

# 1997 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

## ABSTRACT

*In these days of organizational downsizing and reorganization, volunteers are the most overlooked population. Seldom is the impact of this change on volunteers acknowledged and almost never is any planning done to assist them in coping with the organization's transition. This article discusses the particular challenges facing volunteer administrators, the management tasks involved in assisting volunteers to adapt and thrive in a changing environment, and the various strategies used by individuals and organizations to deal with change.*

## Managing the Impact of Organizational Change on Volunteers

Arlene Grubbs

We know that change is everywhere, but in no area of our lives has it become more visible than in our work lives. Today's organizations seem to be in a frenzy of change: mergers, takeovers, reorganizations, downsizing and re-engineering are more common than stable environments. We are gradually learning the lasting impact such massive changes have on organizations. The focus traditionally has been placed on those personnel in an organization who are left without employment as a result of organizational change. Out-placement firms provide support and assistance to those suddenly finding themselves without work. But it is only in the past few years that literature in the field has begun to address the impact of drastic organizational change on the "survivors."<sup>1</sup>

It is now recognized that any major organizational restructuring must include a plan for helping remaining employees cope with the new environment. Volunteers, however, seem to be off the radar screen when it comes to this type of planning.

### THE IMPACT OF CHANGE ON VOLUNTEERS

The first and most obvious truth is that volunteers are part of the organization and experience loss, pain, and displacement just as paid staff do. But volunteers' concerns have a different focus and priority. As unpaid staff, volunteers do not have the need to focus on the issue of current or future paychecks. However, they may feel betrayed and uneasy about whether services will be held to a high standard. In the confusion that follows any major reorganization, volunteers may be lost in the shuffle as other staff scramble to clarify their own roles and responsibilities. If the atmosphere after a restructuring or downsizing is too poisoned, volunteers will exercise their option to move on to work that is more fulfilling and meets their needs.

The relationship between paid staff and volunteers is also at risk during a time of massive organizational change. Volunteers may be viewed by paid staff with suspicion. The old question of whether

---

*Arlene Grubbs* has been active in the field of volunteer management for more than 20 years. She was a field mentor for the first trial of AVA's certification program. She is a founding member and past president of her local DOVIA and of the statewide Pennsylvania Association for Volunteerism. For the last 10 years she has been a trainer and consultant on non-profit management issues. She has co-authored a book on volunteer recognition and serves as adjunct faculty at the Institute for Volunteerism of the Community College of Allegheny County. She has been involved as a consultant in the aftermath of many downsizings and her current interests are in the areas of team-building and community development.

volunteers will be asked to take over the work of displaced paid staff will lurk in the background even if not openly expressed. It will be difficult for the volunteer administrator to be helpful to remaining staff if this issue is not put on the table and addressed with dispatch.

Volunteers themselves will be confused about to whom to report and who makes decisions since even surviving paid staff may not be certain about this. In addition, remaining paid staff, who now must take on more work responsibilities, may ask volunteers to pick up inappropriate tasks, tasks for which they are not trained or which demand more than was spelled out in the volunteer's original agreement with the organization. This may well be an invitation to disaster. At the very least it can lead to burn-out and high turnover in the volunteer ranks adding to the mountain of change already occurring in the organization.

An added risk to the volunteer department is that, for better or worse, volunteers often identify closely with certain paid staff with whom they work. If their paid staff partner is one of those leaving the organization because of major change, the volunteer may leave as well. If the paid staff person is a "survivor," s/he may use the volunteer inappropriately as a sounding board for concerns and complaints about the organization. It's difficult for either side to maintain a professional stance when nothing seems to be stable.

Fortunately, there are ways of helping volunteers through times of major organizational change. Effective management during this time means being aware of how major change impacts individuals and departments/programs and what actions are helpful in dealing with the impact of change.

## MANAGEMENT TASKS

Individuals and organizations go through definite stages in moving through a time of disruption. There are any number of different models available

to describe these transitions. The one we will look at enumerates four stages: resistance, confusion, integration, and commitment.<sup>2</sup> There is some overlap in these stages. At each stage there are specific management tasks and strategies that the volunteer administrator can use to support and guide volunteers through turbulent organizational times. Although the techniques described below apply to managing all staff during times of transition, the nature of the volunteer's relationship with the organization—part-time, unpaid, and voluntary—requires some important changes in emphasis with regard to their implementation.

## RESISTANCE

At the onset of any major organizational change people will behave as they do in the early stages of grief. Their feelings will be running high. There will be an undercurrent of disbelief in which rumors find fertile ground. There will be anger and shock. Obviously, it will be important to be available to talk with volunteers individually, to hear them out and to allow them to express their emotions. Unfortunately, one's instinct at this point may be to put a lid on these emotions, to urge people to get on with it. If there are no opportunities for volunteers to express grief, outrage, and concern, these emotional reactions will continue to simmer and prevent volunteers from moving through the change process.

