Supervising volunteers

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The relationship between the supervisor and the volunteer is critically important. In many programmes the manager of volunteers manages all volunteer staff. This is very time consuming. In some organizations, where volunteers are placed in various departments, units or locations throughout the organization, the manager of volunteers often delegates management functions to the supervisor responsible for the day-to-day oversight of the paid staff and the volunteers (Fisher and Cole, 1993). For example, tutors may be interviewed, screen and placed by a volunteer manager, but the classroom teacher does the actual day-to-day supervision.

In some organizations volunteers supervise other volunteers. According to Ellis (1991) "Volunteers make excellent mid-level supervisors of other volunteers. Using them encourages a team approach. . ." Engaging volunteers in supervisory roles is a way to promote and recognize experienced volunteers. For example, tutors may be organized into teams based on the day of the week they are in the school. A volunteer may serve as the team leader, providing considerable on-site coordination and supervision.

"Wilson states that volunteer/paid staff relations are the foremost problem in volunteerism (1981) and that a major challenge in the voluntary sector is preparing paid staff to work effectively with volunteers (1984). As Wilson points out, volunteers are frequently supervised by persons who have had no training in how to work with volunteers." (Fisher and Cole, 1993, p. 121-122)

The success of the volunteer programme relies on the ability of supervisory staff to understand and work effectively with volunteer staff. It is helpful when managers of volunteers conduct extensive training with paid staff to help them appreciate and understand the unique characteristics of volunteer staff. Unlike paid staff, volunteer are not dependent upon the organization for pay, and in fact are not motivated by pay. Their sources of motivation are often different from paid staff, they gain different benefits and most often volunteers work part time. All supervisors need to understand the dynamics of working with unpaid staff, and understand why volunteers donate their time and talents to the work of the organization. The Independent Sector (1997) lists eight primary reasons given by adults in the United States for their volunteer service:

- A chance to make a difference
- A chance to use a skill or talent
- To develop professional experience or contacts
- A way to express a religious faith
- An avenue to a more balanced life
- An opportunity to give something back
- An opportunity to meet new people
- An opportunity for personal growth and self-esteem

Supervisory staff often find it helpful to have training for dealing effectively with problems involving volunteers. Policies of professional behavior should apply equally to paid and volunteer staff.

Supervisors of volunteers may find themselves dealing with issues of absenteeism, tardiness, failure to perform, or other common problems. It is important that all staff understand the procedures and process for dealing with volunteer as well as paid staff problems. A good risk management procedure outlines the steps for dealing with problem behavior and usually includes one-to-one discussion between the volunteer and the supervisor, a documented plan of action, and an agreed upon review date. Occasionally performance does not improve, leading to disciplinary action or dismissal. Volunteers, like paid staff, must have information on the organizational policies regarding disciplinary offences, and the consequences.

"Eckles, Carmichael, and Sarchet (1983) recommend a first warning that clearly communicates the consequences of a second incident. If a second incident occurs, disciplinary action should be immediate, consistent, and impersonal… Releasing a volunteer from a position is one of the most difficult tasks in volunteer administration. To prevent negative and unfortunate situations from developing, it is necessary to have a sound system of recruitment, screening, selection, orientation, training, placement and supervision." (Fisher and Cole, 1993)

Poor performance by even one volunteer can reinforce negative attitudes about volunteers among paid staff who are negative or ambivalent about engaging volunteers. Paid staff may become hesitant to request volunteer or refuse to design opportunities for volunteers within the organization. Other volunteers may become discouraged and less committed if they judge that performance standards are inconsistent. Finally, the level of service to clients and consumers may be seriously affected by poor performance by a volunteer. Performance issues should be dealt with promptly, fairly and consistently.

Delegation

This is the enabling stage for a volunteer management system. Volunteers are motivated when given encouragement from paid staff and delegated responsibility with authority. Delegation is defined as empowering one person to act for another, which is how we enable volunteers to do their work. Delegation is one of the most critical elements in the management of nearly all organizations and programmes. When delegation is successful all members in the group are involved in activities. Each manager of volunteers must evaluate his/her own ability to delegate, and the ability of other paid staff to willingly and effectively delegate to volunteers.

