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Second-Hand Vols

Is there hope for auxiliaries?

Tackling the subject of volunteer auxiliaries is perilous. It is often the elephant in the middle of the table that the nonprofit dinner guests are politely trying to ignore. While there are countless examples of successful auxiliaries or friends groups, there are even more stories of such volunteer associations dying on the vine, often literally as well as figuratively.

No one is happy about the situation, but it is rarely confronted directly.

There is no single model for how an auxiliary should support an organization and quite diverse types of settings utilize auxiliaries, from hospitals to cultural arts groups. Members may provide hands-on volunteer work on site at the sponsored organization. But, most often, an auxiliary's major purpose is to raise money.

Auxiliaries may operate within the control of the sponsored organization or may be self-incorporated. Either way, they present themselves to the community using the good name of the institution and therefore their actions and image should be of concern to the beneficiary of their fundraising.

Historically, auxiliaries were re-

sponsible for major funding of community institutions. Also typically, auxiliaries were female – frequently the wives of the staff or of the board members. In most cases, the auxiliaries raised the money and turned it over to the decision-makers of the sponsored group.

In response to protest, some organizations created a seat on the board of directors for the president of the auxiliary. Most institutions were glad to spend the cash raised by their auxiliary, while keeping the volunteers exactly as their name implied: secondary and ancillary.

Over time, too many auxiliaries have stagnated – some to the point of no return. Here are just some of the more common problems:

- The aging of members without recruiting new, younger volunteers;
- Procedures that reflect only stay-at-home, older women's lives, such as daytime meetings or reluctance to use email;
- Sticking with fundraisers that have outlived their popularity;
- Inability to continue staffing shops and events without help from

other agency sources;

- Emphasis on attendance at often-boring group meetings over contributing time and energy to the projects needing attention;

- Recycling officers with no real skills in membership development;

- Insistence that all volunteers working in the facility be forced to "join" the auxiliary, in the mistaken belief that this will keep the group alive;

- A sense of ownership over funds that results in withholding money raised from the institution being supported;

- Dues rates so low that it costs more money to keep a member than to lose one;

- Members who never set foot in the actual agency – who prefer, in fact, to keep several miles between themselves and the concrete reality of the problems the facility is trying to address;

- Tension between auxiliaries and other volunteers.

Such issues are visible to all, but not a topic for frank discussion. Executives of the sponsored organization seem reluctant to make waves by challenging the status quo. Perhaps this is due to the belief that auxiliaries are wealthy or influential, or uncomfortable at seeming to criticize older women.

The real problem in too many cases is that auxiliaries were left to their own devices years ago, and it is difficult to recapture a good working relationship after so much neglect.

Clarify relationships

The concept of an auxiliary only makes sense today if you think that you want to maintain a fundraising group with a sense of unity. The social aspects of auxiliaries are indeed important to accomplishing the work, for many fundraising events require long hours of service, and it is much more pleasant to volunteer in the company of friends.

But, you should expect the auxiliary to set goals, submit reports, and make a visible contribution. Establish standards and question low performance, just as you applaud success. Ultimately, it is the agency's image in the community that is most affected if an auxiliary or friends group is allowed to atrophy.

Here are some critical questions to answer fully, probably in writing:

- What is the formal relationship between the auxiliary and the agency?
- Is the auxiliary autonomous or does the facility have some legal decision-making role?

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- When, if ever, can the sponsored organization take control, veto a decision, etc.?

- If the auxiliary is not self-incorporated, what is the parent organization's responsibility/liability in terms of tax reporting, auditing, etc.? To whom do the bank accounts really belong?

- Who are the members of the auxiliary? What are the criteria for joining and are new members recruited with these criteria in mind? Does the auxiliary consciously or inadvertently perpetuate exclusionary practices such as limiting membership only to women?

- Is there an actual or implied hierarchy in which the auxiliary has more status than the in-house volunteers? What, if any, is the relationship between the auxiliary officers and the agency's director of volunteer services? Why?

- Similarly, what, if any, is the relationship between the auxiliary and the development officer? Why?

- Does anyone in the agency receive regular reports from the auxiliary on all aspects of its operation, including membership statistics and financial statements? What is done with these?

Consider the nitty-gritty questions of how the major revenue-producing events of the auxiliary mesh with the projected plans of your development staff or special event staff: Are plans determined mutually in advance? Who has final say over theme, ticket prices, and other elements of the event, which might reflect on your organization's public image? Who keeps the records and submits reports and to whom? Who thinks about insurance and other legal issues? Who sends thank you notes when an event is over?

Unless you clarify these questions in advance, you may someday discover that this year's auxiliary leaders have a very different point of view about what to do (in your agency's name) than you ever anticipated.

In some facilities, the auxiliary runs the in-house volunteer program and, in others, the auxiliary is staffed by the volunteer program manager. Either option is workable. But, avoid the requirement that anyone who wants to volunteer has to join the auxiliary. This is one way to perpetuate discrimination and outmoded tradition, especially if there are special criteria for becoming an auxiliary member.

Perhaps more importantly, few auxiliaries are able to accommodate the type of volunteer who wants to come in for one month to re-catalogue your library or who is on-call to help with press releases when needed. These types of assignments are rarely filled by people seeking to join the auxiliary or wanting the additional social aspects of group activities.

Establish guidelines to assure that any qualified person wanting to offer volunteer help is encouraged to apply to the agency directly, rather than being turned down at the first contact because the person does not qualify as an "auxiliary."

If you are faced with an auxiliary that is struggling, take action before it is too late. Create an environment in which the auxiliary board can talk openly with your institution's management about the problems. Assign key staff to offer training and support.

The volunteer world has changed dramatically during the past few decades, and you cannot assume that auxiliary officers know how to recruit or work with today's volunteers.

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