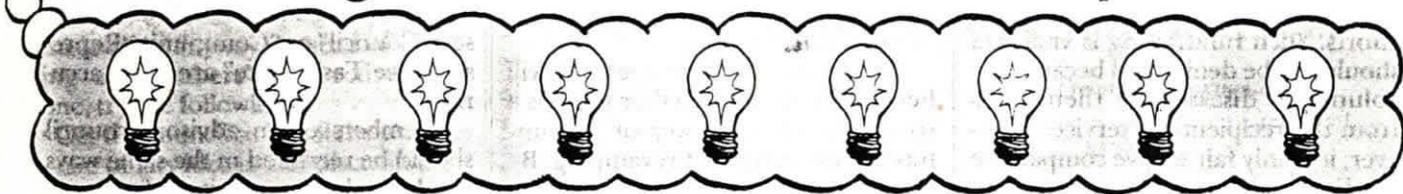


Rethinking Auxiliaries and Advisory Councils



Getting the most from an advisory council or an auxiliary group may mean rethinking their structure and purpose.

By Susan J. Ellis

Most of the literature about volunteers focuses either on those people who voluntarily provide direct services or who act as policy makers on nonprofit boards of directors. However, two other categories of volunteers straddle the line between hands-on volunteering and decision making. Auxiliaries and advisory councils are composed of volunteers who operate collectively, outside the daily operations of an organization. They generally interact with the organization through the executive director. They have influence but no authority. Yet their activities can be highly supportive of an organization. Therefore, their volunteer members deserve to be nurtured effectively.

AUXILIARIES

Quite diverse organizations use auxiliaries. The list includes hospitals,

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NONPROFIT WORLD, VOL. 4, NO. 4. Published by The Society For Nonprofit Organizations, 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719.

long-term care institutions, libraries, cultural arts groups, and law enforcement agencies. Sometimes the group goes by a name such as "The Friends of _____." While there are many types of auxiliaries, their common purpose is usually to raise money.

Historically, auxiliaries were responsible for the funding of most of the institutions we hold dear. Also historically, auxiliaries were female organizations—frequently made up of the wives of the staff or of the board members. In some cases, the auxiliaries raised the money and turned it over to the decision makers of the sponsor group. In other cases, the auxiliaries helped determine how the money would be spent. These two approaches still exist today, along with many combinations of traditional and modern auxiliary models.

Indeed, there is no single model for how an auxiliary should be organized, and the changing structure of auxiliaries sometimes leads to administrative confusion. In some facilities, for example, the auxiliary runs the in-house volunteer program. Such a design may be quite workable, but it may lead to problems if the organization holds onto a requirement that anyone who wants to volunteer has to join the auxiliary. Such a requirement perpetuates discrimination and tradition, especially if there are special criteria for

becoming an auxiliary member. Perhaps more important, few auxiliaries are able to accommodate the kind of volunteer who wants to come in for one month to re-catalogue the library or who is on call to help with press releases when needed. These sorts of assignments are rarely filled by people seeking to join the auxiliary or wanting the additional social aspects of group activities. Yet there is a crucial place for such volunteers in the nonprofit organization. It is important, therefore, to establish guidelines to assure that any qualified person offering volunteer help is encouraged to apply, rather than being turned down at the first contact because he or she does not qualify as an auxiliary.

A new trend, especially in facilities in inner city areas, is the auxiliary whose members never set foot in the actual organization—who prefer, in fact, to keep several miles between themselves and the concrete reality of the problems the facility is address-

This article is adapted from material in *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*, a new book aimed at top administrators of nonprofit organizations which use volunteers. *From the Top Down* (copyright 1986), written by Susan J. Ellis and published by Energize Books, is available for Society members at the discount price of \$15.00, plus \$1.50 postage and handling (for nonmembers, \$16.95, plus \$1.50 postage and handling), from The Society For Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center, 6314 Odana Road, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (608-274-9777). (Orders must be prepaid.)

ing. Some of these volunteer groups are successful in raising a great deal of money through suburban "thrift" shops, debutante balls, etc., and receive publicity and status for their efforts. Such fundraising is vital and should not be denigrated because the volunteers disassociate themselves from the recipients of service. However, it is only fair to give comparable credit to those volunteers who, though not wealthy contributors, are willing to come on site, roll up their sleeves, and work directly with daily service delivery.

