

Replace Current Volunteers or Redirect New Ones?

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In its January 26th edition, the Minneapolis *StarTribune* ran an article titled "[As older Minnesota volunteers leave, who will replace them?](#)"(link is external) which was highlighted the next day by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*(link is external). The newspaper story was quite well-written and even included quotations from the executive director of the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration ([MAVA](#)(link is external)) – bravo to the thorough reporter for finding experts!

If you read the full article, I suspect you'll agree with much of it, especially because it is neither written in a woe-is-me tone nor blames uncaring Millennials for not having the sacrifice gene that older generations had. In fact, the author realistically notes that yesterday's volunteering is no longer viable in many situations, while today's volunteering is legitimately held to different standards by those wishing to serve. And most importantly, the article strongly states that organizations must adapt creatively.

I was surprised, however, to read that a \$200,000 grant awarded to Minnesota was going first to examine how to encourage more volunteering at *food pantries*. Let me quickly say that I totally understand that the *cause of hunger* and the immediate need to *get food to hungry people* remain critical issues. But I could see far better ways to spend grant money than trying to find ways to attract younger volunteers to the traditional (and perhaps doomed) volunteer role of helping the pantry to sort and shelve donated food.

To engage needed volunteers in the future, we must ask better critical questions about what should come tomorrow. The challenge for the food pantry is not "how do we replace our older volunteers?" but rather "how will we change everything we do to get things done?" Ironically, this means examining how the organization *uses its money* as well as how it can benefit from new volunteers.

A Different Perspective

The food pantry situation can be used as an example of alternative strategic planning.

I'd start by asking: *Is the food pantry truly getting the help it needs right now from current volunteers?* Just because a corps of people comes in regularly does not mean they are getting the work done. Are current volunteers spending more time socializing than sorting food? Are some older volunteers becoming less productive at the physical labor needed?

As a single day of service, almost any kind of group can be recruited to sort food once. But the more pertinent question is: *Is it realistic to expect that someone in their 20s will ever want to do this same volunteer work, week in and week out?* Generational differences are real (not that every senior

volunteers or that no twenty-something gives a lot of time to a cause). In today's volunteer world, people want to do things that make the most of their limited time. While it might be counterintuitive, the more we recruit by minimizing the effort of a volunteer role, the less attractive it becomes to those who want to make a real difference.

Ready for a radical idea?

Given the amount of effort it takes to recruit, train, supervise, and schedule dozens of volunteers for every pantry, I would consider this question: *Might we be smarter to hire some of the people needing the food to work full time for a decent wage to do this as a job and get it done efficiently?* Then fewer and more skilled volunteers could work in much more flexible ways, devoting their time to other important things, such as soliciting large donations of produce from new sources, negotiating discount cards at local restaurants, starting an after-school healthy snack program, or lobbying legislators to extend and improve food stamps.

I can hear the objections already. *But, Susan, we don't have the money to hire food sorters.* Well, maybe that is a fundraising goal for next year. Or maybe you can become a work placement site for people who are developmentally challenged or settling into a half-way house of some sort. Or maybe you set up a self-help coop in which those who need the food also contribute their time to help everyone else. Remember that making no change means you are diverting paid staff into a lot of volunteer coordinating work that stops them from being as productive as you and they wish.

Employees or Volunteers?

"What can volunteers do for us?" is only one half of the equation. The other half is: "Where should we put our money?"

Executives tend to think only in terms of employees as the *doers* of the organization's primary work and volunteers as low-skilled *assistants* with some of the tasks. This is short-sighted. In small organizations, especially, it's more effective to reward a paid staff member for spending time coordinating skilled volunteers and others who can (if they are the right people) multiply the outputs many times more than what the single staffer can do alone.

Budget cutting often eliminates low-level jobs. Not only does this save the least amount of money in payroll, but it leaves remaining staff without needed support – forcing them to answer phones, do clerical things, etc. And it's just those types of activities for which it is harder and harder to find volunteers.

The reasoning I just presented about considering food pantry stocking as a paid job is important. Pay money for work that needs to be done at *a specific time in a consistent way*. Please understand that I am not recommending that we start paying people just because it's hard to recruit for some volunteer positions. I am simply asking organizations to be holistic in determining where to direct their financial and human resources, with the end result of gaining different (and possibly more) volunteers to attractive and important activities. And, if they have been expecting all sorts of people on staff to understand how to find and work with volunteers, maybe it will become obvious that one way to spend money is to hire a staff member expressly to coordinate volunteers!

What kinds of roles are smart to carve out for volunteers? Build on the unique capabilities volunteers offer, such as:

- Skills and interests *different from* those of the organization's employees so that volunteers expand the available talents rather than duplicate or simply assist paid staff
- Having the luxury to focus as much time as necessary on a single client, long-term cause, or specific task (since employees generally have to juggle the demands of the whole workload)
- Availability on days and in time periods when paid staff are not working, but client needs still exist
- Being product-oriented rather than schedule-oriented

It's probably also useful to note that just because a group of long-time volunteers love their work is not enough reason to keep replicating the same model forever. Those dependable senior food sorters would probably not be attracted to helping the pantry at home at midnight on a smartphone. Guess what age group might listen up to *that* recruitment pitch?

OK. Your turn. Philosophically and practically, when should we consider hiring staff for some tasks and redirecting volunteers to new roles?

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