

Next Door to the CEO: Where the Volunteer Administrator Belongs

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Volunteers flood your doorways with skills as substantial as those of paid staff, managers, and contractors. Phone numbers are collected and promises offered.

Out of sight, however, the staff have another story to tell: Volunteers are unreliable, incompetent, and stupid. Volunteers get no paychecks, proving their lack of ability. If, somehow, a volunteer demonstrates ability, congratulations fly to the limit of the volunteer's hearing.

The staff fear that volunteers threaten their jobs.

Employees see nothing discretionary about being paid: Nonprofits have openings. Applicants compete to show extraordinary qualifications and gain full remuneration. They survive a screening in which the majority wither. Finally, the selected few accept the responsibilities implicit in being hired.

Contrast this with the volunteers, who lack financial need: We escape screening. We stroll into the leadership's offices. We expect unearned responsibility. We pick and choose our duties.

Or, rather, that's what the staff claim. Realistically, volunteers don't mind being screened; nor do they mind being given assignments based on the agency's needs and commensurate with their abilities, as well as conserving of managers' time. But the staff don't see eye to eye with the volunteers.

The CEO² is different, being the visionary. Goals envisioned, however, often exceed abilities. To accomplish enough goals, managers and staff are hired. Their jobs are to prevent mistakes while executing grandiose plans. The expectation is that one hired to do a job will not delegate it to anyone unpaid and essentially unknown to the chief. Delegating would make the hired person disposable.

The dynamic that impacts on volunteers

boils down to the CEO wanting volunteers while the staff do not. The busy CEO, however, hands volunteers over to others to manage. The staff, who perceive their jobs as being threatened by people who work for free, know exactly what to do. But since they can't dismiss all volunteers at once, since the CEO wants them, the staff excuse volunteers one by one, which takes time.

Into this struggle the volunteer administrator is inserted. That's you. The plan is for staff to provide tasks, which you'll oversee.

Since hierarchy generally correlates with pay scales, volunteers stay at the bottom. Since you supervise the unpaid, you also are not paid much, keeping you beneath most other staff.

The workday begins. You approach everyone for tasks for the volunteers. Not much is offered, and often nothing; so, pretty soon you're beseeching them that since the lovely volunteers will arrive at 2:00, you'll need something for them to do. Low-skill work, even busywork, is sought, being the only thing for which fulfillment can be promised, volunteers being unknown and not trusted.

You'll need smooth relations with the staff, or work won't materialize. Then you wouldn't have anything to oversee. The CEO didn't hire you to do nothing. That puts your job at a cliff's edge, at the staff's mercy, unless you swallow the staff's predominant views about volunteers.

Few institutions embody their prejudices in writing, mainly because almost no one writes up anything too obvious. Alleging that "you get what you pay for," most folks consider volunteering a huge waste of talent and time. You'll be fighting an unspoken bias. Debate and reform almost never take place, and on the rare occasions when a reformer does make changes, he or she is usually fol-

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lowed by a traditionalist who undoes the prior effort.

THREE KEYS

Solutions require many elements, but a few would ensure major progress.

First, the CEO must demand such voluminous production from most managers and staff that the only way to meet the higher standard is by using volunteers to the limit of their offers and skills. Only two functions cannot be parceled out to volunteers, and both are uncommon.³

The staff, focused on attaining success, narrows the CEO's mission to what's achievable. That's reasonable, except when ignoring substantial capabilities that would allow more to get done. Volunteers offer those capabilities. If they're not needed for what's being undertaken now, the mission itself can be expanded.

Ultimately, a refusal to use good volunteers is insubordination. That cannot long be tolerated.

Second, the CEO needs a person of strength and rank to enforce workload expansion. You must be an executive, the job redefined, and you need a title with clout.⁴

Instead of awaiting hand-me-down assignments, you must proactively create new responsibilities for every manager. That a manager rejects volunteers is usually irrelevant. Given the nonprofit's mission, everyone needs more duties. You're to propose what those duties should be and which volunteers can do them.