In addition to being available to talk with volunteers one-on-one, the volunteer administrator must set aside specific times for answering questions and giving information. This can be done by holding question-and-answer sessions, by giving volunteers written updates, by installing a "question box" and posting answers on a volunteer bulletin board; in other words, by any and all methods you can think of. Part of this information giving and receiving should be a clarification of volunteer rules and procedures. Some adjustments may need to be made on a temporary basis. These will need to be

communicated often to volunteers. In communicating with volunteers, the emphasis must be to deliver clear, honest answers. Be willing to say if you don't know what is going to happen and try to find answers to the best of your ability.

Finally, a major part of managing this stage is to find ways for volunteers to say good-bye both to the old organization and to those people who are no longer with the new organization. Rituals that focus on what the organization hopes to become and that include an acknowledgment of what it has accomplished can be helpful. Volunteers can recognize and show their appreciation for paid staff who are no longer with the organization by sending cards or hosting an informal farewell gathering if this seems appropriate. If the resistance stage of change is not appropriately managed, it will impact strongly on the volunteers' ability to get through the next stage.

## CONFUSION

As volunteers become less emotional about the changes in the organization, they begin to hunger for some clarity about what is going to happen. They are searching for credibility and a toehold from which to understand their role in a newly structured organization. It is easy to see how failure to deal with anger, loss, and shock early on will make it more difficult to help volunteers find the vision they need to continue their work. The most difficult task for the volunteer administrator at this point is to help volunteers live with ambiguity. The broad outlines of the newly structured organization may be visible, but the finer details have yet to emerge from the planning paper. Living with ambiguity is never easy and it is frustrating to have things changing from day to day. The volunteer administrator needs to provide answers that clarify insofar as possible. As a colleague of mine says, people at this point in the change process become "information junkies." As volunteer administrator you cannot communicate with your vol-

unteers often enough.

This time can be a period of burn-out for volunteer administrators. As much as the thought of hiding out in your office may be tempting, this is the time to be visible. Get out to see volunteers in their workplaces. Help them find areas of stability if only in the fact that you are there for them. This is also a way to keep your finger on the pulse of the change. You'll find it has impacted some areas of the organization harder than others. It is not always obvious which areas these will be. Give extra support where needed.

This is the time to be proactive in reaching out to departments where the upheaval has been the greatest. Changes in key players may mean that you have to reintroduce yourself and explain the role volunteers play in the organization. In many departments you may be starting over. For others it will be a welcome relief to find out that volunteers are still willing to assist in the work.

During this stage of confusion the rumor mill is operating at full tilt. Because there may not be many clear answers, any hints about how things will turn out are grasped as the whole truth and enlarged and modified as they spread through the organization. Rumors have the potential to create significant damage and should be dealt with promptly by supplying facts and information. Putting rumors to rest is a constant battle during this stage. It is important that you listen carefully to what volunteers have been hearing and that you provide ample permission and opportunity for them to tell you. Gradually confusion subsides and the organization begins to settle into a new routine.

## INTEGRATION

Wouldn't it be nice if you could simply relax now and get back to normal? Unfortunately, the old "normal" is gone. Things will never be quite the same again. In today's atmosphere of constant change, just when we think the world of our organization has settled down, a new change is bound to come along.

The business of integration is to assist volunteers secure their roles in the new environment of your organization. The major task here will be for the volunteer administrator to prioritize the workload. When so many things all need to be done at once, it's hard not to feel overwhelmed. Now is the time to delegate some of your duties to volunteers.

An important task is to continue to keep up the information flow. Although volunteers may be beginning to feel more comfortable with the new structure, one cannot assume they no longer need information about ongoing adjustments and changes. Some of the structures you've put in place to handle communication may be mature enough to hand off to a volunteer.

The integration stage is also a time to work with paid staff to deploy volunteers in the most effective manner. Old volunteer opportunities may no longer be the best use of volunteer time and skills and will need to be revised. The redesign of volunteer assignments to meet the needs of the new organizational structure is an opportunity to revitalize the partnership between paid staff and volunteer staff. It is a chance for staff, both paid and volunteer, to join together around mutual needs. The volunteers want meaningful work; the paid staff want assistance where it really counts.

Now is also a good time to reconnect volunteers to the mission of the organization. If volunteers lose sight of the organization's mission, they will almost certainly get discouraged and leave. It is important to help volunteers see how the implemented changes will assist the organization in performing its mission better and to underscore the very important role of volunteers in the organization's future.

At this point the organization and the volunteers are ready to move into the fourth stage in managing change, commitment.

## COMMITMENT

The commitment stage is identified by

the fact that people begin to look to the future. They have a sense of empowerment and a willingness to show how productive they can be. Because all these stages overlap, the tasks of one stage tend to carry over somewhat into the next. Emphasis on mission continues to be an important task in the commitment stage. But this is also the time to encourage suggestions about ways to improve the program. At this point the last thing you probably want to hear are new ideas, but some temporary readjustments that have been made may need a second look. By this time the organization has settled enough that a full re-evaluation of volunteer policies and procedures is called for. One word of caution: With renewed energy there is some danger that volunteers may over-reach, so hold to the course that's been set while being open to new ideas.

