

Are You Managing Volunteers as a Part-Time Responsibility?

Have you been asked to coordinate your organization's volunteer program as an addition to your regular job description or on a part-time work schedule? Although you may have grasped the magnitude of the job of directing volunteers, it's quite likely that no one else in your organization has! Ask for planning time with your organization's executive staff and/or board—those who can make policy decisions and enforce them. It's never too early nor too late to map the boundaries. Ask the following questions:

Why do we want volunteers?

This is not a frivolous—nor easily answered—question. It's the cornerstone of developing a working philosophy about volunteers to translate into a meaningful program. Just as a mission statement articulates why an organization exists, so, too, must you be able to express in concrete terms why volunteers are a desirable part of your operation.

What is our vision for the volunteer program?

What will be the size and scope of volunteer involvement a year or two from now? In 10 years? It is important to clarify such expectations because they're directly related to the amount of time allotted to direct volunteers. If you can only devote a few hours to volunteers, program growth will be limited. Conversely, if a larger or more complex program is desired, consideration may have to be given to expanding your available time.

What are our expectations of volunteers?

What are the goals and objectives for involving volunteers? What exactly do we want them to accomplish? How many volunteers are anticipated at any given time? Bringing what skills?

What does "part time" mean?

Exactly how much time is "part time"? Can you block out specific times of the week to be designated for the volunteer program? If applicable, will your other responsibilities be reduced to allow for this? (Something has to go.) Will you have schedule flexibility for evening and weekend meetings, external speaking engagements and training sessions?

What is my title?

You need a title that appropriately represents your role with the volunteer program. Some options are: Coordinator of Volunteers, Director of Volunteer Resources/Services, Community Resources Director, Volunteer Program Manager, Outreach Coordinator, Member Resources Chair. Without a title that specifically designates you as the person responsible for volunteers, you may find your various roles blurring together in everyone's minds.

What is the chain of command?

You require access to the decision-makers in your organization since there will always be policy questions to be answered. The "higher up" your supervisor, the better. Volunteers need to feel that you're directly tied in to the organization's administration or else they'll suspect (correctly!) they have no effective voice. Similarly, employees also need to know that you, and therefore volunteers, have access to top administration. If many volunteers will be supervised on a daily basis by people other than you, you also need to define your role as liaison. When should a supervisor seek your help with a volunteer? If a volunteer feels he or she has been treated unfairly, what process do you want followed? If someone disagrees with you, who is next in line to handle the concern?

What are my priorities and do you understand my limits?

Commitment to having effective volunteer involvement is demonstrated by an organizational decision to allow you to give the volunteer program priority at certain times each day and week. The attitude cannot be "fit this in when you find the time." You must deliberately make time.

There will inevitably be demands pulling you into other work, but volunteers must be seen as equally important as everything else, not as the function that can always be postponed.

What are the volunteer program's budget and resources?

Trite but true: Volunteers are not free help. You need to develop an appropriate budget for necessary expenses, ranging from printing and postage to transportation reimbursement and insurance. Though it may take some time to arrange for sufficient funds to cover such things, one way an organization demonstrates its commitment to volunteers is to acknowledge that these expenses are real and plan for them in the overall organizational budget.

How often will we schedule status reviews?

Build in periodic re-examination sessions with your administrators to assess whether and how the volunteer program is changing over time. Are the original goals and objectives for the volunteer program still relevant? Is it necessary to adjust your job description to allow you more time with the volunteer program? Do you need additional paid assistance? Have volunteers been planned into new projects?

How will we assure organization-wide involvement?

The designation of one individual (you) to lead your organization's volunteer effort does not relieve everyone else of responsibility for supporting and actively assisting the program. Everyone—from administration to maintenance, salaried or not—must demonstrate respect for, faith in and enthusiasm about volunteers.

Mapping the boundaries is an important responsibility—it comes with the territory of leading volunteers. Don't expect or wait for your higher-ups to define things for you. They may assume that everything is fine because you have not told them otherwise. As hard as it may be for you to initiate discussion about the sticky issues above, it's to your advantage to do so in the long run. If you avoid these issues, you're reinforcing the notion that volunteer management is quick and easy. Volunteers deserve more.

