

The Middle Management Barrier

Susan J. Ellis

As so often happens, this month's Hot Topic focus rose to my attention not because it is new, but because it is affecting several otherwise diverse clients at the same time. The issue: overt and covert resistance to volunteers by *middle managers*.

Of course everything begins with *top* management. The board of directors and the executive staff set the tone and establish policy, budget, and other fundamentals. But they do not do the work! Every service, project, and plan initiated at the top must be implemented across and down the organizational ladder, relying along the way on the often invisible piece of the puzzle: branch/affiliate directors, department heads, unit supervisors, and other middle managers.

Here are some quick examples of various chains of command, with the key middle manager highlighted in red:

Hospital Administrators

Director of Nursing

Nurses

Volunteers on the floor

Police Force Central Command

Precinct Captains

Police Officers

Volunteers working in the station

School District Board and Superintendent

Individual School Principals/Head Masters

Teachers

Volunteers in each classroom

National Organization Board and Executive

Chapter Directors

Chapter staff

Volunteers working in the chapter

When it comes to engagement of volunteers, smart organizations have developed training for paid staff who will do the daily, at-the-work-site supervision of volunteers (the third level in the examples above) and, of course, for the volunteers themselves. But middle managers are vital to how effective the organization's volunteer engagement will be. Do they fill this role comfortably and well? Is anyone aware of how this key group affects the situation? Do they even buy into volunteer involvement? (They are rarely consulted.) Are they given any training – or even an introduction to – the principles of volunteer management?

Middle managers can be a support or an obstacle. Consider:

- They convey overt and subtle messages to their direct reports about work expectations, setting the tone for how things are done in their corner of the organization. So their personal belief in and attitudes about volunteers will shape the way staff/volunteer teamwork is supported (or undercut).
- Because middle managers train new employees to do their jobs properly, and evaluate employee work performance throughout the year, they have substantial influence over how their staffs approach any area of responsibility, including volunteers. Do they have the vision and expertise to mentor well in this area?
- They have the authority to approve work assignments created for volunteers by the staff. So, if a middle manager's image of volunteers is that they are mainly nice but not very skilled, that unit will design volunteer positions with low expectations (and self-fulfilling prophecy will produce volunteers who don't care to be challenged). Conversely, middle managers who raise the bar on what volunteers are asked to do will help you to attract more highly qualified people.
- Middle managers set the agenda for staff meetings and individual supervision meetings. Do they include regular time to focus on volunteer involvement in their department/unit/branch? The inclusion or absence of volunteer-related issues on the agenda sends a message – is it that volunteers matter or don't?
- Employees can get the message from their supervisors that spending time with volunteers is a diversion from their "real job," to be done (if they wish) only after other, more important work is completed. Or, supervisors can visibly recognize and reward staff who help volunteers to shine.
- In a large organization, a middle manager may well be supervising a volunteer program manager directly assigned to that department or unit. Are all middle managers consistent in how they coach and support their VPM? Do they understand the tension between doing what's best for their department and also meshing with the organization-wide volunteer program goals and policies?

To be fair, middle managers are indeed "caught in the middle." Volunteer involvement is probably not the only organization goal that they have been told to implement without their input. They, in turn, are being held accountable for meeting a long list of priorities. Are *their* superiors sending the message that volunteers are important on that list? Do *they* get rewarded for supporting great volunteer contributions to their unit?

Everyone in your organization is undoubtedly overworked and stretched thin already. Adding volunteers to the mix, while of great potential value in the long run, is not easy and definitely takes time. So the goal is to make sure *the benefits of volunteer involvement outweigh the effort*. It's middle managers who can best monitor this balance and establish the importance of community engagement. They can be your greatest allies.

What to Do?

To tackle this issue we first have to **see it**. Consider the middle managers in your organization and diagnose their degree of support, level of expertise, and willingness to pay attention to volunteer involvement. Then answer the following questions...which will lead you to matching strategies:

- Do I know what each middle manager knows about best practices in volunteer management? How can I find out?
- What opportunities do I have to provide better information and more skill development to middle managers? For example, can I:
 - Provide actual training?
 - Invite them to an informal discussion in my office?
 - Speak at a management team meeting?
 - Take individuals to lunch for a one-on-one meeting?
 - Create a special guidebook for middle managers?
 - Prepare regular reports and information specifically for this group?
- How can I provide recognition to those middle managers who are doing a great job setting the tone for volunteers in their departments? What's the benefit to them, personally?

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the monthly Hot Topic essay for Oct 2006 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2006/octo6.html>