

Marlene Wilson: Reversing the Resistance of Staff to Volunteers

Marlene Wilson presented the following challenge to the participants of VOLUNTEER's 1980 Frontiers Conference in Estes Park, Colorado. It is only part of a speech entitled, "Impacting the Future: Are We Ready for the '80s?", the complete version of which was reprinted in the fall 1980 issue of Volunteer Administration. A copy may be obtained for \$2 from the Association for Volunteer Administration, PO Box 4584, Boulder, CO 80306.

I CAN ALMOST HEAR THE GROANS as you say, "Not that again!" We have been hashing that over for 10 years. It is one of those things everyone talks about—but very few really have done much to change the situation. It is almost like it has been a comfort to have a common enemy: THEY (reluctant staff) versus WE (volunteer directors/volunteers).

We must look at this again, for it was, in my opinion, the number one problem in volunteerism nationally and in Canada in the '70s. And it will escalate to become a critical, survival issue in the '80s for volunteer programs in agencies and organizations. I agree with Ivan Scheier when he writes:

The next decade ('80s) will either see a decisive improvement in the helping establishment's treatment of volunteers or it will see a parting of the ways after a half century of imperfect alliance.

He believes these volunteers from institutions will simply quit, or move on to neighborhood and self-help groups to "do their thing."

I think one of the most difficult aspects of this challenge is that it has been around so long; we are tired of it and we have had more failures than successes in dealing with it. I would urge us to deal with our own attitudes again.

A dear friend of mine, who happens to be a quadriplegic, has a motto: "Never stumble on anything behind you!" Just because we have tried and failed in the past, let's not let that keep us from trying again. Instead, let's carefully and honestly reexamine some of the "why's" behind staff resistance and see if we can suggest a few down-to-earth approaches to deal with each:

1. Lack of staff involvement in planning for volunteers.

Suggestion: Involve staff in both planning and defining the job descriptions for volunteers.

2. Fear of losing control of the quality of services when these "free people" get involved. (This stems from the belief that staff cannot supervise, evaluate or ever fire a volunteer.)

Suggestion: Help staff consider volunteers as "non-paid staff." Hold volunteers accountable; never lower standards for them.

3. Staff's fear for their jobs, afraid of being replaced by volunteers (especially in times of tight budgets).

Suggestion: Help staff realize that volunteers make great advocates in the community for services they believe in and are involved in delivering. They become enlightened voters and help tell your story to others. Volunteers historically have created jobs for professionals—not taken them.

4. Lack of staff training to understand and work with volunteers as team members.

Suggestions:

- Better staff orientation and training regarding working with volunteers (including attitudes as well as skills).
- Team training regarding volunteer management seminars as suggested earlier.
- Professional schools (education, social work, health, seminars, etc.)

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must start including this in ongoing curriculum as well as short refresher workshops. (We keep churning out new classes of professionals each year who perpetuate the problem!)

5. Lack of apparent rewards for staff for utilizing volunteers well. (We have not dealt honestly with the critical question—what's in it for them?)

Suggestions:

- Get top-level executive and board commitment to the volunteer program.
- Then, include appropriate staff members in recognition ceremonies as team members with volunteers.
- Include a place for rating "use of volunteers" on staff performance evaluation forms.
- Include letters of commendation in staff personnel folders for exceptionally fine utilization of volunteers.
- Learn from Dr. Jackson Grayson of the American Productivity Center:

The only way to keep jobs in this country is with higher productivity. . . . The growth in real wages in the U.S. during the past 20 years tracks almost exactly with the productivity rate. (During the past few years, the productivity rate in the U.S. has been at zero or below—and real wages are also at zero or minus level.) The only way for people to increase their paychecks is to improve productivity . . . and it is absolutely essential that workers should share in the benefits that accrue from productivity improvement.

He states this is as important in non-profit and government agencies as in industry.

We believe volunteers improve and extend services (when utilized well). How do we make this pay off for staff—in jobs and paychecks? I do not know, but I think our field ought to challenge Dr. Grayson and his Productivity Center to find out. ♡