

ABSTRACT

Lessons about evaluations of volunteers and volunteer programs can be borrowed from the for-profit sector and reshaped to meet the needs of not-for-profit institutions. By assessing which situations would benefit from written, formal evaluations, then applying some of the same techniques corporations use to attract and retain valuable employees, the partnership between volunteers and institutions can be strengthened. This article focuses attention on the review of the organization from a volunteer's perspective.

Volunteer Evaluations — From a Volunteer's Perspective

Barbara Medaugh

INTRODUCTION

As part of my job as operations officer in a New York City bank, I wrote annual performance reviews for the three officers who were my direct subordinates and reviewed the evaluations of the 40 people who worked for them. I learned quickly this process was time-consuming, but could also be a very helpful tool for managers and staff people alike. The reviews allowed for reassessing the goals of the department and encouraged managers and staff to look for ways to enhance each person's contribution, according to that individual's strengths and skills. They also occasionally identified areas where procedures or personnel needed to be changed in order to revitalize the department. I was delighted to find that workers at all levels had valuable suggestions to make the department more efficient.

Since leaving the paid workforce 10 years ago, my volunteer work has included a wide variety of assignments, including blood donation units, field work involved in park cleanup and plant propagation, office administration, and assisting in the coordination of volunteer programs and special events. The longevity of these projects ranged from part of one day to a single assignment requiring sev-

eral days each week for well over a year.

My years of volunteering have afforded me the many benefits that have been so well documented: opportunities to meet and work with some very talented people, to practice skills I already have and develop new ones, and feel that my work has made a measurable difference to the organization. It has also, at times, been frustrating because some of the organizations I have worked with, or thought about working with, didn't seem to take the donation of time as seriously as they would if the volunteers were paid. And there have been only a few instances when the volunteer administrator took the time to formally review my performance or give me the opportunity to review my assignment and the program in general.

This type of review may be even more important in the not-for-profit workplace than it is for corporations, since the nature of the relationship is that of a partnership between the institution and the volunteer. My objective here is to focus on the review of the organization from a personal perspective in the hope that it will encourage volunteer administrators to consider their policy of evaluations from a volunteer's point of view.

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RECIPROCAL NATURE OF EVALUATIONS

One of the differences between the corporate and the not-for-profit worlds is that evaluations in the not-for-profit sector are reciprocal. By this I mean that when I interviewed for a paid position, I needed the salary and I had only a few companies to interview. On the other hand, since the company probably had hundreds of candidates and they had the money, their power was far greater than mine to determine if I would be hired. Supply and demand factored into this equation and gave the corporation much greater influence over the outcome of the interview.

In the volunteer workforce the power is much more nearly equal because money isn't involved. This changes the whole spirit of the transaction. The assessments and evaluations become reciprocal whether or not both parties realize it on a conscious level. And while this may seem to make the relationship more precarious, it can make for a much deeper commitment than a salaried position would.

DECIDING WHERE TO VOLUNTEER

For me, the initial assessment begins when I realize I have some time to donate. The mental exercise of choosing an organization goes something like this: What do I know about the organization? What do they appear to be doing for the community? Would I feel proud being associated with it? Do I know someone who has had positive experiences with it? These initial questions address my perception of the image the institution presents to the community as well as my willingness to be associated with the ideals and goals of the work being performed.

My assessment continues through the application and interviewing process. By this time, the organization is evaluating me also. Does she have the skills and time and personality to contribute to our organization? Is the face that she's presenting likely to enhance our image within the community? Do we have a job that

matches her time and abilities?

My decision whether or not to accept a volunteer position is made much easier when there is a discussion of the institution's mission, and a specific job description that identifies the task, the time requirement, and why the position is beneficial to the department. Occasionally there's even a volunteer handbook outlining the organization's policies and opportunities for volunteers. Volunteer handbooks are helpful because they give an idea of the corporate culture and policies as well as a broad overview of volunteer opportunities within the organization. But more importantly, job descriptions are a real indication that the department seeking volunteers has thought through the project, the time, materials, and space requirements, and the skills needed. In my opinion, where there are good job descriptions, the organization is more likely to value my time as a real donation. Fuzzy job descriptions worry me because I can't judge clearly if my skills are sufficient for the job, and I doubt that my interviewer can either. Additionally, there is a concern that if the project isn't clearly defined and organized at the outset, there may be wasted time when the project begins.

Once assigned to a project, whether it's part of a day or several months, the supervisor and I continue assessing the situation to see if it is meeting our needs. And at the end of the assignment, as before, both of us determine if the results are rewarding enough to try it again. What I'm really saying is that non-verbal evaluations are occurring on a regular and continuing basis. Formalizing the evaluation helps to ensure a positive outcome for the volunteer and the organization.

From experience within the corporate sector, I know performance evaluations can be complex and time consuming. There are so many considerations for the volunteer program administrator: the size of the volunteer corps, the scope and duration of the project, how many different departments an individual volunteer

reports to, how the volunteer feels about formal written evaluations, and how to get the cooperation of the direct supervisor in producing thoughtful, timely reviews.

