

# A Board's Business

*Training and leadership of your most vital volunteers*

It's common for nonprofits to recruit business executives as board members, board chairs of large and small committees, and planners of major special events and fundraising drives. In all such assignments, the executives will be coordinating mainly other volunteers.

While most business management skills are transferable to the needs of the nonprofit, it's important to help leadership volunteers recognize how working with other volunteers could differ from being in charge of their employees.

Intellectually, most people can define what employees and volunteers have in common and where they are quite different. But it can't be assumed that knowing these characteristics translates into applying that understanding in daily work.

Take the time to train leadership volunteers. This will make them far more effective, more quickly, and will avoid some of the pitfalls inherent in neglecting these interpersonal dynamics.

Start by asking leadership volunteers to list what an employee wants and needs from a supervisor – and what a supervisor expects from employees. Ask what the group thinks might be on the same lists for what's wanted and expected in an all-volunteer situation. Expect the first response to be, "they want the same things."

Some of what helps people, paid or unpaid, to be productive are universal:

- Defined roles with clear goals;
- Training or at least good instructions;
- Access to information and advice;
- Fairness and consistency;
- Recognition;
- Coaching; and,
- Appropriate and sufficient resources and tools.

It's useful to acknowledge that volunteers and employees share these wishes, but that's not the whole story. Next, consider some unique volunteer-related issues.

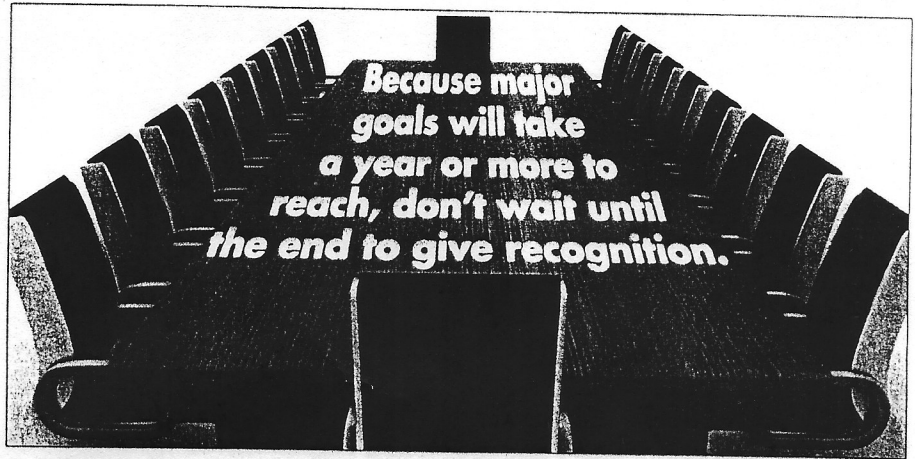
## SCHEDULE AND TIME

One of the major distinctions between employees and volunteers is the number of hours they spend working for your organization. With only very few exceptions, volunteers are actively focusing on your needs for a few hours or less per week, while employees in a full-time job have the organization as a priority in their lives.

Leadership volunteers are themselves busy people with a long list of commitments apart from their service to you. Yet it's easy to forget that also is true of the other board or committee members. This doesn't mean volunteers don't want or intend to keep their promises to follow through on assignments they've accepted. It's just that it's helpful to remember that their paying jobs and already-limited family time might have to come first.

As a practical matter, the issue of schedule makes it easy for volunteers to feel out of the loop. They need to be updated on progress and news in a more conscious way than do employees, who will pick up much of the information and gossip naturally during a week at the water cooler. It's hard to see the big picture when spending only a few hours each week or month on a project, so all volunteers need their activities placed into context. Remind leadership volunteers to:

- Start all meetings with a recap of what's happened since the previous meeting;



- Include volunteers on agency notices and communications, whether snail-mailed or emailed;
- Send background documents, clearly marked "FYI" to differentiate them from materials needing direct attention; and,
- Encourage volunteers to ask questions to fill in gaps in their knowledge, not sit in the dark.

## MOTIVATION

It's as inaccurate to characterize all volunteers as "passionate" for your mission as it is unfair to consider all employees as giving their services merely because "it's their job." Ideally, both paid and unpaid participants care deeply about the organization's work, and it's best to approach both with that assumption.

Nevertheless, it ought to be the case that volunteers begin – and remain – involved because they care a great deal about helping your cause. This means they need to see how their involvement makes a difference. Leaders must thank volunteers for what they accomplish and not simply for "time served."

