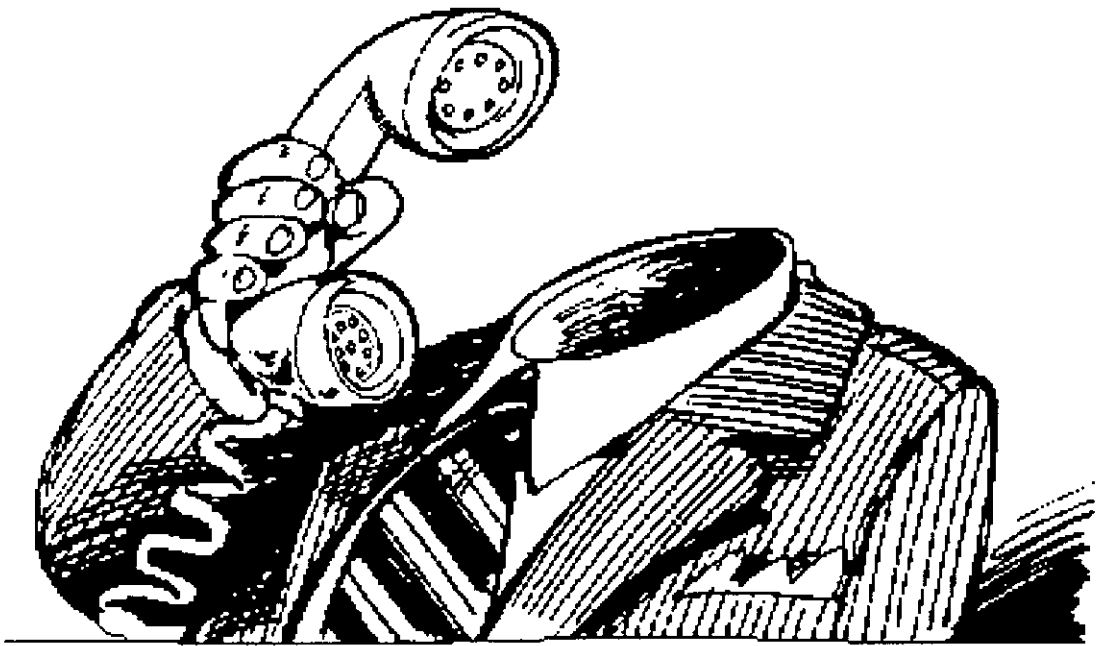# Supervising the Invisible Volunteer

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Long Distance Management Exercise "What's for Lunch?"

Your assignment is to select the items on the menu that you would most like to have for lunch. Do this by indicating 1 choice in each of the categories below. You are then to lobby to get your menu enacted by your group. For each individual, 'winning' in this exercise is getting the most of your menu selections on the final group menu. You are competing with others in your group and you are competing with other groups in this exercise – please don't 'wimp' out, but instead negotiate to get the final menu as close as possible to your initial selection.

A. **Soup**

   ❑ Lentil Soup
   ❑ Minestrone
   ❑ Chicken Soup
   ❑ Lobster Bisque

B. **Salad Dressing**

   ❑ Blue Cheese
   ❑ Oil and Vinegar
   ❑ Honey Mustard
   ❑ Creamy Italian

C. **Entree**

   ❑ Roast Breast of Turkey
   ❑ Veal Piccata
   ❑ Poached Salmon in Champagne Sauce
   ❑ Filet Mignon
   ❑ Eggplant Parmigian

D. **Wine/Beverage**

   ❑ Coffee
   ❑ Wine
   ❑ Iced Tea
   ❑ Tonic Water

E. **1 Vegetable that *Cannot* Be Served:**

   ❑ _____

F. **Dessert**

   ❑ Chocolate Cake
   ❑ Pecan Pie
   ❑ Raspberry Tart
   ❑ Grand Marnier Souffle
   ❑ Fresh Fruit Plate

Chapter Nine
Supervising the "Invisible" Volunteer

One of the biggest challenges in management is supervising those volunteers who work outside the normal office setting. These workers may be separated from their supervisors in a number of ways:

- assigned to a field office, which is geographically separated from the headquarters;
- in a job which requires them to work alone in a field setting, perhaps matched with a particular client; or
- working in a different timeframe from office staff, perhaps an evening or weekend assignment that doesn't overlap normal office hours.

