

Workshop Presentation

Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

Leading and Managing Volunteers:

Keys to Success

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Abstract

As we serve NGOs and public agencies, whether locally, nationally, or internationally, we need volunteers to work in delivering programs and services, raising funds, helping with events, and assisting with administrative responsibilities. They are critical resources for organizational effectiveness. Yet we have few, if any, opportunities to take advantage of volunteer management training to develop our competencies and skills in working with people and strengthening programs. This workshop outlines the key areas of volunteer management responsibilities, and methods for managing volunteers effectively and efficiently in a culturally appropriate manner.

Body of Paper

We hear a great deal on a global scale about the vital engagement of volunteers to build and sustain civil society. Volunteers assist in recovery from natural disasters and in the relief of ongoing human need. They advise, counsel and labor to assist in community development. They work in cultural institutions and programs. They are involved in educational efforts. They give of themselves for the betterment of human life. We speak highly of the value of the volunteer. Yet the NGO sector globally cannot report with any consistency about volunteering in general, and the management methods of those volunteers in particular.

Why Have a Volunteer Programme?

It is difficult to obtain cumulative statistical data indicating the total number of volunteers serving across specific sectors. It also is not possible at this time to
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separate the volunteers who serve regularly, or even full-time, in programmes and activities, from those who serve periodically or episodically. That is true globally, and in the Asian-Pacific region. Even the United Nations does not have a clear sense of the number of people who volunteer globally, whether across borders or within countries. The United Nations Volunteers does track its own volunteer workers, however, and indicates that 6,832 volunteers are serving in its programmes globally in 2005, and that 17.5 per cent served in Asia and the Pacific.

Even as organisations and programmes develop opportunities for volunteer service, there remain many NGOs that hire and pay staff members to do the significant work. They ask, “Why should we have a volunteer program?” After all, the compensated staff members have an agreement with the employer: “I am paid, so I will work,” they say. Volunteers, because they are not paid, come and go as they please and cannot be relied upon for important responsibilities. There is a phrase often heard in NGO executive management: “They are just volunteers.”

This “top-down” model of management (also known as “command-control”) means that NGO managers often give volunteers the most menial tasks, or only occasional activities that require assistance. Yet NGO managers discover that much work cannot be accomplished—and that it can cost a great deal financially. Other NGOs do not develop an organisational model to attract, train and incorporate volunteers in the most dynamic way.

So how can an organisation and its leaders develop a volunteer programme? Basic questions must be answered before NGOs seek volunteers for utilisation in the most fundamental way. First, the organisation and its leaders need to review vision and mission statements, and then relate them to strategies, goals and objectives to carry out the work. Leaders must relate the organisational vision to the volunteer programme and ask, *What difference will volunteers make in the realisation of this vision?* Are volunteers, and the contributions they make, part of the organisational vision? Then, leaders must relate volunteers to the mission and ask, *How will their service improve the community/nation?* The mission statement will define the priorities in volunteer work. An extension of the mission statement is a basic needs assessment. Leaders must ask, *What critical needs can be met primarily by volunteers?*

The Organisation of the Volunteer Programme

Only after these basic questions are addressed can NGO leaders devote the time,

energy and the financial and human resources to develop programmes and activities that will utilise volunteers for the fulfillment of organisational mission and the service to defined constituencies. Then the leaders can ask, *How might our volunteer programme be organised?* We err if we seek to recruit volunteers without having well-defined activities and responsibilities for them.

First, we must determine the main components of the volunteer programme. There are two approaches the volunteer resources manager must take for a well-developed program. First: **what needs have we assessed that require volunteer engagement?** Secondly, **what elements of the core services are best delivered by volunteers?** As part of strategic planning or organisational development, we determine what needs exist in the populations we serve or what elements of our mission statement are best expressed.

As an example, our NGO may define a key strategy as mentoring young people in the development of “soft skills” in the conduct of business. The “hard skills” are being developed in the educational system. In “soft skills” for employability, what are some of the key needs of the target populations we seek to reach and shape? They may be testing for soft skills mastery and gaps, employment counseling, and soft skills practice. We can determine which needs can be addressed by trained volunteers. What elements of soft skills practice are best done by volunteers? Those elements can include creation of a curriculum, recruitment of mentors, development and implementation of training sessions and “labs,” or observation and critique of the skills practice—or every one of these segments.

How can we start the process? In the case above, the process may begin with volunteers designing curriculum. They could be recruited from businesses and professional groups. Or it may begin with program design that includes volunteers with educational skills. Or it may begin with a test group and a limited number of volunteers to work with them. The process begins with an overview of organisational capacity; programme creation, linkages with companies and with educational institutions; or it may begin with the development of programme goals and outcomes.

