

Control and Confidentiality

Behold the evil twins of volunteer management

Many of the concerns expressed by agency executives about volunteer involvement boil down to them wondering: "Can we control volunteers?"

Administrators must be confident that staff members provide quality services in accordance with the policies of the organization. One tool to achieve this is a clearly understood system of rewards for doing the job right and consequences for doing it wrong.

Both top executives and line workers believe that it is the threat of being fired – the mere possibility of it – that keeps employees "in line." This is the crux of the debate about volunteers and control. What threat can an organization hold over the head of a volunteer that is as controlling as losing one's income?

This question reflects a number of interesting attitudes. First, it indicates the managerial perspective that the threat of punishment is the best motivator for generating good work. Second, it confuses the available punishment with a guarantee of prevention of some unwanted behavior. And third, it neglects the important fact that the initial reasons why volunteers choose to serve an organization have nothing to do with a salary.

For some paid workers, the fear of being fired might indeed stop them from doing something wrong. But others who no longer care about the organization, are too weak to resist temptation, or believe themselves clever enough to avoid detection, will act despite any threat to their jobs. Many acts considered "wrong" might be done innocently, out of ignorance, or through strong personal convictions differing from agency policy.

It is therefore a delusion to think that it is possible to prevent wrongdoing simply through the threat of punishment. Keep in mind, too, that by the time someone needs to be fired, the organization has long since lost control.

It is always more effective to manage through rewards than through negative consequences. Visibly showing appreciation for work done right is far more encouraging to everyone on staff than responding only to negative acts. Recognition of volunteers is one thing most managers already understand.

ACTIONS TO INCREASE CONFIDENCE

The best way to feel confident that people will do what you most want is to start with careful screening of employees – and volunteers – at the time they apply to join the organization. This includes clarifying expectations on both sides, particularly about any areas of service that might involve philosophic points of view. It is perfectly acceptable to write and co-sign a letter of agreement spelling out such things as purpose of the volunteer work, anticipated outcomes or products, length of commitment, and other key mutual decisions reached in the application and interview process. Just be sure that this document includes a description of what the organization, in turn, is promising to give the volunteer.

Another tool to assure compliance with the organization's rules is training. Both employees and volunteers deserve full instruction on how to do their work in the best way. This whole process is then reinforced by supervision and evaluation, including positive recognition for doing the job well. Even with this approach prevention of problems cannot be guaranteed. But, the likelihood of wrongdoing is not determined by who receives a salary and who does not.

While fear of loss of income is not a factor for volunteers, the idea of no longer being allowed to participate in the work they care so much about is equally threatening. Losing the chance to be involved matters a great deal.

Yes, this means it is possible to "fire" a volunteer.

Some managers harbor the nightmare if they try to fire a volunteer the person would simply say: "You can't tell me to leave; I'm a volunteer." First, the chances of this hap-

pening are remote. The person who tries to argue probably has some other problem, be it an axe to grind or mental illness. Most volunteers would never stay in a place where they were no longer wanted.

Second, from a legal standpoint, you have the right to designate who will be an agent of your organization, whether paid or not. Document the reasons for firing the volunteer, as you would do with an employee.

In short, control is not dependent upon paying a wage. Your best management approach for paid staff and volunteers alike is to motivate through approval.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The fear that volunteers might breach client confidentiality is closely linked to concerns regarding control and, in fact, is often raised as a smokescreen to hide the underlying fear that volunteers are uncontrollable. Confidentiality is an important and serious issue, but it is a training issue, not an issue tied to paid employment versus voluntary involvement.

Volunteers should be screened and trained to understand the meaning of client confidentiality and the necessity of maintaining it. In fact, violation of confidentiality should be stated as cause for immediate dismissal. However, whether or not a person gossips has nothing whatsoever to do with level of pay.

Volunteers are no more prone to speak about a case outside of the agency than are employees. In fact, the probability might even be less. Salaried staff members, especially workers in certain professions, are more likely to describe the happenings of their week in a social context. Volunteers come in contact with clients for a few hours a week, while employees spend 40 hours a week with the agency's consumers. So, who has more to talk about?

Any agent of the organization deserves to have access to whatever records or information are necessary to accomplish assigned tasks. Conversely, this means that no one should be allowed to peruse records not relevant to an assigned case or to eavesdrop on other workers' activities.

Both of these principles should apply equally to employees and volunteers. You do not give any and all employees access to client records. For example, the maintenance department would hardly have a good reason to read counseling case records. Just as you are able to differentiate which employees may be given confidential information, you can select which volunteers require such data to complete their assignments.

If a volunteer is given work to do that involves a particular client, it undercuts all chance for success to deny that volunteer access to the necessary background information. Much of this stems from suspicion that somehow the volunteer is dabbling in providing service and only the serious (i.e., paid) worker should know the full story. But if you make sure all volunteers are appropriately selected and matched only to assignments that they are capable of fulfilling, this rationale evaporates.

If you still have some doubts, go directly to the client and ask for permission to reveal records to the volunteer. After all, it is ultimately the client's decision to make.

All new hires begin as strangers to you. It is the process of checking their qualifications, interviewing them, and bringing them on board that evolves the relationship of a trusted employee. The same is true of volunteers. They might be seen less often, but that does not mean less dependability or competence. *NPT*

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