

Where should Volunteer Resources be “placed”?

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The question of where to “place” responsibility for the administration of volunteer involvement surfaces repeatedly, with no agreed upon standard practice. While there is no definitely right or wrong department or level in an organization where volunteers belong, where they appear on the organizational chart sends a message as to their importance. As always, the key is to make the choice strategically.

Right now there seems to be a trend for larger nonprofits to put volunteer services into **the marketing or public relations department**. In most cases, this means a transfer out of the chain of command running the organization's direct client services, a move that may have unintended consequences. On the plus side, this placement acknowledges volunteers as vital to strong relations with the community. It also provides the volunteer resources manager (VRM) with access to resources in media relations, technology, graphic arts, and other elements important in recruiting and recognizing volunteers.

On the other side of the coin, however, the marketing staff is removed from the daily operations of the organization and outside of any decision making about client services. This poses a serious problem for the VRM, who must be in the loop about what is going on in order to place volunteers into all units throughout the organization. This requires ongoing contact with direct service staff and participation in planning sessions no one else in marketing would ever attend. So how can the head of marketing competently supervise the VRM and represent the needs of volunteers higher up the chain?

Another negative is the message this placement sends about the role of volunteers. Rather than clearly integrated with the service delivery team, being assigned to the marketing department implies that volunteers are mainly “for show” or to win points with the public. It certainly does not convey the sense that volunteers are doing substantive things to further the mission of the organization.

Other Common Placement Options

One can identify *pros* and *cons* for any of the placement options common for volunteer services.

In the **human resources or personnel department**:

Pros: This permits merger (or eliminates duplication) of some systems for creating position descriptions, staff handbooks, training, and recordkeeping. The VRM is then positioned to be the human resource “specialist for non-paid staff,” and can assure that organization policies foster good employee-volunteer relations, that staff is trained in how to work with volunteers, and more.

Cons: Over time attention to volunteers is whittled down, as volunteers are given lower priority than paid staff. The tendency is to define volunteer management as employee management, without acknowledging the key differences - nor encouraging or funding these special issues.

In the **development or fundraising office:**

Pros: From this vantage point, volunteers are presented internally and externally as part of the department that coordinates outreach to community groups and businesses, bringing in all community resources (both money and time) to further the mission of the organization.

Cons: As with the marketing department, fundraising staff has little direct involvement with the service delivery staff, so again the VRM is at a disadvantage in placing volunteers strategically. Because most organizations value raising funds more than raising time and talent, the VRM is rarely viewed as *partner* in resource development, but rather as an *assistant* to the staff bringing in money. Even more serious is that volunteers may get the message that they are wanted only for their financial value.

All of the options above put the VRM and volunteers "under" another department. That in itself sends a message. If the organization wants to promote volunteer involvement as important and essential, there are two more choices.

Placed within **the executive offices**, reporting directly to the executive director:

Pros: This demonstrates the value placed on volunteer engagement and gives the VRM continuous overview of the whole organization, as well as access to top decision makers.

Cons: But the proximity also means that the executive can divert the VRM to other areas and activities unrelated to volunteer engagement. More critically, lower level staff may feel constrained from sharing concerns or needs with the VRM.

Finally there is the creation of **an independent volunteer resources department**, sending the message that volunteers are recognized as vital enough to warrant focused attention.

Pros: The VRM is seen and treated as a department head, serves on the senior management team, submits a budget to be allocated to support volunteers, and is held accountable for running a successful volunteer involvement initiative.

Cons: Employees can view volunteers as "belonging" to the volunteer resources department when, in fact, everyone is responsible for supporting volunteers wherever their assignment places them. Also, most department heads do not engage themselves in the functioning of other departments and so may wonder why the director of volunteer resources shows up in their work area, speaks to their employees, and works with staff at all levels. Yet this is precisely what is required to identify positions for volunteers and place them effectively.

Where volunteer resources appears on the organizational chart is a decision deserving careful assessment. Recognize that the placement can enable or disable the VRM in developing the potential of volunteer engagement for ongoing success.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for June 2014.