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Polishing the Potential of Volunteer/Staff Teams

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INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to be able to discuss with all of you what I consider to be the number one challenge in the field of volunteerism today: the relationship of volunteers and paid staff. The fascinating thing is that I could have said this same thing 20 years ago and it would have been just as true.

I believe it is time for our field to stop wringing its hands and wallowing in the "ain't it awfuls" about this issue and get on with some clear, positive solutions.

This is a big order for the limited amount of time we have together today, but I believe we can share some useful insights and tools to help at least begin the positive process of "polishing the potential of effective and creative volunteer/staff teams."

To do this, our time will be spent as follows:

1. Discuss definitions and types of teams;
2. Understand the problem;
3. Eight steps to effective volunteer/staff team building;
4. Questions and Answers from the studio and TV audience at designated intervals;
5. Summary.

DEFINITION/TYPES OF TEAMS

The dictionary tells us a team is *any group organized to work together*. (That sounds so simple . . . why is it so hard?)

William Dyer in his book *Team Building* goes a bit further:

Teams are collections of people who must rely on group collaboration if each member is to experience the optimum of success and goal achievement.

(Aha . . . perhaps the key is the word collaboration.)

And then there is *Roget's Thesaurus*, which adds this colorful alternative:

Two or more draft animals harnessed together.

(Not totally unlike the image of some volunteer/staff teams I've seen.)

Obviously, we have all seen and experienced many types of teams. Perhaps the most helpful model I've run across not only to help diagnose what a team is presently like, but also to suggest what it might become is the following:

Types of Teams

- Parasitic 1 + 1 = less than 2
(Competitive)
- Symbiotic 1 + 1 = 2
(Cooperative)
- Synergistic 1 + 1 = 4
(Collaborative)

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Let's look at each type for a moment and see how it relates to volunteer/staff teams:

In *parasitic teams*, the issue of turf dominates everything. Staff sees volunteers as interlopers and competitors, so the energy of the "team" tends to go toward turf protection and conflicts versus mission. (These kinds of teams can also be made up of all paid staff defending their departments or all volunteers where the old leadership protects its turf from new volunteers.) There is also an appalling number of interagency parasitic team efforts.

Basically, the experience that this type of team produces is that "We all got out less than we put in" ($1 + 1 = \text{less than } 2$), and it was a frustrating, unrewarding waste of time and energy.

This, my friends, has been the root of many of the problems surrounding volunteer/staff relationships—and it must stop! It is obscene today to waste our very precious and scarce human resources like this in a world that has increasing unmet human needs. We can no longer afford to waste them!

Symbiotic teams of volunteers and staff ($1 + 1 = 2$) have been the goal of our field for the past 10 or 15 years. This is why we have developed sound and effective volunteer management tools and techniques (job descriptions, interviewing, training) so we could have a fair exchange of value for value between the volunteer's needs, abilities, and motives and the organization's, staff, and client's needs.

Where good volunteer administration is practiced, this shift from parasitic to symbiotic (cooperative) teamwork is evident and to be celebrated.

However, the challenge before us in this time of dramatic increases in needs and ever-shrinking resources is to learn the invaluable skill of *synergistic team building*, where through collaboration of volunteers and staff, $1 + 1$ can equal 4. In other words, we can all get out of the experience more than any one puts in (or another way of saying it is that we are better together than alone). In the proc-

ess, the client is better served than ever before, and neither staff nor volunteers burn out in the process.

I know, it sounds impossible. But it isn't, and when we learn to do it, our field will be on the cutting edge of what is needed by all organizations as we move toward the new century. Are we up to the challenge? I personally believe we are!

Perhaps one of the most significant books on leadership and management I have ever read is a small paperback called *Leadership Is an Art*, by Max DePree. It should be required reading for anyone truly committed to forming synergistic teams. (I will no doubt quote DePree several times in this session). For example, he states:

The needs of the team are best met when we meet the needs of individual persons. By conceiving a vision and pursuing it together, we can solve our problems of effectiveness and productivity, and we may at the same time fundamentally alter the concept of work.

What that says to me is that we must truly care about the needs and concerns of paid staff—as well as those of the volunteers and clients.

NEED FOR A MAJOR PARADIGM SHIFT

What is required when we tackle a problem as big and as long-standing as volunteer/staff relationships is a *paradigm shift*. I'm sure you've all encountered this hot new concept. It's the catch word of the day in how to deal with a changing world. I usually avoid those like the plague, but the longer I deal with creative problem solving, the more convinced I am that this concept is sound, workable, and necessary when tackling big challenges.