How do we set our goals? There are three goal-setting methods in a volunteer programme. First, there is statistical advancement. We will have set numeric goals for programme beneficiaries and for volunteer involvement—whether in sheer numbers of participants or measurable testing of skills mastery. Secondly, there is behavioral advancement. Volunteers, using their skills, can bring about a change in participant word and action to conform with acceptable behavioral standards in soft

skills. Third, there is informational or knowledge mastery on the part of participants. They demonstrate understanding of soft skills. **Yet behind these participant goals, there are volunteer program goals: competency in training, consistency in participation, and continuation in volunteer engagement.** Volunteer resources managers need to consider the key standards in the discipline or field of the organisation when determining the competencies volunteers must demonstrate as they go about their work. There also are competencies general to the field of volunteer programmes by which a manager can determine whether the volunteers are measuring up to global expectations (exactly the work of the Association for Volunteer Administration).

Another measure is the consistency in participation by volunteers. To what extent must a volunteer “show up” in person to get the job done? How does a volunteer resources manager measure “consistency in participation.” The American comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen is said to have observed that 90 percent of success is showing up. Is this idea at work in a particular programme, or are there other measurements?

Finally, continuation of volunteer engagement is a worthy goal. Here again, however, what is the view of “continuation”? Must the same volunteer renew participation year after year? Or is “continuation” measured in how many more volunteers are recruited by an existing volunteer? Or can “continuation” be the transfer of a volunteer’s knowledge and experience to the person who shall follow him or her in service?

However these questions are answered, the volunteer resources manager must **define the steps needed to meet those goals.** Remember that a goal must be tied to key strategies in order to be worth the time and effort in implementing the programme. A goal has five components: **clear intention** (definition of the step); **clear involvement** (what types of people with skills, abilities and training); **clear identification** (the target of the activity); **clear outcome(s)** (changes in attitudes, behaviours, incidences); **clear timeline** (schedule and scheme of events). Ultimately, we must **determine how we will measure our success.** “Success” can be measured in many ways, but usually have two poles to which they are connected: effectiveness and efficiency in delivery of services.

To that end, the work itself must be defined—so the volunteer resources manager must determine **specific tasks volunteers might perform.** The basic outlines of the job may be contained in job descriptions that define five elements of the work to be done: connection to mission; work to be done and skills required for the work;

training to be obtained; hours/days/weeks needed on average; and benefits to the recipient of services **and** the volunteer giving of self.

Finding and Involving Volunteers

Of course, to bestow such benefits on volunteers, and to deliver programmes and activities, the question certainly arises: how shall we find volunteers and involve them? There are distinctive cultural elements to locating volunteers and attracting them to the programmes. The key issue is volunteer recruitment. Where will we find the people we need and how will we ask them to serve?

A fundamental issue for the NGO is public awareness of its work and the results from services delivered, especially by volunteers. This marketing and media matter is a good example of the integration between organisational segments of volunteer recruitment and marketing efforts. Three approaches are the newspaper and radio/television coverage that can be obtained (with clear organisational identification in the story or interview); the leverage of volunteer recruitment through civic improvement organisations, houses of worship, educational institutions, corporations and businesses with volunteer programmes, and other methods; and the organisation's web site that both describes the opportunities and provides an initial application of interest.

Whether on the web site, or in person at the location of the person being recruited, or at the organisational offices, it is important to develop an application that gathers information in five matters: first, basic demographic information (name, address, contact information, gender, age); second, how the applicant learned about the opportunity; third, relevant skills, abilities, and interests; fourth, any prior experience, whether in the community, education, and/or work history; and finally, references to contact confidentially for recommendation.

Then, upon initial acceptance, the screening and interviewing process begins, with documentation of all reference checks and matching to volunteer opportunities. The essential question to be answered: **How will we know we have the right people?** Once a person has cleared the screening process, then an interview should follow that can give the volunteer resources manager and a programme director an opportunity to do a personal assessment of the volunteer. Much can be gained from impression and intuition.

After these processes are completed, placement occurs. In this stage, the volunteer needs to go through organisational orientation and specific task training so

that they are released into their work well-prepared and well-motivated. Often, a probation period is appropriate so that permission exists for a volunteer to exit a programme that turns out not to be a good fit, and for the volunteer resources manager a way to redirect or remove a volunteer from a mismatch.

Effective Direction of the Volunteer Programme

Often, people think of programme direction as the step-by-step oversight by the volunteer resources manager. When a volunteer is being initiated, trained, supervised and recognised, however, the focus must be on the volunteer in the work being done. When a volunteer is well-directed, the client, recipient or matter is well-handled.

The first issue is **motivation**. All the training an organisation can offer will be of little or no effect unless the volunteer *wants* to do the work and to do it well. What motivates volunteers to do a good job? A good volunteer resources manager knows that noble purposes, defined expectations and regular affirmation are good motivators. In the end, the volunteer can understand that the effort is making a difference.

