatened by volunteers, how can we separate the real threats from the mythical ones?
- In this political/economic climate, can those of us in the volunteer community keep repeating the catechism: "volunteers supplement, not supplant"? Really? And why only "supplement"? How about "go forward independently" or "experiment"?
- Do organizations want volunteers for their extra hands, and hope

that they arrive blindfolded and gagged? Along with hearts and hands, volunteers also bring brains and mouths. Many organizations want "help" but not "input."

- Which is more threatening: volunteers who do a mediocre job or volunteers who are a roaring success?
- We are fond of saying that volunteers have no vested interest. But what happens when a volunteer has been on the job for several years - many years - or was an original founder of the group? Veteran volunteers can exhibit the same resistance to newcomer volunteers as can the salaried staff!
- The real test of an organization's commitment to volunteers is what happens when a volunteer does something wrong.
- How an organization treats the *leader* of volunteers is an indication of the prevailing attitude towards volunteers in that organization.
- Is it a matter of choice for each salaried staff member as to whether she/he works with volunteers? Why?
- Ask the salaried staff what *they* do *personally* as volunteers outside of the organization. Bet they never connected how they treat volunteers to how they like to be treated when they're volunteers.
- Why do we assume people know how to work with volunteers? *No* academic/professional training program includes volunteer program management in its curriculum. This means no one (not social workers, not nurses, not clergy, not military commanders, not anyone) learns about volunteers in any educational setting.
- The pay-offs to an individual salaried staff member for working collaboratively with volunteers are *not* the same as the benefits to the organization for having volunteers. So there better be some tangible pay-offs.
- Are salaried staff evaluated on how well they work with volunteers? Recognized for it?
- If an organization cannot articulate *why* it utilizes volunteers—beyond platitudes—it will always have tension between salaried and unsalaried staff.
- Most salaried staff see the job descriptions of volunteers. Why not show volunteers the job descriptions of the salaried staff?

- First, and foremost, relations between salaried and volunteer staff are human relations. So, all the usual personality quirks of human interaction apply.

Whether an organization is just starting to create a volunteer program or whether one has been in operation for years, it is never too late to define the why's and how's of volunteer involvement. At a minimum, the following points should be analyzed and determined:

1. **Leadership:** Exactly who will be responsible for volunteers? If this is not a full-time position, what present duties will be taken away from the designated staff member to free his/her time to handle volunteers? (Note: The job of creating and maintaining a volunteer program cannot be done as an addendum to another major job!)

2. **Budget:** Volunteers are not "free". Consideration must be given to the cost of printing (recruitment materials, forms, certificates), supplies (which increase when volunteers are active), training, and recognition. Also, up-to-date agencies are setting aside "enabling funds" to reimburse volunteers for out-of-pocket expenses such as transportation and child care.

3. **Training:** There are workshops and conferences focusing on the subject of volunteer management. Certainly the designated staff member should attend some of these, but thought should be given to encouraging other staff to attend as well.

4. **Volunteer Assignments:** There are no inherent restrictions on what volunteers can do to help an agency—provided that the right people are matched to the right positions. Creativity and a willingness to experiment are important. And all assignments should be put into writing as job descriptions, which will in turn help in recruitment, screening and on-going supervision.

The executive director needs to consider these and other issues and should open a dialogue with salaried staff and volunteers to discuss the points raised. The subject of volunteers should be placed on the agenda of staff meetings and perhaps should even be the focus of a staff development workshop. The executive *sets the tone* for involvement of volunteers. Commitment starts at the top.