In understanding the concept of paradigms, three images have been helpful to me:

1. *The lens* through which we see life—or any particular situation, problem, or challenge.

2. *Our perceptual map*—A map of Atlanta may be a very good map, but it won't help me get around in Little Rock or Seattle. (The map must be appropriate to our destination.)

As Scott Peck said in *The Road Less Traveled*:

Our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is false and inaccurate, we generally will be lost. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are, and if we have decided where we want to go, we will generally know how to get there.

3. *Our belief system* through which we filter and often distort data and information (so it will fit what we already believe).

"I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it."

(Self-fulfilling prophecies)

As Stephen Covey says in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*:

If we want to make significant quantum change, we need to work on our basic paradigms.

And it seems to me a problem that has been around for 20 years qualifies for this kind of major work.

One of the most useful models I've seen in bringing this idea into practical application was an article by John Scherer entitled "The Change Process: A Matter of Belief" in the *Journal of Religion and the Applied Behavior Sciences* (Winter 1987):

Your Perceptual Map

What you believe is "out there"



Field of Focus

What you notice



Diagnosis

Your interpretation of "the facts"



Strategy

What you intend to accomplish



Action Alternatives

Things you could do



Action

Let me give you an example of how this works, in our personal as well as our organizational lives.

Last summer I took a few weeks off. The intent was to get off airplanes and out of hotels for a while and enjoy my lovely mountain home outside of Boulder. I decided one thing I truly wanted to do to enhance my time at home was plant my rock garden with all kinds of lovely flowers. The difficulty every year we had tried this was that the deer who "hung out" in our yard loved to eat the flowers even more than I loved to look at them.

So I went to the best mountain nursery, asked for the most deer-resistant plants they had, and also got their expert advice on how to keep deer away from the blossoms. They advised me to:

- Add blood meal to the soil;
- Spray plants with Repel;
- Add cayenne pepper as insurance.

Reassured, I had the nursery help me plant an absolutely spectacular flower garden. And for several days I sat on my deck, read, looked down on my garden, and was happy as a clam.

But then I began to notice there were fewer flowers each day. I was mystified, as I didn't see any deer in the yard. Then one day as I was on my deck reading, I heard a funny, wheezing, coughing sound—and as I went to investigate, there was a deer chomping away at my flowers. You see, *she had asthma* and couldn't smell a thing!

So I began to wage a battle to save my flowers, rushing out earlier and earlier each morning, hating to leave the house for fear she'd invade again—and all the time missing the point that I was ruining my vacation.

So—I changed my paradigm from “flowers are beautiful” to “deer are beautiful”—and I relaxed, read, and watched my doe eat contentedly through the summer.

Perhaps that’s when I became convinced of the power of paradigms!

Now, let’s see how changing our old paradigms might help us deal with volunteer/staff relationships:

10 Reasons Staff Resists Volunteers

1. Previous bad experience with volunteers;
2. Fear of loss of their jobs;
3. Fear of decrease in the quality of service and loss of control;
4. Lack of staff involvement in determining how volunteers will be involved, or why;

Paradigm	
Volunteer/Staff relationship problems are inevitable	Volunteers/staff can work as synergistic teams
Staff is the enemy	Staff is our ally
Field of Focus	
Who’s fault is it? (blaming)	Problem solve versus blaming
We (good guys) vs. They (bad guys)	
Diagnosis	
Staff attitudes are wrong	Understand the underlying reasons behind staff resistance
Staff is insecure and incompetent regarding use of volunteers	Examine volunteers and Volunteer Director’s contributions to problem
Strategy	
Shape staff up	Explore alternative ways to overcome the problems Set mutual goals that encourage collaborative team effort
Action Alternatives	
Convert them	Learn collaborative team building skills
Train them	Share skills with staff and volunteers
Ignore them	
Give up and leave	
Action	

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

In line with the new paradigm, I suggest that to effectively problem solve, we must first try to understand the problem. Let’s look briefly at some of the most frequently expressed reasons for staff resistance to volunteers:

5. Little or no involvement in writing job descriptions, interviewing, or evaluating volunteers;
6. Misconceptions about who volunteers are today and what skills they bring;
7. Fear that volunteers are unreliable;

8. Fear that today's skilled volunteer might do a job better than staff can do it;
9. Lack of training in how to delegate to volunteers and how to supervise them;
10. Lack of reward system for staff if they utilize volunteers.

(You might want to discuss other reasons you have encountered.)

