

## Engaging Staff with Volunteers

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If you're reading this article, you've likely caught a glimpse of what volunteerism could do for your organization. You've imagined scenarios in which you offer new programs for children and families, or create better outcomes with existing ones. You've thought about ways in which volunteers can drive new sources of revenue and help you pare back your non-program expenses. And you recognize the potential for elevating community awareness by word of mouth, social networking, public speaking, and advocacy.

Volunteerism is a team sport; it takes investment and commitment from a number of players. Your Board of Directors and executive team need to endorse volunteerism as a key strategy for success. Your co-workers need to embrace the opportunity to collaborate with "unpaid staff" as they work to serve your clientele. Your volunteers need to feel excited about the opportunity to contribute to your organizational mission. And you need a well-ordered volunteer management program to help everyone on the team play well together.

This article takes a look at one crucial element of team success – staff engagement with volunteers. Their attitudes, aptitudes, and actions play a huge role in determining volunteer effectiveness, satisfaction, and retention. I'll start by taking a brief look at sources of staff resistance, and then offer strategies to help make the staff-volunteer relationship successful.

### ***Is Staff Excited About Working With Volunteers?***

I wish that I could tell you that staff always "catches the vision" for volunteerism and rushes to jump on the bandwagon. Truth be told, they don't. Most will get the big picture and give you a "thumbs up" to move forward. But when it's time to place volunteers in *their* backyard, they just might invite you to go to their neighbor's place instead!

What causes staff to resist volunteers? A starter list of reasons includes:

- Prior bad experience – personally or vicariously
- Too much work and/or stress to add anything else to the daily routine – especially if the "helpers" prove unreliable, incompetent, or overbearing
- Concern that the classroom dynamic would change
- Lack of interest and/or skill in managing people
- Anxiety about coaching someone who is older or more experienced
- Worry that volunteers will supplant paid staff in a tight economy

The first step in dealing with resistance is to make it OK for people to voice it. Let them know that you genuinely care about their concerns and that you are committed to building and sustaining a program that honors their needs. Get specifics as you engage in dialog:



- How could your work be supported by volunteers? What are the qualities you'd look for in a classroom colleague? How would you go about finding the "right fit"?
- How would you describe the classroom dynamic today? What do you think would change if a volunteer entered the picture? How would that affect your work? How will it impact the children?
- What potential obstacles give you cause for concern? What needs to happen to ensure a positive outcome?
- Tell me about any bad experiences with volunteers. What happened? How do you think it could have been avoided?
- What bothers you most about having responsibility for volunteers? Do you think you could leverage tools that other teachers have created to make your life easier?
- How could I support you in gaining confidence and skills in delivering feedback to volunteers? Do you think those skills would be beneficial as you progress in your career?

Armed with information about staff concerns, you're in a position to craft strategies to address them.

### ***Get Buy-In for Your Volunteer Mission and Vision***

Clearly, the first paid and unpaid staff members who need to get on-board with volunteerism are the executive team and Board of Directors. They need to validate the strategic importance of volunteerism and communicate their commitment and enthusiasm to the entire organization. They also need to sanction the required investment to develop and administer a vibrant volunteer management program.



Successful programs have a *reason, focus, and purpose for using volunteers*. They connect volunteer time, talents, and experience to the organizational mission, program outcomes, community engagement, and bottom line results. They tie the spirit of giving to tangible expressions of meaning for the organization, staff, program participants, and the volunteers. You'll want to capture *your* reason, focus, and purpose in writing.

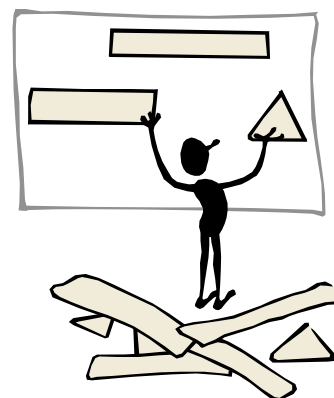
Participants in the Boomers & Babies Learning Community engaged Board representatives, senior leadership, staff, and volunteers in developing volunteer mission statements and program goals. *[See Attachment A for a sample, courtesy of Adelante Mujeres.]* This document narrates volunteerism as a core element of service delivery. It also sets the expectation that everyone is a steward of volunteerism.

One manifestation of stewardship is to include responsibility for volunteerism in staff position descriptions. For example, you might include the statement: "Every employee is expected to treat volunteers with respect, to help them be successful, and to recognize the value that they add in accomplishing our mission." You'll also include a provision for volunteer supervision in selected staff position descriptions.

## ***Engage Staff in Volunteer Management Planning***

Mission and vision need to translate into the “nuts and bolts” of volunteer management – policies & procedures, recruiting, screening, placement, orientation & training, mentoring, recognition, etc. The best practices that attend to each of those disciplines are beyond the purview of this article. As you build out each of those elements, *make sure you include staff in the planning process!*

People are committed to activities and programs that they help design. The simple act of inviting them to the planning table lets them know that you value their input and are sincere in the desire to establish something that works for everybody. Moreover, *you don't have to do all of the work by yourself!* You can be the facilitator as you inspire their creativity, solicit forthright sharing of concerns, and develop workable plans and solutions together.



Timing is an important component of any plan. You may find that staff wants to dip its toes in the volunteer waters before diving into the deep end of the pool. A gradual introduction to a long-term program is not a bad thing. You may also find that certain folks have the capacity to assume more managerial responsibility than others. Volunteer integration with staff does not have to be “one size fits all.”

