

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATOR?

VIEWPOINTS FROM SEVERAL PRACTITIONERS

By Linda Thornburg

What makes an effective volunteer administrator? VAL asked several volunteer administrators and one volunteer consultant. They run very different types of volunteer programs, from collecting and distributing food and firewood in Corvallis, Oregon, to supporting the Boston Symphony Orchestra. But their answers are surprisingly similar. They include:

- Volunteer "ownership" of the program.
- Empowering the volunteer, who should have authority (and accountability) for significant decisions and actions.
- Eliminating the "us vs. them" mentality of staff toward volunteers and, sometimes, volunteers toward staff.
- Communicating well—with all the different constituencies with whom the volunteer administrator must work: volunteers, staff, executive director, board of directors, even clients or program beneficiaries.
- Formalizing the volunteer job, including job description, proper orientation and training, evaluation, prospects for "promotion," and non-monetary compensation and benefits.

The opinions were offered by:

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Lisa Miller-Gray, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Austin, Texas Public Library
Margaret Hilliard-Lazenby, Director of Volunteers, Boston Symphony Orchestra Association

John Mason, Director, United Way Crusade of Mercy Volunteer Center, Chicago

Heller An Shapiro, Director of Volunteers, Friends of the Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C.

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Running Your Volunteer Program Like a Business

The standards you set for nonprofit programs should be every bit as stringent as those you would set for profit-making enterprises, according to Cheryl Yallen, a consultant and trainer who specializes in volunteer programs. "It's a very competitive world and volunteer coordinators are competing for program money and for volunteers," she said. "This means you can't take every Tom, Dick or Mary that comes through your door. If you do, you will spend more time in supervising and counseling volunteers than in serving the needs of your clients. Your program will suffer. We've got to get away from the no-

tion that volunteering is a bleeding heart industry."

John Mason, director of the Chicago Volunteer Center, agrees. "One should not have different qualifications for staff than one has for volunteers doing the same work," he said. "You wouldn't hire a secretary who couldn't type and you shouldn't hire a volunteer receptionist who can't answer the phone correctly. A job description is absolutely essential for every volunteer position."

Mason thinks stringent qualifications for each volunteer position elevates the position and makes the program more effective. "People don't have any 'spare' time, just as they don't have any 'spare' money," he said. "They have discretionary time, and there are many activities competing for it. When you ask for someone's time, you are asking for a valuable commitment. Make sure you clearly define responsibilities so that you can recruit and screen properly, and so strengthen the program's effectiveness."

Communicating Responsibilities Through Job Descriptions

Margaret Hilliard-Lazenby's experience in her employer's summer home taught her "as nothing before how valuable a job description can be." She works for the Boston Symphony Orchestra Association,

which involves 800 volunteers in the Boston area and another 800 in the Berkshires. The Berkshires group, along with a small staff, has responsibility for the well-known Tanglewood music festivals held each summer in the open air.

Tanglewood volunteers have a long history of involvement with the symphony. They originated the idea of holding concerts at Tanglewood, and many in the generally older population of the Berkshires have been involved with the Tanglewood program almost since it was started more than 50 years ago. The community is largely retired, and Tanglewood plays an important part in defining the culture of the area.

Each summer one third of the staff from the Boston offices of the symphony moves to Tanglewood. Last summer, Hilliard-Lazenby, who is responsible for all Association volunteers, spent the summer at Tanglewood for the first time.

"Tanglewood staff were happy managing their own programs, but when it came time to help with other projects, such as the annual meeting, some of them lost interest quickly," she said. "There was animosity between staff and volunteer leaders."

So throughout the summer, she met with Tanglewood's volunteer chairman, members of the volunteer executive committee, and volunteer project chairs to write job descriptions for project chairmen and executive committee members.

"This was a really positive process," she said. "We showed the job descriptions to everyone involved, including staff responsible for these projects, and we found that staff and volunteers did indeed have different perceptions of responsibility and different expectations about what the other group should do."

Hilliard-Lazenby wanted a big picture of how volunteer projects fit into the total scheme of Tanglewood, who key staff members for various projects were, what the managing director expected of staff and volunteers, and what the volunteer project chairs and their volunteers saw as their responsibilities. She found that negotiation among her different constituencies was necessary, and that the more specific the tasks listed in the job description, the better. Responsibilities had to be laid out clearly, or one group assumed the other group had the responsibility.