These are real concerns, and we need to take them seriously. And the good news is there is not one of them that can't be dealt with under our new paradigm.

EIGHT STEPS TO COLLABORATIVE VOLUNTEER/STAFF TEAM BUILDING

Let's begin to get very practical about *action alternatives* to take if you are serious about shifting your paradigm from "volunteer/staff problems are inevitable" to "volunteers and staff can work together as collaborative/synergistic teams." The particular action steps you would each take might vary, depending on what you are already doing well.

I'd like to take these action alternatives one at a time and elaborate a bit on each.

I. Focus on Mission

If you were to ask each member of the volunteer/staff team you have in mind the simple questions:

- Why do we exist as a team?
- What is our purpose or mission, and is this written?
- How do we help achieve the mission of the organization?

could they all give you the answers? If not, why not?

This is probably the single most common problem in volunteer and staff teams. We get task-focused and obsessed with short-range crisis management and lose sight of the overall mission (or don't even know what it is). This is deadly!

Mission Motivates— Maintenance Does Not!

The mission of all of your organizations is to serve your clients. . . . That is why both volunteers and staff are there. It's when we take our eyes off that goal that all the petty "turf stuff" begins to emerge.

So, if your team cannot answer the questions I posed, start there and clearly define the mission of your team (and be sure each member knows the mission of your organization so that the team's purpose is compatible and supportive of that).

Just one bias I have: Mission statements need to be short, snappy, and inspiring. Avoid the long two-to-three-page boring treatises—they don't motivate anyone. As one author put it, "Vision empowers only when it enlivens. Generalities are not very exciting."

II. Determine Clear Objectives and Action Plans Together

Here is where collaboration starts or stops. Is the leader planning *with* or *for* the team? This is where ownership or "buy in" begins. A basic management principle is:

People become committed to plans they help make.

This step helps put good intentions (and lofty missions) into doable actions. It frees people up to know what to do and how to do it.

Objectives: Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Compatible

Writing clear objectives determines *what* you are going to do about your mission this year—specifically, the action plan determines the way it will be done.

Action Plan: Who is to do what
How they will do it
When it will be done
(time line)
Cost involved

At this step, it is essential that you decide together not only what you will do (objectives/priorities), but also what you will *not* do. Everyone in this audience is confronted with endless arrays of things you “could, should, might, or ought to do.” In times of scarce resources, it becomes vital to focus on a few essential priorities and do them well, and that means letting go of some things you’ve done in the past that were “nice but not necessary.” And that is hard! It is a matter of focusing resources on key priorities, and your objectives are your priorities.

When these are mutually agreed upon by your volunteer/staff team, then you can begin to clearly define roles, responsibilities, and job descriptions. Everyone will then know their parts to play and can get on with doing it without wasting endless hours trying to figure out “Why am I here?” and “Who’s on first?” *We/They* begins to become *Us!*

III. Participative/Empowering Leadership Is Essential

Have you ever been on a team where the leaders (either volunteer or paid staff) thought leadership meant *they decide and tell* everyone else on the team not only *what* to do, but *how* to do it. I’m sure that made you feel highly motivated, eager, creative, and needed . . . right? Wrong! This autocratic style of management was both prominent and successful in this country for a long time—when we were an industrial nation of primarily blue-collar workers and needed to run factories and huge bureaucracies. Most of the experts on the subject of effective leadership today agree that this style no longer works and in fact is becoming destructive and counterproductive (it encourages the parasitic 1 + 1 = less than 2 type of teams). So, if our goal is collaborative/synergistic teams, the issue of leadership style becomes critical. Let me share some wisdom from a few highly respected leaders:

Max DePree (in *Leadership Is an Art*):

The art of leadership is liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible. . . . It begins with a belief in the potential of people. Participative management without a belief in that potential and without convictions about the gifts people bring to organizations is a contradiction in terms.

(We’re back to paradigms again—the belief system out of which we operate.)

John Gardner (in his book *On Leadership*):

Leaders don’t create motivation—they unlock it. They must be on the side of hopefulness and instill in their people that they *can* have an impact. . . . *It is the leader’s job to keep the dream alive!*

When I read that, I realized that one of my goals as a leader in this field has always been to be an “optimistic pragmatist” (informed, but hopeful) versus being either a “Pollyanna or Eeyore.” It has served me well!

Tom Peters (author of *In Search of Excellence*, etc.) in an article regarding his experiences in working with leaders throughout the world stated that exceptional leaders have three traits in common:

1. They know they can learn from anyone.
2. They constantly look for 1,000 new small ways to improve what they already do well.
3. They delight in the success of their subordinates.

