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You Are Here

Are you welcoming to newcomers?

One of the nice things about taking action to support volunteers is that there's often a ripple effect that benefits other constituents, too. People considering becoming volunteers and new recruits need to be welcomed into the organization. By assuring that such newcomers feel comfortable you end up with an environment more pleasing to clients and to staff.

What do people see and sense when they enter your building? If you own the building, is the front entrance institutional or home-like? If you rent space with other organizations, is the front entrance sterile, or does it convey lots of activity taking place inside? How clearly is it marked with signs so that anyone can immediately know where to go?

Once a newcomer has reached your door, is the entranceway inviting or formidable? Can someone see people or just hallways? If there is a receptionist, how long does it take for the person to greet someone upon arrival and what words are used to say hello? Maybe a business-like approach is efficient, but it is not truly friendly. Also, what other business is con-

ducted at the front desk? Does the need to greet feel like an interruption of work?

If you have security concerns, are volunteers treated like visitors, clients or staff - and should there be major differences among these three groups? In other words, who is asked to sign in and who is not? Who is challenged by a guard and who is not (not to mention how)?

Waiting rooms are opportunities to communicate. What is on the walls and do pictures or framed documents reflect the tone the organization wants to convey? Is everything formal or is there a sense of fun? Is there a bulletin board or some place for current news and information to be shared? Are there flyers or other materials on the tables for people to read and possibly take away (such as volunteer recruitment announcements)? Can someone become more informed about your work while waiting to see a staff member?

The answers to these questions may highlight, at worst, that you have been inadvertently offering a negative introduction to your organization.

More likely, you'll discover missed opportunities to create a welcoming environment.

Many organizations provide formal orientation sessions to welcome new volunteers. These are excellent, but they may not be scheduled to coincide with the volunteer's actual starting date. Here are a number of ways newcomers can be brought on board effectively. And, many of these ideas might also be helpful to paid staff and even clients:

- Introductions to staff and other volunteers. Although this is usually done informally, consider a bulletin board with photographs, full names spelled out, and titles. This is of ongoing use to remind people of names after a blur of handshaking. It also makes long-timers aware of new staff, and to help everyone spell names properly. If there are too many volunteers to picture, consider a list of their names organized by shift.

- Provide a place for volunteers to store personal things (coats, handbags, briefcases) securely while on site and show this right away. It's interesting how disregard for such security sends a devaluing message.

- If there is a coffee/tea area, explain whether and how volunteers are welcome to have some, if it costs

anything, if they should bring in a ceramic mug or use the Styrofoam cups, etc. This may seem like a very small thing, but it tends to show whether or not volunteers are part of staff.

In a fascinating study of recognition "perks" recently done in Australia, volunteers by a wide margin ranked "getting a second cup of coffee in the cafeteria for 10 cents" to be the most enjoyed way to be acknowledged.

- Provide a jargon and alphabet soup "glossary" to explain the terms and acronyms a volunteer will hear constantly. This can also be done via a bulletin board, with a pen attached to the list so that new gobbledygook can be added as it surfaces.

Just as important as the first day at work for a new volunteer are the second and third days. It's not enough to make an extra effort only on day one. It takes longer than that to learn the ropes and get acquainted with a whole new group of co-workers.

Pay attention over the first few weeks to see if the newcomer seems comfortable, is using the coffee room, talks to others, and other indicators of being at ease. This is where a buddy system can be helpful. Not only does the new volunteer get some personal attention, but the veteran volunteer

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you ask to be the buddy feels recognized, too.

Good instructions

Again, many organizations provide wonderful training for volunteers, often in an intense, classroom format. Yet much of what a newcomer needs

requesting supplies?;

• What is confidential and what is not? Be sure to define “confidentiality,” too. It’s not just keeping someone’s name secret, but assuring that no one can guess the identity from too much shared information.

Finally, the way a newcomer feels about the first few times on site is also

matter to anyone if the volunteer is there or not.

Develop a culture of saying goodbye whenever possible, coupled with “so glad you could help us today,” or “see you next time,” or some other pleasantries. Volunteers can thank each other, too. Receptionists should be trained to say “so long.” They are integral to setting the overall tone of a facility, yet frequently consider the job done when the visitor is directed to another place.

If no one can be present in person when a volunteer leaves, at least place a big sign next to the closet saying something like this in bright letters: “Thank you for volunteering today! Hope you had a great shift. Travel safe

and come back to us soon.” Always add: “If there is anything that you’d like to discuss, please come to room X or call us at ext. xxx. We’re always here to help.” Change the sign periodically, maybe to reflect holidays or other events. A sign that is brittle from age belies its sincerity.

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to think about what a client sees or hears when walking out the door. Leave a warm and caring impression with everyone. ■

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as soon as possible is not skill-building, but good instructions. This is particularly true for simple things that are not intuitive. For example:

• How do the telephones work? Do you need to dial a “9” or something else to get an outside line? How do you transfer calls?;

• How do the copying machine, fax, and other office equipment work?;

• What is the procedure for re-

affected by what happens – or doesn’t – as the person leaves the building. Everyone may say hello; who says goodbye?

Because volunteers work odd shifts, they come and go at different times. If a volunteer finishes, goes to the coat closet, and quietly departs, it’s hard to tell what the person may be feeling. It could be satisfaction at a job well done. But, it could also be a void of emotion or even a sense that it doesn’t

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activities at arm’s length. It does, however, point out that the IRS is serious about intermediate sanctions for excess benefit transactions.

The issuance of the memorandum so soon after the ruling approving the car donation program provides a powerful contrast in how charities should operate. If your organization does not have a working conflict of interest policy, it should adopt and follow one as soon as possible. If your

board is not independent of management, you should also consider the wisdom of that situation.

In general, if you operate in a business-like fashion, dealing at arm’s length with all parties, you should have little fear that the IRS will challenge your operations. ■

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