

Encouraging and Mentoring the Executive Volunteer

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I bring you this morning a topic of real personal meaning to me. I am a volunteer who grew up into a volunteer administrator—a *volunteer* volunteer administrator—and who had help, all the way through, from salaried volunteer administrators. I began my executive service in 1960 in a tiny town in Germany, on a very little military base where, as a Red Cross volunteer of perhaps three years' experience (all of it *menial*), I reported to the Field Director, saying, "I've just arrived and I would like to volunteer my services to the Chairman of Volunteers." "Oh, fine," he said, "and congratulations! Since you are my *only* volunteer, you are also the Chairman!"

Leap with me from that moment to 20 years later where, some twenty geographical relocations and job changes behind me, I found myself occupying two Executive Volunteer positions, job sharing with myself, in effect, by spending two days a week as the first volunteer representing the Services to the Armed Forces at the National Headquarters of the American Red Cross, and two days a week as the first Volunteer Consultant to the department of the Army for its Army Community Service program across town, similar although not identical responsibilities. They had been earned, I feel, by those twenty years of volunteer service, but had been made possible through the support, encouraging and mentoring of salaried staff and supervisors who still inspire my efforts today. Now that I find myself on the "other side of the fence," I consider it my privilege and my responsibility to "encourage the encouragers" and to give heart to the volunteer executives, both

of whom I hope are represented here this morning.

Now, let's see who you are! Could I have a show of hands of how many here are "executive volunteers"? How about "salaried supervisors of volunteers"? Any "volunteers not yet 'executive'?" Any "paid staff not yet responsible for working with volunteers"? Anyone want to identify a category I haven't mentioned which might have brought you here?

WORKSHOP RESPONSE: Of the approximately 50 participants, almost exactly half were salaried supervisors and the others "executive volunteers."

Those of you who raised your hands as executive volunteers, could you let me hear some of the titles under which you operate?

WORKSHOP RESPONSE: Some of the titles offered were Chairman of the Board, Chairman of Volunteers, President (of a nonprofit), Volunteer Coordinator, Volunteer Supervisor.

How about the salaried staff or supervisors, could we hear your titles?

WORKSHOP RESPONSE: Some of the titles were Director of Volunteer Services, Executive Director, Director of Volunteers, Coordinator of Volunteers.

Very interesting to me, more than the fact that you wear different labels and come at this subject from different levels of approach, is that you executive volunteers are so many, and that you paid staff are so interested in this topic. A few years ago, there would have been a different story entirely!

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AVA is a relatively young organization and we consider ourselves very forward-thinking on issues relating to volunteers and volunteer management. Still, I think it is significant that it was nearly 15 years after the organization originated (as the American Association of Volunteer Service Coordinators that *volunteer* volunteer administrators were accepted as members. Even in a field with good working relationships between volunteer leaders and staff, a "second class citizenship" was in effect.

I can remember being invited to go to California for the National Conference on Social Welfare to deliver a paper on the importance of volunteers within a new organization. I was serving as one of its earliest volunteer executives. I was to join a team of salaried staff, all of whose expenses were being subsidized. I was told that I could go and deliver my paper if I were willing to pay my own way; otherwise someone would present it for me. There was, apparently, no energetic effort to persuade funding agents to help me out. I stewed a while, then got myself together and took myself to the conference. I have never regretted my decision, but today I would not condone that benign neglect, in any way!

In earlier times, few volunteers seemed to want to be "chief," but there were *abundant* volunteer "Indians"! Today, with the rise of woman power, career expectations and assertiveness, the "Indians" are becoming less visible and the "chiefs" more so!

Recently I attended a planning session of a nonprofit organization which was putting together an expansion operation and had gathered together experienced volunteers as their action team. Several of them I had known in earlier years and I remembered some as having been very comfortable "Indians." This time, however, it was a different story, because they had all grown into leaders, to the extent that they were almost incapable of operating as a team. All were vying (I believe unconsciously) to be in charge! It was time to turn that around, I felt, so that they stopped focusing on the top and each other, and began recontacting their roots, so as to encourage the building of the leadership ladder, from basic volun-

teer upward.

In her address at the 1985 National Conference on Volunteerism, Marlene Wilson took us to task. She challenged those of us who had devoted much of our time to lobbying for the recognition of volunteer administration as a field and who could take credit for professionalization of our roles and the championing of our volunteer programs. Marlene challenged us to look to those coming behind us and to do a more conscientious job of bringing them along, gathering them into our profession—in effect "encouraging and mentoring." (Marlene did not specify "salaried or volunteer," but I am sure she would say her words applied to either—or both!)

What do we mean by "mentoring"? Well, of course there is no such *verb*! But my *Webster's*¹ defines *the noun* "mentor" as a "trusted counselor or guide," which really says it all.

