

Bridging the Gap: Teaching Staff to Work with Volunteers



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Reasons for Poor Volunteer/Staff Relations

Mark the top three reasons that you think explains difficulties that staff may have with volunteers in your organization.

- Fear of job replacement.
- Fear of decrease in the quality of services provided to clients.
- Fear of superior volunteers making staff look bad.
- Lack of staff involvement in planning volunteer usages and job designs.
- Lack of staff involvement in recruiting, interviewing, 'accepting' volunteers.
- Absence of any staff 'ownership' feeling for volunteer program.
- Lack of understanding of volunteer roles.
- No previous supervisory experience with volunteers.
- No previous supervisory experience period.
- Previous bad experience with volunteers.
- Lack of understanding of volunteer motivations.
- Resentment of additional work load.
- Lack of reward system for utilizing volunteers.
- Unrealistic expectations regarding volunteers.
- Personal antagonism toward a particular volunteer.
- Wrong volunteer placement/match.
- Fear of loss of control over program or work.
- Fear of community examination of agency.
- Fear of change.
- Feeling that volunteer program is an excuse for not solving real problems.
- Fear of loss of power.
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STAFF WORKSHEET

In an effort to supplement the resources of its staff, the Superior Agency has decided that it needs to enter the computer age. You have been designated as the new Manager of Computer Operations for the agency, based upon your ability to handle 'other duties as assigned.' The Executive Director has given you the assignment of developing a plan to ensure that every staff person will have the ability to make *full and happy* use of a computer by the end of the year. Your job is to determine the steps which will need to be undertaken to make this happen.

Use the worksheet below to list the things which you will recommend occur to achieve the successful computerization of your agency.



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Make Your Mark...Volunteer!

Department of Human Resources

State of Oregon

January 1987

Why a Volunteer Program? Every organization has a list of things that it would like to do, if only time, resources, and expertise were available.

The Volunteer Program can help to enrich the programs of agencies and release staff to do other things. The image of agencies can be improved through placement of volunteers within the branches, one-on-one with the clients, or working with a group of clients so service can be increased, extended or improved.

Can the Volunteer Program Help Clients I Can't Help?

Helping people is what our agencies are all about. The Volunteer Program can be a place to turn when you are unable to help a client. Sometimes volunteers will be able to meet some of the client's needs or assist you in identifying resources in the community. The Volunteer Program can make the tough part of your job just a little easier.

What Happens When You Make a Referral?

When you make a volunteer request, the local Volunteer Program Supervisor's (VPS) response will depend on the type of request. If the help you need is available immediately, the request will be filled quickly. If the service, volunteer or resource isn't available, the Volunteer Program will try to recruit, interview and register volunteers for you, or they may help you locate and access other resources. If the request is inappropriate for volunteer involvement, the VPS will call you to discuss available alternatives. Since the Volunteer Program serves four different divisions (Adult and Family Services Division, Children's Services Division, Mental Health Division, and Senior Services Division) every effort will be made to provide equal access to the services available. Priorities for your Volunteer Program are established by a local Volunteer Program board, with representatives from each agency.

How Hard Can It Be to Find Lots of Volunteers?

Our Volunteer Program is competing with dozens of organizations in the recruitment of volunteers. Also, we choose; we want only the best. We screen all volunteer applicants to make sure they are appropriate and capable of serving our clients. Your help is important in keeping and attracting volunteers. Meaningful opportunities and positive experiences will keep present volunteers involved in our program. Also those same opportunities and experiences will help us find new volunteers. Nothing attracts like success. We welcome your help. If you would like to register as a volunteer or know of someone else who would be interested, talk to your nearest Volunteer Program. Our recruitment process is ongoing.

What Does It Take to Get a Volunteer Going on a Project?

Volunteers come to us with a vast range of abilities, experiences, and interests. Some may be well equipped for the jobs and others may require some training. Every volunteer you work with will need clear instructions in order to do the best job for you. The effort you spend training a volunteer and outlining clear performance expectations will make the experience positive and productive for both of you.

Also, since most volunteers have lots of other commitments, working out a mutually agreeable schedule is very important for both of you. Good planning helps ensure success for

everyone, and encourages the volunteer to consider future projects that you may have.

How Can I Count on Volunteers?

We all know of volunteers who have served faithfully for many years. At the same time, it is true, there is turnover in the Volunteer Program. The Volunteer Program staff work to help build commitment from volunteers reducing the unexpected turnover. Every volunteer who signs up wants to work, but each volunteer is different. Just as the Volunteer Program staff identifies the needs and commitments of volunteers, we can also assess the commitments needed to do the assignment. Be sure to let the Volunteer Program know how much time is required to complete the job so the right volunteer can be assigned.

What's In It for Me?

