

Volunteer and Volunteer Coordinator: Working Together and Liking It

Gail McNulty and Shirley Klatt

INTRODUCTION

Based on our collective hospice experience and since we have been both volunteers and volunteer coordinators, we had a number of practical ideas that could be shared with other volunteers and coordinators. We also had experience as workshop leaders and attendees and knew how valuable workshops were when participants were encouraged to share their own experiences. Our purpose, therefore, was to give workshop participants the opportunity to express their wisdom and their problems, and in so doing employ the collective genius of the audience. Each person could leave the workshop feeling empowered, by looking at the positive things they were already doing on the home front, and determined to use the wisdom of the group as it applied to him/her.

WHAT WE LIKE AND DON'T LIKE ABOUT VOLUNTEERS

Participants shared their likes and dislikes about the volunteers they were coordinating. We like volunteers because they are enthusiastic, dedicated, flexible people who want to make a difference. They make a commitment and they follow through on that commitment. They have the ability to change as well as work well with staff. We don't like volunteers when they are too judgmental and don't follow

through. Sometimes they feel they are second class citizens, and Volunteer Coordinators have to work hard to give them a feeling of importance. It's hard when a volunteer thinks he/she knows how to run the program better than the Coordinator does, but that's frequently the source of good ideas. Volunteers often complain to other volunteers rather than to the Coordinator. Sometimes they are too committed and get burned out, despite the best efforts of the Coordinator. It can be difficult when a volunteer doesn't understand the importance and legal aspects of confidentiality.

WHAT WE LIKE AND DON'T LIKE ABOUT VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS

When the audience donned their volunteer hats, they had additional wisdom to share. We like Coordinators who give on-going recognition, evidence of their ability to be sensitive to both volunteer and agency needs. We liked their accessibility. And we felt that Volunteer Coordinators had the ability to think on their feet and stay calm in a crisis. We didn't appreciate a Coordinator who listened, but took no action. We didn't like being involved with a Coordinator who wasn't prepared for the situation at hand. Insincerity was a red light. When a Coordinator broke the confidentiality guidelines, that was very hard to take.

Gail McNulty was the Volunteer Coordinator for the Hospice of DuPage for eight years. In addition to her work with Hospice Volunteers, she shared her growing expertise through speaking and conducting workshops. Now working with the DuPage County Health Department, she has expanded her support of peers through work with DuPage County, Chicago, and Regional AVA. *Shirley Klatt* worked with the DuPage County Health Department as Volunteer Services Coordinator for five years prior to assuming her present position as Administrative Assistant. Since 1956 Shirley has been providing training to paid and volunteer staff. A lifelong volunteer, her work with the Hospice of DuPage, begun in 1985, continues today.

RESPONSES TO WHAT WE DON'T LIKE

Judgmental volunteers: It is ethical and natural to make judgments for that's how we decide what it is we believe in. It's possible to work in a caring, giving manner, even when we don't agree with the person we are caring for. It's when our judgments get in the way of the caregiving that we must change our assignments. That's o.k., too. No volunteer is able to care for every personality or do every job, although we sometimes expect that we "SHOULD." As Volunteer Coordinators, it's our job to see that volunteers take a realistic look at relationships and to see a change as positive rather than a failure on anyone's part. When the Coordinator sees judgmental behavior escalating, that's the time to have a conversation about expectations.

Lack of follow-through: Having policies in place helps us to handle this problem in the easiest, least accusative way. State your procedures clearly, including what happens if the procedure isn't followed. Include the steps that lead to termination, and follow them.

Volunteers' feeling they are second class: Include a staff person who works with volunteers in the training class/process. Ask staff to talk specifically about what volunteers have done and services that have been provided that weren't possible before a volunteer was in place. Ask the volunteers who present parts of the training to talk about situations and feeling treated just like staff, where that happens. Encourage supervisors to be generous with honest praise. Attend to any problem of insecurity as soon as it is brought to your attention. A one-on-one discussion may be needed to determine if the volunteer has been misassigned.