This separation, while small in appearance, is quite significant in practice. Anyone who has ever worked in a separated environment realizes the increased potential for frustration, inefficiency, dissatisfaction and occasionally even outright revolt. Those volunteers often come to believe that the central office doesn't understand the "real problems" and those in the central offices see those in the field as not seeing the "big picture."

The reasons for the increased complexity in managing volunteers at a distance is based upon logistical and interpersonal grounds. The logistics of dealing with individuals in locations apart from our own are quite formidable. People are harder to locate when you need them; communication more often gets delayed, distorted, or goes totally awry; people don't have access to the same resources, equipment, and support.

Interpersonal problems also abound. We are accustomed to dealing with people on a face-to-face basis, so communication at distance always seems unnatural and works less perfectly. It is hard for a supervisor to trust what they can't see, so there is always doubt that workers are doing what they are supposed to. At the same time, volunteers find it difficult to take orders from a person who isn't on the front line to actually experience conditions, so it is hard to give proper credence to directives from a central office. They also often feel left "out of the loop" in decisions that affect their work.

Long distance management structures represent a vast increase in organizational complexity. Studies of more complex organizational structures have indicated that they are more likely to be subject to the following types of organizational problems:

- Tensions between the field people and the headquarters office people, with neither fully respecting the positions or needs of the other.
- Depersonalized leadership styles, with individuals relating to each other as "titles" rather than as persons.
- Fragmented understanding, with each person holding on to information and failing to share it.
- Inefficient project work and teamwork.
- Growing subservience to paperwork, and an increased feeling that the paperwork bears no relation to reality.
- Flourishing of individual agendas, as the more motivated individuals simply retreat from the organization and begin to follow their own instincts.

> Built into decentralization is the age old tug between autonomy and control: superiors want no surprises, subordinates want to be left alone. The subordinates push for autonomy; they assert that by leaving them alone, top management will show its trust from a distance. The superiors, on the other hand, try to keep control through information systems. The subordinates see the control devices as confirming their suspicions – their superiors don't trust them.
>
> Chris Argyris

You may recognize a few of these characteristics in your own organization.

It is important to note that these types of difficulties are commonly caused by the structure of the more complex system, and not necessarily by the personalities involved. We are simply more accustomed to working in close proximity. We find it "natural" to adopt behavior that is based on working next to our co-workers, and we forget that working with those who are not just "down the hall" can be a quite different managerial situation than what we are used to. In many

cases the structure creates problems despite the best intentions of those involved. In some cases, those same best intentions can actually worsen the situation, since some "good" management techniques that work in the normal office setting can have exactly the opposite impact in a long distance management situation.

A Volunteer Program Manager in a long-distance system must work hard to reduce this distance, and to establish a working environment which offers a sense of bonding and team work, better communication, and a feeling of control for all parties involved in a long distance work relationship. There are three key areas in which to concentrate efforts:

*   Bonding
*   Communication
*   Control

Creating a Sense of Bonding

All long distance supervisory relationships work better when there is a sense of identification or 'bonding' between headquarters and field staff. Volunteers work better when they feel closely connected to the organization, when part of their identity is wrapped up in being a member of the organization. We work more effectively with those with whom we have a sense of shared experience and with those with whom we think we have a personal relationship. In the usual work situation, this feeling will often develop naturally over time; it will only happen with long-distance volunteers if you continually strive to create it:

*   Strive to achieve a sense of personal contact between headquarters and the field. People are more likely to communicate with those that they know and more likely to forgive errors in communication. They are also more likely to feel comfortable being supervised by those of whom they have some personal knowledge rather than some "faceless" being from above. We are more likely to trust and work well with people when we have a sense of "who they are" and think they know us and value us enough to look after our interests as they do their own.

*   The key moment in the bonding experience is when volunteers first join the organization. It is important at this point to give them a sense of welcome and inclusiveness, demonstrating that the organization truly values them and welcomes them into the group. At this early point the behavior of the volunteer and their attitudes towards others can easily be shaped by how they perceive the culture of the organization. A smart supervisor will consciously greet and welcome the new volunteer and make them feel at home, and will frequently seek out the new volunteer during initial days. Research suggests there is a 60-day "window of opportunity" in which opinions are firmly shaped regarding whether the volunteer establishes a positive or negative relationship with the organization.

> If we devise too elaborate
> a system of checks and
> balances, and have
> too many inspectors
> going out as representatives
> of the parent organization,
> it will only be a matter
> of time before the
> self-reliance and initiative
> of our managers will be
> destroyed and our
> organization will be gradually
> converted into a huge
> bureaucracy.
>
> Robert Wood
> Sears, Roebuck and Co.

