

# The Volunteer and Staff Team: How Do We Get Them to Get Along?

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Paid staff acceptance of and cooperation with volunteers has long been recognized as a crucial ingredient to volunteer program success (Wilson, 1973). Today, in an era of dwindling resources, positive relationships between paid staff and volunteers are particularly needed in planning and implementing events, projects, and programs. Conversely, when relationships are strained, volunteers will likely be driven away (Macduff, 2001). Understanding how to create and maintain strong volunteer and paid staff relationships is a desirable and potentially productive aspect of the successful management of a volunteer program.

This paper briefly reviews what is known about volunteer and paid staff relationships, drawing from both the practitioner and research literature and reports the results of a national study of volunteer managers as it relates to positive relationships.

## THE PRACTITIONER LITERATURE

Practitioner literature is quick to alert volunteer program managers to the need for healthy relationships between volunteers and paid staff (Brudney, 1990; Macduff, 2001; McCudden, 2000; Marin, 1999; Wilson, 1973). Regardless of the author, the description of the symptoms of poor relationships are remarkably similar, including lack of communication, "us" and "them" language, and working in "silos" rather than jointly.

Volunteers can be perceived as a threat to job security or as lacking professional credentials to do the work (Marin, 1999; Pearce, 1993). Marin strongly recommends bringing

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unspoken worries into the discussion and working to reduce their destructive aspects. The uneasiness of paid staff can lead to "resentment, suspicion, and disrespect" from both volunteers and paid staff (Marin, 1999, p. 1). Most authors on this topic agree with Marin on the negative impact of poor volunteer and paid staff relations.

Practitioners outline elements needed to effect positive volunteer and staff relationships: communication, training, inclusive planning processes, clearly defined roles, mutual responsibilities, and support. (Brudney, 1990; Ellis, 1986; Macduff, 2001; Marin, 1999; McCudden, 2000; Pearce, 1993; Wilson, 1973).

## THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

In 1983 Pearce pioneered the study of paid staff and volunteer relationships with her work, *Volunteers: The Organizational Behavior of Unpaid Workers*. In that book she asked researchers to study the "tension that can exist between volunteers and employee co-workers [that] remains one of the unpleasant secrets of nonprofit organizations" (Pearce, 1993, p. 77).

While there is not a great deal of empirical evidence related to this area of managing volunteers, some data are beginning to emerge. Netting, Nelson, Borders, and Huber (2004) categorized the available studies as those that (1) examine job attitudes and motivations between volunteers and employees, (2) focus on volunteer participation and withdrawal, and (3) debate the optimal mix of paid staff and volunteers.

In terms of job attitudes and motivations, Liao-Troth (2001) responded to Pearce's call for research, extending the study of volunteers and paid staff into a medical center setting in which he found that paid staff and volunteers have similar job attitudes. Focusing on participation and withdrawal, Van Dyne and Ang (1998) studied contingent workers and employees in Singapore, finding more commitment by paid workers than by volunteers. Similarly, Farmer and Fedor (1999) found major differences between volunteers and other workers in how they psychologically contracted with voluntary organizations. Nelson, Netting, Borders, and Huber (in press) studied volunteer long-term care ombudsmen in one state and reported that the quality of supervisory support from paid staff was an important factor in their decision to leave or stay in their volunteer position. In other research, volunteers and paid staff had slightly different views or used different words, but in the end it appears that communication and trust are critical elements to positive relationships and the longevity of the volunteer's service (Macduff, 2001; McCudden, 2000; Wilson, 1973).

## THE STUDY

This study was designed to address the following research questions:

- What is the perceived climate between volunteer and paid staff in organizations with volunteer programs?
- What behaviors/strategies are being used to facilitate volunteer/staff relationships?

Using the literature cited above, the authors designed a two-part survey. The first was a nine-item assessment of the volunteer and paid staff climate as currently perceived by the manager of volunteers. The second part was a Likert type scale of 25 items identified in the literature as relevant to promoting volunteer and paid staff relationships. Respondents were asked to rank their organization on all items.

The survey was distributed in late summer 2004 to members of the Association for Volunteer Administration and subscribers of the CYBERVPM electronic mailing list for managers of volunteers. An email announced the availability of the survey at the Web site, [www.SurveyMonkey.com](http://www.SurveyMonkey.com).

