

ABSTRACT

The role of the direct service volunteer on the voluntary board is explored and its organizational structure is examined to determine if it facilitates the flow of information from volunteers. The study questions whether volunteers can effectively communicate their suggestions and concerns about volunteer and organizational needs given the structure imposed by Board Member Manual procedure. A two-way relationship via the Volunteer Advisory Committee is suggested where political participation through the committee can give volunteers a political structure to express opinions pertinent to volunteer causes and clear lines of communication between staff, volunteers, and the leadership can be established.

The Direct Service Volunteer and Voluntary Board Member: What Are the Roles and Responsibilities?

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INTRODUCTION

Voluntary organizations such as the American Red Cross and the Easter Seal Society are central to American society. The United States is increasingly dependent upon these organizations to provide the physical and psychological support services that can no longer be supplied by government alone (Keyton, Wilson & Geiger, 1990). With every second American adult serving as a volunteer in the nonprofit sector and spending at least three hours a week in nonprofit work, the nonprofits are America's largest "employer" (Drucker, 1990).

Volunteers differ from paid workers in nonprofit organizations only in that they are not paid (Drucker, 1990, p. 181). Their role has shifted over time from helper to unpaid staff and they have become increasingly important to the nonprofit. With more than eight million employees and more than 80 million volunteers, today's nonprofit organizations must be information-based and structured around

information that flows up from the individuals doing the work, to the people at the top, the ones who are, in the end, accountable (Drucker, 1990).

VOLUNTEERS ON THE BOARD

To learn how volunteers feel about procedures and policies of the organization and to increase the board's knowledge about the direct services of the organization, some nonprofits have established volunteer representation on the voluntary board of directors. Their intention is to promote volunteer participation and to provide volunteers with an organizational structure to express opinions relevant to volunteer and organizational needs. This study examines the role of the volunteer representative on the board to determine if the hierarchical structure described is an appropriate forum for information gathering from volunteers. It also questions whether volunteers can effectively communicate their concerns and suggestions about volunteer and organi-

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zational needs, given the structure imposed by board procedures.

THE NONPROFIT BOARD

Nonprofit organizations are not businesses; therefore the nonprofit board plays a very different role from the company board. In the typical nonprofit organization the board is deeply committed. The voluntary board helps the organization think through its mission, is the guardian of that mission, makes sure the organization lives up to its basic commitment, and appraises the performance of the organization (Drucker, 1990). In sum, board membership means responsibility to the organization, to the board itself, to the staff, and to the institution's mission. The board of directors has final responsibility for the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives.

To accomplish these tasks, it hires an executive director to implement board policy and organizes itself to establish that policy, to fulfill its role, and provide support to staff (Conrad & Glenn, 1976). Board policies determine what the organization will do. The administrator implements policy and determines what individual employees (and volunteers) will do for the organization in carrying out board policy ("The Board Doctor," 1991).

The Voluntary Board Member

Voluntary board member and volunteer representative are not synonymous. Conrad and Glenn (1976) describe four fundamental roles of the voluntary board:

1. **Policy determination:** It is the responsibility of board volunteers to set the policy of the voluntary organization by serving on the board and on the various board committees;
2. **Resource development:** It is more than just raising money. Board volunteers have the responsibility to fund policy decisions they make. A triad of resources for a voluntary organization include support (contribution dollars), participation (people who are involved and committed), and understanding

(enhancing the public image);

3. **Sanction:** Board volunteers give the right to exist as an organization;
4. **Retention:** The board hires the staff chief-executive (a crucial appointment).

The Volunteer Representative

A volunteer representative, on the other hand, is a volunteer, or unpaid staff member, who is elected or appointed to the voluntary board of directors in order to represent volunteers in the organization.

A volunteer is a person who, out of free will and without wages, works for a nonprofit organization which is formally organized and has as its purpose service to someone or something other than its membership (Jenner, 1982).

To function as an effective board member the volunteer representative needs to be aware of not only his or her role on the board, but also the administrator's role. In order to ascertain if a volunteer concern is a board issue or an administrative issue, the volunteer must ask whether it affects the organization as a whole (administration and staff handle issues that affect individuals/volunteers).

