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ON VOLUNTEERS

Susan J. Ellis

Revitalizing Long-Time Volunteers

Making someone feel wanted may not be enough

In the flurry of excitement about recruiting new volunteers, it's easy to overlook the need to keep current volunteers motivated enough to stay on the job. In fact, if you've recently mounted a campaign to attract new volunteers, some of your veterans may see this as an opportune time to reduce their commitment to you -- there's less guilt if fresh faces are on the scene.

How can you maintain the enthusiasm of volunteers over time? Here are some ideas for revitalizing volunteers. These ideas will work for paid staff, too.

Review job descriptions

Periodically revisit volunteers' job descriptions and check if what they signed on to do is, in fact, what they are doing. What has changed since they first joined your organization? What tasks have they accrued -- and do they really want to do these? Ask: "What needs do you see around here with which you'd like to help?"

Another great question is: "Do you have any skills or talents that we have never asked you to use on our behalf?" This question was asked at a board retreat for an organization

that was in deep debt. Imagine the surprise of the board president when two board members answered: "grantwriting"! Why had they never offered this skill before? One said: "you never asked" and the other said "I'm not on that committee." Embarrassment all around. Don't let people get caught in ruts. They become bored and you may be missing some important contributions.

Special assignments

Let long-time volunteers take a brief "leave of absence" to handle a special assignment. Be sure it's something that clearly requires the experience of a veteran (for recognition) and that uses talents the volunteer doesn't usually get to offer you (change of pace). And, of course, select tasks that are truly meaningful for your organization, never make-work.

For example, ask someone who has the talent and inclination to take a few weeks off from the regular assignment to make a photographic record of volunteer activities and accomplishments. Ask volunteers to visit other community agencies to gather information,

form new cooperative relationships or do other outreach work. Have experienced volunteers review the training curriculum for new volunteers, including interviewing people who have been on the job less than six months. Afterwards, these volunteers return to their regular assignments with a refreshed perspective, plus the glow that comes from knowing your agency values them as representatives.

Purposeful play

Hold a "revitalization" party or "redefinition day" for all volunteers who have been on the job for a period of time. Actually, you can invite all volunteers and benefit from the mix of newcomers and veterans. Schedule the event to last several hours, cutting across several shifts of volunteer work. Invite volunteers to join in whenever and for as long as they can. They are "excused" from regular work that day.

This party is different from a traditional recognition event. You do not need any outside speakers or fancy refreshments. Announce the purpose openly as an opportunity to reconnect, rededicate. Make sure

everyone has fun -- but also structure time for everyone to speak briefly about what's been good (and bad) about the work so far this year. Why did people commit to volunteering in the first place -- and now that they have gotten to know your agency, why do they stay?

Ask small buzz groups to brainstorm ideas on such questions as: What would be useful and interesting for in-service training? If we could change one thing about volunteering here, it would be ...? What needs do our clients have that we are presently not addressing? Be sure that ideas are recorded and reported to administrators.

Have lots of colored markers available and make "achievement posters" in which volunteers list their accomplishments together and put them on big sheets of paper to post in agency hallways. Over the next week, encourage employees and clients to add their comments to this "hall of fame." Save these posters and put them out again at the recognition event.

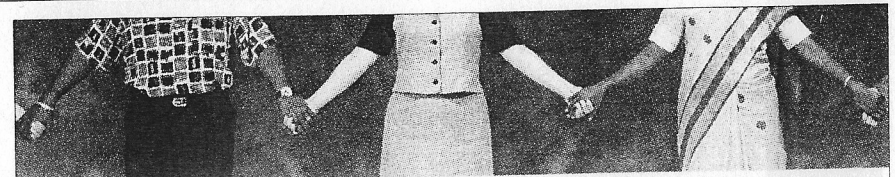
Input and even control

Ask a long-time volunteer to serve on an agency planning task force or some other group in which the volunteer's opinion will be valuable. Make sure that employees do

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indeed value this contribution by explaining why you have selected a particular volunteer to be the representative.

Perhaps even more important, find ways to give experienced volunteers more substantial leadership of the volunteer program itself. This can be a special assignment/leave of absence option or a true "promotion" into leadership. Just be sure that you do not engage the "Peter Principle" and move someone "up" whose greatest satisfaction comes from the direct service volunteer work.

Experienced volunteers with the right background or new training from you can do many things. A few are:

- Orienting newcomers, either as group leaders, facility tour guides, or one-to-one mentors;
- Writing or re-writing handbooks, instruction sheets and other volunteer information;
- Conducting evaluations of various sorts: survey volunteers and employees about the success of pilot projects or any assignment category; developing criteria and procedures for individual volunteer performance assessment; interviewing clients about their experiences with volunteers.

Can You Take It?

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termining that the outcome was either favorable or neutral in all cases, the IRS ruled that the gifts constituted an unusual grant and could therefore be excluded from the computation of public support. While the specifics of this case -- particularly the tim-

- Training new employees how to work successfully with volunteers;
- Planning the annual volunteer recognition event and an annual employee recognition event.

Keep in Touch

One of the simplest and yet most effective things you can do to keep people motivated is make sure they know that you know what they are contributing. No matter how long someone has been filling an assign-

ment, a personal, unexpected thank you is still appreciated. Lead a round of applause when someone comes in or is just about to leave. Leave a Hershey's kiss or a single flower, accompanied by a short note, with a volunteer's work for the day.

Postcards can be wonderful for volunteers who work off-site. Use humor a lot. Send a funny cartoon, relevant in some way to the work at hand, with the margin note: "thinking of you out there in the field!"

For everyone, the most important reason

to remain a volunteer is knowing that the work is something of value for others. Make sure that volunteers know how their work was put to use in the time since they were last in, how their activity added to the ultimate final product, or what the client said that the volunteer wasn't there to hear.

Pay some personal attention and never take anyone for granted. Good advice for life, as well as for volunteer management.

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism.

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