Five hundred and fifty seven (557) persons responded to the survey, 490 (88%) female managers and 56 (10%) male managers (11 did not indicate gender). Number of years managing volunteer programs ranged from 1-16+, and education ranged from high school to doctorates. The majority ( $n=260$ ; 46.7%) of respondents indicated bachelor's degrees as their highest education;

**TABLE 1**  
**Volunteer & Paid Staff Climate**

Category	Yes	No	Not Sure
Staff say "thank you" to volunteers publicly.	520 (93.4%)	11 (2.0%)	6 (1.1%)
The leaders of the organization (paid staff and/or volunteers) are visible at volunteer association events.	455 (81.7%)	57(10.1%)	23 (4.13%)
Volunteers & staff both use words like "together, we, our project" when referring to the work they do.	427 (76.7%)	70(12.6%)	43 (7.72%)
Projects are planned collaboratively between staff and volunteers.	383 (68.8%)	126 (22.7%)	27 (4.85%)
Reports on volunteer activities during paid staff management meetings come from other staff, not just the person responsible for volunteer coordination.	370 (66.4%)	140 (25.1%)	29 (5.21%)
Volunteers and paid staff engage in relating the history of the organization through the telling of stories.	359 (64.5%)	84 (15.1%)	93 (16.7%)
Volunteers are visible in leadership decision-making committees.	329 (59.1%)	190 (34.1%)	20 (3.6%)
Volunteers say "thank you" to staff publicly.	329 (59.1%)	190 (34.1%)	20 (3.6%)
Volunteer are asked to give input and assistance in most organizational projects.	295 (53.0%)	195 (35.0%)	48 (8.62%)

those with master's degrees were the second largest group (n=150; 27%).

Volunteer programs were primarily located in nonprofit organizations (n=399; 71.6%), following by governmental agencies (n=100;

18%), other (n=37; 6.6%); corporations (n=7; 1.3%) and military (n=6; 1.1%).

"Other" included organizations such as art museums, faith-based organizations, and educational institutions.

**TABLE 2**  
**Volunteer/Staff Relations Behavior**

Behavior	Almost Always /Usually	Sometimes	Not Often	Not Sure/ Rarely	No Response
Paid staff express appreciation to volunteers regardless of their length of service.	430 (77.2%)	63 (11.3%)	14 (2.5%)	50 (9.0%)	
There is an official procedure for welcoming volunteers.	419 (75.2%)	43 (7.7%)	33 (5.9%)	62 (11.1%)	
Volunteers are informed about the inner workings of the organization as it relates to their work.	402 (72.2%)	78 (14.0%)	25 (4.5%)	52 (9.3%)	
There are regularly scheduled award recognition events to highlight work by volunteers and paid staff.	394 (70.7%)	45 (8.0%)	51 (9.2%)	67 (12.0%)	
Volunteer position descriptions are readily available to paid staff and volunteers, and describe appropriate roles.	389 (69.8%)	64 (11.5%)	44 (7.9%)	60 (10.8%)	
Paid staff are informed about the inner workings of the volunteer program as it relates to their work.	384 (68.9%)	90 (16.2%)	27 (4.8%)	56 (10.1%)	
Different types of volunteer positions or projects have operating guidelines that spell out duties.	374 (67.1%)	72 (13.0%)	47 (8.4%)	64 (11.5%)	
Volunteers and paid staff have easy access to a handbook that spells out expectations for volunteers related to policies and organizational structure.	370 (66.4%)	56 (10.1%)	55 (9.9%)	76 (13.6%)	
The organization is rich with "stories" of the organization's history as it relates to volunteers and paid staff, as well as consumers of services.	346 (62.1%)	92 (16.5%)	52 (9.3%)	67 (12.0%)	
Volunteers sign a confidentiality agreement.	324 (58.2%)	39 (7.0%)	75 (13.5%)	119 (21.4%)	
Paid staff members participate in training sessions for volunteers.	317 (56.8%)	100 (18.0%)	74 (13.3%)	66 (11.8%)	
Volunteers use words like "we, us, together, all of us" when referring to their relationship to paid staff.	307 (55.1%)	124 (22.3%)	68 (12.2%)	58 (10.4%)	
There are regular communication mechanisms to keep volunteers and paid staff informed about each other's work.	302 (54.2%)	92 (16.5%)	97 (17.4%)	66 (11.8%)	
There are follow-up procedures in place to contact volunteers who have not been seen for a week or two.	298 (53.5%)	101 (18.1%)	91 (16.3%)	67 (12.0%)	
Paid staff use words like "we, us, together, all of us" when referring to their relationship with volunteers.	289 (51.9%)	140 (25.1%)	74 (13.3%)	54 (9.7%)	
The organization maintains a library of material on the management of volunteers. Books, journals, and periodicals are available to all paid staff.	258 (46.3%)	69 (12.4%)	133 (23.9%)	97 (17.4%)	
Changes are made based on recommendations of volunteers.	245 (44.0%)	183 (32.9%)	59 (10.6 %)	70 (12.6%)	
There are awards for volunteers who work effectively with staff.	230 (41.3%)	91 (16.3%)	122 (21.9%)	114 (20.5%)	
Paid staff are comfortable discussing confidential matters with volunteers.	226 (40.6%)	149 (26.8%)	91 (16.3%)	91 (16.3%)	
Paid staff attend orientation of new volunteers.	219 (39.3%)	88 (15.8%)	152 (27.3%)	98 (17.6%)	
The organization maintains a "brag board" where news articles about volunteers and paid staff are posted.	211 (37.9%)	90 (16.2%)	147 (26.4%)	109 (19.6%)	
Volunteers do a formal assessment of the training they receive from staff.	189 (33.9%)	90 (16.2%)	171 (30.7%)	107 (19.2%)	
Volunteers and paid staff spend time jointly planning programs that affect them.	178 (32.0%)	192 (34.5%)	127 (22.8%)	60 (10.8%)	
Volunteers and staff attend one another's meetings.	117 (21.0%)	162 (29.1%)	196 (35.2%)	82 (14.7%)	
Minutes from meetings of volunteer committees or staff committees are posted for everyone to see.	95 (17.1%)	86 (15.4%)	230 (41.3%)	146 (26.2%)	
There are awards for paid staff who work effectively with volunteers.	75 (13.5%)	61 (11.0%)	256 (46.0%)	165 (29.6%)	
Volunteers participate in training for staff.	44 (7.9%)	104(18.7%)	265 (47.6%)	144 (25.9%)	

