

# Strengthening Organizational Goodwill through Effective Volunteer Conflict Management

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## INTRODUCTION

The Nonprofit Risk Management Center (1997) categorizes risks associated with community-based programming as follows (1) people (board members, volunteers, employees, clients, donors, and the general public); (2) property (buildings, facilities, equipment, materials, copyrights, and trademarks); (3) income (sales, grants, investment earnings, and contributions); and (4) goodwill (reputation, stature in the community, and the ability to raise funds and appeal to prospective volunteers). While each of the categories identified are important and deserve equal attention, an organization's goodwill or reputation in the community is paramount to its ability to deliver effective programs.

It is not uncommon for nonprofit leaders to think of worst-case scenarios first and implement strategies to manage those potential risks, even though such incidents are relatively infrequent. Organizational leaders seldom consider conflicts that emerge involving volunteers as a potential risk that could harm the organization's reputation, even though these issues are common and potentially harmful if ignored. While not always easily identified or managed, volunteer administrators must recognize that conflict exists in all organizations. Failing to manage conflict can have a detrimental, long-term impact on the ability of the organization to achieve its goals related to volunteer recruitment, program expansion, and fund-raising. Additionally, persistent conflict may adversely affect the morale of volunteers, potentially leading to ineffective programs for service recipients.

## CONFLICT

Hocker and Wilmot (1995) define conflict as "an expressed struggle between at least two

interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (p. 21). Nonprofit organizations face many challenges to meet community needs, including diverse agendas and goals of volunteers, decreasing budgets, and changing societal expectations and needs. Volunteer administrators are likely able to identify with the challenges mentioned, as potential sources of conflict; however, just as important is investigation of the potential impact on the organization involved and strategies to reduce negative conflict.

Conflict is a persistent fact in organizations; however, it is not always dramatic or highly confrontational where third parties are necessary to resolve the dispute (Kolb & Putnam, 1992). Conflict is likely to be embedded in the organization, potentially out of sight to many individuals, and not requiring extensive negotiation or implementation of grievance procedures (Kolb & Putnam). Conflict among volunteers that does not require extensive negotiation and/or is not a result of a highly charged issue may still require some level of intervention by volunteer administrators.

There are times when conflict is positive and can benefit the organization. When conflict emerges between individuals or groups, the dialogue is likely to produce contrasting opinions that may lead to further discussion and new and creative ideas (Zander, 1993). Zander goes on to suggest that conflict, specifically between board members, may increase group cohesiveness as they struggle to work together addressing an issue. As a result of intense discussion, individuals are more likely to understand opposing viewpoints and gain greater appreciation and

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respect for each other. Positive conflict provides tremendous opportunities for organizations; however, ongoing, negative conflict potentially causes long-term harm.

## SOURCES OF NEGATIVE CONFLICT

The volunteer administrator may or may not be able to control the circumstances that create conflict. Conflict emerges in organizations as a result of a number of factors including short supply of funds, authority, privileges, benefits, or time; communication barriers; personality clashes; a strong emotional response or resistance by decision-makers to a style used by advocates presenting their ideas (Kreitner, 1998; Zander, 1993; Deutsch, 1973); or the failure of organizational leaders to address emerging issues.

Organizations rely on volunteers for a variety of services, ranging from committing a specific number of hours at a location to having volunteers in remote locations with flexible hours and multiple responsibilities. Volunteers serving in a more remote capacity (i.e., not directly supervised each time they are serving, and geographically away from a central location) may present management challenges for an organization. The "off-site" volunteer is oftentimes required to work independently; perform tasks in multiple timeframes; serve as a primary communication link; be inaccessible during traditional office hours; and have sporadic access to resources (McCurley & Lynch, 1996). Volunteers not centrally located may also feel less connection to the organization, losing focus on the mission, vision, and values, ultimately serving outside the scope of their responsibilities and in conflict with their intended responsibilities.

Volunteer administrators may ignore potential conflict as it requires staff time to resolve, or they don't have the skills to address the issues. McCurley and Vineyard (1998) suggest that conflict is ignored because there is hope it will go away; nobody really notices; confrontation is bad; and, if confronted the volunteer may quit. Additionally, those involved in highly competitive programs may ignore conflict, as they believe that conflict is a part of the program and is to be expected in

competitively based programs, or that the volunteers perform better when entrenched in conflict. Ignoring conflict only supports an ongoing negative environment that potentially has a long-term impact on the organization.