But how about the "executive volunteer"? How is that defined? In *Webster's*² "executive" includes the following:

Designed for . . . carrying into effect.

Having administrative or managerial responsibility.

Relating to the execution of the laws and the conduct of public . . . affairs.

Charged with . . . diplomatic representation and superintendence of the execution of the laws. An appointment of officials.

Usually some power over legislation.

Combining those descriptions with the word "volunteer" makes a very powerful person indeed!

Suppose yours were the role of the "mentor." How would you identify the executive volunteer who could be for you "a risk worth taking"? What would you look for, what characteristics or indicators, if you were seeking a potential volunteer executive leader to bring along as Marlene asked you to?

WORKSHOP RESPONSE: Indicators of a worthy "executive volunteer" suggested by the group included:

- Positive attitude.
- Proven effectiveness in operation.
- Ability to take administrative and managerial responsibility.
- Good public image and presence.
- Good relations with others, especially paid staff and volunteers.
- Understanding of the organizational mission.
- Ability to communicate with the public and with all levels of the agency.
- Self-confidence, assertive but not aggressive.
- Respect for policies and systems (learning before changing).
- Willingness to speak with the organization in public, but to speak candidly to the organization's leadership, in conference.
- Creativity.
- Loyalty up and down.
- Trustworthiness in all circumstances.
- Commitment to high standards of ethics and performance.

If you, on the other hand, were that outstanding executive volunteer looking for a worthy mentor, what characteristics might you be seeking?

WORKSHOP RESPONSE: Suggested indicators of a worthy "mentor" included:

- Highest standards of professionalism.
- Respect for the abilities of volunteers.
- Compatibility with the volunteer executive.
- Willingness to invest time in guidance and counseling.
- Creativity.
- Loyalty up and down.
- Ability to communicate.
- Willingness to be an advocate for appropriate volunteer concerns.
- Commitment to the future of the field.

Now that we know what we are looking for, suppose that in our own agency, we have identified "Bill," a volunteer with potential executive leadership. His immediate supervisor is "Alice." Maybe Alice has identified Bill herself (I hope

so!) and she is willing to bring him along into peer executive status, or maybe the CEO has made this judgment or suggestion. Even if she thinks that this "encouraging and mentoring" is a good idea, what concerns might Alice have about the relationship? In reverse, what worries might Bill have along with his pleasure at being selected for elevation to "executive" status?

NOTE: At this point the trainer divided the room in half. Half represented the volunteer executive and the other half the salaried staff mentor. Each side listed concerns about the "risk" of a potential relationship, from their point of view. These were shared through flipcharts. Time permitting, a desirable follow-through would be to have each side respond to the concerns of the other, with individual defenses or comforts. The presenter at this workshop chose instead to address the importance of *training* to the mentor/mentored relationship.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

An odd term which I once heard used in a military lecture on leadership was "coup d'oeil." As nearly as I can explain, it is that ability to seize on an instant at which an important decision must be made correctly, one which ultimately turns the fate of an operation, or even history, and to make the right reaction. As the lecturer described it, "coup d'oeil" is what often has been credited as "luck": someone in the right place at the right time, making the right choice. "What luck!" or "Wasn't he lucky?!"

According to its proponents, however, "coup d'oeil" doesn't happen unless the climate is ready, unless the person to whom it occurs has already been prepared and fine-tuned, so that right-reactions are going to be instinctive, given the proper combination of circumstances. It's a little like that moment, after you have drilled for years on a foreign language, always struggling from the other side of a communications wall, when one day you hear someone talking in that language and you are suddenly aware that you are thinking of a reaction in Spanish

or French or whatever! It happened without your conscious effort, at last!

The best way I know to insure the "coup d'oeil" of executive volunteer leadership, the guarantee that when the moment comes the person is ready for it, is ongoing, planned training . . . training that is not exclusive to the volunteer, but inclusive of the organization or agency and its community, consciously building team progression from the very first.

NOTE: Here the trainer presented a cyclical plan for training which gave opportunities for shared learning experience by salaried and volunteer staff members at escalating levels. It was based on one designed by the trainer some years later, for Army Community Service use.

The program as I designed it is both cyclical and escalating. It insures that training takes place at every level of the agency at some time during every year, and that there is appropriate upward movement, all along.

It starts even outside the organization, with an orientation from the general community which it serves as the initial outreach piece and progresses to the initial orientation for new volunteers (or refreshers for incoming transfers), to OJT, then reinforcing in-service training, to the earliest staff leadership training, to staff management and finally senior management training.

Looking at it from a "ladder" perspective: (See accompanying chart.)