Numbers of volunteers in respondents' programs ranged from 1-501+, with the largest category being over 500 (n=206; 37%). The remaining programs were fairly evenly spread over the other categories. Number of years volunteers had participated in these programs ranged from 1-20+, with the majority of programs having used volunteers over twenty years (n=328; 58.9%).

Respondents were asked to answer nine items designed to assess the volunteer/paid staff climate in their programs. Table 1 lists these items in the order of those receiving the most "yes" answers. Publicly saying "thank you" to volunteers was marked yes by 520 (93.4%) respondents, and "leaders being visible at volunteer association events" came in second with 455 (81.7%) responding "yes." Least evident was "volunteers being asked to give input and assistance in most organizational projects."

After having completed the climate assessment, respondents rated twenty-seven statements as to their applicability to their volunteer programs. These items are based on organizational and individual behaviors identified in the literature as relevant to positive paid staff and volunteer relationship building. Table 2 summarizes these results in the order in which the items are most likely to happen in these volunteer programs. Table 2 provides an overview of these results.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The purpose of this study was to ask the experts what actually happens in their programs to influence volunteer and paid staff relationships. The sample represented experienced respondents, the majority of whom manage large-volume programs with more than 300 volunteers.

The highest-rated items on both the climate inventory and the behavioral tool were related to expressions of appreciation. One might call these items the civility of running a program, but it would seem face-to-face interaction is indeed important to healthy volunteer and paid staff relations. Saying thank you, expressing appreciation, officially welcoming people, and being present at asso-

ciation events appear to pay off even though they are time consuming.

In addition, 65% of the respondents indicated that volunteers are almost always or usually informed about the inner workings of the organization as it relates to their work, that position descriptions are readily available, that paid staff are informed about the inner workings of the volunteer program as it relates to their work, that volunteer positions have operating guidelines that spell out duties, and handbooks that spell out expectations. The respondents appear to indicate that standard information about programs and duties need to be given to volunteers and staff alike so that no one is taken by surprise.

Of interest is the fact that items related to more instrumental volunteer and paid staff interaction do not appear to happen quite as often in all programs. For example, the lowest item on the climate scale is "volunteers are asked to give input and assistance in most organizational projects" and only 44 (7.9%) managers indicate that volunteers almost always or usually participate in training for staff. Similarly, one-third of respondents indicate that volunteers do not say thank you to staff publicly nor are they visible in leadership decision-making committees.

## CONCLUSION

Although much has been surmised about staff resistance to volunteers, it is obvious that program managers in this study are taking a number of actions to welcome volunteers, establish the ground rules, and inform both staff and volunteers about what is happening. Interestingly enough, the behaviors that seem to be particularly evident in these programs focus on paid staff taking the time to be welcoming and to be present and visible in creating a positive climate in which volunteers and paid staff can relate to one another.

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