"What we got from the process of sharing the job descriptions with all of those affected was extremely valuable," Hilliard-Lazenby said. "First, it clarified re-

sponsibilities. But it also opened communications between staff and volunteers, helped us all focus on what was really for the good of the symphony, and set a precedent for future volunteer positions. If someone comes to me with an idea, I tell them now that I can't go any further until I have a job description to go along with it. The description may change as we think and talk about it, but we need a place to start, in considering why this position is needed and what the expectations are."

Hilliard-Lazenby established a procedure to review and update job descriptions at the end of each summer musical session. Incoming project chairs can use the new job description as an orientation for their upcoming responsibilities.

Evaluation Essential to a Healthy Program

Evaluating volunteers is something nobody seems very comfortable doing, but it is essential to the health of the program, Cheryl Yallen believes. An annual evaluation serves several purposes, not the least of which is to give the volunteer an opportunity to get and give feedback. From a yearly formal evaluation, a volunteer administrator can document the validity of using volunteers in the program, clean up the volunteer list so that those who are no longer active don't continue to appear, and contribute to the volunteer's sense of program ownership.

"If you have a volunteer who constantly comes in late and or doesn't show up and nobody says anything, that volunteer certainly isn't going to feel needed," Yallen said. "You must constantly be sending the message to the volunteer that he or she is important, and one of the ways to do that is to evaluate their efforts seriously."

As a part of the evaluation you can gain valuable information from volunteers about their satisfaction with the program, how easy it is to work with clients, if their expectations are being met and their thoughts about how to make the program stronger.

Compensation and Benefits

"Nobody volunteers out of the kindness of their heart," Yallen said. "They volunteer to meet people, to contribute to a special cause, to learn new skills. They need a form of paycheck, just like paid staff members. It's the coordinator's job to see what that paycheck has to be, and paychecks have to be individualized for individual volunteers."

John Mason says you have to read be-

tween the lines to determine the appropriate paycheck for each volunteer. "Most people can't articulate exactly what they need and want, but you can learn these things if you are sensitive," he says. "I have a volunteer who edits our newsletter because she wants to maintain her writing skills. Her paycheck is recognition from me and others of her writing excellence."

Sharon Walkinstik, in coordinating the collection and distribution of food for a community in Oregon, works with some low-income volunteers. Their paychecks are sometimes gift certificates for haircuts, or new clothes that they can wear comfortably in the office.

Providing the Opportunity for Ownership in a Program

Similar to the concept of a paycheck is the concept of ownership, or having a meaningful stake in the program and its success. Ownership is easier when you share most of the information you have about the program. Sharon Walkinstik tells her volunteers how their work, no matter how small the job, affects the total program. She says it's important that her volunteers know what's going to happen with the fruits of their labor, what types of obstacles the program may run up against, and what types of funding the program has.

She holds monthly meetings with key people to inform them of underlying developments that may affect her food distribution programs, such as actions by the U.S. Congress, any new legislation or procedures from the state of Oregon, and any local ordinances. Walkinstik's volunteers, in 11 nonprofit gleaning and distribution groups, distributed one-and-a-half million pounds of food to 56,000 people last year. She thinks it is important that those involved with the program know this.

"Sharing information is really important, especially if you are forced to make changes in program content or procedures. If we only tell people what we think they need to know, we degrade them, we don't empower them," Walkinstik said.

Yallen remembers an organization involved in providing housing. The program used both direct service volunteers, who were quite familiar with the houses and their tenants, and clerical workers, who coordinated mailings for fundraising. "The fundraisers wanted to go to the houses and see what they were like and who lived in them," Yallen said, "but until they made the request, nobody had thought about their ownership of this particular aspect of the program."

Staff Respect for Volunteers

Not only do volunteers need ownership in the program, but staff need ownership in the volunteers, a condition sometimes even more difficult to establish. "Staff often don't trust volunteers a lot," Cheryl Yallen said. "They have misconceptions about them—that they won't be reliable, that they are going to take over the job or show up the staff, that it's easier to do it alone."

Yallen and Mason agree that it's important to involve staff in creating the job description, recruitment and screening, and orientation and training for volunteers. "If they are involved from the beginning, they are better able to conceptualize how volunteers also can be professionals," Mason said.

Lisa Miller-Gray has more than 500 volunteers and 18 branches to oversee as director of volunteers for the Austin City Public Library. Her volunteers help with or run a number of programs, including a reading and math tutoring program which has gained some attention from the city as a prototype for similar endeavors, partly because of its use of skilled engineers in higher math tutoring.