The executive director fulfills management functions such as planning (short-term), organizing, staffing (such as the hiring and firing of staff members), directing and leading, and controlling (spending the current budget) ("The Board Doctor," 1991).

THE STUDY

Given the roles outlined above, the author asks: (1) Which, if any, volunteer issues are appropriate material for volunteer representatives to bring for board discussion? (2) Might a conflict of interest exist between the volunteer's role of unpaid staff under the executive director and the hierarchical position of the board? and (3) Does the volunteer representative remain eligible for elected board position if/when the volunteer is terminated or resigns from his or her volunteer position in the organization?

THE BOARD/STAFF CONNECTION

In addressing some of the concerns stated above, "The Board Doctor" (1991) cites two simple rules of thumb in addressing board/staff relations. The first is that all communication between the staff and board should be channeled through the executive director. Personnel management is the administrator's job. Unless there is policy to the contrary, staff grievances should not go to the board ("The Board Doctor," 1991). Volunteer (unpaid staff) grievances should not go to the board. When the board listens to volunteer/staff grievances, they may be settling one problem and creating new, more serious problems such as sending the staff mixed signals about who is in charge and creating a strain on the relationship between the board and the administrator. If the volunteer representative brings volunteer concerns/suggestions directly to the board, the volunteer representative breaks the first rule of thumb, that all communication between the staff and board is channeled through the administrator. If this is the case, how does the volunteer representative represent the volunteers and how can the volunteer representative increase the board's knowledge about the organization?

"The Board Doctor's" (1991) second rule of thumb is that boards do not manage staff, administrators do. The staff does not evaluate the administrator. A possible conflict of interest can occur when the volunteer, or unpaid staff member, sits in a position to evaluate the administrator. Not only is it difficult for staff to remain objective when evaluating their "boss," but it also would be so for the volunteer.

A third area of concern involves the administrator's role in firing staff or terminating volunteers. In these instances the administrator makes the final decisions while the board has no role. Contract issues may be implicated when an organization and a volunteer enter into a contract, agreeing upon conditions of the volunteer's service. There are potential

discrimination and civil rights issues in the hiring and firing of volunteers (Kahn, 1990). What, then, is the board's legal and ethical stance when a volunteer resigns or is terminated from his or her volunteer position and desires to remain on his or her elected position on the board?

Can a nonprofit organization, with the hierarchical structure described above, facilitate the flow of information from the volunteers who perform the service up to its organizational leaders through volunteer representation on the board?

THE TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIP

An effective nonprofit organization builds a two-way relationship with its volunteers by asking, "What do you have to tell us?" The question brings problems out in the open. According to Drucker:

. . . Every organization wants and needs stars, but as in a good performance the star is not separate from the cast. The cast supports the star and as the star delivers an outstanding performance, the supporting cast is lifted out of its mediocrity. That is the payoff of an effective two-way relationship (Drucker, 1991, p. 159).

The political participation and political structure of voluntary organizations contribute to the sense that people have of an organization being truly theirs. Outstanding volunteer organizations are rated by their leaders as having members who are lower in apathy. In addition, outstanding organizations' leaders see their rank-and-file members playing a more significant role in decisions. They are also more likely to have committees, as a political organizational feature, other than the board of directors or an executive committee (Smith, 1986).

Seventeen Miami-based nonprofit service organizations were randomly surveyed (see Appendix) to determine if: (1) the organization had a board of directors; (2) the organization involved volunteers to delivery direct services; (3) the organization included volunteer representation

on its voluntary board. A "service organization" is defined as an organization that has as its purpose to help others or to do things for others (Heidrich, 1988). The survey indicated that 16 of the surveyed organizations operated with a board of directors and one with an executive committee. Three organizations did not include volunteers on their boards and 12 did not distinguish between *volunteer* and *volunteer representative* on the voluntary board.