These are all descriptions of participative/empowering leaders—and if you’ve ever had the pleasure of working with one of them, you have no doubt experienced a truly synergistic team. *Replicate it!*

If the leader is too busy doing most of the work, which is one of our traps in this field, there is neither time nor energy for this type of leadership.

IV. Determine, Develop, and Utilize the Strengths and Skills of All Team Members

Once again, let me share a quote from *Leadership Is an Art* which deals with this important step:

It is fundamental that leaders endorse a concept of persons. This begins with an understanding of the diversity of people's gifts, talents, and skills. . . . Each of us is needed. . . . We must admit we cannot *know and do* everything.

Whenever I start a team or task force, I like to have a team building session as early in the process as possible. The purpose of this meeting is simply to help us know and understand more about one another so that we can "maximize our strengths and minimize our weaknesses" as a team. It's also how we begin to articulate our needs and hopes. A simple format I've used may be of help:

If the team is composed of a dozen or less people, I ask each one to take a few minutes and write down answers to four questions:

1. What are two strengths (abilities/talents) I bring to this team?
2. What are two weaknesses (things I don't do well) I bring to this team?
3. My major concern for this team is _____.
4. My major dream for this team is _____.

To debrief this exercise, it is vital that the leaders share their own answers first. (If you are honest, open, and therefore vulnerable, they will follow your lead—If you play games, so will they.) What you can end up with is a clear list of *team strengths and weaknesses* that will help you make sensible and creative decisions about work assignments and delegation. It become apparent very quickly that synergy makes sense. . . . We really can be better together than alone. The lists of concerns and dreams are the starting place for planning and problem-solving priorities. This is where roles start to be less important than persons!

One of the essential skills both volunteer and staff leaders *must* develop is the skill of effective delegation. We can have the greatest collection of skills and abilities on our team, but if we don't know how to share our work effectively, we don't need teams at all. We just need to continue being heroic Lone Rangers until we burn out. (And when we leave, we take everything we know with us!!)

We must deal honestly and seriously with the fact that today's volunteer work force is the most skilled, talented, and varied we have ever had. We must personally, as volunteer administrators, learn to seek out and utilize these professional volunteers in our own departments and programs and see to it that other staff is trained to do so as well. Believe it or not, many paid staff are totally unaware of the revolution in our field as to who is volunteering, what they have to offer, and why they're doing it.

So we have new training challenges before us to help staff and volunteer leaders understand and accept today's volunteers as full partners on their teams and task forces. Some topics needing to be addressed are:

- Trends in volunteerism (Gallup Reports, etc.)
- Delegation
- Creative problem solving
- Collaborative team building

Believe me when I say your paid staff has gotten almost none of this training in their professional schools.

Training is simply helping people succeed in what they have said "Yes" to—so we must provide whatever training is needed for both volunteers and staff to be at their best.

V. Develop Creative Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Skills

I am often intrigued by how much we have forgotten as adults that we knew as kids. One of the biggest things is how to be creative!

1. The difference between kids and adults is problem solving.
2. Maslow quote:

Give an adult a hammer and we treat the whole world as a nail. Give a child a hammer and they may dig with it, sculpt with it, or weigh down papers with leaves in between—because no one told them it was to hit a nail.

So the key to creative problem solving is really thinking in terms of:

Alternatives & Options

I conduct a week-long session on this subject at the 3rd Level of the University of Colorado Volunteer Management Program each year. I have found a simple three-step process to be very helpful.

1. *Clearly and creatively identify the problem to be solved and the goal to be achieved.*
 - Be sure it's the real problem and not just a symptom;
 - Have more than one alternative solution or option ("No one is more dangerous than a person with an idea, if it's the only one they've got").
2. *Strategize carefully.*
 - Determine who can say yes or no to your proposed solution;
 - Decide who, how, and when to approach them (use strengths of your team);
 - Make your case effectively;
 - Avoid getting "No's" because you didn't do your homework.
3. *Negotiate effectively.*
 - Listen to the other parties' needs and concerns;
 - Be flexible and open to a new, collaborative solution that helps you both win;
 - Always concentrate on problem solving versus blaming;
 - View other party as your ally versus your enemy.

VI. Encourage and Reward Creativity and Risk

If we are to encourage and develop creativity in our teams—in planning, problem solving, decision making, and carrying out their assignments, we must make it a valued group norm. That means that as a team we decide not only to tolerate, but also to encourage risk taking and innovation.

