

Spring Cleaning: Take a Fresh Look at Your Volunteer Program

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It's Spring in the Northern hemisphere and we're opening windows, letting in fresh air and sun. As is traditional, this is the time for closet cleaning, fix-up projects, and other winter's-over activities. Why not apply the same mindset to volunteer management?

Volunteer programs tend to take on more and more tasks without ever stopping to consider whether "more" makes sense without divesting from older, less useful work at the same time. If we buy new clothes we have to make room in the closet for them. When was the last time you "made room" for fresh volunteer activities - or for allowing yourself space to think, dream, and plan?

Here are some strategies to consider.

You are not alone with your dust cloth! The more people you can engage in the "fresh look" process the more likely real change will occur. Form a "Spring Cleaning" task force of 6 to 8 volunteers (some who've been around a long time and some new ones) and paid staff supervisors to help steer the assessment process. Invite a volunteer management colleague from another agency to sit in, too - maybe you can exchange your services and help two volunteer programs in the process.

The task force will help you determine how you will collect evaluative feedback from program participants: what you want to know, who are the best people to ask, and how you will obtain and then analyze the information. If you like the "Spring Cleaning" theme, focus your attention on identifying areas or issues that have gotten stale, musty, and in need of change. Work on formulating questions that will reveal useful information about those areas.

Take each volunteer assignment area and really examine it. Why was this role created in the first place? Is this still a vital need? What is the impact of this work and on whom? Can we recommit to its value or have circumstances changed enough to question if this is still the best way to ask volunteers to contribute their time?

Consider the work of your organization and the needs of the people you serve. What are the most pressing concerns today? Assess whether volunteer activities are addressing the most critical needs or the peripheral ones. What else might volunteers do that would be of greater help?

Even if you determine that current volunteer assignments are still valid, ask volunteers: "If we had to cut one activity out of your assignment, what could we eliminate with the least amount of negative impact?" Then ask the paid staff the same question from their point of view: "If we had to cut one thing that volunteers do in their assignment...."

Other good questions to ask volunteers:

- What skills or talents do you have that we have never asked you to apply on our behalf?
- What needs do you think our clients have that we don't seem to be addressing?
- What would make volunteering here even better?

And it's always ok to ask respondents: "What else would you like to tell us?"

Now get out that "back burner" list of new program ideas that has been sitting around for a long time. Toss these out to your Spring Cleaning Task Force and see which ideas generate enthusiasm. How might some of these possibilities become reality? What might you stop doing to make room for something new?

It's also important to ask *yourself*: "What tasks am I doing now that I'd love to remove from my to-do list?" (Then assess whether you still, in fact, need to do each of these, or can stop doing them, or could recruit a volunteer to do some or all of it instead.)

Finally, invite a colleague to your office and together take a look at your shelves and files. As you explain what you have in the office, think about whether you really need items at your fingertips out in the open. Or might some go into files, be boxed for storage, or even--gasp!--be thrown out? What about your books and reference materials? Are any still unread that you might schedule to read soon? Does your colleague want to borrow anything? Then go and visit your colleague's office and reciprocate!

So, are you ready to grab that mental broom? Please share how you've done program assessment (any tips?) and what you did as a result. Have you ever eliminated a volunteer assignment? Why? How?

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