

CAN THIS MARRIAGE BE SAVED?



Thoughts On Making the Paid Staff/Volunteer Relationship Healthier

By Deborah Schroder

“It was a marriage made in heaven!” We don’t often use this phrase to describe marriages these days. Most of us have come to the conclusion that good marriages are formed and sustained through hard work, cooperation and consideration.

Unfortunately, people frequently assume that paid staff/volunteer relationships “just happen,” but actually these “marriages” are also formed through hard work, cooperation and consideration. The dynamics of paid and non-paid employees working through an agency or organization for the benefit of the community are complex. No matter how many theories on motivation one reads, several facts remain clear—individuals are working together, for whatever personal reasons, for the greater good of the client/organization/community and must respect each other’s motivation, knowledge and time.

In almost every instance of paid staff/volunteer difficulty, the relationship was initially formed with the best of intentions. Good intentions are easy to set aside momentarily, however, as workloads increase, budgets decrease, and egos and tempers collide.

Assuming that the volunteer program manager has already developed some valuable preventative medicine in the form of clear, concise job descriptions, agency personnel are often startled when problems arise between paid staff and volunteers. If everyone knows what his or her job is, and is doing it, how can there be trouble?

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As with any other kind of relationship, the potential for trouble often lies buried in the subconscious minds of the individuals involved. No matter how enlightened we may consider ourselves, unconsciously we may still be harboring some false stereotypes, misguided assumptions or unrealistic expectations about our working relationships with one another, whether we are paid staff or volunteers.

Some of the more common nonproductive scenarios of paid staff/volunteer relationships are as follows:

Nonproductive Paid Staff/Volunteer Relationships

1. Parent/Child—An easy relationship to fall into—we’re all so familiar with it. The volunteer has very limited participation in the decision-making process of the organization. Paid staff tends to “talk down” to the volunteer and doesn’t usually feel that the volunteer is as capable as a paid staffer. The volunteer is not held accountable for his or her actions; therefore, he or she does not feel a strong sense of responsibility for those actions. The staff person always knows best.

2. Child/Child—“It’s mine, mine, mine!” Picturing this scenario is easy—one needs only to imagine two 3-year-olds fighting over a pile of blocks. Each participant is saying, “I want the decisions, I want the responsibility, I want the credit—this is my program, and I don’t want to share. You can do the stuff that I don’t want to do, isn’t in my job description, you’re getting paid to do, volunteers always do.”

3. Trainer/Poodle—If the volunteer will only jump through enough hoops, he or she will earn the promised reward. Paid staff dangles some strange carrots, never

bothering to find out why the volunteer showed up in the first place. Each volunteer wants a lapel pin after five years, right? Paid staff is not open to suggestions, comments or, heaven forbid, criticism.

4. Captives/Pirates—A small band of paid staff held captive by the whims of the volunteers. The captives are notorious for begging, pleading for more time, more energy, more commitment. These captives, or paid staff, rely heavily on guilt—trying to make the pirates give in and serve on that board, bake those cookies, raise those funds. The volunteers sometimes seem to enjoy the power they hold over the paid staff. After all, they can quit any time—they’re “only volunteers.”

While these scenarios are undeniably exaggerated to illustrate the situations, they do exist in many organizations and agencies.

Productive Paid Staff/Volunteer Relationships

Some examples of more productive paid staff/non-paid staff relationships are:

1. Teammate—Paid staff and non-paid staff work together as equals in order to accomplish the agency’s goals. Paid and non-paid staff share a feeling of ownership of the program, each valuing the other’s contribution. All positions are considered equally important to the good health of the program, with volunteers involved at all levels of planning and decision-making.

2. Employer/Staff—slightly more hierarchical than the “team” concept. Clearer lines of authority exist with non-paid staff usually directly responsible to paid staff. Volunteers are included in the planning

process, however, and their participation in it is an important facet to the success of this relationship.

3. Organizer/Entrepreneur—Paid staff essentially outlines what needs to be done or needs to happen (non-paid staff may also participate at this level), and volunteer staff “takes the ball and runs with it.” This relationship features great flexibility and creativity for the volunteers, but to be optimally effective, must have some solid guidelines in place and periodic review sessions for purposes of accountability.

It becomes obvious that clear and frequent communication plays an important role in the development of productive paid staff/volunteer relationships. As with marriage, a sense of honesty and mutual trust is the best enabler for a healthy relationship. But one factor not touched on yet, and perhaps the most important of all, is a good sense of humor. We must all be able to laugh at ourselves as we work together to provide human services. If we can't, we risk denying the “human” element of human services.