Miller-Gray says she wrestled with challenges of trust from staff when she assumed her position five years ago. There had been no one doing her job for six months, and staff had become comfortable with the idea of not using volunteers, or using them in individual and sometimes idiosyncratic ways. She developed a strategy for gaining the interest and support of staff that included keeping her office open and accessible, making her volunteers wear badges to identify them so that the public would know how many were working, coaching volunteers about dress and behavior, and sending the best volunteers to fill jobs where staff members were the most skeptical.

"These people turn out to be my best advocates," she said. "But the most important thing you can do to help your staff take ownership of volunteers is to involve them in orientation and training. This means the volunteer gets really good training and the staff person has an interest in seeing that the volunteer succeeds. It also leads to some volunteers being hired for staff positions, a 'try before you buy' opportunity for staff."

Heller An Shapiro, whose Friends of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts volunteers in Washington, D.C. put in 71,000 hours at an estimated value of \$953,000 in 1991, says she encourages

staff to give volunteers those back burner projects they have to do but hate. "Staff will miss volunteers when they don't show up then," she said.

Shapiro recognizes staff who work well with volunteers in her volunteer newsletter. She succeeded in making working with volunteers a category on which staff are evaluated in their performance reviews.

Shapiro's last training was an all-day affair, in which she tried to capture the same excitement one might experience at an all-day conference. Volunteers were trained by Shapiro and staff and had lunch with a key staff person. Volunteer supervisors also participated in the training by conducting their own workshops. She says it energized everyone involved.

Communicating Change and Working with Volunteers to Accept It

The longer your volunteers have been a part of your program, the harder it will be for most of them to accept major changes—such as changes in key staff people, in procedures that at one time may have seemed set in stone, or in the program's mission. Two key points to remember: Eliminate as many surprises as possible by giving people information far in advance of the change, and solicit the input of volunteers who will be affected by the change.

Heller An Shapiro gives a wonderful example of a change which could have wreaked havoc with her volunteers but resulted in more ownership in the program. Many of the Kennedy Center volunteers work in gift shops and information booths where they deal continuously with visitors to the Kennedy Center. A major renovation of the building, which took two years to accomplish, included reconstructing the gift areas and the desks of these volunteers. Shapiro held volunteer-wide meetings to talk about the changes and had those volunteers directly affected meet with the architect to relay ideas about what would work best.

When she learned a staff member who worked closely with gift shop volunteers was to be laid off, Shapiro announced this immediately to her volunteers, both through their supervisors, who are volunteers themselves, and in writing, through a "blue book" that she uses to give every volunteer information about policy and procedure changes.

"We talked about this for six weeks before it happened," she said. "I made sure

volunteers knew that the employee would have severance pay and outplacement help, and that the termination was because the Kennedy Center had to cut back on staff. We don't want people shaken when they walk in the door; things should go according to plan."

Sharon Walkinstik remembers when she had to change some monthly reporting forms so that they could be entered in a computer data base. "For three or four months I talked about the forms, telling people what information I needed. I asked them how they wanted to put the forms together. I had meetings in my office to discuss this. I had the consultant designing the database explain what we were doing. It made the volunteers feel privileged to help make these changes. When I had the proof copy I called them and asked them what they thought. We changed it again.

"If you don't involve your volunteers in these changes, you will spend a lot of time on damage control."

John Mason thinks that you need to use several ways to communicate, both when training and when communicating change. "People learn in different ways," he said. "Some people need to hear the words; others need to see them written. Still others, a smaller percentage, need to feel them, to have this knowledge experientially. You can sometimes tell which works best for an individual by listening to how they talk. Some will say 'I see that.' Others will say 'that sounds right.' The third group might say something like 'that doesn't feel right.'"

Volunteer Committees Can Be Very Helpful

A good way to communicate change and establish ownership is through volunteer committees. "I'm a big believer in committees," Cheryl Yallen said. "You need to choose people with the right skills, set up the rules ahead of time, and be clear about who has to approve what. You want your volunteers to come up with policies. They will be well designed, but the executive director and board need to have final say."

The Boston Symphony Orchestra Volunteer Association has a number of committees that work to coordinate the various responsibilities of the Association. With a total of 1,600 volunteers, a highly structured hierarchy is necessary. There is an executive volunteer committee, to which nine staff members were recently added to facilitate communication between staff

and volunteers. The executive committee includes volunteer program chairmen. There is a board of overseers, of which each member represents various committee responsibilities. And there is a board of trustees, the members of which are selected from the board of overseers.

This hierarchy gives the Association something Yallen calls "mobility on the career ladder." Margaret Hilliard-Lazenby says a committed volunteer chairperson at Tanglewood whose term was up was able to move to the board of overseers as an adjunct member and continue to use her expertise. Had this option not been available, this volunteer would have worked against some of the changes necessary because she cared so much about Tanglewood and couldn't see the value of the changes.

