

Beyond Lip Service

10 indicators of true commitment to volunteers

Ask any nonprofit executive director if volunteers are an important part of an organization, and you will undoubtedly hear a glowing endorsement of the importance of community participation. Look closely, however, and you will often see a gap between rhetoric and reality. If you want to know the level of true commitment to volunteer involvement, assess whether the following 10 indicators are present.

1. *Volunteers are not considered a "program."* Volunteers are engaged in delivering service and working towards the organization's mission, so they are team members alongside employees, not a "project" or competing service area. When understood as human resources (albeit without wages), it follows that qualified volunteers are welcomed into all sorts of roles, in every department, rather than just filling slots in a defined program.

2. *The expectation of working effectively with volunteers is written into all employee job descriptions.* The best way to demonstrate that partner-

ing with volunteers is expected and not an option, is to define this responsibility in all employee job descriptions. Then it follows that prospective employees are asked about their experience in working with volunteers during their interviews and trained to increase their skills in this area once hired. There are consequences if an employee is not effective in working with volunteers, and there are rewards for those employees who are great at it.

3. *The best volunteers are sought for the skills they offer and then are held to high performance standards.*

The organization appreciates anyone who offers help, but has a process that defines assignments for volunteers and requires qualifications for being accepted onto the team. Holding volunteers accountable for their work is understood as a sign of respect. The best recognition is acknowledgement of real accomplishments.

4. *A competent and committed person has been designated to lead the organization's volunteer involvement strategy and has been given the time*

and resources to do so. No human resources professional would be hired purely because the person has experience as an employee. So, why is being a volunteer the main pre-requisite for leading volunteer engagement? Organizations that truly value volunteers appreciate that it takes time and skill to be their leader and hire accordingly. They see the correlation between the amount of time and resources this leader is given and the growth and success of volunteer engagement.

It also follows that the director of volunteer involvement is placed appropriately on the organizational chart, as part of the management team with direct access to decision makers.

As volunteer involvement grows, increasing the work necessary to recruit and support volunteers, staffing increases as well. Similarly, if budget cutting is necessary, the director of volunteer involvement position is not in immediate jeopardy, since it is understood to be instrumental in maintaining or expanding the corps of volunteers.

5. *Creativity in developing roles*

for volunteers in every unit of the organization is prized.

No staff member or department is allowed to refuse to work with volunteers and is expected to create ways that qualified community members can be helpful. Everyone understands that "volunteer" service is a broad umbrella that can include student interns in professional training, or pro-bono consultants managing a project independently, as well as on-call expert advisers or virtual assistants working online. It becomes routine to think outside the box about how to tap available resources on behalf of clients.

6. *Executives and top managers also partner with volunteers.* Volunteers are not seen mainly as helpers to lower-level staff members, though, ironically, also as members of the board. Instead, department heads, vice presidents,

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and even the CEO welcome the contributions of specially-recruited volunteers with the talent and experience to help them in their work.

The organization considers all volunteers community representatives. Administrators make a point of talking to volunteers regularly, both formally and informally, to get feedback and input on how the group is viewed by the public.

7. The board of directors regularly discusses volunteer engagement as a formal agenda item. The board discusses money, paid staff, and community relations. It approves the budget and fundraising plans. It is therefore clear that it is equally relevant to focus attention at periodic intervals to friend-raising, community outreach, and the contributions of time donors, especially in organizations in which the number of volunteers already active far exceeds the number of paid staff.

8. Strategic planning sessions always include discussion of how volunteers can help with any new project. When volunteers are truly integrated into the organization's activities and services, it is assumed everyone will intentionally consider how volunteers will be asked to participate in any new initiative. In the same vein, goals and objectives

are articulated annually both for what volunteers will accomplish, and for how the right people will be recruited for these activities. All of this planning is meshed with overall organizational goals.

9. Substantive reports on volunteer activities and accomplishments -- beyond "hours served" -- are produced regularly, read, and acted upon. Once goals have been set for volunteer engagement, it naturally follows that organization executives monitor and measure progress, requiring regular reports presenting more than simplistic body count statistics. Systems for collecting data on volunteer contributions are established, with software designed for this purpose, not pieced together from donor software.

10. The development staff and the volunteer involvement staff coordinate their work. Because both money and time are seen as necessary resources to be developed, and that both come from individuals and corporations, fundraising and people raising are coordinated. The development office meets regularly with the volunteer office to share plans for outreach efforts such as speaking engagements, mailings, and the annual report. Both distribute literature for the other.

Annually the list of volunteers is compared with the list of financial donors to see who is on both lists. Volunteers are asked to give money with a special appeal and money donors are also invited to give their time and skills, leading to greater commitment of both. The development and volunteer services staff work together to encourage corporations to expand their philanthropy by combining cash grants with loaned staff expertise. The organization's wish list for donated items is

shown to volunteers to get their help in finding in-kind resources.

Very few organizations will score a perfect 10 on these indicators of whether they truly value volunteers. These actions push the boundaries of common practice, yet are reasoned and reasonable. The further away from incorporating these practices, the lower the chance for significant impact of volunteer engagement.

"Having" volunteers is not an end unto itself. Only by integrating them into daily operations will the return on investment of time and energy -- by both staff and volunteers -- reach its highest potential. *NPT*

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