Now is the time to celebrate successes and congratulate yourselves for coming through a difficult time. The organization has changed and the volunteer department has changed with it. None of you will ever work in the same way again.

As mentioned above, it's important to remember that although we have identified four stages in the change process, they are not discrete. One stage flows into another almost imperceptibly. In addition, organizations, departments, and people move through these stages at different rates. Senior administrative staff who have been planning major organizational change for months may well be ready to get on with it when the rest of the organization is still in the resistance stage. Different departments or programs will have their own timelines for adjusting to organizational changes depending on the leadership of the department/program, the personalities of the individuals within the department, and the coping style of the department itself. All of this will affect your volunteers.

## THERE'S MORE!

In case you are in any doubt that

change is a messy, complex process, think about this: Complicating the picture is the fact that organizations, departments/programs, and individuals have their own styles for dealing with change and the stages described above.

In general we can identify three styles for coping with change: The change resister, the change adapter, and the change seeker. None of these styles is necessarily right or wrong. Each one has its advantages and disadvantages. The point to remember is that these coping styles will impact on how quickly or slowly individuals and departments/programs move through the change process. Figure 1 summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of each style and suggests some management techniques for interacting with each style.

It is important to understand how you and the volunteers deal with change. In addition, a volunteer administrator

should learn how to be flexible and adapt appropriate coping styles in response to organizational change. There are times when change must be resisted, times when it must be sought, and times to adapt. Major organizational changes can force all of us—volunteers and volunteer administrators—to explore other ways of relating to change. Knowing your own coping style can be an enormous help in thinking through what challenges you will face in managing volunteers during a time of major organizational change.

### THE BIG QUESTION

What if the volunteer department is being downsized or re-structured? What do you do if it is you who is out-placed? First of all, if you have any advance notice, prepare volunteers as soon as you can for the change. If possible try to have a transition plan in place. Talk to departments/programs that utilize volunteer

	<b>CHANGE RESISTERS Like Control</b>	<b>CHANGE ADAPTERS Like Comfort</b>	<b>CHANGE SEEKERS Like Risk</b>
<b>Advantages</b>	Cautious	Resilient	High need for challenge
	May see unanticipated problems	Open to possibilities	Risk takers
	May be more open about expressing emotions	Survivors	Action-oriented
<b>Disadvantages</b>	Stubborn—don't want to let go	People pleasers	Impulsive
	Look for drawbacks, problems, and failures in restructured organization	Lack of awareness of personal needs	Too quick to act
	High need for control over events	High need for comfort	Don't take time to process decisions
	Can feel victimized		
<b>Management Tasks</b>	Hear them out	Encourage them to pay attention to their feelings	Provide structured opportunities for them to process decisions/actions
	Seriously consider their struggle with problems about the reconfigured organization	Offer opportunities, encouragement to take reasonable risks	Build in opportunities for them to take on some challenges
	Give them as much control as appropriate and possible	Acknowledge their feelings of discomfort	

**Figure 1**  
**Coping Styles in Dealing with Change**

time and skills to remind them they will need to be prepared for new ways of managing volunteers. Without a volunteer administrator certain program structures will rapidly disappear, particularly those around communication, record keeping, evaluating, and recognizing. Individual departments will have to pick up these functions if the volunteer program is to survive.

Encourage volunteers to ask for the support they need from the organization and suggest whom they might contact. Volunteers may need to request opportunities to receive feedback about their work. They may need to be more proactive about getting information. Paid staff may need to be reminded that volunteers are not always on site when important organizational announcements are made and thus have no way of staying informed unless someone takes responsibility for keeping them up to date. Volunteers may have to be more supportive of each other in terms of providing day-to-day recognition of work well done.

It is to be hoped that volunteers are attached to the organization and its mission and not to you personally, at least not in a way that would make them say, "If you're leaving, I'm leaving." Flattering as this may be, it indicates a failure on your part to help volunteers connect to what they are really doing. Encourage volunteers to make up their own minds whether to stay or go and remind them of the important work they do for the organization. Good-byes are difficult. Recognize the toll that leaving will take on you. Find support for yourself and be professional in all your communications with volunteers.

## CONCLUSION

To say that managing in an organization undergoing major change is difficult is probably the understatement of the century. Change is complex and chaotic in spite of the best planning in the world. Unintended consequences have a way of undermining even the clearest picture of

what change will mean to the organization. But somehow organizations get through it. By being more aware of the change process, and its implications for individuals and programs, volunteer administrators can assure that volunteers are not left behind as the organization moves on. The longing for the way it used to be is a natural reaction to change. If the energy from resistance can be appreciated and channeled by appropriate management strategies, the volunteer program will emerge stronger than before. The "good old days" may not even look quite so good now that we've learned how to be even better.

---

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a good discussion of this topic see *Healing the Wounds: Overcoming the Trauma of Layoffs and Revitalizing Downsized Organizations* by David Noer. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1993.

<sup>2</sup>Material adapted from *Traveling Through White Water—A Manager's Guide for Organizational Change*. Available from KF Enterprises, 666 Dundee Road, Suite 1706, Northbrook, IL 60062. Phone (708) 205-0862.