

On Volunteers

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Volunteers and community relations

You might have heard (or even said) that volunteers are "good public relations" and that they are "community representatives" bringing views of the community to your group and representing your group to the community. Both might be true, but neither occurs spontaneously.

Are you missing some exceptional opportunities to spread your message or gain a new perspective?

Find specific ways for volunteers to get word out about your work:

- Give each volunteer three agency brochures and ask him or her to give them to someone who might benefit from knowing about your services.

- Ask volunteers to write to funders, legislators, or the newspaper about what they have learned about your agency or cause while working for you.

- Select a work project that requires lots of hands and ask each volunteer to bring one friend or relative for three hours to help accomplish the task. (This is far more effective than the common practice of holding volunteer recruitment "teas" in which friends of current volunteers are fed a sign-up pitch along with cookies.) The project is an end unto itself, will make all who participate feel good, and does more to publicize your usefulness to the community than do speeches.

Beware

You may need to begin by making sure all volunteers are really your supporters. This is not self-evident! For example, some volunteers may be giving their time to "protect" clients of the organization from being mistreated. If volunteers have taken on the role of watchdog or advocate, find ways to show approval of their concern for your clients. Win them over by enlisting their help in making services the best they can be.

You may find that some volunteers are positive about your organization, but do their assignments routinely without much thought. Or, their assignment may be done off-site so they have few opportunities to connect with what is being done by the rest of the organization. In these cases, your first task is to help volunteers rediscover the feelings that made them volunteer initially.

Once you feel certain that the majority of volunteers are enthusiastic about their work and about the organization, you can begin to translate such good feelings into more concrete community relations work.

For volunteers to be effective as public relations agents, they need accurate information. On a regular basis, keep volunteers informed about new services, changes in personnel, issues affecting your agency. For

example, a hospital in the Philadelphia area ran a day-long seminar for volunteers about AIDS and the hospital's response to it. There were several purposes to this day: Addressing volunteers' fears about the disease; asking participants to share the information as a public service of the hospital; and making a case for the hospital's request for increased funding. Without apology, the administration ended the program by asking for letters of support and for the volunteers to speak out in the community on behalf of the hospital.

Even if your issues do not require a full-day seminar, consider whether periodic meetings to inform volunteers about your plans for the future might not yield positive results. Adding volunteers to your newsletter mailing list or even to in-house memo distribution might also increase their ability to speak accurately on your behalf.

Internal feedback

Volunteers bring a different perspective to your agency than do paid employees or clients. This point of view may result from being less vested in the professional process, or from being younger or older, or from simply having the distance that a part-time schedule allows. Do you have a way to let the volunteer perspective be heard?

Here are a few simple strategies for getting useful feedback from volunteers:

- Ask them. Informally or formally, be

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sure to elicit the opinions of volunteers. Their point-of-view can be valuable on any subject from the proposed new logo design to what clients think about a particular service offered (remember that volunteers often are in a position to hear what clients are saying). Schedule time for members of administration to meet volunteers individually and in small groups as a "think tank." This has the added benefit of serving as a very meaningful form of recognition.

- Make sure that any agency program evaluation includes the surveying of volunteers.

- Convene all volunteers carrying the same assignment at least annually with the employees of that unit so that volunteers can share their thoughts on what is going well, what needs improvement and what might be planned for the future.

- Be sure that volunteers are tapped to serve on agency planning committees.

Volunteers are too often the invisible constituents of the organization—affected by decisions but not consulted. If you truly believe that volunteers have a perspective that represents the community at large, give some attention to encouraging and listening to their input.

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