Next, **solid supervision** is vitally important. The volunteer resources manager or designee must be sure that the volunteer arrives and departs according to plan, is given direction and clarification on priorities and tasks to be done, and affirmation or correction as necessary to demonstrate accountability in the work. After all, not only is the organisation relying on the volunteer—so is the recipient of services. Supervision occurs not only on an as-needed basis, but with some regularity so that the volunteer resources manager may understand what issues and concerns are being faced by the volunteer, and so that the volunteer may get some updates on progress in the work and effort he or she is putting into the task.

Orientation and training are vital to volunteer success. This point already has been noted, but the key responsibilities of the volunteer resources manager are to determine what knowledge and skill base must be developed, who shall do the training, and how it shall be documented. The programme director often will identify essential information the volunteer must possess in order to do a good job. Sometimes this training scheme is mandated by a unit or agency of government, with defined criteria such as testing, or number of hours of training required. The volunteer resources manager will do well to become familiar with training methods that will impart the information in a meaningful and memorable way. Conduits for

training also need to be identified—staff members delivering the services, educators, or even other volunteers already engaged in the service delivery.

Documentation is becoming more important in nearly every country with significant volunteer programmes. Volunteer resources managers need to determine what information must be collected about the volunteer's work, including hours put into the effort, monies expended in service delivery, and people or situations handled. If there is any problem or even an allegation of negligence or wrongdoing, good record-keeping will facilitate review and remedy. Also, in some countries, there is a currency equivalent to volunteer hours given, so that a valuation of total volunteer effort can be determined. This information can be helpful in securing programme support funds from philanthropic sources in government, private foundations, and companies.

Another issue in programme administration revolves around internal communications. We will want to utilise certain methods to communicate with volunteers and staff so that a sense of unified approach is developed. In this way, there is a strong sense of mutuality in the work, and in the results and improvements being obtained through all efforts.

Some organisations engage in this joint communication in printed newsletters, in web site news, and in staff-volunteer special events. The special event, whether monthly, quarterly or annually, is a venue for an organisation to recognise and celebrate volunteer accomplishments. Some organisations will present certificates, call people forward for specific description of work done, and personal congratulation for that work. Other organisations will produce a video programme or DVD that highlights key incidents and elements of volunteer engagement in a given year.

Another issue: shall an organisation rely on individual recognition for outstanding performance, or will group or team efforts be commended? In some cultures, group or family recognition is the accepted method for celebration of work contributions. Sometimes personal recognition is a good strategy when celebrating a service milestone, such as 10 years or 25 years of service (though with cultural shifts more generally, such milestones are becoming rarer. Other ideas: recognition for the best idea for programme improvement, most new volunteers recruited, or youngest and eldest volunteer, to name but a few opportunities.

Continuous Programme Improvement

No volunteer programme ever achieves perfection. With changes in technology,

cultural shifts, service developments, and other movement in the field of the organisation's work, there always is room for improvement. One area for programme improvement is to evaluate **existing volunteers and their level of performance**. A semi-annual or annual evaluation of a volunteer's service can be beneficial. The volunteer can know the impact of his or her work, and that can motivate renewal of service commitment.

Few organisations have instituted what is called a 360-degree performance evaluation among compensated staff members. But what about the volunteers? Can they have the opportunity to evaluate their supervisor who has an impact on their work? Can they evaluate the organisation's strengths and weaknesses? Can they make suggestions for programme improvement or service economisation and efficiency? If nothing else, organisations need to secure volunteer suggestions for overall improvement and refinement in service delivery. After all, the volunteers are on the front end of service delivery. They observe and know a great deal.

In this way, we who manage volunteers and are accountable for service delivery can assess how well we manage the program and the volunteers. This holistic approach will help volunteer resources managers, programme directors, executive directors/chief executive officers, and executive board members gain a greater sense of organisational strength, benefit to recipients of service, and fulfillment of vision and mission—which, after all, is why organisations exist in the first place.

Conclusion

Four ideas are clear as result of this review and examination of volunteer resources management work. First, every organisation needs to rationalise the need for a volunteer programme and its integral role in vision and mission fulfillment. Second, there are ways to measure the impact of voluntary effort, which can have an impact on recruitment and retention of motivated workers. Third, a carefully designed knowledge and skill training effort must be developed to maximise volunteer engagement and performance. Finally, the volunteer resources manager, and the organisation as a whole, must be dedicated to continuous improvement in service delivery, and volunteer input can aid greatly in the pursuit of NGO excellence. Thus, every volunteer resources manager will do well to create an organisation-specific and personally beneficial program to attract the range and number of volunteers needed to carry out key responsibilities.