

6 Principles of Successful Volunteerism

New times demand a new definition of "volunteer" and new approaches to managing a volunteer workforce.

Throughout American history, volunteers have helped shape our nation. Now, as we approach a new century, the needs of our society are changing—and so are the responsibilities, needs, and identity of our volunteer force.

A NEW DEFINITION

To prepare for the 21st century, the American Red Cross conducted a comprehensive study of current issues in volunteerism. The study presents a new definition of "volunteer." This definition still contains all the traditional elements of volunteerism:

- service to something beyond one-self
- a willingness to contribute time and effort without pay
- a donation of time and effort beyond one's normal responsibilities.

But the new definition broadens the traditional concept significantly:

- It acknowledges that volunteers themselves benefit from their charitable activities—yet it does not pass judgment on their motives for volunteering.
- It includes employees who volunteer on company time if the ser-

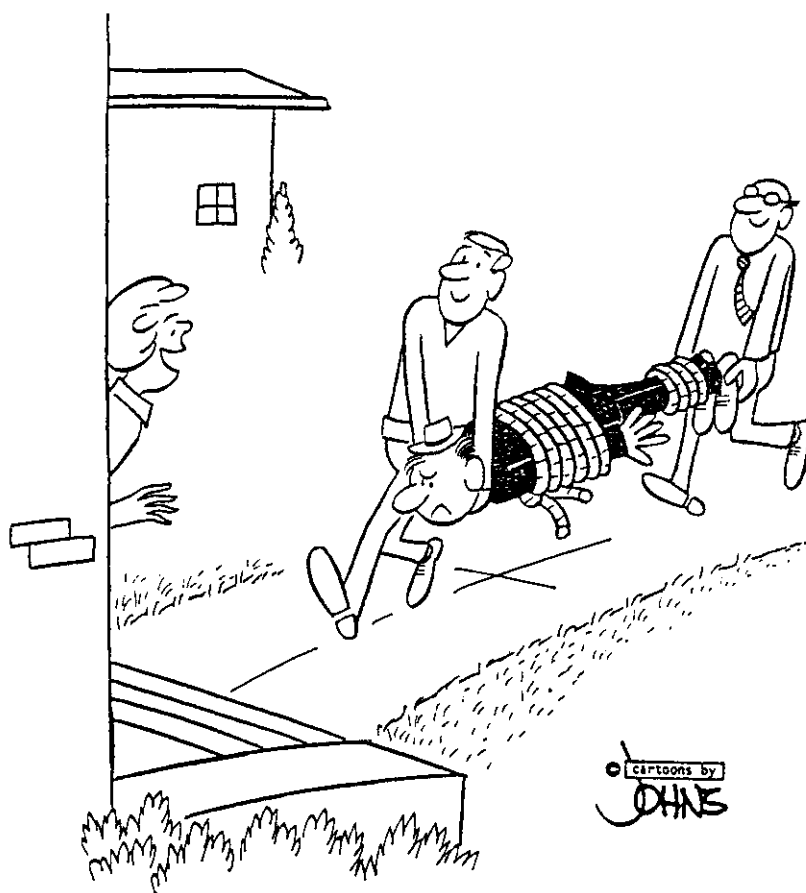
vice they provide is not part of their regular job.

- It encompasses the growing number of volunteers in government programs and in political campaigning or lobbying.
 - It does not rule out training, stipends, vouchers, or other benefits meant to assist volunteers to overcome financial barriers.
- The new definition of "volunteer"

is nonjudgmental, flexible, and inclusive. It takes into account the complexities of the volunteer world and our rapidly changing society.

SIX PRINCIPLES

Keeping this new definition in mind, the study developed some



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"Oh, good! Another volunteer."

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CREATIVE VOLUNTEER IDEAS

Recruit With an Imaginative Eye

Take an active, imaginative approach to seeking volunteers for your organization. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Painesville, Ohio, for instance, arranged for local pizza restaurants to include brochures with their pizza deliveries. The brochures encourage people to volunteer as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. Similarly, you might arrange to include your organization's volunteer recruitment brochure with regular mailings or deliveries by businesses in your area.

fundamental principles of successful volunteerism. Six of the most basic principles are explored here.

