

The Care and Feeding of Sprouts . . . Nurturing Your First Job in Volunteer Administration

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Although the comparisons between a new career and a budding plant are obvious, the advised nurturing of a newly-sprouted career start is seldom as clearly marked as the planting and care instructions found nestled among the leaves of a newly-bought begonia. There is no secret formula or recipe developed to ensure success in volunteer administration. A well-tended plan of action can be developed, however, that helps the new administrator step confidently ahead in his or her new position.

Stepping ahead with confidence requires more than a positive outlook and a briefcase full of projected trends—I believe that a clear action plan comprised of two essential steps can enable a volunteer administrator to develop a successful beginning in the field. These two steps involve the following:

1. Defining the Job and Setting Personal Goals
2. Reactivating Enthusiasm
 - A. Within Your Organization
 - B. Within Your Community

DEFINING THE JOB

One would hope that "Defining the Job" would be unnecessary, assuming that most organizations have written job descriptions. Unfortunately the opposite is usually true—vague job descriptions with foggy, immeasurable goals are often unearthed from ancient personnel policy notebooks. Even more commonplace are the job descriptions that look very impressive on paper, only to be found to be mere fantasy; the position is dramatically different in "real life."

It is vital that the new administrator

establish what his or her job really is and how it fits into the greater picture of the organization. We do this automatically with and for new volunteers; we seem to be much more negligent on our own behalf. One should establish if the day-to-day functional activities inherent in one's position are truly in line with the organization's goals or if the goals and objectives are being obscured by the consummative daily demands and crises. Does our organization mean what it says? Does it allocate time and money for its stated priorities? Do you agree with what your board/boss determines to be your top priority? Are you given or can you develop the resources to accomplish your goals?

Goal setting itself is an area that could often use some polishing in many agencies. Hopefully, your organization will have clearly defined and measurable goals. If your organization doesn't have a clear picture of where it is, what it is doing and where it is headed for the next five years, your personal goal setting will be that much more difficult, if not almost impossible.

In order to establish meaningful personal goals, one needs first to recognize the incredible juggling act that often is the basis of a position in volunteer administration. Volunteer administrators are noted for their juggling skills, often attempting to keep the majority of an organization's balls in the air single-handedly. Many of us attempt to juggle fundraising, public relations, volunteer recruitment, volunteer training, volunteer supervision, board/staff relationships, statistics and recordkeeping, program de-

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velopment, and staff management all at the same time. Most of us would do well to seriously look at our ability to delegate. We also need to remember that we never have to be experts at everything—we should feel comfortable drawing on the expertise of others in our community.

It is all too easy to pay only lip service to the "teamwork" concept and get completely bogged down in the details of a multi-faceted volunteer program. Personal goal setting demands that we spend some time seriously evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of our areas of responsibility, then use that information to determine what goals we can set that will be in line with the organization's goals, while strengthening our own position and career.

REACTIVATING ENTHUSIASM: INSIDE

After defining what one's job really is, and then determining what needs to be accomplished in that job, one must move ahead and make things happen! "Now that I know what I'm doing does anyone really care?"

The answer will be a resounding "NO" unless we take the time to reactivate enthusiasm first within our own organization, and then within the community.

Our own organization needs to hear what it is doing *well*. We need to spend some time sharing success stories, talking about the impact our program has on the community, hearing again what has been accomplished during the past year and wallowing in a good measure of praise and self-congratulations. We who are involved in human services are definitely our own worst critics. We see the immense need and we reflect on our own tiny efforts at combating that need; we tend to see what yet should be done instead of ever seeing what was done. We need to feel good about ourselves in order to have the impetus to move forward courageously.

It will be impossible for us to move ahead if we are too cautious about breaking rules and taking risks. A common trap for a new administrator is the difficulty we often face in burying the ghost of our predecessor. Organizations may have trouble letting a previous director's influence "Rest in Peace." Be aware of your

predecessor's style of work but never feel bound to continue in that way, or your own enthusiasm and your staff's will undoubtedly be dampened.

Without belaboring the sprout/plant analogy, there are weeds in any garden and there are other organization-based weeds worth mentioning that have the capability of strangling newfound enthusiasm. Two that seem to be the most prevalent are unnecessary paperwork and meaningless meetings.

A good way to deal with these two issues is to question every piece of paperwork and every meeting agenda that comes across one's desk. Is it truly worth spending any time on? What will be accomplished by filling out this form or holding this meeting? Of course we cannot do away with paperwork or meetings completely, but we can eliminate the unnecessary or the unproductive. Too many organizations almost seem to form emotional attachments to a Wednesday morning meeting or a mid-month report, despite the fact that if those participating were questioned, most would admit to not knowing why the practice was started or why it is still continued.

REACTIVATING ENTHUSIASM: OUTSIDE

When enthusiasm has been reactivated within an organization, it is time to move on and share the excitement with the rest of the community. Does the community really know your organization? Do you know your organization's personality or reputation in the community?

It is important that a volunteer program be recognized as a vital, visible member of a community. Volunteer administrators can help develop the public's perception of their program by being a visible community supporter themselves and involving their programs in appropriate networking opportunities and cooperative ventures. A factor in effective public relations that is often overlooked is community etiquette.

Community etiquette involves healthy competition, cooperation, shared planning for the future, and being seen as a "team player" in the community. Being a "team player" can be as simple as participating in a community resource fair or as involved as co-sponsoring an annual fund

raiser. Every volunteer administrator needs to spend some time volunteering for another organization. The benefits are numerous and include the opportunity to make new contacts and share information, the chance to see how another volunteer program operates, the chance to see that every volunteer program has its own peculiar problems, and the much needed opportunity to do what we all encourage others to do - fit a volunteer commitment into a hectic schedule.

There are, of course, a few rules involved in volunteering for another organization. First, volunteer for a completely different type of organization. And second, if you are volunteering in an administrative capacity, be certain that there is no conflict of interest.

THE POTENTIAL RESULT

As an organization becomes more visible in the community, the more exciting and positive the volunteer administrator's position becomes. If we are able to sell our product, our program, effectively, we are in a position to dramatically increase the scope and impact of that program. The marketing of an organization or a volunteer program is obviously a task to be undertaken with careful study and planning. The significant point is to realize that it needs to be done—we can never assume that the general public, the business community, or our potential funding sources understand or completely comprehend what our organization does and why it exists.

Volunteer programs exist to serve a wide variety of needs in each community; that is a fact about volunteer administration that makes the field the challenging and exciting one that it is. Given the diversity of the field, each volunteer administrator will have unique circumstances to work with peculiar to his or her position. Common denominators do present themselves within the field of volunteer administration, however, and a common sense approach to nurturing a career in this field should prove most advantageous. By first defining the position and setting personal goals appropriate to that position, the new volunteer administrator can then move ahead and reactivate enthusiasm; firing the imagination of those

nearby and keeping the dreams that inspired the organization's founding alive and thriving in the greater community.