## IMPACT OF NEGATIVE CONFLICT

Organizations that rely heavily on word-of-mouth strategies may find it extremely difficult to recruit and select candidates when they are experiencing ongoing negative conflict (Bennis, 1989). The impact of negative conflict goes beyond the recruitment of potential volunteers. The loss to the organization as a result of ongoing conflict may include (1) a decrease in financial support from donors and grantors; (2) a decrease in membership and/or participation; (3) difficulties establishing or strengthening community collaborations; (Jackson, White, & Herman, 1999); (4) the diversion of human resources from program implementation to conflict management; and (5) diminished morale among volunteers involved.

In the current environment of reduced operating budgets and reductions in paid staff, it is becoming increasingly important for organizations to collaborate with community partners. Organizations experiencing ongoing negative conflict may find it more difficult to form partnerships in their communities. Organizational leaders may not be interested in working with groups that experience constant conflict and are not focused on program delivery, but rather on continually resolving internal disputes.

Conflict escalating out of control in an organization and affecting the organization may require additional staff time to resolve. Time devoted to addressing conflict takes away from program delivery, likely resulting in less effective programs. Furthermore, it may become necessary to engage third parties in conflict resolution, increasing the expenditure of financial resources. At the same time, extensive conflict may damage the morale in the organization as a much larger group of people become involved, through formal interviews and meetings and informal "hallway" discussions.

Many nonprofits have a policy or decision-making body responsible for guiding the organization. When conflict emerges among these groups, there is a tendency to dispense with acceptable protocol and civility. Individuals involved may seek to speed discussion, exaggerate, mislead others, make accusations, or resist compromise and desire the status quo (Zander, 1993). The behaviors exhibited by individuals involved, particularly at the decision-making level of the organization, will be seen by others. Talking about the conflict with friends, colleagues, and neighbors (potential stakeholders) will only damage organizational reputation and cause individuals to not become involved. Whether an individual is directly involved in the conflict or not, an individual may avoid, or actually leave, the organization due to the negative environment that exists (Merrill, 2000).

## MANAGING CONFLICT

Managing negative conflict in the organization must be done with compassion and understanding of greater organizational issues. Volunteer administrators must fully understand the issue(s) so that they may focus on exploring options and agreeing on a plan of action with all parties involved, rather than blaming, intimidating or destroying an individual's self-esteem (Gunderson, 1998). Relying on the same strategies to resolve all conflicts in an organization will likely be unsuccessful as there are going to be different individuals involved, unique situations, and multiple variables leading to the conflict.

There is virtually no way to assure that a volunteer administrator will not experience negative conflict during their tenure. Volunteer administrators must address negative conflict in an effort to contribute to a positive reputation in local communities. Volunteer administrators should consider

- implementing consistent volunteer selection policies and procedures focusing on an individual's skills, knowledge, abilities and interests as they relate to the position responsibilities;
- requiring orientation to the organization's mission, vision, and values; and ongoing educational opportunities that enhance a

volunteer's ability to effectively serve clientele;

- developing feedback opportunities that allow volunteers to evaluate their experience(s) as well as allowing the organization to evaluate the volunteer's service;
- providing access to resources, including supervisors, that have the skills and abilities to facilitate conflict resolution between individuals and/or groups;
- implementing ongoing communication strategies, including verbal, written, and electronic, that provide all volunteers with the necessary information in a timely manner to perform their service responsibilities, especially during times of organizational change (Fisher & Cole, 1993), and especially for those serving "off-site" (McCurley & Lynch, 1996);
- monitoring communication and interaction between volunteers/staff to insure accurate information is relayed, using effective methods;
- providing opportunities for volunteers, especially those serving in a competition-based program, to meet and interact, in an informal environment so that they may become better acquainted with other volunteers in a non-competitive environment; and
- providing opportunities for paid staff and volunteers to gain knowledge and skills to facilitate and bring resolution to negative conflict situations.

## CONCLUSION

Negative conflict is inevitable in any community-based organization engaging volunteers to deliver programs. The risks associated with ongoing, negative conflict may ultimately lead to a decrease in new volunteers; loss of current volunteers; decrease in service recipients as caregivers seek other, more supportive environments; financial support from donors and other funding agencies; and decreased opportunities to collaborate with other community-based organizations.

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