Know-it-all volunteers: In a situation like this, simply state your feelings; e.g., "When you tell me you know a better way to do the filing, I feel defensive. Let's see if we can figure out a way you can offer suggestions that will make me feel like I'm being helped, instead of being criticized. Maybe if you say, 'What do you think of. . .', or 'I've got an idea about the filing system I'd like to share with you.'"

Complaints: Share with volunteers, in person or through a newsletter format,

some of the suggestions you've had from volunteers and how you've used them. Tell a story about how morale was affected when volunteers complained among themselves without involving the Coordinator. Show how sharing problems with the proper person can benefit all.

Burnout: Control this by limiting volunteer hours. After a person has been a part of the agency's program for a while, you may decide it's o.k. to increase those hours. As a general rule, ask people to give between one and four hours a week to start.

Confidentiality: Use your confidentiality agreement as part of your policy on volunteer termination. Stress the importance of confidentiality repeatedly. While a volunteer may plead ignorance, there is absolutely no excuse for a professional to violate the confidence of a volunteer or agency; if this happens, the professional must be confronted. If you're a volunteer, explain your feelings. If you aren't satisfied, see the professional's supervisor. If the agency doesn't have a confidentiality agreement, write one and have volunteers and staff sign it. On this issue, all must be professional!

Coordinator who listens, but takes no action: As Volunteer Coordinators who encourage feedback from volunteers, it's essential to explain the format for feedback; e.g., "I'm open to anything volunteers have to say. I'll listen, think and decide. If you don't like my decision, you have the right to go to my supervisor. We encourage you to exercise that right." Putting this in policy form helps the volunteers to see they are not powerless to effect change. Tell the volunteers why you will or won't or can't use their suggestion. Be honest!

Not being prepared: When you've been coordinating volunteers for a long time it's easy to rely on "making it up as you go along." That doesn't seem to work these days. Volunteers are often professionals themselves, busy people who are looking for a valuable, personally rewarding experience. These busy people will want job descriptions and written policies and procedures. If you waste a volunteer's time, he or she will go elsewhere. Be prepared!

Insincerity: Being a Volunteer Coordinator can sometimes mean having what seems like a perpetual smile on your face. We must remind ourselves to give deserved praise, not empty praise. Overenthusiasm is as bad as condescension. Be real!

RESPONSES TO INTROSPECTIVE QUESTIONS

After asking the audience a series of introspective questions, we summarized the responses and discovered nuggets of immediate value to all.

What do you wish your supervisor would do that he/she doesn't?

We are looking for increased sensitivity from our supervisors, more feedback, and a feeling that they know what we are doing. More than anything, we agreed it would be a real treat to have our supervisors "waste time" with us.

What would you like to change about your style?

We would like to spend more one-on-one time with volunteers. We would like to be more laid back, at the same time we'd like to be more professional. We want to feel as though we had the luxury of handling our affairs in an unhurried manner. We would like to give volunteers more responsibility without worrying about the unknown, take a chance on them. We'd like to acquire the gift of making quick, correct decisions, when we need to, which is always.

What won't you budge on?

We insist on quality training. We will be honest, even when it hurts. We will not provide volunteers for assignments we feel are inappropriate. We want to *keep feeling like a peer to volunteers*, as we want them to feel they are peers with the people they are helping.

What do you do with or for volunteers that you don't do for paid staff:

We provide more support and praise. We hug them and take them to lunch and talk on the phone forever. We give in more often because we can afford to be more flexible.

In your experience as a volunteer, what is the thing you've most appreciated about the Volunteer Coordinator?

We like that support, those organizational skills, that accessibility and those sincere words of praise. We can take it when we are confronted in a professional way. We like the kind of supervision that helps us to grow to our greatest potential in this job at this time in our lives.

If others were describing you, as a Volunteer Coordinator, what is one word they might choose?

We think others see us as enthusiastic, friendly, compassionate, and supportive. We are warm, funny, capable, and intelligent. We are patient and easy to be around.

CONCLUSION

We touched on a lot of information in this workshop and, although we were not able to elaborate on every part of it, our purpose was met. One participant wrote in her evaluation, "Excellent small group participation—a new look at myself as Director of Volunteer Services." People left the workshop with new food for thought and we agreed that we are, indeed, Volunteers and Volunteer Coordinators: Working Together and Liking It!