

As I See It

The Seductive Silver Lining

By Jane Mallory Park



Jane Mallory Park is the author of *Meaning Well Is Not Enough: Perspectives On Volunteering*, published by Groupwork Today, Inc., South Plainfield, NJ, 1983, and the creator of several cassettes designed for volunteer and staff training (also available through Groupwork Today, Inc.). She is a lecturer, trainer and consultant in volunteerism, particularly in the area of effective boards. She has also been an active volunteer leader in her community, currently serving as PTA unit president, chairperson of Broome County's RSVP Advisory Council, and board member of the Broome United Way and the Southern Tier Educational Television Association.

AT LAST IT IS A GREAT TIME TO BE IN THE volunteering business! Until recently, those of us who are volunteers or manager/advocates were caught in what seemed like a cause passe. As the number and size of human service organizations mushroomed, particularly in terms of paid staff, volunteers began to seem vestigial. As these same organizations rode the relative gravy train of better economic times, the need to use volunteers seemed a poor reflection on one's financial planning and funding success. It at least was a stopgap measure until we could find a way to do it "right."

Now the idea whose time seemed to have gone has come again. In this period of budget crunches and priority reassessments, volunteers and their advocates are no longer struggling for recognition on the fringes of social progress. Instead, they have been thrust into the forefront of public attention as the way to continue achieving that progress.

Even though much of the public discussion tends toward generalities, based on nostalgic perceptions of that peculiar American phenomenon known as volunteering, this limelight has given many of us a much-coveted opportunity to pull out all of our sophisticated, contemporary stops on how to professionalize volunteers and make them truly effective. Why, we are even seeing the rise of a new professional field: volunteer management and administration. If that is not a good sign, what is?

However, as I see it, this flurry of attention, while it constitutes a silver lining of sorts, may be just a bit too heady. It may cause us to disregard the clouds that still surround volunteering and offer various threats to assuring that the silver lining is both real and here to stay. It is important that we understand those clouds and consider their implications for our own actions.

Cloud: The Good Old Days



Americans used to volunteer more. So we think, and perhaps it was so. Our images of volunteers past focus on the good old days of quilting bees and barn raisings. Then everyone pitched in on a peer basis with a unanimity and focus among community members that clearly defined what needed to be accomplished.

To stop there is to forget that we have moved beyond the quilting bee in our understanding of social problems, their causes and treatments. It is to forget that, even in those same old good days, some Americans volunteered in other than a good neighbor, mutual self-help style. They formed organizations to address specific concerns and spent considerable time and energy trying to mobilize sufficient volunteer and financial resources to fulfill the group's purpose. What this probably meant then and certainly means now is that few, if any, voluntary efforts have achieved the results or had the total public support that their members would like. Today's spectrum of volunteering encompasses such a wide variety of human service

(Continued on next page)

activities that it may be helpful to remember that for any one cause or setting, volunteers are and/or feel like a minority.

Cloud: Volunteers Are Free Help



Volunteers are not on the payroll, to be sure. However, they are not free help, no matter how you interpret that phrase. For one thing, they bring many expectations in many combinations: doing something useful, feeling obligated, developing career skills, making friends, getting recognition, etc. These expectations, alas, often are not clearly articulated and constitute a price tag that must be mutually understood.

Also, volunteers do not work for free; they usually pay for the privilege. Out-of-pocket expenses incurred while volunteering can really mount up. Even modest ones can be barriers to some potential volunteers. More attention needs to be given to this reality in the financial planning done by volunteers and organizations.

Finally, effective volunteering requires an investment of time and money by the organization. Recruitment, orientation, training, supervision, recognition events and the like all cost something. To assume otherwise is false economy in the long run. Successful volunteer programs recognize all of the psychic and cash costs and negotiate the best price.

Cloud: Accountability (Or Lack Thereof)



This cloud arises out of the first two. If volunteers were working for free solely out of the goodness of their hearts, we might not be far wrong in deducing that accountability is out of the question. Many organizations that rely on volunteers have, in fact, adopted a beggars-can't-be-choosy stance in relation to those volunteers. If, as I have

Volunteer administrators in newly created positions all too often find that other paid personnel view their job as capturing, taming and feeding volunteers and keeping them at a proper distance from the real work.

asserted, these are not the premises on which volunteers work (whether they are aware of it or not), the case for their accountability rests on two complementary factors.

First, human service organizations today are asked to be accountable for their corporate performance. While this is primarily due to the funding squeeze, it is to be hoped that

it is also because our knowledge of human needs has changed and our ways of addressing them have become more sophisticated. Although we cannot be sure that current methods of intervention are not glorified meddling, they should represent our effort to do the best for clients and causes that can be done at present. Organizations that rely on volunteers cannot afford to use that as an excuse for poor performance. Volunteers need to understand the limits and potential of their roles. We had all better be working to define reasonable standards for performance.

