

# NICOV TAKES A LOOK AT...

## ETHICS IN VOLUNTEERISM

Edited by Debbie Boswell  
National Information Center on Volunteerism

### A Beginning Dialogue

By Putnam Barber and Ivan Scheier

*Editor's note: The authors used the words "ethics" and "values" interchangeably throughout their dialogue. From their limited experience with this topic, they are convinced that many active volunteers and staff in the field welcome and are strengthened by the opportunity to take part in discussions on values/ethics. It is their hope that others who work with the volunteer community will explore this topic, use or adapt the process model presented here, and correspond with them about their results.)*

**Narrator:** The dialogue format is used here to convey the real sense of struggle to understand this subject.

### SCENE I

*(1975, Boulder, Colorado, 5,428 feet above sea level)*

**Narrator:** NICOV board members Put Barber and Ivan Scheier are reviewing recent patterns in NICOV technical assistance requests—questions asked at workshops, queries addressed to the library coordinator, etc.

**Scheier:** Here's one on the mechanics of recruiting.

**Barber:** Here's another from a director of volunteers: "Our agency is suffering serious budget cuts, though things might get better next year. Because paid staff are being laid off, I'm being asked to increase recruiting, maybe even to replace staff with volunteers. What's my best policy?"

**Scheier:** Here's one asking about the latest techniques for training boards.

**Barber:** This one is from a person who volunteers as a board member: "I believe deeply in what this agency is trying to do for the elderly. I also have reason to believe our agency director and some of our board members deliberately are overstating the effectiveness of our program in reports to our primary funding source. If I blow the whistle we could suffer serious funding loss, hurting our clients. If I don't . . . Do you have a guidebook which tells me what to do?"

**Scheier:** Here's a question on how to conduct a screening/placement interview.

*Putnam Barber is the administrator of the Washington State Office of Economic Opportunity and a NICOV board member. Ivan Scheier is the president of NICOV.*

**Barber:** This one is from the executive director of a youth-serving agency which involves volunteers as companions: "We have many boys who could benefit from the services of a volunteer companion. Fairly far along in a screening interview process, an applicant stated that he was a former mental patient. Upon request, he gave us the name of his most recent therapist. The therapist told us he felt this person was reasonably well recovered, and that the volunteer experience would do him good. What screening methods will resolve this issue?"

**Scheier:** Maybe we should change NICOV's name.

**Barber:** Why?

**Scheier:** The key word in it is "information," right?

**Barber:** I see what you mean. Some of these questions can't be answered simply by giving information.

**Scheier:** Right, there doesn't seem to be any purely technological answer. Beyond a certain point, there's no "how to."

**Barber:** And whatever it is that's more-than-information, it isn't easy. I don't see any possible cookbook answers.

**Scheier:** Nor do I. It's uncomfortable. I want at least to identify the mysterious "other."

**Barber:** Suppose we think about that. Roughly speaking, there's a dilemma in each instance. The board volunteer is hesitating between wanting to be honest and fearing reduced agency services to the elderly. She values both honesty and the well-being of the elderly.

**Scheier:** Right. The director of volunteers seems torn between her belief that more volunteers should be involved, and her concern not to justify permanent job loss for deserving paid employees.

**Barber:** And the agency director likewise is in a conflict situation. He values the dignity of the volunteer applicant, and his right to participate and benefit from it. At the same time he values the well-being of the youth his agency serves. Also, he doesn't want to excite fears of people who might be future clients.

**Scheier:** I think what's more than information in this thing is values or ethics, the "why" kinds of questions, rather than the "how" kinds.

**Barber:** Approximately yes, but not all of it is ethics. None of these instances seem to question the *why* of volunteering in the first place, the social and personal values which prompt people to participate. Volunteers already are in-

## The why of volunteering: the search for personal values that prompt people to participate

involved here, or are at least wanting to be involved. We're not questioning the value-based rationale for volunteering. We're talking about the ethical issues which arise when volunteers are already on the scene in service, policy or advocacy roles, interacting with career leaders of volunteers, paid staff and clients served.