You can use the supervision of volunteers as experience when you are applying for promotions. By using tools such as position descriptions, training, evaluation and feedback, you develop your own management skills. Involving volunteers in your problem solving and planning may help you gain a unique and valuable source of contributions and ideas. With the everyday workloads, it's hard to get to special projects and activities. Volunteers may be able to help you accomplish some of the things that you have had to put aside. At the same time you help yourself, you are helping volunteers reach their own goals.

Can Volunteers Replace Paid Staff?

It isn't fair to volunteers or paid staff of your agency to use volunteers to replace paid personnel. Volunteer staff can supplement and complement the work that is being done by employees. Also, volunteers can help you catch up on things that are backlogged and/or help extend some of the services that you provide.

Can I Depend on Volunteers to Be Professional?

Most volunteers have a professional attitude about their work. They take their responsibilities seriously, and uphold the policies of the agency and other requirements such as confidentiality. Identifying the assignment and carefully matching the volunteer to the job will help to eliminate future problems. Good direction from you and other staff with periodic monitoring and feedback will help the volunteer serve professionally.

Saying Thank You is Important!

Recognition is the volunteer's paycheck. Annual appreciation is a small part of what is needed to keep volunteers interested and happy. Saying thank you, showing your appreciation on a daily basis, is the most important feedback you can give volunteers. In addition, include volunteers working with you regularly in office socials. If you recognize birthdays, be sure to remember theirs.

"Thoughts on Supervision of Volunteers"

by Kathleen Brown

Voluntary Action Leadership

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As a trainer in volunteer program management, I often cover volunteer supervision. To introduce this topic in my workshops, I ask people to think of an example from their own lives when they were very well supervised, either as a volunteer or a paid staff member. We then list the qualities of that interaction that made it so positive. Answers from all groups usually include some variation of the following:

"Willing to share expertise."

"Trusted me."

"Gave frequent feedback."

"Had clear expectations."

"Gave me credit when I deserved it."

"Treated me with respect."

I next ask workshop participants to think of a time when they were poorly supervised. Almost all people can, with a shudder, recall a time when their productivity and morale suffered grievously due to a nonsupportive or even destructive relationship with their supervisor. Comments elicited from groups include:

"Took credit for my work."

"Never gave me any feedback."

"Changed expectations in the middle of a project."

"No appreciation for my work."

"Wouldn't give me the information needed."

"No flexibility."

The purpose of this exercise is to extrapolate from our own experience the basic principles of good supervision. I have used the qualities of a good situation mentioned by participants in my workshops to create the following 'rules' for supervising people:

- Give plenty of feedback - both constructive criticism and praise.
- Set clear expectations.
- Give instruction on how to do the job when needed.
- Encourage creative solutions and new ways to do a job.
- Respect the person as an individual.
- Give credit when it is due, publicly and privately.
- Show flexibility in dealing with work issues.

These principles are the general ones that apply equally to paid and unpaid workers, but there are additional things we must consider in supervising volunteers. From my own experience as a director of volunteers as well as the comments of people in my workshops, I would like to make the following observations:

1. Who Supervises?

The question of who should supervise volunteers in an organization sometimes becomes a major issue among staff. In many cases, the volunteer administrator can supervise the volunteers, but in others it makes much more sense for other staff members to be the supervisors. Examples are found in schools where classroom teachers supervise their own volunteers, in multi-service agencies where each program director supervises his or her volunteers, and in multi-disciplinary health care teams where volunteers work under the supervision of the professional who is the team leader. The job of the director of volunteers in these programs is to work with staff in designing volunteer jobs, then to recruit, select, orient, train, monitor and evaluate volunteers - all with input from other staff.

A common problem in programs where the director of volunteers is not the supervisor is that many staff members are reluctant to give up their time to supervise a volunteer, even if that volunteer would be particularly helpful to clients. An example from my experience was found in residential treatment facility for emotionally disturbed teenagers where counselors wanted a volunteer to give a child guitar lessons, but no staff member was willing to spend time with the volunteer to give necessary background information on the child or to 'debrief' the volunteer after each lesson. Without this minimal supervision, the volunteer could not deal effectively with the troubled youngster. The volunteer placement did not work out.

Sometimes it takes only one enthusiastic staff member to convince the rest of the staff that taking the time to supervise volunteers is not only rewarding to clients but also can be of tremendous help to staff as well. In the early days of school volunteer programs, for instance, one teacher in a school where I was teaching convinced all of us

who were reluctant to bring an 'outsider' into our classrooms that volunteers really increase her effectiveness by giving more students individual help. Most of us overcame our misgivings and quickly found out she was right.

Difficulties can occur for the volunteer administrator who is the supervisor as well because day-to-day supervision is time-consuming. Doing that job well can prevent the director of volunteers from having enough time to further develop the program, recruit for the program in the community, and maintain contacts with staff whose goodwill the program needs. Having a career ladder of volunteers with one or more promoted to supervising other volunteers may be the answer in some organizations.

