



Involuntary Retirement

Facing the truth about aging volunteers

One of the reasons why so much of the public holds the stereotype that volunteers are "little old women in flowered hats and tennis shoes" is because there are some highly visible volunteer groups that are indeed comprised mainly of senior females -- not by design, but by evolution.

If your agency has a volunteer group that is disproportionately older women, such as an auxiliary or guild, it may be cause for serious concern. What can be projected as the future of a volunteer organization that is "aging in place" without taking active steps to revitalize its membership? Can a group that has not kept pace with changes around it ever recover its initial vitality?

This is not an ungrateful attack on the extraordinary work of countless dedicated volunteers who happen to be on the far side of age 65. Rather, the focus is on agency administrators who have allowed wonderful volunteers to age in place without much attention. If you are wondering whether you have a worrisome volunteer situation, consider the following questions:

1. Do you have a group of volunteers that has been in existence for more than 15 years, but has not added any new members in the past two or three years?
2. Have the same volunteers been holding top office positions for a long time (either never changing positions or rotating key roles among a small handful of people)?
3. Was there a time when this group raised a great deal of money but that amount has decreased over the years? Are their fundraising events attracting fewer people each year?
4. Is your development department or special events office chafing at the bit to organize fresh new activities but frustrated at the veteran volunteers' resistance to innovation? Or are current volunteers simply not capable (skills or health-wise) to put the energy into new projects?
5. Are you considering starting another, parallel volunteer organization so that you can have a structure for involving younger people, couples, businesswomen, and other types of volunteers who may not feel welcome in the original group?
6. Are you so concerned about offending the current volunteers that for a long time you have done nothing to confront the situation?

It is time to face something that is rarely admitted openly: Agency administrators, especially men, just don't like older women volunteers very much and will do anything not to have to deal with them. It's not that executives are wicked by nature -- it's more that they feel uncomfortable in raising difficult questions with women who have been agency supporters for a long time.

It may initially seem the wisest course of action to "let it be." After all, so what if a volunteer group winds down after many years? Is it worth the hurt feelings and possible negative community response to give offense to a group of supporters? Clearly, many executives answer no. But the consequences of inaction may ultimately be worse than taking action.

Here are some of the results of allowing a volunteer organization to atrophy:

- The older volunteers grow increasingly frustrated and unhappy, feeling that their earlier hard work no longer has any meaning. They wish that they could watch a new generation of volunteers continue in their footsteps, but they have no idea how to make this happen.
- The agency's public image begins to suffer because fundraising events or other activities conducted by the aging volunteers may seem old-fashioned (how many younger couples really and truly enjoy the same old dinner gala?). Further, do these volunteers reflect the way you would like your agency to be seen? Age diversity is desirable. But if every volunteer the public sees representing your agency is an older woman, what conclusions might they draw about the nature of your services?
- While some older women love change and challenge, too often love of tradition is the norm. Also, discomfort with innovations such as computer technology for record-keeping or e-mail for communications may cause discomfort. Without a more varied volunteer pool to keep it up to date, the veteran group will move further and further apart from the work of the agency.
- You may be effectively disenfranchising new volunteers by not providing a welcoming environment for their contributions. If the existing group cannot accommodate evening meetings, fax messages, fundraising events requiring physical fitness, or any other new idea, where exactly are you going to put younger and mixed gender newcomers? Are you really not going to create a place for them?

What to do

The most important thing that an executive can do is to be engaged in strategic planning about the future of your volunteer supporters. If the groups are not self-incorporated and use your agency's tax exemption number, there may even be solid fiscal reasons to become more consciously interested in their work.

There are several steps you can take. First, analyze the groups' current stage of development. Are they thriving or dying? Provide guidance, training and, if necessary, staff support to enable the officers to conduct a formal evaluation of their situation. The evaluation should help determine: How effective they are in meeting their goals and whether their membership development is keeping pace with their work needs. If the evaluation raises any red flags, encourage the volunteer leaders to face the problems. Again, offer tangible help.

Set measurable goals for the volunteer group (with mutual agreement) and be prepared to hold the members accountable for achieving them. Integrate the volunteers' fundraising projects with the agency's overall development plans. Honestly discuss whether some long-time events may need to be updated in some way, or even changed dramatically.

If the volunteer leaders do not know how to recruit new members, find a way to train them. Note that it may be more realistic to recruit a more diverse, and younger, pool of people to help on specific projects, rather than to concentrate on "joining" the existing group right away.

Sometimes, the most supportive thing you can do is assist the volunteer leaders in finding a way to retire gracefully, even to bring closure to their group. This can be done in such a manner as to make volunteers feel honored, as well as welcome to participate as they wish in new activities that will take the place of the old.

Whether or not it is possible to revitalize a group that is stagnant will vary from situation-to-situation. But ignoring the problem or hoping that volunteers will "work it out" themselves can be self-defeating. You may

find that giving your time and attention to the situation will elicit great relief among volunteer leaders who did not know how to tell you that they no longer feel of use to the agency they care so much about. Take the first step today or -- one way or another -- you will not have a volunteer supporter group in the future.