I don't expect a formal, written evaluation after working on a short-term project. More often than not, the supervisor will check in periodically to make sure the work is progressing and the volunteers have the materials they need. At the end of each shift, there's usually a short discussion about any problems and general feelings about the work. At that time there is a sincere thank you for the help and the reciprocal evaluation continues. The supervisor decides whether or not to invite me back for this type of assignment and I decide whether to come back. This decision is based on whether the job was as described to me, whether the organization was prepared for my arrival with appropriate materials and adequate work space, whether I was comfortable with the behavior of the staff and other volunteers toward me, and if I understood the value of the work I've done for the group. In short, do I feel emotionally satisfied at the end of the shift? If the assignment finishes on a positive note for us both, then the partnership between us has been profitable for the organization.

FORMALIZED EVALUATIONS ARE HELPFUL

In longer assignments, I have found scheduled, formal evaluations—either written or verbal—to be very helpful. I have been privileged to work with two organizations that evaluated me on long-term projects. That the volunteer administrators took the time to review my work, talk to me about it and listen to my responses and then elicit my opinions, showed me they took my work seriously and we could measure the difference to the institution. In one instance, I was asked for a written report reviewing the project including my recommendations for making the event better in the future.

With both these evaluations, I got a real sense of the partnership that's possible between the volunteer and the institution. I felt I was perceived as a valuable, contributing member of the team. Thinking specifically about ways in which my assignments might be done better, or more easily, increased my commitment and loyalty to both organizations. Additionally, the administrators' generosity in taking the time to evaluate my work and make suggestions for future projects further demonstrated the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

These evaluations were not performed using a pre-printed boilerplate type of format. They were both very job-specific, and were based on the job descriptions that had been given to me at the beginning of the assignments. A written format, rather than just a discussion, is useful not only with the current relationship, but also may be valuable to me and to the volunteer administrator in the future. It identifies for me which of my skills the organization values most highly and may encourage me to strengthen others. I can use it when I look for paid or unpaid positions. In addition, it gives the organization a written history when an administrator leaves and someone else takes the position.

To be most helpful, the evaluation should address several items. It should describe the project, and speak to the quality of the work, my respect for the time commitment I've made, my interactions with staff and other volunteers, any specific goals I achieved or helped the institution achieve, and suggestions for future growth. And it should allow the opportunity for me to evaluate myself and the program in the same manner. These are the same types of categories that many businesses use when evaluating staff people they wish to retain.

As important as I believe the written format to be, I'd interject a word of caution. I think that volunteer administrators need to treat written evaluations just as

they would any other personnel files, making sure they're held in confidence and don't include anything that would get either the institution or the individual in legal trouble if the confidentiality is broken.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

So far I've been discussing evaluations between individual volunteers and the organization. There is also an evaluation of the program as a whole. This becomes important because my experience with the program is going to be influenced by my perception of the importance of the program to the overall organization. If the organization doesn't respect the volunteer program, why would I want to be part of it?

Here are four criteria to help me measure the success of the volunteer program with respect to the volunteers.

1. *Demonstration of top management's commitment to the program.* A few examples of this commitment might be: Is the volunteer administrator an integral part of planning for events that will require volunteers? Does the director or CEO treat volunteers with the same courtesy as staff people are treated? Does the director or CEO volunteer and encourage staff people to volunteer also?

2. *Demonstration of financial commitment.* A budget sufficient to accomplish the goals of the program is essential. If, for example, the major means of communicating with the volunteers is through a monthly newsletter, but there's no budget for printing or postage, that says a lot about the importance of the program to the organization. At least one organization I've worked with required the volunteer administrator to develop an annual budget which was then submitted to the development office so funds could be raised through grants or donations specifically for this program. Two of the many messages in this policy were that: 1) the

administrator needed to work closely with other departments to plan and fund projects for the upcoming year; and 2) the organization understood the value in spending money to get many times that amount in donated time.

3. *How are volunteers recruited, and retained?* If there is high turnover, either the volunteer administrator may not be a good manager or there are other obstacles that make the volunteers uncomfortable. Without long-term volunteers, as with employees in any other business, invaluable institutional memory may be lost.

4. *How effectively do the volunteers help the organization fulfill its mission? And how is this information conveyed to the organization, to the volunteers, and to the community?* The information may be statistical or anecdotal, but the important point is that volunteers actually help the organization serve its community and the organization recognizes the depth of that contribution.

Above are the four criteria a volunteer can easily use to evaluate a program's importance to the organization. Actually, there is a fifth, but much less visible one, for the volunteer. In an ideal world, candidates for staff positions would be asked if they have experience working with volunteers and then part of their performance evaluation would be linked to their success in training and supervising volunteers.

CONCLUSION

As in the corporate workplace, clearly thought-out projects, evaluations, and demonstrations of strong management commitment can enhance the value of the volunteer program to the organization in accomplishing its mission. I strongly believe that, in recognizing the partnership between volunteers and the institution, opportunities will present themselves for making a valuable relationship even better. My loyalty was increased when my strengths were recognized and I had a

partner in working for my growth as a volunteer within the organization.

The first challenge is to determine which projects and volunteers will benefit most from formal evaluation. Once this determination has been made, techniques used for the evaluation of paid employees can be borrowed and reshaped to be very effective tools for the volunteer corps. The same objective applies: attracting and retaining the best of the best. Without a salary increase as motivation, the volunteer administrator finds other ways of strengthening loyalty and commitment to the institution. In some cases, written, formalized evaluations can meet the objective.