Next, you bring your job-adding initiatives to the CEO for approval. Consent should normally ensue. One exception would be a conflict of interest between a manager's old job and a new one; swapping among managers would usually solve that.

You then order top managers to take the added jobs, and the CEO forbids the abdication of any prior duties. Simultaneously, you assign qualified volunteers. You and a manager may then negotiate details, such as a start-up date.

If a particular volunteer is unwanted, so be it; one can be exchanged. And managers' new tasks can be traded within limits. Overarch-

ingly, however, the principle must be enmeshed and concrete results collected. That's your major executive work.

Volunteers should be transferred to each manager, not segregated into a volunteer department or a specific night. People who are paid \$20,000 yearly are not segregated into one room, and neither should those paid \$0 yearly. Walls prevent learning about volunteers' capabilities and managers' needs, keeping both groups from doing their most useful work.

While continually pushing managers to succeed, the CEO must also cut managers some slack as they learn how to manage people who don't need paychecks. A transition period should not be much longer than it would be for comparable new hires.

At meetings, don't dwell on how busy volunteers are. That's distracting. Instead, focus on managers' output and quality. When they fall short, volunteers can make the difference.

You'll refine future assignments, while resisting pressures from initial failures. Any work faces failures, but successes normally make up for them.

Third, you must stay in touch with volunteers and former volunteers. How fully are they being used? Have their jobs become simply busywork? Which managers are better? Why?

Debrief all volunteers, even those who left for travel or family reasons. Seek possible dissatisfactions, regardless of cloaks of politeness. That a volunteer admires a manager is not important; what matters is how that manager actually used the volunteer. Gregariousness does not make up for persistent failures to use good services.

Doubting managers is good practice. They can be remarkably persistent in denying volunteers' usefulness. You must remove managers' masks.

TRAPS AND WRAPPINGS

Implementing these solutions has costs.

Being described as the problem may enrage staff and managers. Their economic concerns are enormous, but they won't admit it, lest an admission jeopardize their jobs. They think volunteers are the problem. Therefore, they'll

undermine you and sabotage the arrival of volunteers.

The CEO will try to be your ally, but will bumble it. They often make precisely the wrong arguments for the inclusion of volunteers, e.g., that they're nice people, they save money, and the best of them can be hired. The latter two arguments are taken ominously as threats, while niceness suggests targetability. Shift the argument fast to one of increasing staff productivity and rewards.

You, by making the program effective, will make many enemies among the staff. You can't object to making enemies or you will fail. What will save you will primarily be a CEO who demands more from everyone, and makes you the means of their success. A second saving grace will be your artful negotiating of details. When managers want you to change your orders, be a knowledgeable, careful, and creative crafter of multiple solutions, not Machiavellian but trustworthy, as long as your principal goals are being met. Meet the staff's and management's complex needs so the nonprofit can complete its mission with little call for the CEO's intervention.

The main result will be that, as achievements rise under your direction, the nonprofit will accomplish more of its larger mission. That will boost revenues and justify pay raises for all the paid folks. Compensation reviews for volunteerism should start out as quarterly or monthly, eventually becoming yearly.

Document and quantify each manager's accomplishments resulting from improved volunteer utilization; in turn, this will support their pay negotiations. Remember those enemies you were making? All will be forgiven. Naturally, their vast accomplishments accrue to your credit, too. Don't be too bashful about that.

ENDNOTES

¹Here, staff means "those staff, managers, and contractors receiving pay."

²The CEO is functionally the highest executive regardless of title, usually being whoever shapes the organization's nature and mission, and oversees it daily.

³If scientific disinterest is requisite, hire. And don't subdivide creative work after it has begun.

⁴The exact title depends on a particular nonprofit's customs. Ascension later won't suffice; future executives are denied power now. If you possess the skills commensurate with the desired rank, you require a status that signifies that you report directly to the CEO, even though you shouldn't need frequent one-on-one time with her. You need that title so the staff gets the message.