

VOLUNTEER-STAFF DYNAMICS

The ability of an association to achieve its goals depends on the effectiveness of its volunteer leadership. In most cases, associations hire only a few employees to provide the

day-to-day continuity of office management, membership support services, and fiscal control. The remainder of the work is handled by active association members—those individuals who have volunteered to accept an assignment in support of the association.

Board officers and members do the decision making, while committee chairmen act as the "staff" of the association, actually implementing programs. All of this is done on a volunteer basis. Yet how to build effective working relationships among salaried staff and volunteers—and among volunteers themselves—is all too often an invisible management issue. Organizing and maintaining such a relationship is an issue that can be addressed by both volunteer leaders and the staff chief executive officer.

To assess whether an association has planned sufficiently for volunteer/employee and volunteer/volunteer interaction, its volunteer leaders and its CEO should jointly consider the following questions:

- How many of the salaried staff have had formal training (not just on-the-job experience) in how to supervise or work with volunteers?

Meshing the efforts of volunteers with staff requires careful analysis and planning by management and the elected leaders.

By SUSAN J. ELLIS

- How many committee chairmen have had formal training in how to run a committee?
- If a dispute develops between a volunteer and an employee, is one or the other always presumed to be right? Do volunteers or employees have "more rights" in your association? Why?
- Who develops meeting agendas and how many people know how to place a subject of concern on an agenda?
- How does the nominating committee select new leaders and how many years must someone be a member before it is possible for him or her to be given a position of genuine responsibility? Is this because of bylaw restrictions or because of the low amount of turnover in the association's key positions?
- Are you certain that new members know the ways they can become involved in the work of the association? Can every member accurately identify all the committees and what they do?
- Are there clearly defined channels for members to make suggestions, voice criticisms, and so forth?
- How many members have left the association in the past year due to dissatisfaction with the way decisions are made or the way participation is encouraged?

tions of policymaking and program implementation.

There is also tension because of the nature of one "side" being volunteer and the other salaried. To minimize such negative feelings and create the teamwork necessary to make the association successful, volunteer leaders and staff CEOs must understand the factors that affect the relationship of volunteers and paid staff.

Teamwork is key to success

Try reading between the lines when employees and volunteers interact. Are there underlying feelings based on misperceptions of each other's roles and/or background? Do staff members truly value volunteers or do they just "tolerate" the involvement of active members? Conversely, do members value the special skills of the association's employees or do they treat the staff as "servants" hired to do the legwork volunteers dislike?

In addition, it's important to consider the dynamics of what might be taking place when veteran volunteers and newcomers try to work together. Too often new members are stopped from becoming active because of the way "insider" members control their volun-

There are some management experts who discuss what they call the "necessary tension" between the board of directors and the chief executive. This tension arises from the checks and balances of the func-

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teer roles. Association leaders, both volunteer and salaried, have to be able to diagnose possible negative attitudes and be able to differentiate which reflect genuine, reasonable concerns and which are based solely on habit or prejudice.

One practical strategy for counteracting misconceptions is to insist on accurate job descriptions for everyone, including volunteer leaders. Job descriptions are generally acknowledged as valuable for salaried staff, but they are rarely applied to boards of directors.

Some executives believe that an association's bylaws provide sufficient role definition. Bylaws usually outline general functions and specific powers of the board and officers, but do not actually clarify all of the expectations of these roles. Without separate job descriptions that enumerate the many tasks of board members, it is difficult to hold any volunteer accountable for fulfilling this demanding position—and it is easy to understand why the lines of

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authority between volunteers and employees are often blurred. When the organization does not define what it wants from its leaders, each new set of leaders (and every employee) will interpret roles differently. This sets up possible conflicts with the salaried staff, who must adapt to new officers every term.

Some associations have job descriptions for volunteers, but only for officers and committee chairmen. This creates the impression that only the "top" volunteers are really expected to do any work.

An association's volunteer leaders should begin the task of assigning job descriptions for other volunteers by defining the role of every member of the board (or of a committee). This job description should include statements about:

- Expected attendance at meetings.

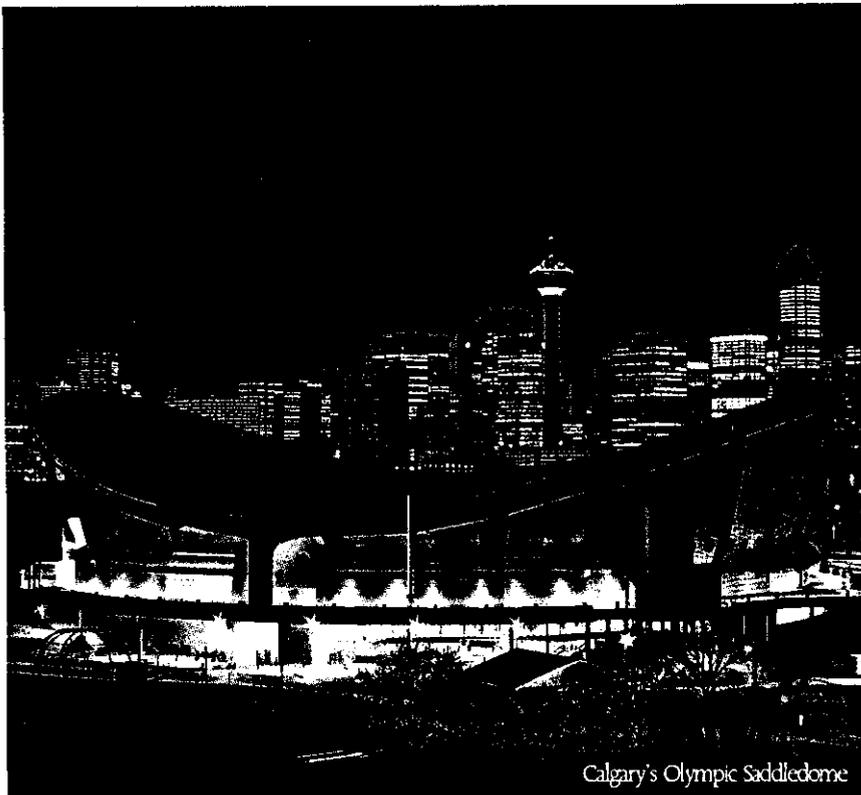
- The amount of work expected between meetings, including such responsibilities as reading any preparatory materials before a meeting, the possibility of having to do follow-up work as assigned during