2. It Takes Time

It may take time, and therefore more patience, to train a volunteer than it would a paid staff person to do a particular job. This is not because the volunteer cannot learn as well, but simply because volunteers usually spend only a few hours a week at a task rather than putting in a 40-hour (or even 20-hour) week. This infrequency sometimes leads to forgetting between work times, and can lead to frustration on the part of the supervisor. Even if there is a very good pre-job training for volunteers, they still need on-the-job training from their supervisor. Problems can occur when the supervisor's expectations as to how fast a volunteer can become productive are unrealistic.

3. Confrontation is Difficult

Staff supervisors of volunteers often have a hard time confronting those volunteers on inappropriate behavior, or even just giving them constructive advice on how to do their jobs better. The prevailing attitude seems to be, "Oh, he/she's just a volunteer," or "I can't say that to a volunteer." Yet volunteer workers, just like paid workers, should be confronted on their inappropriate behavior and terminated if the offense is serious enough. Furthermore, volunteers deserve from staff constructive criticism that can help them improve their performance. Almost everyone who takes on a job wants to do it well, and volunteers will stay longer, feel more satisfied, and be of greater help to the organization if they receive constructive feedback from those who supervise them.

4. Appreciation is Recognition

In my opinion, the best form of volunteer recognition is frequent appreciation shown to the volunteer by the staff of the agency, especially by the volunteer's supervisor. Annual recognition dinners, pins, birthday cards and the like are important, but

nothing can surpass "thank you" or "we really missed you last week when you were on vacation." This was clear to me personally when I was a volunteer receptionist at a family planning clinic. One nurse never failed to thank me at the end of my shift for simply being there. As a volunteer supervisor, I made sure that I thanked each individual as he or she left for the day. All workers need appreciation from their supervisors, but volunteers need it more frequently, since they do not receive regular rewards in the form of a paycheck. If volunteers are not appreciated, they will leave.

5. Each Person Needs Individual Supervision

Good supervision of individual volunteers involves understanding each person's motivation for being with the organization and making sure those needs are filled. There are many general motivations for volunteering: wanting to learn a skill, wanting to be needed, wanting to belong, filling free time with meaningful work, and so on. But each volunteer has his or her own very precise expectations, and only if these are met will he or she remain involved in the activity.

To illustrate this idea, you can think about a volunteer activity you are (or were) engaged in and make a list of the precise reasons you went into that activity. The list for a man working as a Boy Scout leader might look like this:

- Opportunity to be with son.
- Opportunity to teach about outdoors.
- Opportunity to go back-packing.
- Opportunity to re-learn things learned as a boy.
- Male comradeship.
- Leadership role: move up in organization.

Once you have a list of your activity, you can rate each point on the degree to which your expectations are being met. If the degree is high, you are probably planning to stay with the activity for a while. If it is low, you are probably thinking of leaving (or have already left) the activity.

The connection of this exercise to the supervision of volunteers is that each individual comes to the job with precise expectations, even if they are not entirely conscious. The more the supervisor knows about each volunteer's expectation, the more likely the supervisor can see that they are met. Or, if the volunteer's expectation are unrealistic, the supervisor can channel the volunteer into a more appropriate position. Having a volunteer to an exercise like that above will help the supervisor and the volunteer clarify expectations and make appropriate modifications to meet them.

6. Volunteers Can Be Shy

Volunteers are sometimes reluctant to ask questions of their supervisors for fear of appearing ignorant. Often, despite the best efforts of the organization to recognize their value, volunteers feel they are 'just a volunteer' and do not feel they have the right to question staff and things they do not understand. A good supervisor will encourage volunteers to ask questions and take the time to answer those questions. Informed volunteers do their jobs better, feel more commitment to the organization and stay longer.

7. Volunteers Need Flexibility

Volunteers, like all workers, need to be treated as whole people, not just job-fillers. Most volunteers will feel more comfortable working with a supervisor who is interested in the rest of their lives as well as in the job they are doing for the organization. In addition, supervisors should realize that a volunteer job is seldom one's first priority, and they may need to be more flexible in excusing volunteers for family or employment obligations than they would for paid workers.

Supervising volunteers often involves balancing the needs of the volunteer for flexibility with the needs of the agency for consistency. Giving a volunteer a month off for a vacation may inconvenience staff, but having that person come back refreshed and eager to resume volunteer work may offset the inconvenience, especially since training a new volunteer can take much longer than a month. Sometimes the opposite is true: no matter how good some volunteers are, their frequent absences make them ineffective in a particular job. In that case, the volunteer administrator might try to find another slot where frequent absence does not cause problems for the organization.