**Scheier:** Well put.

**Barber:** Don't congratulate me. Jessie Kinnear of the Church Council of Greater Seattle, said it.

**Scheier:** Roughly then, ethics *within* volunteering as distinct from ethics *of* or *for* volunteering. I wouldn't push the distinction too hard; they probably overlap, but it will serve, for now.

**Barber:** And it still leaves a lot of ethics mixed in with the information.

**Scheier:** It also leaves me a little scared. We get a lot of these kinds of questions. We have much of the information needed; that's our business. But we're no better than anyone else on ethics or values. Maybe we should simply refer people to their pastors, ethics professors, or the like.

**Barber:** I don't deny that would be helpful. But I do say it's a serious abdication of a responsibility on the part of NICOV as well as pastors, ethics professors, and other volunteer resource organizations.

**Scheier:** But NICOV does not stand for National Information Center on *Ethics*.

**Barber:** Maybe it should! Look, our broader justification—and the same for any organization like us—should be to give people all the help we can in practical day-to-day situations in which they find themselves. And these ethical questions are coming up daily in the lives of volunteers and their leadership. They're not something we made up; nor are they classroom exercises. Besides, we've already agreed you can't really separate information from ethics in such practical situations. In fact, more information may sometimes help focus attention on the truly ethical parts of decisions.

**Scheier:** How do you mean?

**Barber:** Well, if our board member knew the funding sponsor was likely to cut funds when given a more honest appraisal of program effectiveness, her decision might not be that much easier. But she would know more clearly what had to be decided. And suppose our agency executive had solid information on past performance of ex-mental patients in similar situations? He at least would know whether there were, in fact, an ethical choice which had to be made between the well-being of client and volunteer applicant. In other words, ethical decisions are tougher when made in situational ignorance. With more information, we can dissect out the hard questions of ethics or values and focus on them.

**Scheier:** So NICOV needs to be working in this area?

**Barber:** Yes, definitely.

**Scheier:** A good speech. I think you talked yourself into helping us do something about it.

**Barber:** Ethics prompts me to say "yes," but where's the information to focus my decision?

**Scheier:** It's here: You say we have a responsibility to be responsive, but if there's such a thing as competency in

ethics, we don't have it.

**Barber:** What's your competency in volunteerism?

**Scheier:** I'm not sure, but enough for the responsibility to try, if ethics is an essential part of volunteerism.

**Barber:** We've just agreed it is.

**Scheier:** Ethics in volunteerism, then. We've left the definition of ethics/values loose thus far, hoping we and others know generally what we mean even if we can't say it explicitly. But we also need an equivalent understanding of what we mean by "volunteerism."

**Barber:** Two undefined terms are too much. What's your suggestion?

**Scheier:** A broad definition of volunteerism we've been using with reasonably good acceptance: Any relatively uncoerced work, intended to help, and done without immediate thought of financial gain.

**Barber:** People will accept that well enough for us to go on to talk about ethics in volunteerism.

**Scheier:** As for the third word, "in," we know what that means, I hope.

**Barber:** And we've resolved to do something about the conjunction of the three words. Let's think about it and meet again.

**Scheier:** Good.

## SCENE II

*(Several months later at sea level)*

**Barber:** You recall our conversation of a few months ago?

**Scheier:** Yes.

**Barber:** How does it set now? Was it a temporary high altitude mood, or the meat of the thing?

**Scheier:** The meat. I've checked with some colleagues and most seem to see the sense and the need for it.

**Barber:** I found the same feeling about it, too. The question is, what now?

**Scheier:** We should proceed to do something about it.

**Barber:** What's the first step?

**Scheier:** It's been taken. Carol Moore of the Association for the Administration of Volunteer Services (AAVS) just sent me a draft copy of a code of ethics they're preparing for directors of volunteer services. I'm impressed, first of all, by the basic ideas running through it, such as the dignity of the individual human being. I'm also impressed by a professional association that finds the issue important enough for investment of their time and talent. After all, AAVS is not primarily an ethics study group. They must see this as a vital part of the professionalism they encourage.

