

"What do we mean when we say 'volunteers are not free'? We mean that while they may not expect to be paid in money for their efforts, they do seek and expect to receive many different sorts of compensation . . . "

Recruiting Volunteers

by Lawrence I. Kramer, Jr.

Everyone from de Tocqueville to President Nixon has commented on the uniqueness and importance of volunteers in getting things done in American society.

Volunteers are involved in countless constructive activities that enrich their lives and the lives of others. Alone, or in tandem with trained professionals, they set policy, augment programs, and raise money for churches, schools and colleges, voluntary health agencies, child and youth-serving agencies, and groups concerned with the life of the poor, the suicidal, and the mentally troubled. Volunteers make possible our political campaigns. They insure the continued existence of our symphony orchestras, opera companies, and museums. They fight to preserve our natural heritage, as well as historic manmade monuments. Volunteers are into practically everything.

Volunteers are a more important and dynamic resource for most non-profit organizations than money! Nevertheless, very few volunteer-using organizations spend as much time, thought, or energy on the identification, recruitment, and construc-

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tive employment of volunteers as they do on fund-raising.

All right, we agree that volunteers are important and wonderful — how can we recruit and hold them more successfully than we have? Here is an experience-born axiom that we use in our work with all kinds of voluntary organizations: Volunteers are not free!

THE COST

Building from the important premise that organizations that want to use volunteers incur some obligations, we have identified five basic requirements for successful volunteer recruiting:

1. *Know clearly what you want the volunteer to do.*
2. *Know why it is important.*
3. *Know where to look for volunteers.*
4. *Recruit the volunteer you want and need.*
5. *Help the volunteer to be successful.*

What do we mean when we say "Volunteers are not free"? We mean that while they may not expect to be paid in money for their efforts, they do seek and expect to receive many different sorts of compensation: companionship, status, a sense of achievement, *the feeling of having made a difference*, new knowledge, new experiences, and a new dimension to their lives. It is safe to say that most volunteers genuinely

want to contribute something of themselves, but at the same time, consciously or subconsciously, they seek some compensating reward for themselves. The volunteer-recruiter who understands this fact and analyzes the satisfaction that his prospect may seek can recruit more successfully for two reasons: (1) he can appeal to the prospective volunteer in a more attractive, specific manner; and (2) he can make sure that his organization makes every effort to fulfill its implicit "satisfaction contract" with recruits.

Let's examine a few case studies of different types of volunteers whom we have all known. These vignettes illustrate the varied reasons and combinations of reasons that motivate volunteers and also show the five basic requirements as set forth above.

A PLACE TO BE NEEDED

Frances B., 63 and a widow of 18 months, lives in a single small room in an inexpensive hotel. Her means are modest but adequate for her needs. She does not need to work for money. Before her children were born, she had been employed as a file clerk for several years in an insurance company office. She had enjoyed the work and had been good at it because of her orderly methodical approach.

Now, with the first acute pain of widowhood receding, but feeling

lonely and useless, she learns from a radio "spot" that the Volunteer Bureau is looking for volunteers to work in the office of the local Heart Association. Since her husband had died of a heart attack the thought of being of service to the Heart Association is particularly attractive to Frances. On a visit to the Heart Association Frances finds out that their special need is for someone to keep current the Association's mailing list of donors who receive the quarterly newsletter describing the research and community service programs their contributions support.

Over a cup of coffee Frances hears about the job requirements from the volunteer who has been doing the work, but who's moving out of the area, and from the Association's office manager. The office manager points out that a mailing list is only useful if it is current, and, with city people moving about as much as they do, lists tend to become outdated quickly. Frances learns from the departing volunteer that with the list at its present size the job takes about five or six hours a week, and entails typing labels, making cards for each new donor, changing addresses of donors who've moved, and removing addresses no longer current. The office manager, pleased that Frances had had filing experience which she had obviously enjoyed, promises additional help as the list grows and points out that Frances will be able to schedule her work time to her own convenience. Frances agrees to try the job for one month.

That was six years ago. Since then the list has tripled and Frances spends more than 15 hours a week, often working with other volunteers, in the Heart Association office.

VALUE RECEIVED

Why is Frances' experience a success story for her and for the Heart Association that recruited her? Frances has a place where she is needed

and wanted. In the companionship of the office setting she found an antidote for her loneliness and useful work that fits her skills and personality. For the Heart Association, Frances' work requires only that they maintain a congenial work environment, provide additional help when needed, recognize the value of Frances' contribution, and outline a precise, well-defined job to be done. No money has changed hands, but value has certainly been received on both sides. The Heart Association "pays" Frances by giving her a sense of purpose and accomplishment. In return, Frances gives time and skills worth several thousand dollars a year.

