

Providing a Sense of Control to Volunteers

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Our sense of personal power comes not only from a sense that our actions are effective but that we decide what actions we will take. People with a sense of personal power feel that they are masters of their fate rather than helpless victims of circumstance. They feel they can decide to do something about the problems they see. And they feel that when they take those actions, those actions will make a difference.

When we talk about giving volunteers a sense of control, we are talking about giving them the authority to think, the authority to plan and evaluate their work, the authority to decide what to do. The volunteer has a degree of autonomy in determining what they do and how they go about doing it. With this authority the individual or team of volunteers not only does the work but can also play some part in deciding how to do it.

Many Volunteer Program Managers have a built-in resistance to allowing volunteers this authority. For one thing, the volunteer may work only a few hours per month and so have difficulty keeping up with what is going on. And for another, standard management practice holds that it is the supervisor's job to do the planning and the deciding and the employee's job to carry out whatever the supervisor thinks should be done.

Indeed, when a volunteer first comes on board, this may be the most comfortable way to proceed. As volunteers learn the job and begin to figure out what is going on, however, the fact that they are only doing what someone else decides begins to sap their motivation and dilute their feelings of pride in what they accomplish. They will tend either to resent being told what to do or to lose interest in the job. Either of these will increase the likelihood of their dropping out.

This does not mean that we should abdicate our responsibility for ensuring good results from volunteers. Obviously, we can't afford to have all our volunteers doing whatever they think is best, and without guidance. We need to make sure that they are all working toward the achievement of a coordinated and agreed set of goals. What we can do, however, is involve them in the planning and deciding process so that they do feel a sense of authority over the "how" of their job. We should ask: "How would a person who tells the volunteer what to do know what to tell him?"

Or we could ask: "What does the volunteer's supervisor do in order to figure out what to tell the volunteer to do?"

We can then include those thinking tasks in the volunteer's job description, healing the schism between thinking and doing. In a sense, in doing this we give the volunteer back her brain.

By "empowering" volunteers, we mean making them more autonomous, more capable of independent action. The wisdom of this approach is that it is easier to get good results from

empowered people than from people who are dependent. We can do this by giving them authority to decide, within limits, how they will go about achieving the results for which they are responsible. In such a relationship, the manager becomes a source of help for the volunteer rather than a controller or a goad. This not only feels better for the volunteer but allows the manager to spend less time making decisions about the volunteer's work and more time to think strategically, to concentrate on grasping the opportunities that will never be seen if she is mired in the muck of day-to-day detail. It also gives her time to work with other staff of the agency on how to improve their involvement of volunteers.

As an example of providing volunteers with their own sense of control and autonomy, consider the following from a study of the Travelers Aid Society volunteer program. McComb (1995) in a study of the TAS program at Washington Reagan National Airport noted the following ("Martha" is the TAS volunteer program manager, an old friend of the authors):

"Connected to the rewards of competence and excelling was the reward of autonomy. Martha told me that she wanted volunteers to feel that what they thought or did mattered, and was careful to give them ownership of their environment. Volunteers did not explicitly mention autonomy as a reward, yet autonomy was apparent to me. I understood that Martha's motto of "there's policy and then there's style" meant that different ways of doing the job were permissible. And volunteers did have ownership of the desk on their shifts. For instance, one volunteer decided on his own that the desks needed "Information" signs as well as Travelers Aid signs. He went ahead and had signs professionally printed for each desk; TAS reimbursed his costs."

The result of this approach, along with other practices we've discussed, is significant: "TAS volunteers stay. Eight had worked for 15 to 20 years, nine for 10 to 14 years, working 52 three- or four-and-a-half-hour shifts a week."

Colomy, Chen and Andrews (1987), in a study of volunteers at various agencies, perhaps summarize all this chapter when they cite the importance that volunteers give to what they refer to as 'situational facilities,' a variety of job-related factors including suitable workload, clearly defined responsibilities, competence of their supervisor, and a reasonable work schedule. They conclude:

"Perhaps the single most important finding reported in this study is the relatively high importance volunteers accord situational facilities. The high ranking and high mean score of situational facilities are evident both for the sample as a whole and for each of the three sub-groups of volunteers. In addition to the intrinsic and extrinsic incentives associated with volunteer work, then, it appears that individuals strongly desire conditions and organizational settings that facilitate effective and efficient volunteer work."

Don't we all?

Excerpted from *Keeping Volunteers: A Guide to Retention*, by Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch, Fat Cat Publications, 2005.

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