The Difference between Needing and *Wanting* Volunteers

Susan J. Ellis

Here is a true story without identifying the people or organization involved.

I have a friend who is a licensed psychologist and who has enrolled as a volunteer with Give an Hour (www.giveanhour.org), a national organization that helps mental health professionals donate their services to U.S. military personnel and families affected by the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. She was recently referred a client and had an excellent contact with the director of volunteer services at the referring facility. In fact, the DVS was so excited about the potential of Give an Hour as a resource that she sent a special memo to the staff alerting them to this new opportunity to assist clients. But the memo got an unexpected reaction from a department head who refused permission for any staff to refer clients to this community organization. Why? It would make us look bad for not being able to serve everyone ourselves.

I wish this story was unique. Unfortunately, every day something similar occurs in all sorts of settings around the world. We need to recognize and tackle what amounts to the prejudice of paid staff against people who offer their services for free. This will only grow as a problem with the proliferation of "skilled volunteer" or *pro bono* projects, where – by design – highly-qualified professionals are recruited to donate their expertise.

It's the gap between ever-expanding *needs* getting volunteer attention and the resistance from paid workers who do not actually *want* this help.

In the situation I just described, where was advocacy for the needs of the clients? Who should (or could) ask the question "are you exploring every resource available to you already?" Or, who defines what "serving clients" means? Is it not as valuable to have the access and knowledge to *refer* someone to a competent counselor as to make him or her wait for the same (possibly even less competent) service from someone directly on staff?

More Examples

This reminds me of the arguments I had a number of years ago in two different public library systems at the time they were expanding volunteer involvement. First, the librarians resisted allowing volunteers to conduct story hours and, then, library aides refused to allow volunteers to check out books. In both cases (and in both systems), their reasoning was: "that's MY job." And, in response, I noted that "your job is *to make sure there are* story hours or that books are checked out. One way to fulfill that obligation is to give oversight to volunteers whom you train to do the work properly." It was a new perspective – particularly convincing after librarians admitted that they rarely had time to do more than one story hour a week themselves, but that children would love more. Not to mention that the librarians could still choose the books, but that the volunteers who

would read them out loud might be selected for their *performance abilities* (hardly a common skill for librarians).

Again, despite the benefits to service recipients, resistance to volunteers stemmed from employee self-protection. Who challenges when such self-protection is legitimate or merely selfish?

In another recent incident with an anonymous organization that was concerned about the lack of ongoing orientation and support of volunteers, I was asked how to respond to staff's reluctance to involve experienced volunteers as training facilitators because "we're not sure we can count on them to say what we want them to." OK. So the logic is that it's better to squeeze in sporadic sessions the staff can find the time to do rather than train appropriate volunteers do them regularly and well? Not to mention the offer was to have *experienced* volunteers be the facilitators.

Whose responsibility is to question the priorities and attitudes of these staff members?

Implications and Questions

We have dealt with the issue of volunteer/employee relations many times in this space, in books and articles, and in training sessions. What makes it "hot" right now is all the attention being paid to the increasing need for volunteers as the economy takes its toll on available services. I have no doubts that people are willing to contribute their time and want to do so effectively. But I am very concerned at the less-than-enthusiastic reception they will get in too many organizations.

How open is *your* organization to meaningful volunteer engagement? To how many of the following statements can you answer "yes, we do"?

- We ask "what roles can volunteers fill in this activity" every time we plan a new project or service.

- Volunteers are assigned to work with department heads and other managers, as well as to lower-level employees.

- We recruit consultants and various experts to give their services *pro bono* when we need to tap special skills – especially skills not already offered by anyone on staff.

- Volunteers serve on planning and assessment committees alongside employees.

- We regularly turn to volunteers for new ideas, feedback and input.

- We value time donors as much as money donors.

These are only a few measures of true willingness to find the full range of resources to help meet your organization's mission and serve the most people in the best ways. It's volunteers as *integral* to service delivery, not just as nice helpers.

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 Mar 2009 and has been reposted with permission from
http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2009/09mar.html