Assessing Your Auxiliary

In order to establish a successful working relationship with your own auxiliary, it is important to clarify the answers to the following assessment questions:

- Is the interrelationship of the auxiliary and your organization clearly defined? Is the auxiliary autonomous, or do you, as sponsor, have some formal decision-making role to play in its governance?
- Who are the members of the auxiliary? What are the criteria for joining, and are new members recruited with these criteria in mind? Does the auxiliary perpetuate exclusionary practices, such as limiting membership only to women, to people able to pay membership dues, etc.? If so, are these discriminatory practices justifiable?
- Is the auxiliary still strong, or is it a remnant of its old self from years ago, with members aging fast and no longer able to give or generate financial contributions comparable to those in the past?
- Is there an actual or implied hierarchy in which the auxiliary has more status than the in-house volunteers?
- What is the relationship between the auxiliary officers and the person who directs the in-house volunteer program? Is there a direct line of authority? In what direction? Why or why not?
- Does the auxiliary president expect and receive direct communication with your organization's top executive? Why or why not?
- Does the auxiliary submit regular reports on all aspects of its operation, including membership statistics and financial statements?

• If the auxiliary is not self-incorporated, what is the parent organization's responsibility and liability in terms of tax reporting, auditing, etc.? To whom do the bank accounts really belong?

The answers to these questions will help you to decide whether yours is a strong, viable auxiliary or an outmoded one in need of revamping. By clarifying these issues in your own mind, you may realize that your auxiliary is not accomplishing what it was set up to do or that a different structure may be more effective.

Given today's volunteerism climate, the concept of an auxiliary makes sense only if you feel that you want to maintain a fundraising group with a sense of unity. The social aspects of auxiliaries are indeed important to accomplishing the work, for many fundraising events require long hours of service, and it is much more pleasant to volunteer in the company of friends. But you should expect the auxiliary to set goals, submit reports, and make a visible contribution. Establish standards, and apply the principles of good volunteer management.

ADVISORY COUNCILS

Advisory councils, like boards of directors and auxiliaries, are special categories of volunteers with direct relationship to the top executive. Government agencies often work with a legally mandated advisory council, some or all members of which may be appointed by political leaders. Nonprofit organizations more frequently establish a group of advisors voluntarily in order to gain more community input. Either way, members of an advisory council will respond most productively to motivational management techniques.

Clear expectations are imperative. Just because you have an "advisory" council does not mean that anyone has promised to use the advice given! Take the time to define exactly what the role of the advisory group is—and what it is not. Do not imply power when there is none. Most advisory groups have an impact through influence and persuasion, rather than through decision-making authority.

For this reason, it is good to avoid the use of the word "board" in rela-

tion to advisors. When someone joins a group called the "Advisory Board," there could be an implication of authority well beyond anything intended. Designations such as "Advisory Council" or "Community Representative Task Force" are more accurate.

Members of an advisory council should be recruited in the same ways as other volunteers. Criteria for membership should be determined and a process instituted for interviewing, screening, and orienting candidates and new members. A written job description for each member, with additional tasks for council officers, is also a critical tool.

Getting the Best Advice

If you have an advisory council, utilize it. People who have volunteered would rather be activated than to see their names used on letterhead for political clout, without having any input into what the organization is doing.

One of the obstacles to genuine involvement of advisory councils is the feeling that the only way to activate members is to call a group meeting. Ironically, full council meetings tend to work contrary to the goal of getting advice. Most advisors have been recruited because they "represent" a specific constituency: an ethnic group, neighborhood, profession, funding source, etc. In a group meeting, these very different people attempt to reach consensus on issues. In the process of reaching consensus, special interest, minority opinions are overlooked or played down. But it is often those minority opinions that you most wanted advice about!

There are two ways to counteract this tendency to make the advisory council function as a group. First, ask advisor volunteers to provide service in two distinct ways: by participating in one or two group meetings of the full advisory council per year, and by spending a few hours consulting with you one to one. Sometimes what you need is the perspective of someone with a very specific point of view. You can only gain this information individually; group meetings will dilute the opinions of any one particular advisor.

The other way to assure the benefit

of many diverse points of view is to make sure advisory council meetings never take a vote. Taking a vote implies that the council can make policy, which it cannot, so allowing the majority to express only one opinion is misleading anyway. Instead of distilling all members' perspectives into one, try the following:

- Get the council to list all the *pros and cons* of any idea under discussion.
- Have the group generate a list of all the *questions* they can think of in reaction to a particular issue. (Sometimes a good question is more valuable than a lengthy statement of opinion.)
- Ask for the minutes to reflect the "*minority opinion*," just as the Supreme Court publishes the perspective of those judges who disagree with the ruling of the Court.
- Ask council members to suggest community *resources* that might assist with a particular project.

This approach gives you a great deal of advice that you can *use* and also makes advisor volunteers feel recognized for their input.