**Barber:** True. So the job's been done already?

**Scheier:** Not quite, and I don't think AAVS would claim that either. We now have something important to build on, but extensions are still possible.

**Barber:** Such as?

**Scheier:** AAVS naturally concentrated on ethical issues from the perspective of the administrator of volunteer services. Well and good. We can try to extend that to the viewpoints of other significant actors in the ethical dramas of volunteering.

## There are some recurring patterns and themes related to ethical dilemmas

**Barber:** Volunteers.

**Scheier:** Paid staff and management.

**Barber:** Board members.

**Scheier:** Clients.

**Barber:** Anyone involved in a volunteer-related situation.

**Scheier:** Right. The scope is large. Who are the experts I wonder?

**Barber:** You've just named them—the people involved. They hold the answers. All we need is a process which helps them articulate instances and issues.

**Scheier:** And solutions, if any. Later, we can gather them all together in a set of principles.

**Barber:** Much later, and only if that much coherence actually comes out of it.

**Scheier:** It wouldn't be the first time our trainees have become our trainers.

**Barber:** Speaking of trainees, will anyone be interested?

**Scheier:** Last time we met, we saw that a lot of people were asking questions involving ethics or values. I assume they're interested.

**Barber:** And we can pilot test the process briefly in the context of a conference, then evaluate participant reaction.

**Scheier:** Right, but who will risk this with us?

**Barber:** We're both connected with NICOV, which describes itself as willing to take such risks through exploration at Frontiers conferences.

### INTERLUDE Events and Process

**Narrator:** In 1976 NICOV sponsored a half-day workshop on ethics in volunteerism, and the feedback process began. The next such discussion group participated in a two-day conference at Lake Wilderness, Washington, in the fall of 1977. (The conference was convened as a follow-up to NCVA's National Congress on Volunteerism and Citizenship.) The third session occurred in late October 1977 at the Minnesota Association of Volunteer Directors' Conference, which included a half-day workshop on ethics on its agenda.

A total of about 150 people participated in these three feedback sessions conducted by Barber and Scheier. Each followed a similar process. In the first step, participants were asked to record, in brief written form, "critical incidents" involving ethical problems or dilemmas which had happened to them or which they personally knew about. Usually they were about one paragraph in length. These instances, called "The Anecdotes," did not include the solution which may have been adopted, nor any identifying information which conceivably could embarrass any of the actors in the ethical drama.

After some introductory discussion, the anecdotes were distributed to small groups to discuss the situation and its implications, and to devise and defend suggested solutions or recommended action. In one case the small groups also were asked to develop a less-preferred solution, then analyze the differences between their preferred and less-preferred solutions.

The participants first were organized into dyads, then into larger groups of three or four dyads. Barber and Scheier recommended that each participant choose a person from a different volunteer context as his/her dyad consultant-partner. This was intended to enhance objectivity of perspective as well as to force each dyad partner to explain clearly the background of his/her solution to the other partner.

After the dyads' discussion, the sets of dyads worked over the anecdotes and recommended solutions, which were reported to the group at large. Then the groups worked on summarizing and categorizing the picture they provided of the day-to-day strains and challenges of living ethically within the field of volunteerism. Finally, these groups were reshuffled to give participants a choice of general ethical issue areas to work on.

### SCENE III

*(Early July 1978, a phone call from Boulder to Olympia)*

**Scheier:** Put, we're under pressure to put it together. NCVA wants a VAL article delivered by late September. We also have a request to do a workshop session in late September at the Lake Sylvia conference in Minnesota.

**Barber:** Can we be ready?

**Scheier:** I think so. We've got good records on all three workshops, including copies of anecdotes and how people analyzed them, main conclusions reached, attendee evaluations, tapes, etc.

**Barber:** I think we should begin with participant evaluations. These people produced the material. We first need to know what they thought about it. Will you look it over and write me? Meanwhile, I'll be thinking about main substantive conclusions.

