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"On Volunteers" column

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Donors and Volunteers – More Alike than Different

The concept of philanthropy includes many types of giving, though you'd hardly know it from the conferences, journals, and academic programs that use the word in their titles. Most of the time, "philanthropy" is used as synonymous to "fundraising." No one argues that volunteering is technically interwoven with donating, but giving of time is the stepchild of resource development.

There are many reasons why organizations prefer money to volunteers. Clearly it is far simpler to put cash to work. Many needed items must be purchased—rent, electricity, food, supplies—and so fundraising focuses on those. Leaving aside a discussion of the benefits of volunteer involvement itself, it's also important to understand that donors and volunteers are frequently the same people. Or, more accurately, philanthropic people give both time and money, though they may contribute to different organizations in different ways at different times.

Studies show that people who volunteer tend to give more money to charity than people who do not. There is also evidence that annual donors can lose interest over time, but that being asked to share their time and talent revitalizes their commitment—even if they do not accept the invitation. In addition, money may follow volunteers, from their employers as matching funds and from family and friends who want to support a volunteer's special interest.

Some people move in and out of volunteering as their time and funds allow during their lives, perhaps contributing time when funds are low. So a young person who cannot afford to give money right then starts by affiliating with an organization through volunteering. Or a retired person on a fixed income volunteers, while considering a future cash gift through estate planning. Never assume that volunteers have no money to give!

All in all, there are very blurry lines between volunteers and donors. So why are there concrete walls between the development office and the volunteer services office? Volunteers—both current and lapsed—should be solicited to give money, and donors should be invited to volunteer. The key is acknowledging how the person already contributes to the organization and making sure the new appeal is presented as simply one more option for support.

Are Volunteers and Donors the Same?

There are certain similarities between volunteers and donors:

- Both must be found and nurtured.
- Both must come to believe in your cause and in your organization.
- Both must value philanthropic activity.
- Both must feel that their contribution can be helpful.
- Both need to be recognized.
- Both can eventually stop contributing.

From a management perspective, it is more provocative to examine the differences between volunteers and donors. There are many:

- While there are many ways to ask for money, the action desired from the donor is simply to write a check. It's comparatively easy to do. Funds can be given online, mailed in, or telephoned and all amounts are accepted at any time. Volunteering is not "one size fits all" and is far more complicated, for both the organization and the doer. The "actions" desired range from quick help to an intensive commitment of time and talent.
- To accept money, an agency needs an accounting system. To accept volunteer services, however, there needs to be preparation (designing the work), an application process, training opportunities, and ongoing supervision.
- Apart from some political and ethical considerations, an organization will happily accept money from just about any source—and donors expect their check to be accepted. Prospective volunteers must undergo an application and screening process. Not everyone is accepted nor on their terms.
- There is always a need for money, but vacancies in volunteer assignments and schedules change.
- Donors can contribute once and, depending on the size of their check, make an enormous contribution in a few minutes time. They only have to think about your organization occasionally. To have a sizeable effect, volunteers must remain involved for a duration of time. Volunteers must maintain enthusiasm for your cause on an ongoing basis.
- Giving money is a low-risk action. It certainly may diminish the donor's resources, but the cash is given as a gift, not as a financial investment. Physically, the donor can remain far away and uninvolved—and is rarely held liable for what happens once the check is cashed. Volunteering, on the other hand, is often a very risky activity. The person must be physically engaged in the work, which might even jeopardize personal safety. And then there's the possibility of being sued.
- Donors need very little else besides money. Volunteers need skills, personality, accountability, and a schedule that meshes with your needs.
- Money can only buy things that cost what the budget allows. Volunteers can contribute value far beyond what the organization would ever be able to pay.
- Death ends volunteering, but may generate new money.
- Money is spent and is gone. Volunteering generates a ripple effect of goodwill, community education, and other long-range benefits.

Implications for Action

This discussion leads to a number of recommendations. First, make sure that staff assigned to raising money and staff assigned to raising people plan together on a regular basis. If you are going to ask for donations from volunteers and ask donors to give time, it is critical that all such appeals be done with the involvement of both departments.

The volunteer program staff ought to share details about who volunteers currently, who interviewed even if they did not become active (since such inquiries clearly demonstrate the person is interested in your organization), and who has left. In each case, a different appeal needs to be crafted, but why not maximize such commitment? Departing volunteers may actually welcome a new way to contribute to the organization.

Similarly, the development staff ought to be asking questions of donors to learn their occupations, skills and hobbies and then share these with the volunteer office. There is no need to sacrifice confidentiality! The personal information should only be accessed on a "need to know" basis. In the best of all possible worlds, the donor database and volunteer database should be integrated, so it is immediately clear how many people (or members of the same family) give both time and money.

It is becoming popular to develop online giving opportunities. Websites increasingly include a plea for money and ways to donate immediately. Far fewer websites include the invitation to volunteer. But a word of caution! For all the reasons just enumerated, it is important not to equate "giving" and "volunteering" through two online checkboxes. If someone clicks on "giving," you can offer all the necessary instructions. But if someone clicks on "volunteering," it should start a much more complex process. One good approach, if you cannot have a whole area of the Website devoted to current volunteer assignment opportunities, is to make the following offer:

We would like to explain our volunteer opportunities to you. For more information and an application form, please give us your e-mail address.

Or simply ask site visitors to click on: "Please send me more information about volunteer opportunities."