• One way to get people to know each other is to bring new field people for a visit to headquarters. Frequent meetings (conferences, in-service training, workshops, trips, planning retreats) are another way to achieve this. A supervisor can get to know his or her people by visiting them in the field, but this should be mixed with attempts to get the field people into headquarters to give them a sense of relating to the larger organization.

• There are ways to assist bonding that do not require face-to-face meetings, but they are not as effective. These include electronic mail systems, telephone messaging systems, and other means of electronic communication. Publishing a telephone directory with photographs is another means of getting people to see one another as human beings and not as cogs in the machine. Other ways include support groups, utilization of teams composed of people from different areas, or the swapping of assignments with other volunteers (the 'walk a mile in their shoes' approach).

• Mentors and "buddies" can also be used to establish bonds with the organization. You must be careful with this approach, however, since the bonds formed will be stronger with the individual than with the organization. If the mentor leaves or is dissatisfied with the organization, this will affect the feelings of the volunteer.

*   Bonding can be strengthened through adding the personal touch to communication. Being interested and concerned in another's personal life, remembering birthdays and anniversaries, or remembering and asking about

family members, are ways to show a separated volunteer that you value them as a person, not just as a worker.

- Having a common vision is another key element in bonding. People who feel they are working toward a mutual goal and who feel responsible to each other are more likely to perceive shared interests and values. This is why wide participation in strategic planning is important.

- Recognition events are great opportunities for bonding and mutual celebration. Being congratulated in front of a peer group tends to strengthen peer bonds if the recognition system is perceived as a fair and honest one.

Maintaining Communication Linkages

Supervising people who work away from your office requires proactive efforts at communication. The main danger is that people will become alienated from the organization and develop an "us versus them" attitude. Consider the following suggestions:

- People in isolated or separated settings will naturally have more communication problems than those who are gathered in one spot. The smart supervisor will simply plan for this difficulty and adjust to compensate. Generally speaking, processes will take longer, will include a greater chance of misunderstanding, and will need to be managed more carefully.

- Workers in isolated or separated settings are prone to develop fears about their degree of inclusion in the system. They will worry about whether they are being kept informed of things (both as decisions are considered and after they are made) and whether their input is sought and valued.

- Withholding information from your people creates a sense in them of having second class status. Secrets are the bricks in the walls between people. People from whom information is withheld will go to extraordinary lengths to either obtain the information or to create their own versions of what is going on.

- When decisions that affect people are being made, efforts should be undertaken to involve those people in the decision-making process. Bringing people together for interaction is the best way to accomplish this. At this stage of development, technology can supplement but not totally replace face-to-face communication. For many people, written communication is not an adequate substitute.

- The longer it takes for a decision to be made at the central office, the more left out people outside will feel. The more important the response, the longer the response time will seem. Strive to get back quickly to those in the field, if only to deliver an interim response. Remember that they can't "see" that you're doing something with their message; to them no response will seem as though they are being ignored.

- Much of communication in an office takes place by osmosis—we learn things simply because we are in the vicinity of their occurrence. A supervisor in headquarters is in a much better position to learn via osmosis than a field worker, and a smart supervisor proactively attempts to pass along as much information as possible to the field. It is better to pass more information than is needed than to give the field a sense that you are restricting their access to information.

- Good communication should be viewed as a 'web' connecting all within the system—it should function up, down, sideways and across. If you do not design your system to function this way, your workers will re-engineer it to do so, and will probably leave you out of their design.

- Claims by central office staff that it is "difficult" to communicate effectively and swiftly with geographically separated workers will never be believed by those in the field. After all, we are all joined by a highly unofficial "rumor mill" which communicates instantaneously.

> Communication is not just words, paint on canvas, math symbols or the equations and models of scientists: it is the interrelation of human beings trying to escape loneliness, trying to share experience, trying to implant ideas.
>
> William Marstellar

- Communication and bonding strategies are often the same. One CASA program, for example, assigns each of its board members to communicate with a small group of field-placed volunteers. Each month the board member is to have some type of communication with each of their assigned volunteers, either in person via an individual or group meeting or on the phone. This gives field volunteers an opportunity to communicate (with an important "perso-

nage") and creates a sense of teamwork. It also gives the board members something "real" to do and gives them a true sense of what is happening in the organization at the work level.

