

Volunteer Management is NOT Volunteer Coordinating

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In the business world, we would describe personnel management as hiring and developing employees so that they become more valuable to the organization; and one element of the manager's job would be to supervise the work to be done. We would never think that simply coordinating employee time as the extent of management duties. Nor would we hire someone and then figure out what should be done with their time after they arrive for their first day at work. It would be ridiculous in the business world yet it happens every day in nonprofits.

"Volunteer Manager" is a title often given to the entry-level employee staffing the front desk. This "manager" is tasked with coordinating volunteers while also dealing with other work, leading to confusion, frustration, and dissatisfaction among staff and volunteers alike. Managing volunteer relationships and establishing priorities is a much bigger job than simply coordinating schedules. Without properly organizing and channeling the talent and resources volunteers bring, a nonprofit will inevitably experience high volunteer turnover, draining precious time from staff and community.

If your nonprofit doesn't have a volunteer manager whose *first* priority, every day, is to manage volunteers, you have a problem. This doesn't mean that every organization needs a full time volunteer manager, but it does mean that volunteer management should be a top priority for someone on staff. Coordinating is a management task, but there are many other essential functions that are far more important to the organization's health. Here are a few of the essentials:

Be prepared. The single worst thing a volunteer manager can do is to fail to prepare for volunteers. Poor management is the number one reason volunteers quit. If a volunteer shows up and there is nothing for them to do, their time has been wasted, the organization looks bad and, worst of all, the volunteer will not likely come again. Everyone's time is precious, and wasting it is disrespectful. We all get busy and forget things, so keep a list of ongoing tasks that you can easily refer to. If you make a scheduling error, instead of saying "Oh, I forgot you were coming", *even though you may think it*, say instead "I'm so glad to see you! We have lots to do, but I just need a few minutes to wrap up your task list. Go ahead and sign in, and I'll be right there". At that point, you can take a few minutes to pull priorities from your ongoing task list. No one ever needs to hear or know that you forgot about them.

Priorities. Have ONE manager who is the sole keeper of priorities. Volunteers should not have multiple "bosses" assigning work who may not have a complete view of big picture needs. This is one reason why it's important for the volunteer manager to have a place at the table when strategy is planned and management decisions are made. For volunteers, having multiple "bosses" can be confusing, and it may make your organization seem unorganized.

Communicate quickly and clearly. We live in an "instant" society with emails, texts, social media, and more. Apply the "sundown rule" and respond quickly to any potential volunteer, otherwise the excitement quickly disappears and you may lose that opportunity to have their help and support. For current volunteers, make sure your instructions are detailed and clear. Taking an extra five minutes to properly explain a task can save much

“re-do” time for a task hurriedly explained, and therefore, poorly completed. Encourage volunteers to always ask questions and make it a point to encourage quality over quantity.

Know what you need and recruit only when you have a need. Properly identify where volunteer help can be utilized before advertising any volunteer opportunities. Organizations just embarking on or expanding a volunteer program should think this through carefully. Assess what is needed and query every staff person in detail about their responsibilities to determine if their work could be enhanced by volunteer assistance. Make time for this needs assessment at least once a year. Think about ongoing and episodic opportunities for individuals and groups and write job descriptions *before* recruiting! Job descriptions are a great recruitment and communication tool. Never recruit a volunteer and say “*we’ll figure it out when they get here*” because this is poor management and will lead to turnover. With a specific role, volunteers understand what they will be accomplishing each time, and benefit from a sense of independency.

Know your team. When a person volunteers, it’s important to get to know them; not only what they’re good at but also what motivates them and what they feel most passionately about- as well as what they enjoy doing. Take the time to learn enough about the person so that you can match their skills to the work that is needed. Be aware that sometimes a person may be very good at something (ex: bookkeeping) but want to volunteer in a different arena (ex: cleaning). Perhaps they’re tired of doing the same thing or want a change from their work life. Either way, honor their wishes and you’ll have a happier and more productive volunteer. Interview the candidates and find out what they’re interested in, what they’re good at, what they’d like to do- and why. Forms can help with this but are not a panacea; in person interviews are best as you’ll come away with a better sense of what makes them “tick”.

One note about forms: a little bit of effort will go a long way here. Don’t hand out a form that has been copied so many times that it’s fuzzy or crooked. This sends the message that the organization doesn’t care and accepts shoddy work. People respect paperwork that’s crisp and professional and a web site that’s easy to navigate.

Consistency. It’s best if a volunteer can be trained to one specific project that they will come to know well. When they become experts, not only do they need little to no supervision, they can train others.

Make the connection. Work doesn’t have to be glamorous or strategic to be meaningful, but if the task is mundane, the art to sustaining engagement lies in linking the work to the mission. For example, at a hospital hospitality house, one of the daily projects is folding linens, and making sure each bundle has a matched set of sheets. Folding and matching sheet sizes isn’t exciting or glamorous, but when it’s explained that if the sets don’t match, that a family would come back to the house after hours at the hospital at the side of a sick child only to find they couldn’t make up their bed – suddenly that changes everything. Thinking about families in need puts the project in context and makes it more appealing to volunteers. Make sure the volunteer understands exactly how his/her piece is part of the whole.

Put your smile on. This seems so simple, but it’s easy to forget. It can be hard to be “on” all day for all volunteers, but it is part of the job. If you are having a bad day, or there is work drama, or you have multiple deadlines, volunteers don’t need to hear about it. Volunteers deserve an energetic, warm reception and genuine appreciation each time they volunteer.

Optimizing volunteer resources. Don’t be afraid to push the boundaries of traditional expectations. There is a growing trend away from conventional volunteer schedules, with the same volunteer coming in for the same number of hours week after week and only handling low-level tasks. With both spouses working in many families, it has become very important for organizations to be more flexible and creative in how they think about

volunteer work. If you're having trouble recruiting for in-house positions, see if work could be done from a volunteer's home or whether episodic volunteers or a project team might meet the need rather than a longer term regular commitment.

Think creatively about the work each volunteer will do. If these were paid positions, would they all have the same title? If not, try giving each job its own title. This can be an effective way to recognize the volunteer's contributions and elevate the value of their work within the organization.

Volunteers generate valuable ideas and solutions. If they're the person working most closely on something, they are usually better positioned to make recommendations than staff that are farther removed from that work. It's important to develop a culture that encourages volunteers to be part of the solution, not passive participants in something that may not be working as well as it could.

A strategic and essential volunteer program doesn't evolve overnight. Even when you've managed a large volunteer program for years, there is always room for improvement. In order for the volunteer program to be respected for the mission-critical value it contributes to an organization, it must be well managed. When an agency director prioritizes staff time so that an employee can efficiently devote time to volunteer management, the result is an enthused, engaged, effective group of helpful people who upgrade and elevate the entire organization.

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