**Scheier:** Good.

*[August 1, 1978, in a letter from Ivan to Put]*

Dear Put:

Here's my overview assessment of attendee evaluations at the three workshops on ethics in volunteerism.

On the up side, most people felt the process increased their awareness of ethical issues in practical volunteer-related situations. They thought they'd be more sensitive to their occurrence in the future, less likely to blur or avoid them, or confuse them with technical questions.

Beyond this, people tended to feel the process helped them reexamine and clarify their own assumptions about their own value systems as expressed in practical situations. (Some people were surprised at what their operative values really were.) But some people wished they'd gotten more direction from us—or from ethical experts—in such matters as definition of ethics and how one goes about making ethical decisions in practical situations. Somewhat related to that was a quite pervasive sense of incompleteness. Time was too short for full closure; it didn't seem to matter whether the workshop took three hours or two days. I do think we have the opportunity to achieve somewhat more closure in more leisurely examination of workshop records.

Attendee evaluations confirmed what you and I saw in person. The subject vitally concerns people. Whatever their frustrations at a less than complete wrap-up, they were excited about it, and many of them intended to do more work on their own.

I think we have the same responsibility. Let's get together and go ahead with it soon.

## SCENE IV

(Early August 1978, Tacoma, Washington)

**Scheier:** Where do we go from here? What did you think of my letter?

**Barber:** I agree with the gist of it. Certainly, that's the kind of thing people said on the evaluation forms after our sessions. In addition, the most frequent comment I recall was to this effect: "We need more practice in finding the ethical core of events, and in living with what we find."

**Scheier:** Which is consistent with what the philosophers say—no one can really do it for you in the realm of ethics.

**Barber:** Nevertheless, it's more than practice; there are some recurring patterns and themes related to ethical issues in the field. And the discussions people had in the course of the sessions do throw some light on what those issues are and what makes them special.

**Scheier:** We'd better list them.

**Barber:** Okay, I've got two: Finding a balance between the needs of clients and the rights of volunteers, and steering a course between the need for frankness in dealing with the public and the confidential, risky nature of what goes on in many programs.

**Scheier:** I've got two more: The volunteer coordinator has to accept responsibility for what volunteers do without either claiming the credit or giving up his or her self-respect. And the agency or program has to be sure there are sufficient rewards and satisfactions in the volunteer's work without abdicating long-term responsibility for program and clients.

**Barber:** Is it fair to generalize that many of the key issues arise out of the volunteer director's role as a broker or go-between?

**Scheier:** I think so. The business of being a matchmaker is well-known for its pitfalls.

**Barber:** That suggests we might get one sort of handle on the range of ethical issues by reviewing the working environment of a typical volunteer program or effort.

**Scheier:** Better look at people. Ethics is a personal subject.

**Barber:** Then we can start with the ethical decision-maker.  
**Scheier:** And the cross-cutting loyalties that position is exposed to.

**Narrator:** Using handy butcher paper, Scheier sketches a "loyalty wheel" like the one he had worked out in Minnesota in 1977. See diagram.

**Barber:** That's great! A "map" like that will tell us where the hard questions are likely to come up, who the people or groups are that might be affected by your ethical decisions, and where the weight of your ethical decision is going to help or hurt.

**Scheier:** But it won't say what those questions will be, or how to answer them.

**Barber:** No. That's the point of the practice our colleagues have said they need and want. But the "loyalty wheel" does provide a convenient way of organizing the subject. It helps you identify the significant actors who might be helped or hurt by a particular decision. Then, when the hard choice comes, you can be more aware of your own value priorities.

