

Organizational Culture and Volunteer Programs

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The organizational work influences the culture of the agency and the character of the volunteer program as well. Many of the volunteers of the residential programs were relatives of agency clients. Hospice volunteers were noted for their ability to nurture others and their receptivity to the staff's "dark" humor that counter-balanced the deadly seriousness of their task. At a recreational program, the volunteers most appreciated were those who knew how to have fun and to play. At a program fostering independence for its residents, volunteers were sought who could function autonomously.

One of the conclusions from the PAVE study is that volunteer programs, to be successful, must be compatible with the agency's organizational culture and an integral part of that culture. There has been recent attention in the field of organization development to the importance of organizational culture. Edgar Schein, in his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, has developed the thesis that it is a prime task of the leader of an organization to manage the organizational culture.

Applying this concept to volunteer programs, it becomes the job of the Director of Volunteers to manage the volunteer culture. Since the Director of Volunteers is also a middle manager, s/he also is the liaison between the volunteer program and the larger organization. S/he therefore becomes the link between the organizational culture and the volunteer culture and it is his/her job to bring the two together. Some Directors of Volunteers do this job well. Others do not attend to it. Rarely do we make explicit this expectation and almost never do we provide training or supervision to the Director of Volunteers on how to accomplish this task. Yet if we want volunteer programs to succeed, we will need to highlight this aspect of the Director of Volunteers' job.

We expect volunteers to "fit in," yet we often leave them on their own to discover just exactly what they are to fit into and how they are expected to do this. This type of trial-and-error training is costly in time and people. It reminds me of doing marriage counseling and hearing repeatedly that one partner expected the other to read his/her mind, anticipate his/her needs and desires, and "just know" how to fulfill them.

Few of us are mind readers, yet we expect our volunteers to know what we want and how to do it. To complicate matters, we often try to hide our organizational dynamics (which we sometimes see as "secrets") or our "dirty laundry" from our volunteers. We train them on how we would like our agency to perform and tell them precious little about how it actually works. To the extent that we withhold or disguise the organizational culture from our volunteers, we set them up for failure.

Organizational Culture and Adaptive Strategies

The job of socialization should begin in the planning and recruitment stage: The Director of Volunteers must develop a clear notion of the organizational culture and volunteer needs, in order to determine a profile of the volunteers that will be compatible with the tasks to be done and the organizational culture to be entered. The Director of Volunteers should be communicating not only the skills needed to volunteer for the agency, but also the personality style, attitudes, and beliefs necessary to succeed in the agency.

Marketing approaches and materials should be carriers of this organizational message. Volunteer job announcements and job descriptions should contain information about the attitudes and skills required for successful job performance. Examples I have seen include: "Must be comfortable with issues concerning death and dying," "Must be able to work well in a group situation," "Flexibility imperative," "Must be dependable and able to work independently," "Sense of humor required," "Commitment to ending domestic violence," "Commitment to teamwork important."

Excerpted from *At the Heart: The New Volunteer Challenges to Community Agencies* by Nora Silver.

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