8. Be Available

In supervising volunteers, one of the biggest problems occurs when the staff supervisor is simply never available to talk to the volunteer, give feedback, answer questions, and provide adequate on-the-job training. If staff members cannot be available at least part of the time, they should not take on the supervisory role. I have seen staff members ask for a volunteer's help, then never find the time to train him or her to do the job correctly. I also have observed a rather naive attitude ("Oh sure, I'll supervise that volunteer - it's no effort") on the part of staff members who do not understand how to work effectively with volunteers. Better training for staff can solve these problems.

Conclusion

Supervising volunteers has many more similarities than differences with supervising paid staff, but the few differences need attention. One of the most crucial functions of a volunteer program manager is to understand the principles of good volunteer supervision and to teach other staff members how to be successful in the supervisory role. When volunteers are not well supervised, all the time and effort spent in job design, recruitment, selection and training can come to nothing. Good supervision is vital to the ongoing development of volunteers, both for improving their job performance and for increasing their commitment to the organization. Volunteers deserve good supervision, and it is the job of the volunteer program manager to see that they get it.

Overlapping Volunteer/Staff Responsibility Task Analysis Sheet

Use the following sheet to develop clear lines of responsibility and function in areas in which there is an overlap between the job of the staff and of volunteers. At the top of the sheet list the area in which there is overlapping responsibility. In the blanks below, outline the differences in the activities which each party is responsible for within this area.

Area of Overlap:

**Activities for which Staff
is responsible:**

**Activities for which Volunteers
are responsible:**

1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.

How to Generate Conflict Between Paid Staff and Volunteers



- † Don't involve staff in the decisions as to if and how to utilize volunteers within the agency. Everybody loves a surprise.
- † Don't plan in advance the job descriptions or support and supervision systems for the volunteers. These things will work themselves out if you just give them time.
- † Accept everyone who volunteers for a position, regardless of whether you think they are over-qualified or under-qualified. Quantity is everything.
- † Assume that anyone who volunteers can pick up whatever skills or knowledge they need as they go along. If you do insist on training volunteers, be sure not to include the staff with whom the volunteers will be working in the design of the training.
- † Assume that your staff already knows everything it needs about proper volunteer utilization. Why should they receive any better training than you did?
- † Don't presume to recognize the contributions that volunteers make to the agency. After all, volunteers are simply too valuable for words.
- † Don't reward staff who work well with volunteers. They are only doing their job.
- † Don't let staff supervise the volunteers who work with them. As a volunteer director, you should be sure to retain all authority over 'your' volunteers.
- † Try to suppress any problems that come to your attention. Listening only encourages complaints.
- † In case of disputes, operate on the principle that "The Staff is Always Right." Or operate on the principle of "My Volunteers, Right or Wrong." This is no time for compromise.

MANAGEMENT CHECKLIST

✓ SUPPORT THE INITIAL DECISION TO UTILIZE VOLUNTEERS

- Educate staff about agency position supporting volunteer utilization.
- Answer staff questions about how volunteers contribute to agency mission and strength.
- Deal with staff fears about volunteer utilization in an honest and open fashion. Do not 'oversell' volunteer abilities.
- Attempt to reduce any staff anxiety, indicating that decision to utilize volunteers is under *their* control at all times.
- Work with staff to develop volunteer jobs that are important to staff and immediately helpful to performance of staff duties.
- Make follow-up calls, both by telephone and face-to-face to talk with staff throughout this decision-making process.
- Ask for feedback, both positive and negative.
- Introduce staff to other volunteer users; build a mutual support system.

✓ HELP MANAGE THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

- Assist staff with getting their decision to utilize volunteers approved.
- Assist staff with paperwork: job descriptions, requests for facilities and equipment, etc.
- Involve staff in recruiting, interviewing, and training.
- Counsel staff on key management requirements.
- Keep in touch and keep staff informed on progress in recruitment.
- Do not promise any help you cannot deliver.

✓ DEAL WITH PROBLEMS AND DISSATISFACTION

- Empathize with staff feelings.
- Respond to problems promptly and honestly.
- Continue to anticipate concerns and expectations. Be alert for what you are *not* being told.
- Reinforce the anticipated benefits.
- Never attempt to force staff usage: withdraw volunteers and deal with the problem, then seek to re-introduce usage.
- Make sure you know what is *really* wrong.

✓ ENHANCE THE RELATIONSHIP

- Be available.
- Arrange for continued personal communication.
- Do not wait for staff to come to you - check for problems and approach *them*.
- Facilitate open, candid communication.
- Maintain high quality volunteer referrals.
- Assist staff as problems or questions arise.
- Become a resource for information, help, new ideas, problem solving.
- Hold staff accountable for good volunteer management.
- Praise staff for good work, and inform staff supervisors of success.

SUPPORTING STAFF DECISIONS TO UTILIZE VOLUNTEERS