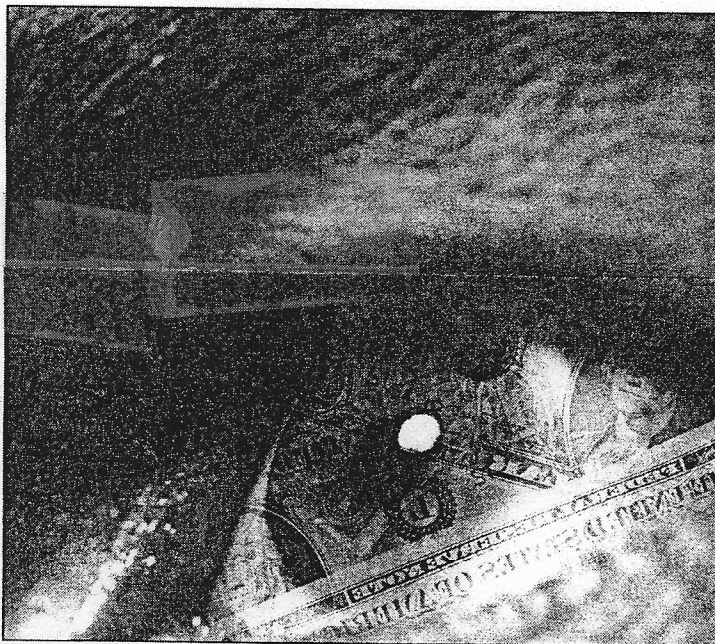


Volunteering Values

Considering why you engage them

One of the hallmarks of a profession is the articulation of ethical principles based on shared values. When volunteer resource managers spend time considering the values of volunteerism, it becomes clear that we are discussing issues that are fundamental to democracy and are based on our view of the rights, obligations, and choices of every citizen.

The following is a "starter set" of some volunteerism-specific values that have evolved from a number of peer discussions on several continents. There is some evidence that these are universally held, regardless of the type of volunteering done, the setting in which it is done, or the country in which it occurs. Unfortunately, few organizations spend time



considering why they engage volunteers, beyond lack of funds.

1. VOLUNTARY participation is vital to making communities work.

When Lincoln said our government was "of the people, by the people, and for the people," he meant it. Though our population centers have long ago lost the hands-on immediacy of 18th century town meetings, and many citizens have become cynical of the political process, it remains true that anyone can make a difference – or at least make the attempt – providing there is a willingness to do the hard work involved.

Activists mobilize their neighbors to protest, march, and lobby for causes as local as the placement of a stop sign or as global as world hunger. For the even more political-minded, getting on the ballot as a candidate for office, particularly at the local level, requires little more than a few signatures (*winning*, however, takes organization and money, both of which need volunteer involvement, too). The best places to live still hold neighborliness as a functioning concept, from doing errands for someone who's ill to picking up litter.

2. EQUAL respect is due to work that is volunteered and work that is paid.

Despite our society's preoccupation with the status that money can buy, there is nothing inherent in a salary that elevates an employee's work above that of a volunteer. Indeed, every skill in the world is of-

fered for free somewhere, sometime. Payment does not make an activity legitimate nor effective.

In the same vein, contributing service without pay does not endow the activity with any aura that lifts volunteers above employees.

3. VOLUNTEER involvement balances three perspectives and sets of rights: those of the client/recipient; those of the volunteer; and those of the agency and its paid staff.

The mission of the organization is the vision to which both paid and unpaid staff must commit, and is also the goal of the organization's clients/consumers. Despite this circle of mutual interests, each stakeholder can be – and often is – affected differently by the organization's policies and practices. So when decisions must be made, it's important to consider all the points of view. If volunteers are to be involved in implementing a decision, their perspective must be actively championed.

Too often, however, volunteers are overlooked. Just examine how many nonprofit mergers have occurred in recent years in which no one considered the opinions or feelings of existing loyal volunteers, despite significant impact on the work contributed by those volunteers before and after such major changes.

It's important to note that the client is the priority stakeholder.

Neither volunteers nor employees have a greater interest in the decisions made than those who benefit from the services of the organization.

4. IDEALLY, volunteering is an exchange in which both the recipient of services and the giver benefit.

The old concept of noblesse oblige, whereby the rich who have so much, give to the poor who have so little, may be positive in its outcome but terribly outdated in its approach. It reflects paternalistic "charity" and is definitely a one-way donation, often based on the belief that the recipient has nothing to offer in return.

Volunteers will often speak of how much they get from volunteering: friendship, fulfillment, skill development, new perspectives, and many other benefits both tangible and intangible. This makes volunteering an exchange, a positive two-way activity in which the direct recipient of services provides value back. Satisfied volunteers do more enthusiastic work, so the recipients get the greatest help, and the exchange grows.

5. VOLUNTEERING is an equalizer.

When an employee provides services to a client, both recognize they each fulfill a role with definite status and rules. Paradoxically, a salary both elevates the worker into a position of authority (someone who can give or withhold service) and also lowers the worker into the position of a servant (someone required to follow the organization's rules regard-

less of personal preference). To clients, the perception is much the same: they are the "job" of the paid worker.

Volunteers are different precisely *because* they are unpaid. From the perception of the client, a nurse has to be nice to someone with AIDS, while a volunteer chooses to be so; a babysitter is paid to take a child to the movies, while a Big Brother or Sister wants to be a friend. The relationship is one of equals.

Further, volunteering can be done by anyone, regardless of financial status, and so permits generosity by everyone. It is also true that at times in our lives we all find ourselves in a position to help others and at other times we become those who need help. Such mutuality is basic to volunteering.

Finally, volunteering allows someone to contribute to the level of their ability which, depending on the role, may have nothing to do with formal credentials. While planting trees in the park, it doesn't matter whether the volunteer is the bank president or its custodian, both are equal volunteers for the cause.

6. VOLUNTEERS have the right to be mavericks.

One of the remarkable things about volunteering is the freedom it offers, particularly to those who see things differently. When one accepts a salary, it means accepting the rules, the schedule, and the public front of the organization. Volunteers are independent agents with fewer consequences to "outside the rules" action. If someone is volunteering formally with an organization and commits to the requirements, then the person absolutely ought to abide them or leave.

But nothing says that a volunteer has to join an organization or always represent it officially. Working independently, or with a few like-minded people, private citizens can do almost anything: lobby legislators, write letters to the editor, cross state and national boundaries to meet with others, and other actions that have personal, not organizational, consequences.

7. VOLUNTEERING is a strategy for getting things done.

Volunteering itself is not always "good" nor on the side of "right." It's possible to be passionate about a cause and also be *wrong*. For that matter, there may be several right sides to any issue. Both pro and anti forces mobilize their followers in similar ways: protests, voter turnout drives, public education campaigns. It's quite amazing to see the diversity of groups who march on Washington in any given year.

8. VOLUNTEERING is, however, a political act.

Volunteers put their bodies where their beliefs are. Some people may feel compelled to work at paying jobs with employers they do not like or even do not trust. A person who does not support or no longer supports an organization or cause will stop volunteering for it. Even for volunteers who do not articulate a political agenda, the collective choice to give time on behalf of a cause demonstrates visible community approval, whether representing the majority or minority opinion.

Perhaps this column will spark some discussion in your organization and lead to both personal and organizational values clarification. What do you believe about volunteering? *NRF*

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