

Creating a Statement of Philosophy on Volunteer Engagement

Betty B. Stallings with Susan J. Ellis

Step 1

With key staff, board members and other volunteers, discuss the question, “If we had all the money we want and need to support the organization’s mission, would we still involve volunteers and WHY?”

This tough question is posed by Susan Ellis in her book, *From the Top Down* (2010, 13-26). Spending time thinking through an answer is a way to get at the true value of volunteers beyond the usual—and inaccurate—response that they merely “save” money.

Step 2

Revisit the mission of your organization.

Basically, the mission is the purpose for which the agency exists. It is not a list of what you do but is rather a declaration of what you want to accomplish (e.g., eradicate hunger in our community, end violence among our youth). Being clear about the organization’s mission is critical to deciding how volunteers will be involved to support that mission.

Step 3

Identify how you involve volunteers today in carrying out your mission.

Answer these questions:

- Who is defined as a volunteer in our organization?
- What do they do?
- Do they have a wide range of roles, including program support, consulting, short-term projects, research and advocacy, administrative support, fundraising, etc.?
- Do they work throughout the organization, in all departments and units, and partner with everyone from frontline staff to executives?
- Are volunteers considered partners in our work or assistants and helpers? (These are key words that set the tone for how volunteers are perceived.)

- Are there any activities from which volunteers are barred due to concerns about confidentiality, risk, or staff resistance? (Revisit any of these as they may be based on outdated or inappropriate criteria.)
- How do staff view the involvement of volunteers? Do they have personal biases or stereotypes that might cause resistance, or are they open to the different ways volunteers might contribute?

Step 4

Re-examine the questions above, but this time create a vision of potentially great volunteer engagement.

Have executives, staff, board and volunteers give input envisioning their hopes and wishes for how your organization might more successfully involve volunteers in the future. Discuss the impact this could have on your mission. Don't be concerned about why you don't currently have volunteer involvement at this level—just visualize an expanded corps of volunteers serving the organization, effectively and creatively, in myriad ways.

Step 5

Identify your key stakeholders (internal and external) who do or could benefit and/or contribute to successful volunteer engagement.

Include their input into the discussion of the organization's philosophy or value statement about volunteers.

Step 6

Based on your answers in steps 1-5, develop a draft of a statement of philosophy on volunteer engagement for review and discussion by all stakeholders. Rewrite the draft until the statement accurately reflects your collective values.

Here is a sample philosophy statement offered in [*From the Top Down*](#):

Our agency encourages the teamwork of employees and volunteers so that we can offer our consumers the best services possible. Volunteers contribute their unique talents, skills, and knowledge of our community to provide personalized attention to clients, enable the paid staff to concentrate on the work for which they were trained, and educate the public about our organization and its cause. (Ellis 2010, 28)

More examples are on the next pages.

Step 7

Ask the board of directors to formally approve the statement of philosophy to make it an official part of the culture and policies of the organization.

Step 8

Disseminate the statement of philosophy widely to make certain that it becomes a living philosophy guiding the organization's engagement of volunteers.

Consider all the ways you can share the statement, such as:

- Put on a plaque and hang in the lobby
- Include at staff and volunteer orientation and training sessions
- Put in policy and procedure manuals
- Include on your Web site
- Share regularly at departmental staff meetings
- Mention at volunteer recognition events
- Include in materials that go out to the public, such as letterhead, recruitment flyers, pamphlets, monthly newsletters, etc.

Step 9

Review the statement annually to determine if the organization is continuing to be guided by this philosophy/commitment statement.

Excerpted from *Leading the Successful Volunteer Involvement* by Betty B. Stallings with Susan J. Ellis © 2010, Energize, Inc.

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