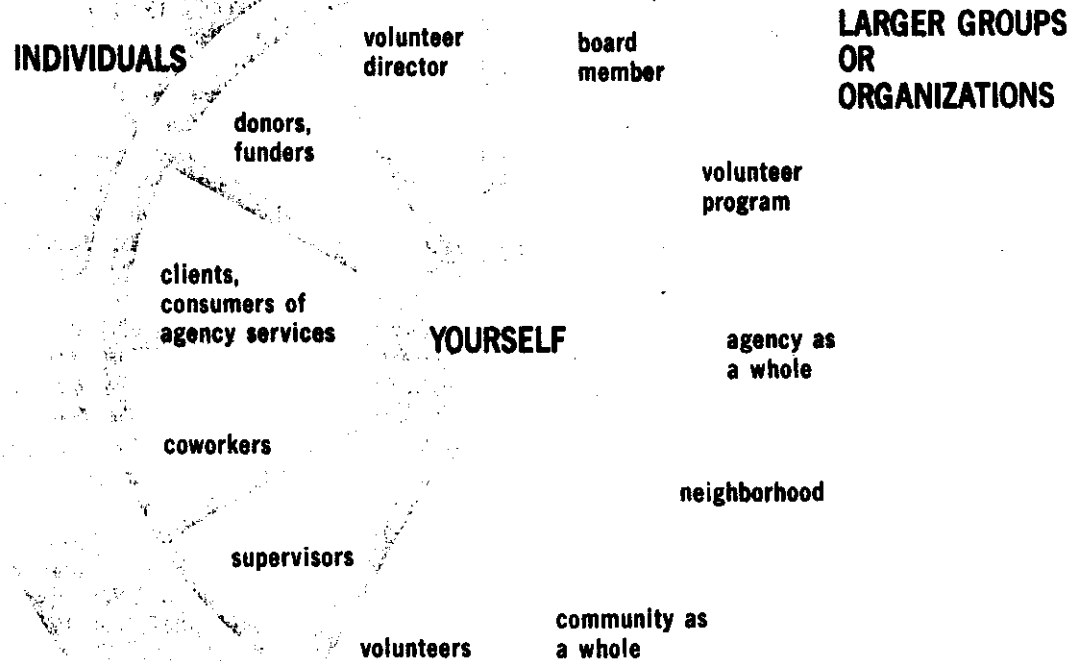
**Scheier:** I think that's a key point our colleagues came up with: the almost inevitable conflict in all practical ethical situations. No matter how well developed your ethical position is, you rarely can help everyone concerned.

**Barber:** Right. All persons have dignity; every person deserves our respect and concern. But in many, if not most, volunteer-related situations you can't help one person (or one type of person) without endangering, damaging, or helping less another person or type of person. Rejecting the questionable volunteer may hurt him/her, but ultimately help the client. Accepting him/her may have the opposite consequence.

**Scheier:** The other part of the loyalty wheel that might help is the difference suggested between the left and right sides of it: roughly between values in relation to individuals and values in relation to groups.

# THE LOYALTY WHEEL

Note: "Yourself," at the decision-making center, could be any person or group represented on the rim of the wheel. Up or down position on the wheel does not imply value priorities: the wheel can be rotated to change these at will.



## Many of the key issues arise out of the volunteer's personal life

**Barber:** It's not quite the same thing, but another pretty general theme among our participants was the possible conflict between personal and organizational values. If there is serious divergence, you've got to decide at some point whether to confront the difference, decide to live with it, or quit.

**Scheier:** I agree. The loyalty wheel could be developed to reflect these issues, too. In fact, I think it will work best when the person faced with an ethically conditioned decision designs his/her own chart or wheel specifically for that decision situation. The very process of designing your own decision chart or wheel may help you clarify the decision.

**Barber:** One case where reinventing the wheel is useful. But before we quit, we should say more about where volunteerism's key ethical issues come from. I still think they are related to the special situation of volunteers. Because there isn't a paycheck to balance the books, each volunteer represents an unknown potential "obligation" for others in the agency or program (including other volunteers). Good planning, good communications, and good interpersonal relations can set limits around that obligation, but the volunteer director is constantly on deck, responsible for making sure the whole thing stays in balance.

**Scheier:** Yes, but isn't the field well accustomed to the idea of nonmonetary rewards?

**Barber:** But we still must recognize that these rewards differ from person to person, program to program, time to time, and situation to situation.