It's also worth noting that volunteering is a "leisure time" activity, able to be done only when the volunteer is not committed to a paying job, to family needs, or to other obligations. So it's paramount that a welcoming climate is created in which volunteers look forward to doing their service. Having fun is a great tool for volunteer retention, as well as fostering creativity and innovation. "Fun" can range from offering time to socialize before or after meetings, making sure volunteers become acquainted beyond the facts of their resumes, or consciously building in applause and humor wherever possible.

- Recognition is a con-

tinuous responsibility of volunteer leaders, and it's so much more than annual formal thank-yous. The personal touch matters a great deal, as does expressing appreciation as soon as possible after the good work is done. A few other ideas are:

- Because major goals will take a year or more to reach, don't wait until the end to give recognition. Break down the time line and applaud reaching intermediate targets and small but vital successes along the way;

- Thank volunteers by name for specific contributions. Use gag gifts to make a point. For example, hand out Lifesaver candy rolls at the very next meeting to the volunteer responsible for finding the new venue when the original one canceled. It might be corny, but it will be noticed.

## LEADERSHIP STYLE

One of the wonderful things about working with volunteers is that they bring a wide spectrum of dif-

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## ON VOLUNTEERS

ferent skills, experiences, and community contacts. This means a leader is not required to have all the answers, nor should expect to make decisions alone. A collaborative, participatory team decision-making approach has the most success, especially when all the perspectives volunteers represent are

included in the deliberations.

Conversely, while acknowledging the skills of volunteers, it's also important to note that no volunteer is too experienced or too high status not to benefit from orientation and even some training. This is why it's right to prepare volunteer leaders

for managing other volunteers. You could encounter concern that it might be insulting to ask other business executives, for example, to attend a training session. Point out that the intent is not to imply lack of knowledge, but to give support to ensure success in this particular nonprofit context.

You might need to coach leaders in how to criticize a colleague when both are volunteers. A person who has no trouble being the boss in a business could be very reluctant to be directive or perceived as negative in your setting. Point out that:

- It is worse to talk negatively about a person with others than to confront the person directly about poor performance.

- It's actually more flattering to suggest that a volunteer could do better at something than to act as if you think they've already done the best they could.

- If you want to recognize good volunteers, then deal with volunteers who are not doing the right things, otherwise, you send the message to all the others that it doesn't matter whether or not they do something well.

- It could be a relief to the volunteer that you are offering options for improving a situation the person also believes is not working out.

- Stress self-fulfilling prophecy. Set high standards and don't settle for "well, we've got to accept whatever volunteers do." Expect the best and that's what you'll get. But don't assume that everyone automatically comes with positive expectations, even volunteers themselves. *NPT*

## Bush Signs American Red Cross Governance Overhaul Bill



American Red Cross

President George W. Bush has signed legislation that will allow overhaul of the governance structure of the American Red Cross, which is federally chartered, as part of a wide-ranging change in operations at the charity.

"The American Red Cross is very grateful to President Bush, members of Congress, our Governance Advisory Panel, other nonprofit and for-profit governance experts and the entire Red Cross family for their outstanding support throughout this transformational process," said Bonnie McElveen-Hunter, chairman, American Red Cross.

The Red Cross last year initiated a comprehensive assessment of its governance structure that resulted in a 156-page report entitled, "American Red Cross Governance for the 21st Century." Based on the report and its unanimously approved recommendations, the board sought Congressional approval of its recommendations of which the most significant reforms included:

- To downsize the 50-member board to 12 to 25 members by 2009 and to 12 to 20 members by 2012.

- To clarify the role of the board to focus solely on governance and strategic oversight.

- To streamline the three categories of board members into a single category; these individuals will be elected by the full board.

- To establish a new Office of the Ombudsman that will address whistle-blower complaints and provide annual reports to Congress.

- To redefine and better delineate the roles of the chairman and the president and CEO.

- To transition seven of the presidentially-appointed governors into a new Cabinet Council that will serve only in an advisory role.

"The American people need the Red Cross," said Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa). "We just saw tornadoes devastate parts of Kansas. People left homeless by natural disaster look to the Red Cross for immediate relief, and they receive it. In turn, the Red Cross needs the financial and moral support of the American people. By embracing reform, and wanting to improve its performance, the Red Cross is ensuring that its trust from the public is well-deserved." *NPT*

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