Frances' story is an example of one of the most typical uses of volunteers. The job to be done was simple and concrete. The Volunteer Bureau was the recruiting vehicle which brought Frances and the job together. But the lesson to be learned for volunteer-recruiters is the same as in the more complex situations we'll look at in a minute.

To recruit and retain volunteers it is important to know what you want done. Know how and where to look for people who can do the job. Meet the human needs of the volunteer.

In the case of Frances B. we started with her needs and motives and showed how they were met successfully by a volunteer-recruiting organization. In the next situation we are going to start with a need, an idea, and a volunteer-recruiter.

RECRUITING EXPERTISE

Reverend Matthew K. was concerned because his city lacked retirement housing for middle-income retirees. While his congregation shared his concern they felt that the magnitude of the problem was too great for them to handle. However, because of the great need they did authorize Rev. K. to see if he could put together an ecumenical committee to get a project started.

Then Rev. K. made an important move: He stopped to analyze the kinds of expertise and community muscle he'd need to deal with the complex problems of finance, construction, governmental relations, and politics which stood between him and his goal. Simply not able to identify all the help needed and ready to throw in the towel, he remembered that while "it's impossible to pick a rug up from the middle — it's easy to pick it up from any edge." He stopped trying to anticipate every problem and every necessary resource. Instead, he tried to identify one key person to whom he could turn for help.

Rev. K. picked out a tough, veteran City Councilwoman with a long-standing interest in public housing as his key person. Taking his courage in both hands, he met with the Councilwoman, told her about the project he and his congregation had in mind. He explained why he thought it was important and what it might involve, and asked if she would help.

She was convinced by his strong arguments and agreed to chair a small committee to work out a feasible plan. Then the two of them began to list the kinds of help required and the resulting list contained the names of some of the busiest and most prestigious people in town. Rev. K. was aghast. "They can't possibly make the time for our project."

The Councilwoman had not won her political spurs by being bashful: "Reverend, is this project really important?"

"Of course it is," he said, "but . . ."

"But, nothing," said his first volunteer recruit. "I agreed to help because you sold me on the idea and on the importance of my help. Others will help too if we tell them why we need them to join us!" And they did.

A MATTER OF COMPETENCE

Just like the Councilwoman they

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recognized that such a large, complex housing project couldn't be done by just anyone. Special experience and know-how were required and they responded to the challenge. From this beginning Rev. K's concern eventually grew into a soundly financed, well-constructed, seven million dollar retirement facility for middle-income retirees.

To get his first recruit Rev. K. had to know what he wanted done and why it was important. He knew that if he couldn't explain it clearly, then it wasn't clear enough in his own mind. The Councilwoman forced him to recognize that specially qualified people would be required to get the job done.

Very often volunteers are chosen, not because they are necessary, but because they are available. For important jobs availability is often not enough. In our experience the successful volunteer-recruiter is the one who remembers that volunteers are people, has a clear, explicit picture of what the volunteer is to do, why it's important; and why the target volunteer is a good choice for the job. When the recruiter has all these requirements in mind he still has to figure out where to look for volunteer help. For many types of volunteers, the Volunteer Bureau, if your community is blessed with one, is an excellent place to start.

The Volunteer Bureau serves as a broker between organizations seeking volunteer help and prospective volunteers looking for rewarding assignments. While it is successful in many different volunteer-search situations, it is generally most effective in finding volunteers for routine helping roles. The organization seeking special skills, technical expertise, or community "clout" will have to develop other resource banks.

The good Volunteer Bureau executive will force the volunteer-recruiter to develop a precise picture of the volunteer job he's trying to fill. This in itself contributes greatly to successful volunteer recruiting, because volunteers, being people, like to know what's expected of them.

USING WHAT'S AT HAND

Sometimes, as in the case of Rev. K., the complex nature of the job dictates that one must use the entire

community as resource pool if the diverse talents required are to be found. More often the primary volunteer resource pool is right under the recruiter's nose, taken for granted, unclearly perceived, and poorly used.

Consider the plight of Bob S., Chairman of the Church Extension Committee of a denominational judicatory in Hawaii. Bob's organization was a client of our management consultant firm. We were helping them develop a reorganization plan. Their membership included a heavy representation from the establishment power structure.

In the course of our work, Bob asked me to recommend a mainland real estate firm to advise on disposal of some church-owned property. I started to make a suggestion, but then realized where the best answer really lay. I asked Bob if he could name six bank, loan-office, or real-estate executives from within his own constituency right there in Hawaii.