The rationales for including volunteers on boards were: (1) volunteers identify community needs and problems; (2) volunteers initiate policy and programs to meet community needs; (3) volunteers contribute their knowledge, skill, interest, leadership, and money to the organization; (4) volunteers solicit support and participation in organizational functions; (5) volunteers use their influence in the community to get things done; and (6) volunteers increase the board's knowledge about the organization's effectiveness (feedback). Twelve organizations made additional forums (formal and informal) such as committees, meetings, and questionnaires available to their volunteers.

Volunteer administrators who trust their volunteers arrange meetings in which volunteers can offer opinions about organizational structure and procedures and allow volunteers to make important decisions. They understand that many volunteers seek a chance to be involved in action that alleviates a problem. They also maximize learning and developmental activities and facilitate an organizational climate that allows volunteers to be self-supporting (Ilsley, 1990).

The two-way relationship is reciprocal and the organization has an obligation to meet the needs of its volunteers. If the organization does not respond to the needs of its volunteers, morale will fall and volunteer turnover will rise. The increasing size and complexity of nonprofit organizations require a more sophisticated volunteer administration to recruit, train,

and retain volunteers. Without volunteers to provide leadership, carry out tasks, and deliver services, many organizations and the services they provide would cease to exist (Cull and Hardy, 1974). This is especially critical in organizations for which recruitment is difficult due to the nature of the work and/or the amount of time invested in training due to the specialized service. Disaster relief and crisis intervention are two areas in which people are least likely to have volunteered and the area in which people are least interested in becoming volunteers (J.C. Penney Survey, 1987). It is especially important to retain volunteers in these areas.

If an organization includes volunteers on the voluntary board, yet, due to its organizational structure, inadvertently creates a barrier that prevents the information flow from those doing the work to its organizational leaders, the organization in question can meet its obligation to the volunteers by identifying the barrier and creating a path for a two-way relationship.

THE VOLUNTEER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The advisory committee is presented as a path for a two-way relationship so that participation through the committee can give volunteers the organizational structure to express concerns and suggestions about volunteer and organizational needs. The committee's recruitment is influenced by information about the role and responsibility of the group and the staff's relationship with the volunteers (Macduff, 1989). Expected outcomes of an advisory committee include:

1. Leadership officers and volunteer coordinators who take on responsibilities relevant or important to volunteer causes;
2. Members who demonstrate personal commitment to volunteer goals and who can articulate those goals;
3. A communication system by which problems can be comfortably raised and solved and through which issues and the decisions surrounding them are carefully documented;

4. External contacts or support with the board and other levels of administration are maintained through well-defined channels.

Recruitment for the advisory committee begins by insuring that volunteers know what will be expected of them. Roles and responsibilities are spelled out and volunteers are informed what staff members are available to support them. Staff support includes record keeping, continuity, timely reporting and recognition of the work done by the committee. It also includes the development and maintenance of the general structure of the group. Staff members should also provide assistance and leadership in the development of operational policies and procedures. Volunteers need to be educated about the organizational structure and leadership. Retention is influenced by the two-way relationship that exists with the staff. This includes a commitment to teamwork, clear lines of responsibility, and good communication among staff, volunteers, and the leadership in the organization (Macduff, 1989).

According to Macduff (1989), volunteers on the advisory committee should understand the meaning of the word "advisory" and that their role is different from a board of directors. Most advisory groups focus their attention on known problems or existing concerns. It is easy to move from assigned tasks to other problems in the organization, so it is essential that members understand the limits of their area of exploration. The findings of the committee should be compiled into written statements followed by information which points to new opportunities or major problems that need attention.

SUMMARY

If the staff is objective and open to suggestions from the volunteers, involves volunteer time and talents wisely, exhibits openness in their individual and organizational relationships, adequately

prepares for all meetings with the volunteers, shares leadership with volunteers, and advises the volunteers as to the appropriate role/responsibility they have to the organization (Macduff, 1989), the advisory committee can be an effective forum for volunteers. The information will flow up from the individuals doing the work to the people at the top—the ones who are, in the end, accountable (Drucker, 1990)—and the volunteers will move from political observer (passive role) to political participant (active role) in the nonprofit organization.

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