As we continue to work together—paid and non-paid staff—it is beneficial periodically to evaluate our “way of work”—our working style. A good way to do this is to introduce some consciousness-raising entertainment into paid staff/volunteer meetings.

A skit or a one-act play is a fun way to “break the ice” and encourage people to open up and share feelings and concerns. Involve both paid staff and volunteers in the skit—it's fun to have them switch roles and have a chance to experience each other's position.

If we can laugh at exaggerated caricatures in a skit or play, we are often more able to see the tendencies for those same behaviors or attitudes in our own agencies or organizations.

A skit can be written to cover any number of situations or problems. The following skit has been used at a variety of meetings and workshops and usually promotes laughter followed by some thoughtful sharing.

“Secret Thoughts” (A Skit)

Our story takes place in a medium-sized nonprofit agency. “Maggie” is a paid staff person in the senior outreach program. “Laura” is one of the program's volunteers. The story also features “Maggie's Thoughts” and “Laura's Thoughts” (props—it's nice to have red devil's horns for the “Thoughts” to wear).

Maggie: I'm so happy to see you today, Laura. I'm sorry that I called at the last minute and didn't give you any notice.

Maggie's Thoughts: Good grief! You finally showed up! It's about time—probably

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had to drag yourself away from “As the World Turns.”

Laura: Oh, it was no problem. I'm always happy to help out when I can. I never get that much done at home on my day off anyway.

Laura's Thoughts: I was only in the middle of cleaning the living room, doing nine loads of laundry and making a week's worth of casseroles.

Maggie: Sue called and said she couldn't come in and we are just swamped with paperwork. Would you mind getting her reports caught up?

Maggie's Thoughts: I want you behind that desk until the in-basket is empty!

Laura: Oh, I don't mind at all. I know how quickly the paperwork gets piled up around here.

Laura's Thoughts: If the staff at this place did more than just drink coffee, the paperwork would be *done*.

Maggie: I hope that these funding reports make sense to you—statistics can be so confusing.

Maggie's Thoughts: If you even came to any of the volunteer training sessions, you might have a clue about what needs to be done.

Laura's Thoughts: I sure wish you'd remember that I never said that I was good at this kind of stuff. Do you ever look over the volunteer registration forms?

Laura: By the way, how are the plans for the spaghetti fundraiser coming along?

Maggie's Thoughts: If you ever came to one committee meeting, you might know. And it's been in the agency newsletter—but then you probably just toss that in the trash.

Maggie: Oh, just great. We're hoping to

raise 30 percent more than we did last year. I hope that you're still planning on serving.

Laura's Thoughts: Sure, slopping spaghetti around for 200 people sounds like great fun. And what will you be doing? Probably showing up in a designer dress to give a little thank-you speech at the end.

Laura: I'll be there—our spaghetti dinner is such a nice annual tradition.

Laura's Thoughts: It'll probably cost me \$15 to bring my family so they can eat a dinner that would have cost me \$5 to make at home.

Maggie: I just don't know what we'd do without the community's support for our fundraisers.

Maggie's Thoughts: I can't believe my salary depends on stuffing 200 people full of Italian food. Maybe I should have gone into some other line of work. Mother always said that I would have made a great dentist.

Laura: Have you ever thought about asking Karen Clark to help plan the dinner? You know, she's in charge of all the catering and banquets at the City Center Hotel.

Maggie: Well, I wouldn't want to ask someone to volunteer to do the same kind of thing that they do at work all week.

Laura's Thoughts: Well, I suppose I'd better get busy on these reports. I really enjoy volunteering here.

Maggie: I don't know what we'd do without you.

Laura's Thoughts: Volunteering is for the birds! It definitely should be illegal.

Maggie's Thoughts: Volunteers—can't live with them, can't live without them.

Maggie and Laura, in unison: This agency wouldn't last ten minutes without me!

THE END

Sometimes it may seem that getting a relationship to a productive, equally beneficial stage isn't worth the time and effort. In the case of the paid staff/volunteer relationship, a concentrated effort on everyone's part usually pays off in very positive results, to the benefit of not only those involved, but to the organization and the greater community.

Keeping the big picture in mind of what the combination of volunteerism and community organizations can accomplish often helps those of us involved in paid staff/volunteer relationships come to the conclusion that yes, “This marriage can be saved!” Not only saved but reinforced and strengthened through hard work, cooperation, consideration . . . and a dose of laughter.