**Scheier:** Right, a reward which may be perfectly okay in one place and time may be disastrously inappropriate in another. The volunteer coordinator has to be checking that balance all the time, and so do other decision-makers who may be involved.

**Barber:** I think the numerous anecdotes we got about volunteers' "rights" to preferential consideration for paying jobs in an agency are a case in point. In some cases, it's legitimate to offer this as an incentive for volunteer service. In other cases, it's definitely not ethical; for example, when you know the volunteer never could qualify for the job in the agency, or when you know the agency hiring policy is unlikely to permit it, however qualified the volunteer.

### SCENE V

*(Late August 1978, Denver airport)*

**Barber:** Well, where are we?

**Scheier:** In the midst of a process, still exploring.

**Barber:** Yes. We've found a lot of interest in this subject. And we agreed before we began that a large part of it was always going to be up to individuals. People have to find the bedrock of their own values for ethics to enter everyday life.

**Scheier:** If we've been able to advance the subject any, it's because of the insights of the 150 or so colleagues who've taken part in the sessions.

**Barber:** You wrote something about that in your last letter to me.

**Narrator:** Barber gets the letter out and they look at it together.

**Dear Put:**

Drawing on our last talk, here are some further thoughts on themes emerging from the ethics workshops.

I asked myself what were the kinds of things in our colleagues' conclusions which would help other people confronted with ethically conditioned decisions in a volunteer context. I came up with this list:

1. **Sensitivity awareness of when you are in an ethically conditioned, rather than a purely technical, problem situation.** Otherwise, the danger is you will treat an ethically conditioned situation as if it were purely a "how-to" proposition. That is at least confusing and it might be disastrous.

2. **Clear awareness of "where you're at" in your own personal values/beliefs.** The "loyalty wheel" was one attempt to provide people with an aid in doing this. Sheer practice or rehearsal was another process we agreed would help with both of the points above.

Beyond that, the responses indicate it may be helpful to the decision-maker to refer to essentially similar values we all seem to share. At any rate:

The importance of human dignity is a main one. This includes the need for honesty in dealing with one another, and the desirability of offering all people the fullest opportunities for self-realization or self-actualization.

For recognizing volunteers as people, we value the need to express concern for other people and our special responsibility to help make this happen.

For recognizing clients as people, we want to help them define the circumstances and nature of help offered them and reject this help if they think it unsuitable. The client's right to privacy is a strong consideration.

We tended to consider these values quite fixed because they tended to be shared in common among our 150 colleagues who also confirmed the values previously identified in the AAVS code of ethics.

We did recognize, however, that such values may vary somewhat via cultural conditioning. We also recognized a certain "dilution" of pure ethics at survival or near-survival levels: stealing food on behalf of your starving family, dissembling by a starving organization. I am not sure how much we agreed to "excuse" this, and this leads to another major conclusion, unanimous, I would say. However clear you may be, or become, about your own values, they are often extraordinarily difficult to apply to decision-making in practical situations.

The next three points were thematic suggestions on improving this process of application:

3. **A policy statement of the organization(s) you're working with or for, if and as this policy statement clearly reflects the organization's mission and values.** This gives you and others concerned a clear, consistent and "fair" reference point for ethical decisions.

4. **Information—the more, and more relevant, information the better.** Please recall our earlier discussion of this in Scene 1.

5. **A systematic practical process for analyzing practical ethical problems and arriving at best possible solutions.** I

think we can claim some credit, with the help of our 150 colleagues, for making a contribution here. We've demonstrated that this process helps, after familiarization via rehearsals and regular practice thereafter. Incidentally, the process doesn't require a workshop. You can practice it in the relative privacy of a dyad or small group, back at the office, or in the board room.

As I look back over this letter, I can't help noticing how the theme of awareness and clarity runs through all five points, whether the clarity comes from information, policy statements, or rehearsal of an analytic process. This awareness certainly doesn't guarantee easy ethical solutions; nothing does. But at least it avoids the additional confusions and anxieties of ambiguity. I doubt if ambiguity ever helps resolve an ethical conflict situation.

