

Are You Using Volunteers Effectively?

A maxim of time management is to aim for effectiveness over efficiency, since efficiency is doing something right, while effectiveness is doing the right thing right. This has particular meaning in volunteer management. It's not enough for volunteers to do a job well. The real question is: Are volunteers putting their time and energy into doing the most needed jobs well?

Many organizations assume that, if people seem happy in their volunteer work, everything is fine. But job satisfaction is only one criterion of effective volunteer

effort. Perhaps more crucial is whether or not volunteers are helping the organization address priority needs.

Consider these examples of ineffective use of volunteers (all of them real):

◆ A senior center tells a printer not to use its automatic folding machine for 5,000 invitations (a cost of no more than \$40) because "folding will give today's volunteers something to do."

◆ A political campaign manager has one group of volunteers stuffing envelopes in the front room while another group unstuffs them in the back room because "keeping

people busy makes them feel affiliated with the candidate."

◆ A hospital volunteer director has a closetful of undistributed baby booties despite a decline in maternity care because "the volunteers have been knitting these for 30 years and love to do it."

It is hard to believe there weren't other tasks these volunteers could have done to contribute more meaningfully. Very few agencies would purposely waste donated money. Yet contributed time is wasted when volunteers work like this.

There's an inherent conflict between

what volunteers want to do and how organizations create volunteer projects. Because many paid workers are overworked and have little time to devote to thinking about volunteers, assignments are created quickly and without much respect for the skills or interests of those who will fill them. While it may be difficult to parcel out work when volunteer time comes in short fragments, the real problem is usually little faith in the abilities of volunteers. It's less risky to limit volunteers to tangential roles that wouldn't be missed if the volunteers are undependable.

But for the volunteer, time carved out of a busy schedule for volunteer work is quite precious. Volunteers hope their time will have real meaning and make a differ-

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ence. Given the choice, people would select a volunteer assignment that accomplishes the most—in fact, that's the whole point. And ethically, volunteers trust organizations not to put them to work on useless things.

So, if agencies limit volunteer roles while people volunteer to do the most good, can these two perspectives be reconciled? They can, but only through thoughtful work design and periodic critical assessment.

Begin with the question: "What needs to be done?" This is very different from "What could volunteers do around here?" A serious identification of client and staff needs should lead an agency to define ends-oriented work and then recruit the right people to volunteer for those assignments. Goals and objectives need to be articulated for volunteer work just as they would for employees.

At regular intervals, evaluate volunteers' work to assure quality of performance and the satisfaction of both giver and recipient. The real point, though, is to assess whether the tasks are still valid. Has the client population changed over the years? Have the problems addressed by your agency changed and have volunteer roles adapted accordingly? What will be the most pressing issues for your agency in the next decade? How will volunteers contribute to those priorities?

One of the rewards of focusing volunteers on the most important work is that you'll attract the most competent and engaged individuals. If you value this "people raising" the way you value fundraising, you'll never again waste contributed time.