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One Step Further: Volunteer Services and Agency-wide Education

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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It's clear that orienting and training volunteers are key elements of a successful volunteer program. But if we focus only on training volunteers, we miss the opportunity to facilitate education for our entire organization. Taking a significant role in agency-wide professional development raises the status of the volunteer program and recognizes you as a valued part of the management team.

We already know the benefits of providing solid initial training and informative continuing education sessions for volunteers. Offering "lifelong learning" boosts recruitment, maintains enthusiasm, and increases retention. But with a bit more vision and creativity, we can position our access to community resources to provide all sorts of learning opportunities for paid staff as well as volunteers.

Professional Enrichment for Staff

It is not common for an organization to go to the volunteer services office when seeking professional development for the paid staff. So you may have to explain how you can contribute to an agency-wide education strategy. This also gives you a great reason to sit down with human resources staff and explore a more cooperative relationship.

Laura Otten's article/speech on "[What's Unique about Human Resources in the Nonprofit Sector?](#)" proposes a number of great ideas for non-cost ways to accomplish staff development. It struck me how many of these could be facilitated through the volunteer services office. Here are a few possible initiatives her article stimulated in my mind:

- Advocate for or design in-service training for both volunteers and paid staff together, particularly for continuing education. On the most basic level, schedule periodic group discussions of current trends and issues affecting your setting and invite anyone who's interested. For more in-depth training, form a planning team from both audiences to

brainstorm possible topics and speakers. Then recruit speakers from the community to volunteer their time (more on this below).

- Interview staff to learn about their own professional learning objectives. This is what Ivan Scheier calls “Quests” in his “job factoring” process (see [Building Volunteer/Staff Relations](#)) and might include the chance to practice conversational Spanish, learn how to write a funding proposal, or be more effective in doing Internet research. Once you have this list, recruit volunteers with those skills and make their assignment “staff development.” After all, isn’t it a meaningful way to serve your organization’s mission by building the skills of the staff?
- Arrange volunteer work for employees to do in other organizations. We applaud employee volunteer programs in for-profit businesses and encourage companies to allow such activities both for service to the community and for building employee teamwork and skills. Don’t these benefits apply to any employer? For government and nonprofit organizations, offering volunteer opportunities to paid staff is a really low-cost form of education (while doing good!). If it’s a work-release time project, employees do the volunteering (from the perspective of the recipient agency) during regular work hours. And that allows the employer to select types of volunteering that build skills the agency needs back home. For example:

- Volunteering that teaches how to work with a specific consumer group.

- Volunteering that introduces staff to public policy issues, political processes, and strategies for getting things done locally.

- Rewarding/recognizing existing skills by allowing employees to volunteer their talents, on behalf of your organization, to help other organizations, thereby building bridges for future collaboration.

And who is the best person in the organization already knowledgeable about such potential volunteer placements? You.

Can you see how offering these sorts of staff development opportunities positions your office as valuable to the entire organization? And that this is a legitimate extension of your mandate to tap community resources?

Recruiting Short-term Volunteers as Educators

The beauty of involving volunteers in an educational strategy is how well this fits into today’s reality of people wanting short-term assignments. By seeking trainers, speakers, and staff developers, we suddenly have ways to engage all sorts of experts and specialists in limited – but vital -- volunteer

work. It is flattering to be approached to share your talents and most people will make time to be of help, if they agree with your cause.

A DOVIA (association of volunteer program managers) might actually develop a speakers and trainers directory of local experts willing to make presentations a few times a year. In fact, one way to start this directory is to ask every organization to recruit two of their present employees and/or volunteers with special skills to register with the directory. This “shares the wealth” already available in a more formal way. It also is another form of professional development for those invited to make presentations.

It's also possible to form a training cooperative, in which several organizations develop a year-long training calendar. All the volunteers from each cooperating agency are invited to all the sessions (not all will want to come, remember), but each organization is only responsible for doing the planning for one or two sessions a year. Not only does this divide up the work equitably, but it then becomes possible to recruit even more popular speakers who might prefer a larger audience (even the mayor or a foundation head might say yes).

Keep in mind that recruiting volunteers as educators can be a bonus for your personal learning goals, too. Want to develop your media relations techniques? Recruit an advisor/coach from your local radio station or newspaper. Need to design better evaluation surveys? Ask a university faculty member to critique your drafts. The possibilities are endless! You become better educated while a whole new circle of volunteers is introduced to your organization's work. Win-win-win.

What do you think about all this? Tell us about your education strategies and how you tap the community for learning resources.

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Submitted on 5August2003 by Carol Bloemer, RSVP Director / Volunteer Center of East Central WI, Appleton, WI

The program that I worked for previously often encouraged volunteers to attend the staff trainings. Every new staff person was required to attend the Volunteer Training. I think they did a great job at combining the two groups for purposes of education, appreciation of each other, and to have a shared experience. Quite a few ex-employees have been volunteers after they left the agency . I think that the respect that the agency placed on volunteerism is one of the reasons why ex-employees and volunteers have made long-term commitments to the agency.

Submitted on 5August2003 by Judith Milton, Manager, The Board Bank Program, United Way of Gtr St. Louis, St. Louis, MO Your article on professional education sparked me to articulate an education/training idea for diversifying nonprofit boards of directors. Making the first woman, man or person of color be willing to take the risk of joining an established board is important to successfully diversifying a nonprofit board. New recruits must feel comfortable and included to

participate effectively. Education and training for key staff and volunteers who are recruiting minority board members has been overlooked.

Submitted on 5August2003 by Sara Redfern, Coordinator of Volunteer Services, AIDS Committee of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

This is a great idea! Offering training sessions to both staff and volunteers in the agency where I work has contributed to the cohesiveness of the team & has exemplified our commitment to professional development for both paid and unpaid staff.

Opening in-house training sessions to volunteers from other organizations has facilitated partnerships and resource-sharing with key community members & agencies.

Submitted on 5August2003 by Mary Ryan, Manager, Community Resources, Southlake Regional Health Centre, Newmarket, Ontario, Canada

As usual, Susan has "hit the nail on the head." This approach helps us achieve two things - it's an opportunity for us to raise our profile and credibility within the organization from a professional perspective and a great opportunity to partner with our human resources colleagues to build awareness and commitment to what we do i.e. the human resources management of unpaid staff. I will be sharing at our next combined staff meeting.

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