**Barber:** Your points are also my sense of practical principles emerging thus far. But I'd like to add something to your first point about recognizing what's ethically conditioned and what isn't.

**Scheier:** What's that?

**Barber:** Ethics is not expediency. Sometimes what's ethical also may happen to be expedient; sometimes it may not be.

**Scheier:** Nice guys finish last?

**Barber:** Sometimes, at least in the short run.

**Scheier:** Yes, I see the point. Sometimes I felt our colleagues were struggling for solutions which were both expedient and ethical, when such solutions simply couldn't be found. The attempt to compromise literally compromised both ethics and expediency.

**Barber:** Agreed. I think we also need to say we have yet to isolate any special "causes" of ethical dilemmas in volunteer-involving situations. When we first talked about this subject I was absolutely sure that there's only one ethical topic worth talking about in the field of volunteerism: the special difficulties deriving from nonmonetary rewards for volunteers. You were, to your credit, less certain.

**Scheier:** I'm not sure what it means that no one in our workshops has brought that topic up. I don't think it's because exploitation of volunteers isn't an issue. But it's clearly not as central for the participants we've worked with as it is for commentators from outside the field.

**Barber:** People in the field already are committed to the idea that there are nonmonetary rewards.

**Scheier:** And people in the field see all the other problems on a day-to-day basis. They know, from everyday experience, that ethical problems are always with us. They come up, in practice, from unexpected quarters.

**Barber:** That's why the effect of having a code of ethics for the field can't be to get rid of ethical problems.

**Scheier:** My guess is that it works the other way. Once you have a code, you see ethical issues more easily and find that they require more and deeper thought to resolve.

**Barber:** I believe the code and the rehearsal process can be more effective together than separately.

**Barber:** What we learn from colleagues in the future will help.

**Scheier:** I'm particularly eager to see other things written on the experience of ethics applied within volunteering. Let's make sure we ask people to send us copies of ethical writings they've found useful or helpful.

**Narrator:** Send copies or criticisms to NICOV, PO Box 4179, Boulder, CO 80306.

## AS I SEE IT

(Continued from p. 2)

they don't really understand why they are there. Unless all truly understand and can verbalize clearly the mission, they can't answer the question, "Is what I'm doing right now really important?"

### A Fluid Internal Structure

Most organizations have a structure designed to solve historic problems that no longer exist. Line charts seem to be set in concrete. Archaic structural arrangements of divisions, branches and departments make it literally impossible for new programs to thrive and develop. While lip service is given to new programs, the structure itself does not allow for creative growth and development.

### A System of Individual Objectives and Measurements

So much has been said about the importance of setting individual objectives. So much has been written on Management by Objectives, yet so few public service agencies truly practice this system. MBO can create a true sense of individual accomplishment and individual growth within the organization. Discouragement and despair flourish. The challenge to each individual is absent. The cliché, "how to survive from nine to five," too often becomes the objective in a culture which does not support qualitative measurements and individual growth.

### A Common Organization and Management Language

Verbal confusion abounds in our public service agencies. Jargon and "alphabet soup" become so commonplace, it is difficult to communicate with those around us. We don't know if we should speak in medical model jargon, social science jargon, or public administration jargon. Everyone becomes confused. The words "logical consequences," "negative reinforcement," "punishment," and "being held accountable" all might mean the same thing, or they may have entirely different meanings depending on the user.

### Decentralized Decision-Making Using Various Approaches

Centralized decision-making in a nonparticipatory climate still too often prevails. We still promote planning and evaluation by the top administrators, while we limit the workers to "doing." This limits the worker's stake in the organization. We still haven't learned to trust through a delegation system, and we haven't truly understood the meaning of such words as "responsibility," "authority" and "accountability." Decision-making still too often is done unilaterally at the top with not enough emphasis placed on the importance of many decisions made at all vertical levels in the organization, including the lowest levels. A redefinition of the golden rule for the organization too often is pervasive: "Those who have gold, set the rules."