

Making Friends with Volunteers

Donna Amos

Can a volunteer member of your team also become your friend? Or, by doing so, do they cross a boundary into an area where volunteers have not traditionally been permitted to enter?

I believe volunteers should be as included as paid staff. As with any team member, if a friendship develops it will develop of its own accord regardless of whether or not the people in question are paid or unpaid. Therefore I had no qualms about hearing how one volunteer working in the critical unit team of an acute care hospital had become very friendly with the rest of the team.

For several months this committed volunteer worked alongside the nursing, medical, clerical and allied health staff assigned to the unit. He became a team player. He remembered their birthdays. He was invited to out of work functions. They rang him at home if he missed a shift due to illness. He even joined in on the Footy Pools at the unit's insistence. All the niceties were fulfilled and as a Volunteer Program Manager I couldn't have been happier.

So why did I get a call from the Unit Manager one day saying that the volunteer had overstepped the boundary between volunteer and staff? Oddly enough, I didn't know there was a boundary. So what was his crime? He had dared to ask a salaried staff member out for dinner something any team player might do from time to time, colleague to colleague. Why, then, was he told he was only a volunteer and needed to remember his place?

I was soon to learn that the staff and Unit Manager had never worked so closely with a volunteer in such an intense environment. They believed it was important to make the volunteer feel at one with the team so that he would continue to work with them; but they also believed he understood where the boundary between volunteer and friend was. In spite of all the niceties, the staff perceived a natural progression into friendship as the volunteer slowly seeping across the boundary line.

So it seems being a good Volunteer Manager is not only about training your volunteer staff in all matters of best practice but to also inform the salaried staff about the need to truly include volunteers in their teams and not to create boundaries where there need not be any.

So where are they now? The volunteer became disillusioned with the whole idea of volunteering and the unit decided volunteers were more trouble than they were worth. Thanks to many hours spent convincing this volunteer of the benefits of volunteering, he still works with the organization to this day and is dedicated, sincere and focussed on making his role an important one.

The unit, meanwhile, are as busy as ever and still searching for ways to help ease their heavy workload without volunteer help.

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