Heller An Shapiro uses her volunteer advisory committee at the Kennedy Center to help communicate difficult changes. The committee members serve two-year terms, half rotating every year. Their photos are always posted so that everyone knows who they are. The agenda for their meetings are distributed ahead of time, so that volunteers can come to them with special concerns before the committee meets.

Empowering Volunteers Results from Good Supervision

An empowered volunteer will add the most value to your program. In supervising volunteers, volunteer administrators, supervisors who are volunteers, and staff who supervise volunteers all face the same challenge: how to give up control without giving up standards for the program. Supervision is more of an art than a science, John Mason says. You have to intuit which people need to have everything laid out for them and which like to be given the desired results and left the freedom to achieve them the way they best see fit.

Good supervision requires open communication between the supervisor and the volunteer, clearly defined responsibilities for each, sensitivity to the things that motivate individuals, a firmness in pointing out mistakes and letting the volunteer know when their actions are not acceptable, and a willingness to listen to volunteer's ideas.

"Don't come with a finished attitude; come with the attitude, I need your input," Heller An Shapiro said. "We have several programs in the Kennedy Center which wouldn't have been started if we hadn't

listened to our volunteers. They are the closest to the visitors, and they know what visitors want."

Shapiro said one of the best programs at the Center is a self-guided tour for those visitors who can't come between the hours of ten and one, when guided tours are given. "Our volunteers suggested this and designed it. I gave it to our advertising department, who just put the final touches on it."

Sharon Walkinstik is writing a manual on how to put together a gleaning group. She wouldn't think of doing it without asking her volunteers for their input. "My philosophy is to make sure to give every volunteer dignity in some way," she said. "I haven't yet found a volunteer who doesn't live up to my expectations. If you see volunteers right, they get what they want and you get what you want."

Learning from Other Programs

Lisa Miller-Gray is a valuable resource for other volunteer administrators in Austin. She is the past president of the Austin DOVIA (Directors of Volunteers in Agencies) group, and is known for her ability to put her hands on the right material for whatever challenge comes up. But Miller-Gray also is learning all the time from others in the volunteer community.

She attends orientation sessions of other groups just to get ideas for what works and what doesn't, and she volunteers in literacy programs and pet therapy groups to be reminded of what it's like to be the volunteer. She says giving a workshop is a wonderful way to learn. "You have to do enough research to become an instant expert, and you learn by teaching." Miller-Gray picks one theme a year to research. This year it's liability.

John Mason says it's important not to give up volunteering. "There is no substitute for networking and learning, for trying out things you might not be comfortable getting paid for in a volunteer setting."

He also thinks volunteer administrators need to get out of their own settings to stimulate a wider perspective. "Businesses call it benchmarking," he says, "which means looking at the best practices for various areas. Volunteer administrators can do the same, and it's most effective when you go to an agency or program that is out of your discipline. You can learn how they approach the old standards—interviewing, orientation, training, supervision, recognition and rewards, and some of their ideas may benefit your own unique program." ■

APPLYING BENCHMARKING TO VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION

The following definition of benchmarking have been excerpted, with permission from the winter 1992 issue of HR Horizons. It was written by Jac Fitz-enz, Ph.D., who is recognized as the pioneering developer of the total system method of managing the return of investment of staff functions. His methods on the design and implementation of staff strategic management and measurement systems are currently being applied in over 400 companies in the U.S.

Like most newly discovered ideas, benchmarking, currently one of the most talked about business monitoring processes, has been around in various forms for more than a decade. Its present popularity is due largely to publication of the work Xerox has done in benchmarking. Since then stories of other benchmarking efforts have come out and many organizations have jumped on the bandwagon.

What is Benchmarking?

In its simplest sense, benchmarking is a process for searching out best methods. However, it is much more than a field research activity. Benchmarking is a proactive process that yields data used by managers to construct objectives based on current leading practices and metrics. It is not a mechanism for setting resource reduction targets. Rather, its objective is to redeploy and more efficiently use resources. The result may even suggest an increase of resource commitment to a given process.

Benchmarking fits very well with quality and customer service improvement projects. In fact, the use of benchmarking in these types of activities is what generated its current popularity. Benchmarks are reference points and models toward which quality program managers drive their efforts. Rather than focus solely on internal improvement goals, most quality programs now look outside as well. The purpose is to locate and study how the best organizations are managing given processes and to learn what types of results they have obtained. This information then serves both as a goal and as a measure of progress.