

Staff/Volunteer Relationship "Perceptions"

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One way to build more effective volunteer-salaried staff relationships is to recognize that these relationships are based on differing perceptions of time, authority, and power. When conferees entered the room in which this workshop was held, they found a number of illustrations posted around the room. These pictures, taken from a variety of art and math books, were all examples of optical illusions. The group discussed how easy it is to be fooled by visual perceptions. In much the same manner, we can view the staff-volunteer relationship as a matter of perceptions. Facts can be perceived in so many ways and it is this perception with which you are dealing when the function of paid staff and the function of volunteers appear to be in opposition.

An administrative volunteer may feel that the staff he or she is working with is unappreciative of all the time and energy he or she expends. The staff person may feel that the administrative volunteer is interfering with the organizational operation. The fact may be that the various accountabilities of each of them have not been clarified, or that they are both working in a defensive communication climate, or that the perceptions of each of them about the facts are so different that it appears they are working on different projects.

Try to look at the situation with new eyes--deal with the perception, not the facts.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TIME

An employee of an organization works within a highly structured, already set time frame. The paid worker works from 9 to 5, or 8 to 12, or 12 to 8, or some regular arrangement of starting and finishing. This makes 8 hours per day, 5 days a week (or 4 hrs. per day for 5 days a week, or 4 hours per day, for 3 days a week). There usually will be some irregularities, but on the whole this category of worker will know how much consolidated time will be spent during working hours.

Staff meetings will usually be held at a specified weekly time. If an emergency staff meeting needs to be scheduled, it can usually be held within a few days or even, at the unit level, on the same day.

On the other hand, the volunteer worker for an organization chooses the time structure within which to accomplish the job. The time that a volunteer gives will be restricted by personal commitments which could include family, paid job, schooling and any number of other time-using functions that must be prioritized by the volunteer to ascertain what time is available for the job to be done.

The volunteer worker will agree to work within a structured time of

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two or three hours a week, five hours a month, or time for attendance at board or committee meetings plus study of materials on the business at hand. The time commitment of a volunteer can be irregular, or highly structured, but by the volunteer's choice. A call for an emergency meeting, which would involve time not previously scheduled, needs to be planned around the volunteer's other commitments and often as much as three days notice is necessary.

So each of these categories fosters quite different time perceptions. The paid worker's perception of project implementation will be hours, days, perhaps weeks. The volunteer worker's perception of project implementation will be weeks, months, perhaps years.

And these are both valid: the actual hours that a project will take could be identical but because of the different time structures, those working hours will be spread differently.

Thinking time, dreaming time, and time used for creating will be vastly different in each category: in the paid work world it will be within hours, days, and weeks. In the volunteer world there can be weeks, months and years of developmental time. This certainly makes for different perceptions of how long a project "needs" for completion.

A person who has worked in the volunteer world for many years could have a real problem upon entering the paid work world with a supervisor who expects a creative project to appear in three days: 24 hours. These same twenty-four hours could have been eight weeks of work at three hours a week.

On the other hand, a person whose work experience has been in the paid world could have a problem with a committee chair who has not yet reviewed a proposal received two weeks ago. These same two weeks could have been only four hours of work at two hours a week. Here is a real difference in the perception of time and time-using functions.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT AUTHORITY AND THE CHAIN OF COMMAND

An employee of an organization answers in most cases to one person, the boss. This means that the definition of the function of the paid worker is screened through the perception of the person to whom our worker reports. Actually the goals of the organization can be very well defined, but even specifically stated goals can be interpreted many ways.

Job security is a very important factor in the motivation of the paid worker. The worker will accept a less than perfect situation if the probability of job security exists. Even if the paid worker has differences of opinions with the supervisor, the worker will attempt to (in fact must) find understanding of the supervisor's opinions and perceptions in order to perform in a satisfactory manner. So the manager holds the "lock" on the worker's effectiveness. It is through the perceptions of the manager that the worker defines his or her job.

A volunteer worker, on the other hand, answers in most cases to the goals of the organization directly. The volunteer is "paid" in means other than money and will choose a job in an organization whose goals are synonymous with his or her value system and personal objectives.² Job security is not a motivational factor for a volunteer worker. The volunteer can change jobs whenever he or she wants. If there is a difference in opinion or perceptions, the volunteer worker is free to move into another situation.

Oftentimes when a volunteer leaves an organization and there is a psychological upset, the statement is made that "there was a personality clash." It is possible that "personality clash" is a cover-up for poor management of volunteers. The person to whom a volunteer reports does not hold the "lock" on that worker's effectiveness. Rather, the volunteer's manager holds the key to effectiveness. The manager must know

how to turn the right key for the retention and effectiveness of the volunteer, including recognition of all kinds: formal and informal, constant and occasional.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT POWER

A paid worker has the power of the position in which he or she functions. The power of hiring and firing--which is the ultimate power in the paid-work world--belongs to the person to whom our worker reports. Because this power is an absolute, it often overrides skill, ability and good intentions. The administrative worker can use this power directly to move projects along.

A volunteer worker, on the other hand, has the power of choice. As mentioned earlier, nothing holds a volunteer to a job. The power of being able to move if the situation gets uncomfortable is a great incentive for effective management practices.

So how do we harness the energy, capture the enthusiasm, and standardize the perceptions that will motivate the workers in our own organizations? We must try to make sure that each worker knows not only what he or she is doing and is expected to do, but also knows what the people with whom he or she must work are doing.

TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY

A characteristic that anyone dealing with the myriad perceptions of the staff-volunteer structure would do well to develop is a tolerance for ambiguity. To state, or even think, that the whole answer to dealing with this unique relationship is structure is not only an over simplification, but is a dangerous solidification in a field where flexibility is a must. On the other hand, neither can the principle of flexibility be so total that the workers, be they paid or volunteer, have no direction. Goal statements, job descriptions, structure charts, evaluations and all of the other basic structural tools are a necessity.

The organization needs to find the middle ground between structure and flexibility. In this totally people-intensive business that we are in, the answer is the administrator with a tolerance for the ambiguity arising from the relationship between volunteers and salaried staff.

There is no formula that we can impose on every organization. That is one of the difficulties in our field. And yet it is also one of the main opportunities. We have to develop each of our organizations differently. We will all have a structure, but there will be as many differences as similarities. Every group needs a leader (president, chair), a recorder (secretary, scribe), and a financial person (treasurer, accountant). Every organization must have built-in areas where flexibility can be handled (who can predict when there will be a hail storm on the day of a fund raising track meet?).

The ability to recognize that a structure that might be unwieldy for one organization could be just the thing for maximum efficacy in another has implications in the area of staff-volunteer relations. The tolerance for the ambiguity of noodle-like time flexibility being built into the same structure as inflexible line responsibilities will serve well to improve staff-volunteer relations.

FOOTNOTES

¹I'd like to clarify the way I'm using the word "worker." A worker can be entry level or administrative or any level in between. Any of the statements that I make can be read "direct service," "assistant manager," "manager," "supervisor," "assistant director," "secretary," "vice president," or any descriptive term included within any organization.

²The effective management of the volunteer worker will include training. This is not different from the effective management of the paid worker. The difference is that the training itself can be conceived as payment for the volunteer. The taking of a volunteer position is often connected with the chance to expand one's expertise in an area hitherto untapped.