1. We are gathering representatives of the local community into knowledge of us, in the *community orientation*—perhaps the first contact a potential volunteer, including *executive volunteer* will have.
2. When a new volunteer is signed on, or new paid staff joins, then an *initial orientation* takes place. (Transferring veteran volunteers or staff coming from another part of the organization may have a refresher instead.)
3. OJT is a "given" for all staff beginning operation in a new setting.

4. Later, when they are secure in the job, they add *in-service* training, to give depth and additional expertise to the role they are filling.

5. *Staff leadership* training will be given regularly to all key staff members, whether paid or volunteer, including second-level (middle) managers.

6. *Staff management* training will be a reward and incentive piece for senior managers within the agency, again both salaried and volunteer personnel.

7. *Senior management* training will pull from only the top, for the most sophisticated training, often requiring extra subsidy.

NOTE: A detailed handout describing the full program was given the workshop participants. At the end of the workshop the trainer offered the participants two "thinking papers," one for the mentor and one for the executive volunteer, to ponder before embarking on the relationship. They consisted of questions to be thought through before making the commitment.

GUIDELINES

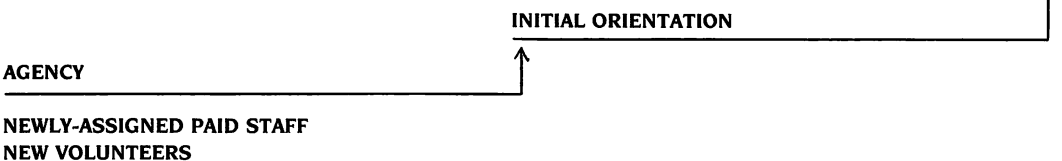
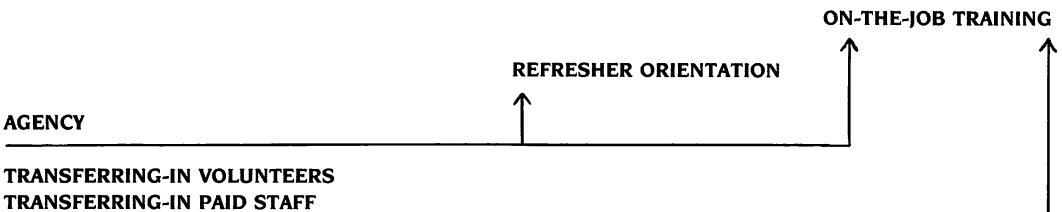
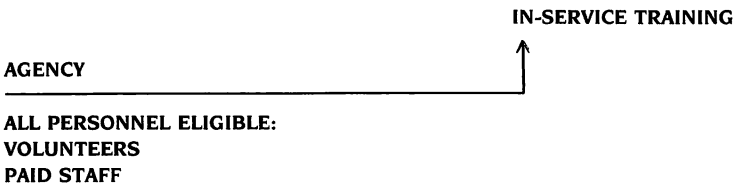
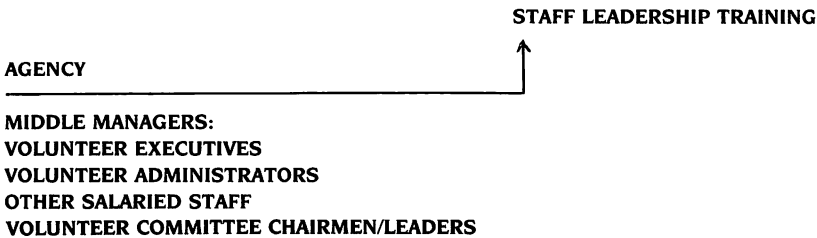
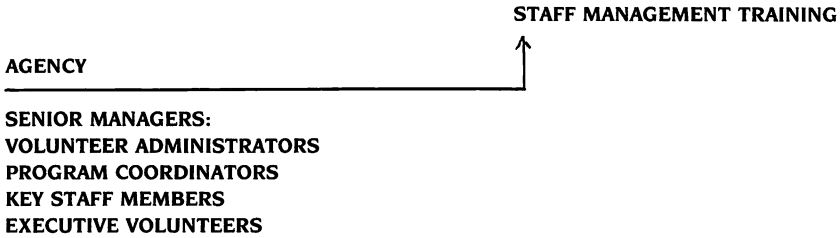
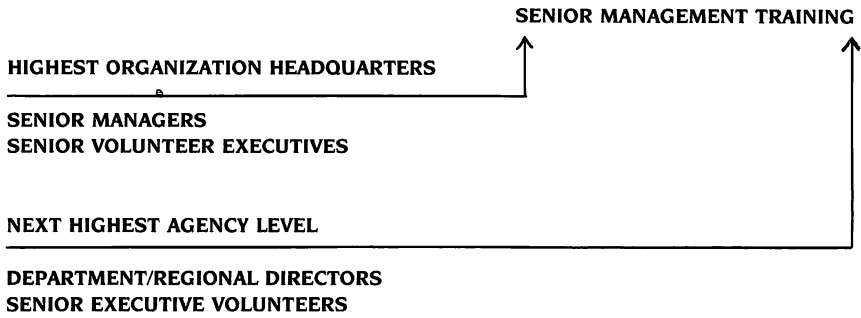
The workshop concluded with the following guidelines. To the *mentor*:

1. First understand yourself. Meet your prejudices frankly, and consider whether there are ways they may be overcome. If you cannot divest them, prepare to share them frankly with the volunteer you seek to mentor.