1. Remove Barriers to Volunteering.

Unfortunately, some potential volunteers are largely under-represented. These include: minorities, low-income families, and people who are disabled, homebound, or without transportation. Before such groups can participate, stumbling blocks must be removed. Some barriers to volunteerism include the following:

- **Language Differences.** The words associated with volunteerism sometimes don't exist or have different connotations in other languages. Also, volunteer recruitment is too rarely conducted in foreign languages.

- **Cultural Differences.** Certain aspects of volunteerism—highly structured committees, work outside the local community, intrusion into other people's private lives, to name a few—are alien to some cultures.

- **Economic Hardship.** While many people from low-income households gladly work without pay for causes they believe in, they often can't afford such expenses as trans-

portation, child or elder care, training, lunches, or uniforms.

- **Physical Impairment.** Handicapped people still have trouble accessing many work areas, and too much communication never reaches sight-impaired or hearing-impaired people.

- **Time Constraints.** Too many volun-

CREATIVE VOLUNTEER IDEAS

Say "Thank You" With Flair

In Gainesville, Florida, local stores gave discounts to all volunteers presenting a "VIP" (Volunteer Identification Permit) card. Agency staff in Weld County, Colorado, ran a car wash during National Volunteer Week (celebrated in April each year) and sent coupons to their volunteers for a free wash and wax. For other creative ways to thank volunteers, take a look at *Accent on Recognition*, available free of charge from Philanthropic GIFT, P.O. Box 10214, Silver Spring, Maryland 20914. For a free catalog of volunteer recognition items, write the National Volunteer Center, 1111 North 10th Street, Suite 500, Arlington, Virginia 22209.

teer opportunities are still limited to normal working hours.

- **Barriers to Togetherness.** Too few opportunities exist for couples or entire families to volunteer together.

- **Distance.** Despite strides in communications that permit a decentralized workplace, too many programs still require that volunteers work on-site at central locations, thereby excluding people who are homebound or without transportation.

Fortunately, with some effort and imagination, these barriers can be eliminated. For instance, one of the Red Cross's most exciting success stories involves homebound volunteers who have become "command centers" for disaster relief operations. Homebound volunteers' contin-

ued presence near their phones has allowed them to bolster 24-hour phone coverage and emergency communications and has made them central and involved members of their communities.

2. Treat Volunteers as Professionals.

Management expert Peter Drucker recently observed that more and more organizations are managing volunteers as "unpaid staff" rather than as "well-meaning amateurs." The following steps will help to encourage professionalism in volunteer programs:

- Match volunteers carefully with jobs that will take best advantage of their skills. Create a job description for each job, and be faithful to volunteers' expectations of the work they will do.
- When assigning volunteers a new task, be sure that they immediately receive orientation, training, supervision,

CREATIVE VOLUNTEER IDEAS

Encourage Diversity and Accessibility

Open your volunteer program to as many types of people as possible. To help staff work with people of diverse cultural backgrounds, ask to see the "Complete Cultural Diversity Library," available from ODT, P.O. Box 134, Amherst, Massachusetts 01004 (413-549-1293). For information on recruiting minority volunteer leaders, order *Blueprint for Volunteer Diversity*, available for \$21 from Sales Services America, 901 North Pitt Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314 (800-772-0008). For tips on making your workplace accessible to people with disabilities, see *The Workplace Workbook: An Illustrated Guide to Job Accommodation* \$32 from the Publications Department, National Easter Seal Society, 70 East Lake Street, Chicago, Illinois 60601.

hands-on experience, and evaluation.

- Establish apprenticeship stages when teaching skills that take time to develop.
- Design a performance management system for volunteers that parallels the system for paid employees. This helps guarantee across-the-board quality control in services and leadership.
- Be sure that volunteers have accurate job descriptions, a straightforward succession plan for leader-

that no major initiative will move forward without volunteer input.

4. Place the Right Person in the Right Job.

Nowadays, the heightened competition for volunteers often obscures the fact that successful recruitment should not be measured by volunteer numbers alone. It is more

There are government-funded and government-administered volunteer programs at federal, state, and local levels. There are state and municipal commissions and councils on volunteerism and government volunteer coordinators on federal installations.

