



🕒 Monday | December 1st, 2008

## Divining A Skills Set

George Weiner    News    December 1, 2008

With few exceptions, nonprofits view board volunteers as distinctly different from direct service volunteers. As a result, boards of directors are separated from the routine volunteer management processes developed to ensure more effective volunteering for everyone else. Most volunteer program managers typically have little or nothing to do with the management of the volunteer experience of those who serve as board members.

How could a skilled volunteer program manager be of help to the board and to the CEO most responsible for working with them? There are many ways to help.

The executive director's main experience in finding and hiring anyone is usually limited to employees. The same is true of the business people often serving on the board's nominating committee. Why should we expect them intuitively to understand what makes recruitment of high-level volunteers different from finding management employees? But, it is different. Successful volunteer program managers are adept at inviting skilled community members to donate time.

In the same vein, the corps of volunteers already serving the organization is rarely perceived as a talent pool for prospective board members. The prejudice that "volunteers" are, by definition, low-level folks with few executive skills and probably no money or contacts still runs rampant.

Again, board members (who don't identify themselves as volunteers much of the time) are seen as a breed apart.

Request a report on the volunteers serving in the organization, including such important (and perhaps surprising) facts as:

- University degrees earned and other professional education;
- Current and former occupations;
- Current and prior board service in other organizations;
- Direct relationship to the mission (e.g., personal experience with the problem or issue); and,
- Which time donors are also financial donors.



Ask the volunteer program manager to recommend three to five possible candidates for the board (or at least for a board committee) from the group. Similarly, find out all the places where opportunities to volunteer with your organization are already listed and select those you think have the greatest potential to help recruit board members, too.

Ask the volunteer program manager to add information about available board positions to any recruitment outreach campaigns. Do the same with online registries specializing in board service. It's become common in the UK for agencies to place ads in the mass media to recruit volunteer board members — something still unusual in the United States. Why not give it a try?

To expand the use of the volunteer program further, consider it as a way to get applicants who do not qualify yet for service on the board to become front-line volunteers in other assignments. Make the volunteer program a step in a service career ladder, in which people committed to the cause can work their way up to greater authority. In the same vein, it's where board members who have rotated out of their positions can continue to be active in new ways.

### Screening and training

The separation between board volunteers and direct service volunteers continues beyond recruitment. Governance candidates are asked to serve on the board, but commonly this asking process does not include providing them any information about what they are expected to do, what the nature of their responsibilities will be, or why they personally were thought to have anything to offer to the organization. Apart from the meeting in which the invitation to serve is offered, there is often no real interviewing or screening process, and only rudimentary if any orientation and training.

During the past 20 years or so, as nonprofit boardsmanship has evolved a mini-industry of books, seminars and technical assistance, such poor practice has been universally discredited — yet the evidence is clear that such advice is too often ignored. Ironically, while many nonprofit board members are enlisted haphazardly, on the front lines of the organization's work, volunteer management has become more and more risk management driven.

Consider the case of volunteers serving in hospitals, one of the bulwarks of volunteering in the United States. Currently, your typical hospital volunteer application goes through an intense screening process, including background checks for criminal records, a full health history, training on health safety and hospital practices, and required immunization for possible communicable diseases. On the premise that hospital board volunteers will not have direct patient contact, they are exempt from any of the screening or training requirements of other volunteers. Steve McCurley, co-publisher of e-Volunteerism, notes: "Ever try asking a Director of Volunteer Services in a hospital what the reaction of their new board members were to being offered the required training on HIPPA regulations? Chances are good that s/he won't even understand the question." Yet, patient confidentiality is equally important for the board to practice.

Make a list of any screening procedures and background checks required for service volunteers and query whether it is legal or appropriate to exempt board members from such requirements. It can't hurt to get people thinking. If you are in a small nonprofit where board members also perform direct service roles, you might have some who have already undergone background checks, orientation and training, and other requirements. These individuals can help you present the concept to the entire board.

Examine the orientation program you've created for direct service volunteers and whether this might be offered to new board members, too, or adapted to their needs. Invite service volunteers to give a tour of the facility to new board members. Even veteran board members might welcome a tour. If there are any handouts or other informative materials used with frontline volunteers, make those available to board members, too.

### More opportunities

Occasional direct service volunteering can be great experiential learning for board members. How can a board govern an organization they have never seen operate? Ask the volunteer program manager to find tasks that a board member can do a few hours once or twice a year to observe and participate in the work of the agency.

Include board members in informal and formal volunteer recognition activities, because they deserve appreciation for their donated time. Make sure they receive whatever annual volunteer recognition gift or certificate any other time donor gets. Of course, invite members of the board to attend formal recognition events, but do not allow them to be treated like visiting royalty, "above" the other volunteers. Mingle board members at tables with other volunteers. Do interactive things that allow them to hear the stories of why service volunteers care so much — and to have a chance to share why they care, too.

Design a time/activity report for board work and collect the data on what board members do, especially service on committees and tasks completed in-between meetings. Include this information in reports on community contributions to the agency.

None of these ideas can happen unless the volunteer program manager is allowed to communicate with board members directly or meets regularly with the executive director. Volunteer managers have the potential to help their organizations dramatically improve the capacity of the most important volunteers they have: the board members who provide the vision, leadership, and skills required to guide and support the future. **NPT**

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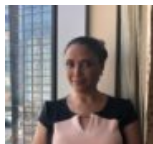
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