2. Train yourself to spot leadership in volunteers. Watch for the characteristics of those leaders in your agency. Check their performance, informally and formally against the "wish list" you may have prepared. If the missing pieces are experiential and not character-ingrained, take those on as part of your personal assignment.

3. Delegate increasing responsibility to the volunteer leader, especially in areas where the volunteer will represent the

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agency in peer status with paid staff.

4. Hold the volunteer accountable, but be sure you have given him or her complete training, and be sure he or she knows this is your policy.

5. Credential the volunteer by practicing peer protocol. That means shared transportation, shared meals, opportunities to be heard, to express opinion. Share bylines, share credit, and give public recognition.

6. Advocate sincerely for volunteer supports when justified. Be willing to go out on a limb for your volunteers if that limb is strong enough to stand on, but don't try to stand on weak reeds.

7. Assist the volunteer with career planning, recordkeeping, resource building, resumé composing and portfolio compiling, to include encouraging a volunteer engaged in pursuit of professional certification.

8. Introduce the volunteer to *your* professional colleagues and inspirers, the people whom the volunteer should meet if s/he wants to understand the best in the profession.

9. Suggest references for learning. Share clippings, recommend books, articles, and training films.

10. Share *your dreams* for the field. Let the volunteer know that you, too, have vision and ideals.

11. Accept new directions in the volunteer's pursuit of professionalism, even if they take the volunteer from your orbit to something outside of your immediate responsibility. Still, remain available indefinitely. Mentorship has no fixed termination.

12. Enjoy the privilege of growing a new leader for our field!

To the *executive volunteer*:

1. Understand yourself first.

2. Next, train yourself to spot examples of superior mentorship in staff persons. Whom do you admire as professionals, and why?

3. Practice top efficiency in your own volunteer service. Thoroughly evaluate your personal competencies (preferably against the AVA Performance-Based Certification criteria). Determine what is needed and what can help you improve.

4. Accept accountability. In fact, insist

upon it, but also upon the training that prepares you for that responsibility.

5. Ask for the training you need and help identify where it might be found if this is not apparent. Be prepared as well to recommend the support resources to enable you to obtain it.

6. Be assertive about your capability. If you have determined that other responsibilities or assignments could improve your effectiveness, do not be afraid to ask for them.

7. Seek counsel of the advisors you need to help you make a proper directional decision.

8. *Choose* your mentor. You are the person who can identify the best inspirer for your needs. If you seek the counsel of a person whose judgement you value, you will listen to that counsel and follow it.

9. Insist on recordkeeping procedures, both for your organizational responsibility and for yourself. Be responsible for preparing your own resumé but ask for work progress reviews and evaluations at appropriate intervals from your superior; and be sure your own portfolio is in order and updated.

10. Seek out the leading expertise in your field of volunteer administration. Seek out the best trainers, thinkers, experts in the field. Read their books. Attend conferences. Share occasions with volunteer administrators, salaried or volunteer, where sharing and exchanging can help you grow.

11. Begin to build your resource library. Become a "clipper," and share references with others, including salaried staff. Stretch your thinking and visioning.

12. Enjoy being part of the profession of volunteer administration. De-emphasize in your mind the differences between salaried and non-salaried staff, but recognize that there may be stumbling blocks which must be worked around gently before they can be dissolved.

13. Continue to seek new directions, taking off from the inspirations you receive at your present level. Use them as springboards to make important improvements in your professionalism and in your view of the profession.

14. Don't lose track of your mentors. Let them enjoy the rewards of watching you grow up in their field. As the years

go by, take the time to recontact former advisors to give them a progress report, to ask for new counsel, and to say "thank you." Consider that they may need mentoring, too!

Finally, remember that *paid staff are people who may even be volunteers in their other life.*

And don't forget that *volunteers are people who may even work for pay in their other life.*

Recognize each other as valued professional colleagues and you both will be rewarded!

FOOTNOTES

¹Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, (Springfield; Marian Webster, Inc.), 1983, p. 742.

²*Ibid.*, p. 434.