## ***Allay Concerns with Written Volunteer Position Descriptions***

Uncertainty can be an underlying factor in staff resistance to volunteers. Well-written volunteer position descriptions diminish uncertainty. They specify purpose, outline responsibilities and expected levels of commitment, define training and support provided, summarize principal impact(s), delineate desired skills and qualifications, and suggest benefits for volunteers. Position descriptions provide “marching orders” for volunteer coordinators as they source and screen candidates for positions. They establish an air of professionalism by setting clear expectations for all concerned. And they take the stress out of the staff-volunteer relationship when roles and responsibilities are clear and relevant.

Formal volunteer training goes hand-in-hand with written position descriptions. Above and beyond a general orientation (*including relevant policies and procedures*), volunteers might profit from:

- A discussion of the core values to which all paid and unpaid staff adhere
- A detailed introduction to the population served
- Knowledge of the organization's theory of change
- An overview of the behavioral model(s) used

Though it takes a little extra effort up front, written documentation on these key aspects of your organization become “supervisory tools” for staff. They serve as valuable points of reference if and when volunteer efforts need to be redirected down the road. As you gain experience with

volunteer placement, you'll update your descriptions and related policies and procedures to align with program, staff, and volunteer needs.

### ***Identify Staff Training Needs***

Competency can be another factor in staff resistance to volunteerism. As a rule, staff buy-in and involvement is more productive and fulfilling when they:

- Understand the needs, concerns, and benefits of volunteers
- Are aware of the needs and characteristics of the generational cohorts with which they will be working (e.g., Greatest Generation, Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials)
- Have the resources, training, and tools to engage volunteers effectively
- Develop skills to cultivate mutually beneficial, collaborative relationships

Invite staff to participate in defining their training requirements. Find out what they already know. Some may have a long-standing history of successful volunteer engagement! Others may have specific things that they want to learn. For example, *how do you provide feedback to someone who is much older and/or experienced working with children – especially if his or her behavior is not helpful?!* Consider working with Oregon Volunteers and/or the Nonprofit Association of Oregon as you develop your staff training resource list.



Build staff training on volunteer engagement into your organizational flow. Choose topics that reflect current needs so that newly acquired skills can be applied in a real-world setting. Take advantage of learning opportunities when you:

- Hire new staff
- Launch a new program
- Re-organize and/or craft a new strategic plan
- Assemble staff for regular meetings
- Convene staff retreats or workshops

### ***Help Staff Engage Rather Than Manage Volunteers***

As Baby Boomers and beyond swell the ranks of volunteers, the traditional dynamic between paid and unpaid staff will change. These generational cohorts seek collegial relationships. As such, staff should not “supervise,” per se; they should support, guide, and collaborate.

One of the simplest ways to establish mutually supportive associations is to create opportunities for informal dialog. For classroom settings, ask volunteers to assist with set-up and/or clean up. It gives them to opportunity to get to know the teachers and vice versa. They can debrief on the day's events or discuss special needs children. And if issues surface, it affords a less confrontational venue for discussion.

## ***Recognize Staff and Volunteer Achievements***

Volunteer management literature consistently speaks to a need for acknowledging volunteer contributions to promote loyalty and service longevity. I'd add a slight turn to that best practice: *Honor your volunteers and their paid co-workers as a team.* Highlight the collaborative nature of their work and give “kudos” for the effort invested in a good working relationship. Make sure you choose a venue that is meaningful to all parties.

- Some like the fanfare and networking of a major event.
- Some would rather have a gift card and avoid the “one more thing on the calendar.”
- Some would feel honored by having their story told – e.g., in a newsletter, during volunteer orientation.
- Staff might appreciate written acknowledgement of their successful collaborations in their annual performance evaluations.



Never underestimate the power of a personal note or simple “thank you” for good work, especially when offered by a person in authority. It can make anyone’s day (*and a fine addition to a personnel file!*)

You can also recognize excellence in volunteer teamwork by inviting staff to serve as mentors for other staff members and/or hold a seat on a volunteer advisory council.

## ***A Final Thought***

When it comes to integrating unpaid staff into your organization, there is no “silver bullet” to ensure success. An effective volunteer management program takes planning and preparation *with active participation by your Board, leadership team, and staff.* Whatever lies ahead, I hope and trust that your working relationship with staff echoes a sentiment from the closing line in *Casablanca*:

“Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

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## **Attachment A: Sample Volunteer Mission Statement and Program Goals**

### ***Volunteer Mission Statement***

We provide our volunteers with the support necessary to effectively serve the community, find opportunities for personal growth, foster intercultural exchange, and employ their unique skills to further the mission of Adelante Mujeres.

### ***Volunteer Program Goals***

Recognizing the important role that volunteers play in our effort to build a stronger and more inclusive community, we pledge to:

- Create a welcoming atmosphere where volunteers, staff, and Adelante Mujeres participants alike collaborate in community-building efforts.
- Encourage volunteers to choose volunteer work that supports their skills and interests and makes a difference in the lives of the participants we serve.
- Clearly communicate to volunteers our needs and expectations, and respect those of our volunteers.
- Celebrate the cultural heritage of each volunteer, staff member, and participant we serve.
- Foster a safe mutual learning space for volunteers, staff members, and participants.