Second, volunteers want assignments suited to their expectations and often (though not always) to their abilities. They want to know if they have actually been useful, learned a skill, helped a friend, etc. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to define in advance mutual expectations and demands, then to evaluate outcomes. In this context, accountability is not a weapon; it is a tool for improving performance AND satisfaction.

Volunteer administrators anxious to establish the professionalism of their new field may find themselves jockeying for position within their organizations and playing pecking order games having little to do with improving the effectiveness of services offered.

Asking for more volunteers or for people to volunteer more does not define what they should be doing. For example, the 1981 Gallup Survey on Volunteering reported some intriguing answers to questions about what kind of volunteering people were doing. One such response was, "I baked brownies for my son's Cub Scout troop." Assume that this is a legitimate form of volunteering and then suppose that every American volunteered but only in this way. Would the results be socially useful, or would we simply have created a generation of overweight Cub Scouts? More is not necessarily better. People may not be volunteering like they used to, and that may not be all bad.

Cloud: Staff/Volunteer Relations



The proliferation in the number of paid positions in human services and the related division of labor among them have created considerable confusion within organizations. Furthermore, these developments have outpaced the public's recognition as expressed in respect and compensation. It is not surprising that volunteers have been caught in this confusion about who should do what, with what credentials and for what price.

The confusion creates tension particularly when staff in

professional positions perceive that the presence of volunteers perpetuates an aura of amateurism that reflects on their work as well. It is compounded when other paid staff feel that volunteers are a threat to job security. Tensions are further exacerbated by volunteers who perform inadequately for whatever reason and by volunteers who

If volunteers get involved in organizations so desperate for help they cannot say, 'Your price is too high,' or in organizations not properly structured to make good use of them, we will see new variations on the old cloud of nonaccountability.

exclude a holier-than-thou attitude toward the paid personnel. Volunteer administrators and managers in newly created positions all too often find that other paid personnel view their job as capturing, taming and feeding volunteers and keeping them at a "proper" distance from the real work.

Administrators, managers, supervisors and boards have to be extraordinarily sensitive to this cloud. Not all the feelings behind the tensions are unjustified, and in any event they are real. Particularly these days, job security is not an issue to be taken lightly. However, this does not instantly clarify the roles in question, and it in no way alleviates the difficult decisions that may have to be made whether or not volunteers are on the scene.

It is important to remember that volunteers are more than "working partners" or "illegal aliens." They are, by virtue of their commitment, allies in our efforts to convince the community that the social needs we are trying to address must in fact be addressed. Too much internal tension may divert us from this fundamental reality.

Cloud: The Silver Lining



To add to the gloom, I am now proposing that the silver lining itself may become a cloud if we are not careful. For one thing, in the new limelight of volunteering some may be tempted to ignore the pervasiveness of the old clouds and assume that these issues are behind us. Most of us can acknowledge that they are not, because we deal with their manifestations on a daily basis among volunteers, staff AND the general public. We must continue to recognize these as examples of larger issues, which they are, rather than simply as individual idiosyncracies of those persons whom we happen to encounter in our work.

Less visible and more seductive may be our own reactions as volunteers and volunteer administrators to the relative limelight in which we find ourselves. Unquestiona-

bly, the concepts of professionalism and accountability can be used to enhance the effectiveness of individuals and organizations. They can also be misused. For example, volunteers can become more sophisticated and precise in articulating their expectations without fully understanding the price they will have to pay if they are to meet those expectations AND the needs of the social cause they purport to serve. If these volunteers get involved in organizations so desperate for help they cannot say, "Your price is too high," or in organizations not properly structured to make good use of them, we will see new variations on the old cloud of nonaccountability. Volunteer administrators anxious to establish the professionalism of their new field may find themselves jockeying for position within their organizations and playing pecking order games having little to do with improving the effectiveness of services offered. Or, if they have difficulty recruiting enough volunteers for their specific openings, they may be tempted to dredge up the argument that people just do not volunteer like they used to. That may be true, but it may or may not be the problem.

Perhaps the most seductive aspect of the silver lining is the opening it allows for viewing volunteering as an end rather than as a means toward the end of a more caring and responsive society. Volunteering is only one means toward such an end. The current limelight may enable us to improve its effectiveness as a means. It is not, however, an automatic guarantee or measure of success. We must be as aware of its limitations as we are of its potential.

Effective volunteering requires an investment of time and money by the organization. Recruitment, orientation, training, supervision, recognition, and the like all cost something. To assume otherwise is false economy in the long run. Successful volunteer programs recognize all of the psychic and cash costs and negotiate the best price.

My analogy of clouds and silver linings may seem to have fluctuated between the pessimistic and the Pollyannish. It is my way of urging all of us to place our piece of the action in a larger context so that our efforts will be effective in the long and short run. The unfinished business of building a more responsive society compels us to view the clouds as challenges to be faced and addressed rather than as excuses for inaction and failure. The real silver lining is the opportunity we have to enhance the building process. As I see it, this is indeed a great time to be in the volunteering business. ♥