DePree has a bit of wisdom here also:

We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are.

Someone else once said:

The enemy of the best is not the worst, but the good enough.

We all know groups and organizations that made the deadly mistake of resting on their past laurels—and getting bogged down in the status quo . . . and in today's rapidly changing world, they're going out of business at alarming rates. In times of decreasing resources, it will be happening to more and more of our programs that were effective "once upon a time"—before the whole world changed.

And that is why what we are discussing today is so vital. It is usually the volunteer members of our teams that will have the most innovative and creative ideas because they see what we do with fresh eyes and new perspectives. They do not live with the problems eight to ten hours a day, five days a week, as the staff does. They have different skills and experiences to bring to bear on the problems—and most of all, they are like persistent, inquisitive five-year-olds, constantly asking those pesky "why" and "why not" questions that we hate, but desperately need to hear.

When I got into this field 25 years ago, I was the first director of the first volunteer center in the state of Colorado, and one thing I enjoyed most was developing new and needed services (youth and senior volunteer programs). Now to be honest, many of these programs went very well; but a few failed, and I never liked that.

My late husband, Harvey, shared a wonderful saying with me that helped me stay a risker, in spite of disappointment:

You cannot be creative if you
don't dare risk,
You cannot risk if you don't
dare fail,
It is not failure if you learn
from it.

So—the key to this step is to encourage and support your team's new ideas, try out the most promising ones, celebrate together when ideas succeed, and learn from them if they fail.

VII. Evaluate the Work of the Team Objectively and Honestly

Evaluation is simply examining periodically your *well dones* and your *opportunities to improve*.

Objective evaluation becomes easy when you have steps 1 and 2 in place—a clear mission statement and specific, measurable objectives with action plans that clarify who is responsible for what, how, when, and costs.

You simply measure your performance against these stated goals and decide:

- Did we do what we said we would, on time and within budget? If not, why not—and what do we intend to do to correct the situation (problem solving);
- Then you take a look at each member's job descriptions and assignments and give them timely and honest feedback regarding their well dones and opportunities to improve as well;
- Did you each keep your commitments to one another as a team? (It is vital to hold one another accountable and not rescue or ignore unacceptable behavior or continual failure to perform agreed upon assignments—it is deadly for the morale of the group);
- How do you celebrate your successes together? "The really healthy people of the world know when to

say 'Yes,' when to say 'No,' and when to say *Whoopee!*" How do you say Whoopee as a team?

It is essential that when the work is done as a volunteer/staff team that *all* members of the team are recognized by the organization equally.

One of the major complaints I hear from paid staff is that their agencies so often recognize volunteer contributions with pins, plaques, and parties—but staff's only reward is getting a paycheck and staying in the background. Evaluation forms for paid staff should include "ability to work effectively with volunteers," and their raises and promotions should be influenced by that factor . . . Then we will see staff attitudes toward volunteers change dramatically. Also as letters of appreciation are encouraged to go from staff to volunteers, the reverse is also important.

VIII. Create and Maintain a Healthy Climate

Good collaborative teams value, respect, and appreciate one another. *And they have fun together!!* This is what creates and maintains a healthy organizational climate. Climate is simply how it feels to be there, and it's apparent how important this is when we have volunteers on the team. Why should a person volunteer to work in a place or with a group that makes them feel bad . . . and do it for nothing? The fact is unless they are masochistic, they leave.

A few of the key components that determine the climate of any organization or group within it are the following:

1. Structure

That is how many rules, regulations, layers, or hierarchy, and how much red tape there is. The less, the better!

2. Leadership style

This is the most important factor in determining the climate. Give people the feeling of being their own boss and being considered responsible and valuable versus being bossed and/or ignored.

3. *Warmth and support*

The team collaborates on work to be done rather than getting hung up on roles and turf. Pitching in and helping one another becomes the norm.

4. *Standards*

Caring enough about what we are doing to be at our best versus "anything goes."

5. *Conflict management*

Disagreements and differences are surfaced and dealt with rather than denying or smoothing them over or letting them go underground.

6. *Strong sense of identity and belonging*

All members know why the team is together, their roles and responsibilities, and feel a sense of pride and purpose in being part of the team.

To summarize what collaborative teams of volunteers and staff can and should be, I'd like to share a quote from *How Can I Help?* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman:

The reward, the real grace, of conscious service is the opportunity not only to help relieve suffering but to grow in wisdom, experience greater unity, and have a good time while we're doing it.