If your advisory council has been selected for its high degree of professional expertise, you may occasionally want the group to give you the benefit of their specific knowledge and "instruct" you on what course of action to take. In such special cases, taking a vote may be desirable. But differentiate between those situations in which you want general advice and those in which you are, in essence, delegating decision making. Otherwise, the advisors will assume that all their input carries the weight of giving instructions, which is probably not the case.

Finally, be sure everyone understands the difference between the roles of the advisory council and the organization's board of directors. Lines of authority can quickly become blurred, especially if you routinely encourage volunteers such as past board presidents to continue their service to your organization by joining the advisory council. You can differentiate between the two groups by the way you plan each set of agendas, deliver reports to each group, and so on.

CONCLUSION

The principles of successful volun-

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more complex than for the private sector. For example, it can encompass several sub-markets, including purchasers of the service or product, the organization's members, foundation funders, and trustees. Nonprofits have to gauge what each of them needs and wants, and to satisfy each quickly and economically.

Third is the *competition*. Nonprofits must evaluate the actual and potential competition to see where they can profitably fit. Sometimes the competition is direct, say for similar day care services or the provision of home health aides to a specific community. Sometimes the competition is indirect, as when chamber music concerts or lectures compete with dance performances for a family's discretionary dollar. Both forms of competition should be measured, as well as the likelihood that success will attract new players onto the field.

The fourth aspect of the external environment is the *public*. The public includes all relevant groups whose activities touch or impinge on the earned income venture. For nonprofits seeking to start a health care business, governmental regulatory bodies may be crucial to obtaining a requisite certificate of need. For others expanding into an adjacent neighborhood, the support of community planning boards or local community organizations may be equally consequential. Publics (including the media) whose responses are important to the operation of the venture should be surveyed and induced to give support to it.

The *internal environment* must be analyzed as well, to uncover impediments to the earned income venture—and to plan remedies for them. The investigation should be performed systematically, by means of an *audit* of five basic areas within the organization. The checklist on page 9 may be used to determine the readiness of organizations to enter or expand earned income ventures. It may be adapted to fit the needs of individual nonprofits.

The internal audit pinpoints the weaknesses. Some organizations will score well in one or two areas yet show pronounced problems in others. The tendency of many organizations is to ignore the weak spots and expect, or hope, that momentum will carry the venture along. Such a belief is dangerous and should be avoided at all costs. Efforts must be made to overcome internal problems in ventures *before* they begin to negatively affect operations.

By evaluating the external and internal environments, nonprofits can determine their readiness to enter—or expand—earned income activity. Some of the analyses will take weeks or months to complete. But the time (and trouble) will

be worthwhile. The paramount point is that if any part of the investigation comes up irretrievably negative, the organization can drop the venture idea before a damaging commitment is made. ■

Getting Your Story Into Print

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with complete information, and do not be afraid to make suggestions about content and style.

Magazines

Although newspapers often have as wide a readership as large magazines, the latter are more extensive in their treatment of an issue. They also tend to be more selective in their articles and are usually read more closely.

It can be difficult for a local organization to secure a feature magazine article. However, there are many weekly and monthly magazines which will list your event in their calendar sections if it is received in time (usually from six to eight weeks before the publishing date). The calendar listing should follow the format of the press release (see the sample press release on page 19).

Most magazines address a specific market. Sports, health care, leisure-time, travel, news, and numerous other magazines highlight and report on a particular subject. There are undoubtedly a number of magazines whose area of interest parallels that of your organization.

Telephone the editor of the magazine you have selected to see how your event or organization can fit in with their editorial needs. Be prepared to tell the editor what it is that makes your organization different and outstanding. At the same time, look for any opportunity that will help secure the initial audience.

In Conclusion

Magazines and newspapers are important publicity avenues for nonprofits. They are an effective way to bring positive public attention to the work and efforts of the nonprofit community. The print media should be approached with care, preparation, and the knowledge that they are also serving the broader community in their efforts to serve your organization. ■

This article is adapted from *Handling Public Relations: A Guide for Waldorf Schools and Other Organizations*, Seven Stars Shop, Kimberton Farms, West Seven Stars Road, Kimberton, Pennsylvania 19442.

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teer management apply equally to special categories of volunteers such as auxiliaries and advisory councils. This means that members of auxiliaries and advisory councils are best recruited by clear and accurate volunteer job descriptions and prepared to be productive by thoughtful orientation and training. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is the need for *communication*; volunteers need to be informed about what is expected from them, deserve feedback on the value of their work, and respond to recognition of their contributions.

Start by being clear as to what your organization's goals are for having such a group as an auxiliary or an advisory council. Then structure the work of these volunteers to accomplish your objectives. In the long run, everyone will benefit from such a management approach. ■

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