- Uniformity should not be pursued as an end in itself. Use what works, which may be very different with volunteers in different situations. As a supervisor your job is to find a method of communication which works.

Using a Newsletter to Foster Communication

In a long -distance situation, one of the most important media of communication can be the agency newsletter. Although typically the newsletter is regarded as junk-mail by volunteers, it can, if created properly, help overcome many of the motivation and control problems of long-distance supervision. An effective newsletter can provide the volunteer with the following information:

- *Pride in the Program*

As mentioned previously, one CASA program includes statements from volunteers in each newsletter attesting to the reason they are proud to be part of the program. Each volunteer who reads these statements gains familiarity with other volunteers (who they may have rarely met) and can share in the pride each offers.

- *Insider Information*

The newsletter should let volunteers know everything that the agency is planning to do and even considering, including problems the agency faces. Nothing makes a volunteer feel more like a second class citizen than reading facts about the agency in the newspaper that he didn't know.

- *Who's Who*

One of the problems of working at long distance is not knowing who the agency staff members are. Volunteers typically are introduced to them at training, but may quickly forget their names. The newsletter can contain pictures and articles about the work of an agency staff person or other volunteer each week.

- *Recognition and Celebration*

The newsletter should note any accomplishments made by the agency in the past month. Volunteers who contributed can be recognized in the newsletter. The newsletter can also spotlight a volunteer each week, telling something about them and their work.

- *Keeping the Purpose alive*

The newsletter should report progress made toward the agency vision. Any small step, such as an appointment for a meeting with a funder, should be noted, so volunteers have a sense that the vision is becoming a reality.

- *Training Reinforcement*

The CASA program in Baton Rouge includes a case study in each issue. Each of these is a thorny problem volunteers might face that they were taught how to handle. Volunteers are asked how they should handle the situation and instructed to call the office if they aren't sure of the right approach.

> We do not expect you to follow us all the time, but if you would have the goodness to keep in touch with us occasionally...
>
> Thomas Beecham, Conductor, London Philharmonic Orchestra

Exerting Supervisory Control

The kind of person who works best in a long-distance relationship is a self-starter. This is a volunteer who is internally motivated rather than externally goaded, who is proactive rather than reactive, and who makes decisions instead of waiting for instructions. This volunteer takes initiative and doesn't need to rely on others to give him orders. This type of person might be referred to as having "the entrepreneurial personality."

There are two problems with such a volunteer. First, they are hard to find. The vast majority of people in our society are reactive rather than proactive. This is why many people who are placed as long-distance volunteers either wind up doing nothing at all or calling the office every fifteen minutes asking for direction.

Second, the very traits that make them desirable can also make them a Volunteer Program Manager's worst nightmare. These volunteers are totally comfortable with the freedom and responsibility but may begin to behave as though this implies complete autonomy over their work activity. They may give higher priority to their own goals than the goals of the program. They may commit their considerable energies in the name of the agency to tasks that bring the agency disrepute.

Setting Up Control Limits on Long Distance Volunteers

The challenge with these volunteers is to rein them in, to channel the energies of the entrepreneurial personality. Managing long-distance volunteers requires establishing a zone of control between these two extremes, since too much variance in either direction will impair the ability to perform effectively in a separated work unit. Some actions to control the entrepreneurial person without demotivating him include:

- *Set Priorities*
  The main tension between supervisors and long-distance volunteers is between the volunteer's need to decide what he or she will do and the supervisor's need to make sure that those things are effective. To minimize the conflict, establish clear priorities to guide volunteer's daily decisions. These priorities should give volunteers a clear sense of what is important and how their time should be spent even when a supervisor is not around to give immediate instructions.

- *Establish Clear Responsibility for Results*
  One problem you can face at long distance is that volunteers will stray from the focus of the program. For example, a volunteer assigned to find the facts in a case of child abuse and make recommendations to the court may begin to engage in a big brother or mentoring role with the child, taking him to the zoo, reading to him after school, buying him presents and so forth. To guard against this, set clear results for the volunteer, as described in the chapter on job design. Further, ask volunteers to recommend observable, obtainable goals each month. These goals should relate to the results they are responsible for achieving. For example, a CASA volunteer (pursuing the result of providing the judge with the information necessary to make the best placement for a child) might recommend that in the upcoming month she could compile the child's complete medical history. By agreeing on what the volunteer is trying to accomplish, the supervisor has some confidence that the volunteer is going to channel her energies in the right direction.