Marlene Wilson, author of The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs, writes about delegating: "The single most helpful thing to me . . . was, and still is, being very honest and realistic about my own limitations, both in time and knowledge." In her book she poses four questions crucial to successful delegation:

1. Do I have enough confidence in myself that I will not only accept, but actively seek out volunteers (people) who know more than I do about a programme area where I need help?
2. Am I willing to delegate significant parts of my programme to qualified volunteers (and be glad, not threatened, if they succeed)?
3. Do the jobs I offer to high level volunteers within my programme make a sensible, logical whole, or are they bits and pieces of busy work that give the volunteer little opportunity for satisfaction or growth?

4. Am I willing to shift from being a doer to being an enabler? In other words, can I become a good manager and find satisfaction in that?

Volunteers need to feel they are a vital part of the organization. People join a group and volunteer their time to contribute something. If they have a part in the actual implementation of the jobs that need to be done, they feel their contribution is worthwhile. Delegation allows more tasks to be accomplished than if one person did them alone. The more that is accomplished, the better volunteers feel about their contributions to the whole.

Volunteer managers, paid middle managers, paid staff, and leadership volunteers may have difficulty delegating for these reasons:

- They may feel they are slighting their jobs if they delegate tasks to others.
- They may feel a volunteer does not have enough information to do the task.
- It is easier to do it personally than tell someone else how to do it and then follow up to see that it was done.
- They may want recognition for doing it themselves.
- They think they have better ideas.
- Personal insecurity about exposing their own lack of knowledge or weak area.
- Believe "I can do it better."
- Lack of experience in effective delegation techniques.
- Inability to direct, think ahead or visualize the work requirements and project outcomes.
- Fear of criticism from supervisors for mistakes.
- Unwillingness to provide the training necessary for volunteers to learn new skills.

Many people may not be aware of the benefits of delegating or may not know how to delegate. The obstacles to effective delegation can be overcome by understanding some of the steps used by successful volunteer leaders. The steps listed below are designed for both beginning and experienced managers of volunteers who want to delegate more effectively.

- Define responsibilities clearly. Describe freedoms and limitations. This allows for consistency.
- When delegating, delegate complete segments rather than bits and pieces.
- Maximize strengths by choosing the right people for the appropriate task. Determine strengths and weaknesses of volunteers and staff and delegate accordingly.
- Provide adequate feedback. Be honest and accurate in assessment of how they are doing. Emphasize what went wrong, not who did it.
- Set goals and performance standards together.
- Provide support through sharing knowledge, information, and plans with them.
- Give those with responsibility for implementing a programme a voice in the decision-making. Freely consult with those involved.
- Commend and encourage. Reward accomplishment.
- Let go! Fully delegate and allow for personal success or failure. Delegation also involves the transfer of authority.
- "Thank you" after the job is done should acknowledge the contribution. Remember: Delegation does not eliminate work, it changes it.

Follow-up and communications

Follow-up is an often forgotten segment in volunteer management. The orientation is complete, a couple of training sessions have been conducted, and it is assumed that the volunteer is fine and the paid professionals forget them.

Follow-up implies checking on, not checking up on volunteers. What new training do they need? Are updates being planned on a regular basis? Are they happy in their roles? Do they feel a sense of accomplishment?

New training cannot be planned unless the supervisor or volunteer manager talks with volunteers to assess their needs. Communication ties it all together. There must be regular on-going method of communication in both directions between the volunteer and the paid staff.

Managers of volunteers tend to create a one-way system with everything going outward, such as newsletters, handbooks, etc. There is little opportunity for feedback from the volunteers and the programme managers. Many volunteers will just continue what they are doing without asking questions unless they are encouraged to do so.

Communication in both directions must be clear and in several forms if possible. Written information is good, but face-to-face discussion gives one the opportunity to answer questions and resolve small problems before major problems develop. Volunteers also need to know who they can communicate with and how.

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