

Ending a Relationship

Some Practical Alternatives to Firing Volunteers

By Susan M. Chambré, Ph.D.

Over the past 30 years, a great deal of useful information on how to manage volunteers has been developed. Practitioners, consultants and academics offer valuable suggestions on how to recruit volunteers, ways to train them, appropriate supervision techniques and various hints and suggestions that can provide rewards and challenges so that they continue to be involved. Based on the notion that volunteers are, in effect, "unpaid staff," many of these techniques have withstood the test of time.

Look at this list again. What's missing?

It includes hiring, training, supervision and rewards. But it omits a common practice in managing paid staff that is difficult to talk about and even more difficult to do with volunteers: how to deal with people who are ineffective or inappropriate for the job—or for the organization. In short, the idea that volunteers might need to be—dare I say it—fired.

The notion that a volunteer could be fired is rarely discussed for a number of reasons. Most people enter the fields of volunteer administration or nonprofit management because they want to help people. Very few volunteer administrators think of themselves as personnel managers or development officers that raise money in the form of donated time. The culture of most nonprofit organizations includes the idea that people should be grateful to volunteers (irrespective of what they actually do) since they freely give organizations a

cherished possession—the gift of their time. Asking a person to stop volunteering is similar to ushering abruptly a previously welcomed guest out the door. Another source of the difficulty of "firing" a volunteer stems from his or her position in the community or social group that supports an organization. Personal or family relations between volunteers and donors often make it very difficult to replace volunteers.

Volunteer careers in organizations seem to have beginnings, but no ends. The implicit message in numerous texts and primers on volunteer management is that if effective measures are used to recruit, screen, train and reward volunteers, then somehow organizations won't have inappropriate volunteers. Why should volunteer administrators be better than managers involved with paid staff?

After all, people are not infrequently fired from paid jobs. The few discussions of firing volunteers recommend that volunteer administrators serve as outplacement counselors and help a volunteer to find another "job."

Here are some scenarios that might be employed in the process of ending a volunteer's involvement. The examples are designed to uphold an organization's integrity and respect the dignity of the volunteer. Three methods are suggested: identifying time limits; building turnover into organizational culture; and creating sabbaticals. Recognizing the enormous difficulties in helping a previously committed volunteer to move on, organizations can—and do—devise methods to build in turnover which not only recognize the needs of the organization, but also the fact that many volunteers remain in their jobs because they come to believe that they cannot be replaced.



Susan M. Chambré is associate professor of sociology at Baruch College in New York City. She teaches and does research on social policy and on nonprofit management issues, particularly volunteer administration. Her work focuses on volunteerism by elders and the role of volunteers in the AIDS epidemic.

Time Limits

Board and committee members are often appointed for a term of office. Students typically volunteer for a summer, a semester or an academic year. Some assignments are short-term or time-limited, working on a particular event or activity. This creates a natural break and an opportunity to stop volunteering. Most volunteer jobs, however, have an open-ended quality. Usually, when a time commitment is specified, it is the minimum time a person should be involved. This is understandable since many jobs require training. If a hospice, for example, trains a person for twenty hours, then a minimum time commitment of, say, six months, is understandable. However, most jobs require minimal training and some people can be recruited on a temporary or trial basis and can undergo the training and the minimum time commitment after they have a better sense of what the job is all about. In AIDS organizations, for example, people need to undergo three or four days of intensive training so that they can become "buddies" offering companionship and household help like shopping, cooking or even cleaning. Many organizations have stopped assigning buddies to most of their clients because they have been in short supply. Yet, it is possible to build in an intermediate, buddy-like role with less training as a kind of trial prior to undertaking the full training.

Built-in Turnover

A lack of clarity about what is an expected average length of time spent volunteering has some other consequences. People are reluctant to volunteer because of this uncertainty: They are afraid that they will get "sucked into" a volunteer job. Once they start, they won't be able to leave. Specifying a realistic and expected time commitment—the number of hours as well as the time span—is critical in recruiting volunteers. It is important, then, in both the beginning and the end stages of a volunteer's career to be clear about how long many people tend to remain in a particular job. This is one way to build turnover into the culture of an organization.

Many volunteers—and their concern is justified—believe that if they leave an organization, the activity or program they started will cease to exist. Perhaps an organization has had a twice yearly clothing drive which has been headed by the same person for 10 or 15 years. Many times, the effort ends when the volunteer quits. Usually, the only way the person is able to quit is to have an argument with someone else in the organization. This then serves as a cover for leaving. Professionals and lay leaders need to help such a person train his or her successor. This will not only ensure a smoother and more pleasant ending to many years of service, but will increase the prospects of continuing an important effort.

By specifying expected or even maximum terms, organizations can encourage volunteers to circulate from one job to another based on changing interests and availability. This involves promotion, but also could be a demotion. Sometimes people have devoted enormous amounts of time to an organization and, when their term of office ends, there is nowhere for them to go but out of the organization. We need to help such people remain involved, perhaps in jobs that require lower levels of commitment. It is also important to enable people to maintain recognition and status even after their involvement or term of office has ended. The Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York, for example, has an annual dinner for all of its ex-Presidents and also lists all board "alumni" in its annual ad journal.

Sabbaticals

Volunteers themselves often take sabbaticals when they need a break. This is formalized in hospices where it is understood people need time away from the stress of working with dying people, particularly after they have experienced a series of deaths. As part of my

research on the role of volunteers in the AIDS epidemic, I volunteered in a long-term care institution in 1990 and 1991. Several of the volunteers I worked with and interviewed initiated their own sabbaticals.

Many times, this was in the guise of some other change in their life requiring that they take a break, like a change in their work schedule. They almost never returned; the sabbatical was how they stopped volunteering, since even if they did go back, the patients and the situation had, they thought, changed so much, that re-entry would be too difficult.

Having volunteers take sabbaticals, perhaps as a regular part of the work, can help some people to rejuvenate themselves, but also encourages others to leave a place where they feel needed. Even though these so-called sabbaticals are really endings, the kind of temporary denial at having an ending be defined as a sabbatical is perhaps necessary and helps a person along until he or she is ready to admit it is time to quit.

None of these ideas is unfamiliar to volunteer administrators or to volunteers, but they do need to be written about and articulated more forcefully. When organizations hold onto volunteers because they fear they will be insulted if they are asked or helped to leave, they do themselves and the volunteers a disservice. Volunteer administrators, staff, executive directors and fellow volunteers should help people move on and redirect their energies making clear the appreciation for past work, recognizing the positive aspects of moving on and helping volunteers to remain connected should they choose to return. ■

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