- *Use the Degrees of Authority*
  Use the scale of control presented in the chapter on supervision to provide yourself with insurance that what volunteers do to achieve their goals is likely to be effective. Over time determine whether the volunteer is capable of working mostly on their own, whether you need to be informed as they make decisions, or whether you need to constantly approve her suggested decisions or even give her assignments. Based on this judgment, allocate your time accordingly to give more attention to those who you are less confident can work alone. Maintain bonding and communication links, but increase the volunteer's level of control to free up your own time.

> The more you want people to have creative ideas and solve difficult problems, the less you can afford to manage them with terror.
>
> Daniel Greenberg

  Unless the volunteer is at level one on the control scale, have regularly scheduled chats to check volunteer progress toward goals. Allocate your time and attention according to your experience with each volunteer. Direct more attention to those who have shown the need for monitoring or re-direction, but do not ignore the good performers simply because they are not causing problems. If you ignore them, they may eventually cause problems just to get your attention.

- *Set Accountability*
  Measure the performance of each volunteer according to the principles laid out in the chapter on job design. Make sure all volunteers get feedback on the extent to which they are achieving their results.

- *Establish Policies*
  As discussed in the chapter on supervision, clear policies give the volunteer guidance in making daily decisions. By making sure all volunteers know the policies that are to guide their actions, you increase the chance that each behaves in a correct manner.

- *Communicate Values and a Common Vision*
  The broadest element of control (and sometimes the most significant, since it can cover unforeseen eventualities) is to make sure that all volunteers share a common vision of what the program is attempting to accomplish and a set of common values about what is the "right" way to go about accomplishing this vision. These broad principles of proper behavior will give the volunteer a sense of what ought to be done, even in circumstances that have not before been encountered.

Dealing with Non-Entrepreneurial Volunteers

Some volunteers are not comfortable with the increased freedom and responsibility of a long-distance assignment, even

though they are perfectly capable of doing the actual work and would fit in quite easily in a "normal" setting. The challenge with these non-entrepreneurial people is to get them to behave in a more self-starting manner. Here are some tips:

> What loneliness
> is more
> lonely than
> distrust?
>
> George Eliot

• *Ask for Recommended Courses of Action*
It is important that volunteers at a distance be self-assigning. Non-entrepreneurial people, however, tend to be externally motivated, meaning they are inclined to value external commands In chapter eight, you learned about four degrees of control. Those who are reluctant to self-assign should operate at level three on the control scale, meaning that you should ask them for recommended courses of action. At this level, they are unable to avoid making self-assignments.

This method requires a commitment to regular communication with the volunteer. The less likely the volunteer is to take action on his own, the more often the manager will have to communicate and ask for recommendations.

• *Check Progress Frequently*
The entrepreneurial personality is motivated by avoiding unpleasantness rather than by achieving a goal. A powerful motivator for such people is the fear of missing deadlines. Therefore, the manager should make sure that these volunteers have clear deadlines to report progress on their efforts.

• *Develop Policies*
In order to learn to make decisions on their own, non-entrepreneurial people need the safety of some approved principles to guide them. The manager needs to develop policies to perform this role. Ask yourself "What decisions do my people ask me to make?" And "What do they ask my permission to do?" After answering these questions, ask yourself "What principles do I apply in reaching these decisions?" Those principles can be communicated to your people to act as guidelines in making their own decisions.

• *Ask Questions*
The entrepreneurial personality is motivated by options; the non-entrepreneurial person prefers procedures. To develop people's ability to consider options, the manager can ask them questions such as the following:

"What else have you thought of?"
"How could we improve what we do?"
"What have you done lately that's proactive?"
"Are there other ways of achieving this goal?"

These and similar questions can spur the employee to think more creatively and to realize that the manager places a positive value on proactive thinking.

The best advice for dealing with non-entrepreneurial people is not to put them in long-distance situations to begin with. Spend more time and energy in the selection of long distance volunteers. You are looking for people whose personality will allow them to follow their own direction and maintain their own momentum. Many people are not capable of the discipline necessary to work outside the normal office setting. Effective long distance workers will need to be self motivated, well organized, and capable of dealing with problems on their own.

Supervising long-distance volunteers is much more difficult and much more uncertain than supervising volunteers who work within the same office structure. The Volunteer Program Manager working in this separated environment must accept the fact that supervision will work less perfectly, more slowly, and with greater confusion than desired.