

# THE VOLUNTEER-STAFF CLIMATE AUDIT



By Nancy Macduff

**I**n some organizations there is a lack of communication that can and does influence its very survival. Volunteers and staff are in an adversarial role that is detrimental to the organization's health. How can management and voluntary leaders determine the current state of volunteer-staff relations and develop strategies to improve the staff and volunteer work environment to increase their productivity?

The first step is to conduct an audit of current volunteer-staff relations, and the second is to implement appropriate steps or strategies to improve the relationship between the two groups.

## The Audit

The climate audit estimates the current state of volunteer-staff relations and provides a way to monitor changes in the working environment. It is distributed to randomly selected staff members, volunteers, clients/patrons/members, and perhaps people outside the organizational "family" who regularly interface with staff and/or volunteers if an "outsider's" perspective is needed.

A random sample of volunteers, staff and clients should receive the survey in one-third proportions. For example, if you want to survey 30 people, then each group receives 10 surveys. If you add "outsiders" to the group, they should receive half

the amount distributed to the three main groups. The number distributed depends on the size of your program, the time needed to compile the results, and the cooperation expected from those completing the form.

The audit should be distributed with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the activity, who is conducting the survey, how confidentiality is maintained, when the results are available, and how the respondent can learn about the results. If the survey is mailed, it should include a stamped, addressed return envelope.

The results of the audit are shared with the leadership of the organization, volunteer leaders and staff management team. People participating in the audit may want to see the results. A decision on the wider distribution of the results of the audit is made jointly by the members of the organizational leadership team.

## Strategies to Enhance Volunteer-Staff Relations

The following are suggested strategies to enhance volunteer and staff relations:

- The job of the volunteer manager is challenging and time consuming. Coordination of volunteer programs is a detailed, professional job requiring a variety of skills and strategies. All volunteer programs are in "hot" competition with other organizations for qualified volunteers. Recruiting and retaining volunteers is an evolving art and science. One key to effective volunteer management is the ability to delegate jobs to leadership volunteers. An effective volunteer manager is one who

gives a favorite task to a volunteer, because it results in efficiency and productivity and is a powerful motivator.

- Volunteers and staff are a team. Training on "team-building" enhances volunteer-staff relations. Involving volunteers at all levels of the organization in planning and decision-making can lead to more "buy-in" of fundraising goals or the need for additional hours of service.

- Volunteers jump the lines of communication in an organization when they don't get their questions answered. It is critical that all staff working with volunteers see their role as supervisory and educational. Volunteers need to understand all institutional roles including their own.

- Open, honest evaluation of volunteer activities is a needed and appropriate activity. Volunteers need to evaluate their own efforts, including gathering information from staff who worked with the volunteer. This is a joint effort and not a session where staff outlines a list of transgressions. Volunteers can improve only if they identify and plan to correct weaker elements of their performance. When volunteers work on an event or program, the evaluation process should also be done jointly.

- Staff should also be evaluated on their supervision and management of volunteers. The organization's performance appraisal form or process should include an area that assesses staff ability to work effectively with volunteers. If a staff member does not work with volunteers, that portion of the performance appraisal is marked "Not Applicable." If management does

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not take volunteer-staff teamwork seriously enough to evaluate staff on a regular basis, why should the staff?

■ Clear communication means:

- straight talk from volunteers and staff
- active listening by volunteers and staff
- emphasis on building a teamwork environment
- volunteer work areas in close proximity to staff

—*paying* volunteers with a constant flow of information

- staff working continuously with volunteer leadership to understand the larger needs and goals of the organization
- frequent thank-you's to volunteers—publicly, even when volunteers contributed only part of the total job

■ Monitor how often the volunteers are included in planning for new projects. For example, a director of volunteers in a large urban setting uses as one measure of volunteer-staff relations how consistently the volunteers are invited to participate in discussions of service goals or projects. This means everything from determining the means to staff envelopes to meeting with the director of development at a problem-solving session on reaching an audience for contributions. This volunteer manager knows things are "ok" if requests increase for the special "expertise" that volunteers bring to the team.

■ The volunteer coordinator is seen by both volunteers and staff in a key linking role. This person communicates the views of volunteers to the staff and explains the demands on staff time to the volunteers.

■ Roles and responsibilities of both staff and volunteers should be mutually defined.

■ Staff need training and orientation on working with volunteers. A training session on supervision, with application to volunteers, can help prevent problems of poor volunteer-staff relations.

■ Volunteers can sometimes see themselves as operating to the side or "off in a field" from the organization. A team approach to volunteer-staff relations means that everyone works *together* to further the mission. Decisions that affect the volunteers and the service they deliver or the money they raise are arrived at jointly.

■ Staff should be represented on the volunteer boards and the volunteers should be represented on the board of directors or advisory committee. They also make good contributing members of management committees. ■

## The Volunteer-Staff Climate Audit

*DIRECTIONS: Read each situation and decide how frequently it occurs. Check the appropriate box. Try to respond to each "situation."*

SITUATIONS	Usually	Sometime	Rarely
1. "They never" or "we always" are words heard when staff refer to volunteers.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
2. Volunteers ask for credits or measures of their worth. Example: paid parking, mileage allowance, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
3. Volunteers and staff both use words like "together," "we," "our project" (meaning staff and volunteers), etc.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
4. Reports on volunteer activities during management meetings come from other staff, not just the person responsible for volunteer coordination.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
5. Volunteers are visible on leadership decision-making committees.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
6. Decisions affecting volunteers are made by staff without consulting the volunteers.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
7. Decisions affecting staff are made by volunteers without consulting the staff.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
8. Volunteers say "thank you" to staff publicly.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
9. Staff treat volunteers who serve on the board of directors or advisory committee with more respect than other volunteers.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
10. Projects are planned collaboratively between staff and volunteers.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
11. Volunteers focus on the past rather than on future possibilities.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
12. Volunteers jump appropriate organizational structure lines to get answers to their questions from staff.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
13. Staff are too busy to explain the "rules of the game" to volunteers.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
14. The leaders of the organization (staff and/or volunteers) are visible at volunteer association events.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
15. Volunteers are asked to give input and assistance in most organizational projects.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
16. Staff say "thank you" to volunteers publicly.	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
17. "They never" or "we always" are words heard when referring to staff.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3

**TOTALS** \_\_\_\_\_

**GRAND TOTAL:** \_\_\_\_\_

Are you?  Volunteer  Staff  Other \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**SCORING:** Add the numbers in all the boxes you checked. If there are situations for which you did not check any boxes, add 2 points for each situation.

38-51 means you have excellent volunteer-staff relations (but don't let up!)

28-37 means you are doing some things right, but could use some tuning up in some sections (the situations can help you identify those areas)

36-17 means you have a serious problem and need to take action immediately.