Bob paused a moment, nonplussed. Then he ticked off nine names — people he knew in such positions. He agreed that any one of them could give expert advice on the problem confronting his committee. I suggested that he call on the person he and his committee felt to be the best qualified of the nine possibilities. Bob was to tell the nominee, truthfully, that careful study of the membership resources of the church indicated that he was the one best qualified to help with the specific, critical job at hand. "Then ask for his help," I said.

Several weeks later Bob called me at my San Francisco office. He told me that they had followed my suggestion. Much to their amazement, the prospective volunteer had appeared delighted at being approached and had responded generously. He had not only agreed to help personally, but made his company's plane available for an inspection of the properties under consideration!

"WE NEED YOU!"

Was his very positive and generous response surprising? It shouldn't have been. After all, the request was a compliment of high order. There

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was a specific job to be done. The target volunteer had been identified as the best qualified person for the job. He was told: "Here's what has to be done. We think you are the best person to do it. We need you."

Know clearly what you want to do. Look for help first from among the human resources closest to your own organization—within the constituency. Carefully select the qualified volunteer you want and go after him or her.

The case of Bob S. clearly shows the importance of knowing the capabilities of the individuals who make up your membership. It is relatively simple to start an information bank on interests and skills of members—professions, interests, hobbies—so that when you have a specific job that needs to be done your group has a detailed talent bank to draw from. Furthermore, most organizations only talk to their members when they want money. Building a talent information bank gives organizational leadership and staff a chance to talk together as concerned people, not as solicitor and perspective donor. It's an opportunity not to be missed.

BUILDING YOUR VOLUNTEER BANK

If you want to start building and organizing your own information bank of volunteers, here are some pointers: Start with a few assumptions. First, you can't hurt most persons' feelings by asking him or her to talk about himself. Second, many members of your constituency will be grateful for the opportunity to make a unique contribution of themselves if they can be shown that their input can make a difference. Third, your organization will be more effective in its work if it purposely harnesses the energies of its members to the accomplishment of worthwhile, mutually agreed upon goals.

Finally, you have a reservoir of skills and interests hidden in your membership waiting to be tapped.

Always remembering that volunteers are people, put together a simple questionnaire that will enable membership teams to uncover useful hidden resources buried in your constituency.

You want to find out what your members think they do well and what they like to do, which is not always the same thing. Do they prefer to be part of a group or to work alone? Do they prefer to lead or to follow? Do they like routine, or would they rather come to grips with finite "one shot" projects? Are they gregarious, choosing to work with people rather than with things or ideas?

You will also want to know about their professional or occupational training and experience, but don't be too quick to label people because of their occupations. If it is true that inside every fat person there is a thin person trying to get out, it is also true that a banker may not want to be on the finance committee. Some teachers like to teach avocationally but others would rather do something totally different. When we make a major career decision in our lives we foreclose some alternatives because we can only tread one path at a time. Volunteer activity can reopen some of those doors we have had to close in the past. We can enjoy and exercise old skills and interests which have been laid aside as our career interest preempts our time and energy. As a volunteer the banker can be a teacher, the housewife a camp program planner, the carpenter a fund-raiser, the teacher a policy-maker.

The recruiting of volunteers is the beginning of a new relationship between the volunteer and the organization to which he or she brings his

time, energy, and skills. The very act of recruitment carries with it opportunities and obligations to both parties. The volunteer is given the opportunity to serve, expand his horizons, and enrich his experience. The organization, particularly its professional staff, has the obligation to use the talents of the volunteers wisely and constructively. The volunteer must earn his successes and satisfactions, but the paid professional has the responsibility for seeing that everything is done to make possible the volunteer's success.

The volunteer who feels that he has wasted his time or who feels exploited or used only as a money-saving expedient is a lost friend and a new enemy. Staff support for volunteer efforts is an essential: setting up meetings, distributing notices and minutes, and follow-up on details between meetings are all usually staff responsibilities. They may seem insignificant, but they are crucial. Anyone who doubts this need only look around at the numerous failures among understaffed volunteer groups. They start out with a burst of enthusiasm but they are soon dragged down because volunteers are loath to get involved with the day-to-day detail provisions of organizational continuity that staff members are paid to provide.

CONCLUSION

Recruiting volunteers should be fun. It opens up new horizons for the volunteer and it expands the capabilities of the recruiting organization. It does require that the recruiting agency know what it wants to do, why it is important, and where its volunteer resources are. The organization that does this homework consciously and then recruits the people it needs and helps them to achieve success and satisfaction will never have to resort to conscription.