meetings, and so forth.

- Reporting requirements—how often and in what form reports will be expected from a member on work delegated to him or her, including the expectation that reports will be submitted even if the member is not present at a meeting.

If a potential board member is recruited with an understanding of the full responsibilities of the job, compliance is more likely. If someone accepts a volunteer position with only a vague sense of what his or her responsibilities are, it is very hard to demand performance later. While it is true that some nominees may not wish to serve the association after reading the job description, those people clearly would have served on the board in a minimal fashion anyway. Far better to screen them out before giving them a three-year term.

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Once the roles of all individual board members have been defined, the next step is for the association's leadership to write the officer job descriptions. These can begin with the statement, "will fulfill all the responsibilities of a board member, and in addition will. . ."

For committees, the overall purpose of each committee should be described in writing by the board. Then the board—or the newly formed committee itself—can write the job descriptions of the members of that committee. Next come the job descriptions of the committee chairman, the secretary, and the other committee leaders.

Finally—and very critically—a job description should be written for the role of liaison salaried staff. In developing such a job description, you should consider such important questions as these:

- Is the employee considered a full member of the committee or is he or she a "support" person (and what does that mean)?
- Can the employee vote?

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- Will the staff member or a volunteer take the minutes?
- Is the employee liaison expected to do the follow-up work of the committee or will the members themselves handle such tasks?
- Can the staff member refuse work delegated by the committee, and can the staff member ask a volunteer to do any of the work?

It takes only a few minutes at the start of each year to clarify such questions—and think about how much easier it will then be to work together. Instead of assumptions about everyone's roles, which can lead to friction, division of labor becomes an open topic of negotiation.

Job descriptions should be reviewed annually, or at least as often as association leaders rotate their terms of office. It is reasonable to revise the assign-

ment of tasks based on the interests and skills of the people in the various positions—both volunteer and paid. The key is to spend time discussing how everyone wants to work together in the coming months.

Another management technique that cannot be underestimated is orienting volunteers when they accept an assignment on behalf of the association. No one is "above" some training; regardless of a person's status in the association's profession or trade, he or she will need help getting started in a new role. In fact, it is more embarrassing to have to ask for information (and admit lack of knowledge) than to be provided with a matter-of-fact orientation. This also saves the association from the embarrassment of discovering that a volunteer is representing the organization in an uninformed and possibly incorrect way.

It may also be worthwhile to train people in the skills of working together as volunteers. A person may be a top-ranking professional yet not aware of how to accomplish work through the

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motivation and encouragement of fellow association members. In fact, some of the qualities that are found in a successful business person may actually be counterproductive when it comes to leading volunteers.

Recognition is an area that many associations handle well when it comes to formal expressions of appreciation for service. But recognition is also a powerful day-to-day motivator: Volunteers will do more for an organization when they feel that someone notices their efforts. For association leaders, a good rule is to spend more time rewarding volunteers who are doing their work well than covering for those who are not doing their fair share. Here are some ways this rule can be applied by volunteer leaders:

- Start meetings on time. This recognizes the people who are prompt rather than making them wait for late comers, whose tardiness is actually reinforced by the delay.
- Expect reports from people who are not able to come to a meeting; other-

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wise, you send the message that nonattendance permits nonaccountability.

- Follow up the very first time someone misses a meeting—this shows you noticed the person's absence and emphasizes that the meetings are important.

- Thank people for their efforts after each report.

A volunteer leader should confront other volunteers who are not completing their assignments. Remember a simple fact: No one volunteers to do a bad job. Asking volunteers to improve their performance implies that you respect their ability to do better.

The volunteer who is not handling his or her share of the workload creates tension as well as extra work for everyone else. By not permitting poor work to continue uncorrected, you provide recognition to the volunteers who are

doing their jobs well.

A volunteer association leader is responsible for the tone of the organization as well as for the achievement of its goals. Encouraging other members to become active

and to accept positions requiring work on behalf of the association is a challenge that requires an understanding of what motivates volunteers. The more definition of roles, the more opportunity for member participation and less rule by veteran cliques. The more recognition of members who work hard for the association, the less acceptance of people who take titles without producing results. And the more visible the concern for clear working relationships, the less friction between staff and volunteers and among volunteers themselves. □

Susan Ellis, president of Energize Associates, Philadelphia, is a consultant in the field of volunteerism. This article is based on her book, From the Top Down, available from Energize Associates at (215) 438-8342.



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