

Advocacy

Should Paid Staff Replace Volunteers?

By Stephen H. McCurley

SHOULD PAID STAFF REPLACE volunteers? This question is prompted more by reading one book and three articles on volunteer fire-fighting within a short period of time than by any sustained philosophical investigation. What struck me in reading the material was that it dealt with the reverse side of a question which the volunteer community nimbly has been avoiding for some time.

We usually ask, "Should volunteers replace paid staff?" It's equally instructive to reverse the question—"Should paid staff replace volunteers?"—and inquire whether or not, and under what circumstances, volunteers should be supplanted by paid staff.

Example: Volunteer Fire Fighters

Since the earliest days of this country, volunteers have provided the manpower for community fire-fighting efforts:

Smaller towns could not afford paid departments even if they wanted them, and in many cases they do not. The volunteers are as much part of the community's civic life as the Rotary Club and the Fourth of July parade, and are part of a tradition that began with Benjamin Franklin, who founded the first volunteer fire department in 1736. More than half the signers of the Declaration of Indepen-

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dence are said to have been volunteer firemen. ("New Conditions Give Rise to Hard Look at Volunteer Fire Units," by James Barron, *New York Times*, December 31, 1980)

In recent years, however, a rift has developed between volunteers and a new group of paid "professional" fire-fighters:

Once the main line of defense against fire ... volunteers have been replaced in increasing numbers in recent years by professionals. In most suburban areas, the two work side by side, but the relationship has led to a running feud, with the professionals accusing the volunteers of being irresponsible and even dangerous. ("Fire Wars: The Professionals Versus the Volunteers," by Loretta Tofani, *Washington Post*, February 7, 1981).

The Causes of Complaint

The specific complaints lodged against the volunteer fire-fighters may

sound familiar. They include:

- An overall lag in recruitment
- Unavailability of volunteers during midday hours
- Undependability—some volunteers don't show up when they're supposed to
- Lack of professional skills
- Absence of uniform standards for volunteer fire-fighting programs
- Lack of in-service training
- Higher insurance rates

This list consists of the traditional fears and the traditional accusations of those who oppose volunteers. If true, they provide adequate justification for paid staff supplanting volunteers. However, an equal list of complaints against paid staff—expense, burnout, dedication to bureaucratic survival rather than service—would, if true, provide adequate justification for volunteers replacing paid staff. And if you substituted "volunteer" for "paid staff" and vice versa in each question, you still would have adequate justification for a change.

Artificial Distinctions

In point of fact, we are more interested in certain traits of competence and commitment than in the artificial distinction of payment for service. No one really believes receiving a wage payment automatically makes one a professional; no one should believe that serving without pay automatically lifts one to a state of grace.

We would all be well-served by avoiding the false dichotomy that our original questions suggest. That distinction in no way addresses the real purpose of putting the right people in the right place at the right time. If we paid more attention to that problem, we'd all be better off. ♥