Less obviously, but more significantly, government affects volunteerism daily through its decisions on such matters as tax policy, tort liability regulation, and government hiring practices, among others. Government action or inaction determines the nature of the environment in which volunteerism functions. It is up to the nonprofit sector to offer its best thinking to public officials to ensure that they create an environment that is supportive of volunteerism.

The words associated with volunteerism sometimes don't exist in other languages.

ship jobs, and responsive grievance procedures.

- Avoid wording that implies volunteers are not professional, such as the unfortunate phrase "volunteers and professional staff."

3. Consider Volunteers as Managers.

The Red Cross study reveals that volunteers can handle any job, including middle and senior managerial positions, if they have the necessary time and skills. Some of the benefits of placing volunteers in management positions include the following:

- A well-matched management team of paid and volunteer staff offers broader expertise, geographic representation, management style, and perspective.
- Management positions "empower" volunteers to design, influence, and—in some cases—control programs. Such empowerment is an important element in retaining capable, dedicated volunteers. It is also a source of great strength to a volunteer organization.
- Having volunteers with management and supervisory experience may eliminate the need to hire more paid staff every time a new program is introduced or the activity level increases.
- Volunteers in senior management and governance roles help ensure

important to place the right person in the right job than to attract volunteers at random. Tools to recruit and hold on to volunteers include

- targeted recruitment to fill specific jobs
- recruitment from within the organization (this produces well-rounded volunteers and less burnout)
- *immediate* opportunities for volunteers recruited via media appeals (nothing discourages volunteers more than responding to an appeal and being turned away, even if only temporarily)
- clearly assigned responsibility for recruitment, to pinpoint accountability
- careful job preparation, including adequate training and supervision

6. Collaborate With Other Nonprofits.

The number of organizations served by volunteers has skyrocketed. The increasing numbers are in some ways advantageous because they provide diversity, specialization, and healthy competition. The drawbacks are duplication of effort, a scattering of resources, and an overwhelming number of choices for financial contributors and volunteers.

Collaboration among nonprofits is the key to effective volunteer management and participation in the

Too few opportunities exist for couples or entire families to volunteer together.

- awareness of a volunteer's motivations and expectations so as to provide a satisfying volunteer experience.

5. Help Shape Government Policies.

Government interest in volunteerism has grown in recent years.

next century. Ideas for expanding collaboration include the following:

- **Volunteer Referral.** Volunteer Action Centers have sprung up in many communities, and many military installations now have volunteer referral positions. Nevertheless, volunteer agencies can do much more to place volunteers in organizations other than their own.
- **Volunteer Loans and Exchanges.** Nonprofits can promote volunteer

loans and peer exchanges similar to college programs that allow a semester at other schools.

- **Shared Training.** Nonprofits benefit by sharing their expertise through frequent joint training ventures. National organizations already provide such opportunities at national conferences. Now it's time to create more local and regional training ventures and to prepare more local instructors.
- **Recognition of Each Other's Strengths.** Nonprofits hoping to share each other's expertise must find better ways to keep abreast of what is happening in other organizations.
- **Shared Infrastructure.** The emergence of national umbrella groups is a great leap forward for nonprofits. Organizations save money by sharing resources, while joint policy pronouncements raise the profile of the entire national sector. Similar initiatives should be explored at the local level in areas such as joint child care.
- **Idea Labs.** As experts develop new ideas in volunteerism, hands-on nonprofits might conduct small pilot projects and make the results available to all.
- **Crosscutting Opportunities.** More organizations are creating unusual collaborative programs. In one imaginative program, museum volunteers have joined forces with volunteers helping the homeless. Together they conduct museum tours for the homeless, in the belief that hearts and minds need as much nurturing as bodies.
- **Linking Up With Other Sectors.** Nonprofits need to share their expertise with the government and corporate sectors and, in turn, learn from the creative volunteer activities evolving in those sectors.

THE NEXT CENTURY

In the best of all possible worlds, each of us is a volunteer. Volunteers deserve support and infinite respect. By applying the principles of sound volunteerism, by thinking creatively, by testing new paths, and by working together, we can ensure that volunteerism will continue to flourish in the 21st century. ■

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*Available through The Society For Non-profit Organizations' Resource Center. To order, see the *Resource Center Catalog* or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (608-274-9777).

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