

MANAGING THE VOLUNTEER WORKER

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Managing the volunteer worker!

To begin with, I'll bet you can guess how awkward I feel telling a bunch of pro's like you how to run your business. And because I do feel awkward, let me begin with a few further words about my qualifications.

For example, I am a professor. And everyone knows what a professor is -- the guy who tells you how to solve problems he avoided by becoming a professor.

As a professor, moreover, I have behind me all of the resources of a great university. And let me tell you what that means! I expect you have wondered why there is so much knowledge in our colleges. It is because the freshmen always bring in a little -- and the seniors almost never take any away.

But then, very seriously, for some years now I have been working closely with Chamber of Commerce executives. And I have learned some things from them about volunteers in organizations that I will risk passing on to you.

For one, I really can understand why you need help -- being in such a "backward" business. No, maybe "backward" isn't the best way to say it; "upside-down" would get at it better. Out on a factory floor, they pay people money to come work. In your situation -- if people will come to work, you let them.

I know you probably get a little tired having that thrown up to you. Nevertheless, I do sometimes wonder if this "upside-downness" doesn't sometimes get in our way. More specifically, I suggest that the biggest mistake that can be made in dealing with volunteers is to assume that people who say they want to help really do.

Your Friendly Volunteer

I realize how strange that may sound when you say it fast. But let me tell you some of

what I think I understand about this from Chamber of Commerce operations.

To be sure, my Chamber friends started out putting it the other way. "Very often," they said, "these people are your friends -- and of course you don't treat friends like you do other folks. And these people are also volunteers, and that is another big difference."

Well, sure enough, I wasn't going to quarrel with that -- at least not before I knew a lot more. So I said, "O.K., for openers, tell me how friends are different from other people in your kind of operation."

And they did! "You don't hassle your friends," they said, "and of course with friends you don't have to."

"Fine," I said, "I've got that; now tell me how volunteers are different from, say, shop-floor workers." And they did that, too! "Volunteers," they said, "are there because they want to be; workers are there because they have to be."

Of course there was one more thing I needed to know. So I asked, "Does that mean, then, that you don't have motivation/performance problems with these friends of yours who are also volunteers?" "Oh no," they said, "there are problems, alright. They're just different problems." And anxious to help me all they could, they went on to explain the difference. "You see," they said, "these people are also busy with their other lives and it is therefore often difficult for them to get at and stay with their volunteer work."

And there, I submit, you have it! That's exactly the trouble we have with factory workers -- who also often have more important things (to them) on their minds than the boss' business. Put a little differently, the factory worker doesn't do as well as would be appreciated because he doesn't want to badly enough; and that's frequently the problem with volunteers. Oh, sure, they do often have "better" excuses. But your work isn't getting done just the same.

Thus, because friends and volunteers, even when they are your workers, are people just like everybody else, you don't really start all that far ahead just because they volunteered.

Keep Some Of Them Far Away

And let's be very concrete about this. For example, the fact that people help because they want to quickly becomes a "little man who isn't there," as those who "are there because they want to be" too easily come to believe they should "do what, and when, they want to do."

And if you then hesitate to hassle a friend who must help you get out the work, you make it that much easier for him to take advantage of your friendship -- by, as only one possibility, "snowing" you with his "good excuses."

Yet there they are, holding down slots in your operation you can't put better people in as long as they are in them. And there you are -- "stuck."

The moral of this part of our story is almost obvious. If we can't take it for granted that people who say they want to be helpful really do, the first big job is careful recruiting. And as you well know, that is not as paradoxical as it might sound to others -- though it does say more about how "upside-down" this kind of operation is. For isn't it interesting that we must work to get more out of volunteers by keeping some of them as far away from our organizations as we can?

Now I know this runs afoul of one of the "magic" words of our day -- "participation." From all directions they are pushing at us the great virtue of "letting everybody help." But may I say to you, very confidentially because professors aren't supposed to say this, that that is not necessarily so. The fact is that "participation" is by no means all it promises; a square peg in a round hole, by any other name, is still a square peg in a round hole.

"Red-Eye Rule Number Five"

From recruiting, thinking naturally moves to rewarding -- for of course these two things are the other side of one another. Surely, too, nowhere is the volunteer business more "upside-down" than in the reward realm. And here also some of these relationships reach more deeply into the way we live together than is often supposed.

To begin with, we tend/want to think about volunteers as working for nothing -- or nearly so. But that is another mistake it is all too easy to make. Nobody knows better than managers of volunteers that they are not costless. The fact is they have come to you for something they want -- and if you are not doing much for them with money, it must follow

that they are after something else. And suppose what they want and what you can give them do not come out even.

As a point of departure -- saying more about this, let me give an illustration that I am sure will not sound foreign to your world.

I was once told that in Chamber of Commerce work one of the choice assignments was being Chairman of the Industrial Location Committee. The group telling me this then agreed that that was because this job carried with it highly desired rewards -- such as pictures in the papers, and going "out on the town" with visiting dignitaries. But, they were quick to add, there is no necessary connection between those who most want these rewards and those who will do well as Chairman of the Industrial Location Committee.

What we are first and foremost up against here, in other words, is "Red-Eye Rule of Motivation Number Five." We are all the time running into workers, indeed, sometimes having great difficulty steering clear of them, who want jobs but do not really want to do what they require -- who are more interested in receiving rewards (whatever it is they are after) than in earning them. And therewith our "Red-Eye Rule," which says that if people can get what they want without giving the performance we want in exchange, they are very likely to do that.

Now I wonder if some of you are beginning to bristle -- as I say things that are not quite "nice" about some of your volunteers. Of course I know that many of these people are dedicated, competent -- and eager to do exactly what, when, and how you want. I shall therefore not be disturbed if you bristle a bit -- for I also know you have problems with your volunteers because everyone has some.

Getting Along Without Money

And so -- let's move quickly past defensiveness and get to cases. Perhaps, moreover, that can best be done by looking closely at the problem of rewards -- and noting how much easier the factory boss' task is than yours.

To be sure, money does have limitations as a payment for work. But at the very least, it gives us two quite useful kinds of flexibility. On the one hand, what we give people can then pretty easily be increased or decreased -- depending on how well they do. On the other hand, we can in effect say to workers, "O.K. so we don't have just what you want -- but here's some money that will let you get for yourself the next best things on your list."

Without money, we have much less of both of these flexibilities. Where people find what they are looking for in intangibles in and around their jobs, very often we cannot increase or decrease these in response to better or poorer performance. Our people are then, to that extent, out of control.

Moreover, money as a "second-best" may be even more fundamental than this. We know, of course, that job enrichment is a widely acclaimed way of "buying" better help. Unfortunately, however, it has turned out that enriching many jobs is not easy. Failing in that, or at least until we succeed, it is really essential to have a money "second best" option. But where, as in our volunteer operations, job enrichment must succeed now "or else" -- this lack of flexibility can be painfully crippling.

The Preacher Has It Easier

Furthermore, speaking of job enrichment, there are some other complications which also cut across the siamese-twin difficulties of recruiting and rewarding. And these might best be looked at by noting how much better off than you ministers are.

After all, the church is also a "helping" organization. And most of the assistance the minister has available as he manages that helping work must come from volunteers. But if he does not get confused about some quite basic things, he has some real advantages.

Thus, as every minister quickly learns, people do their helping in their way -- and very often that means the easy way. Furthermore (and there really is little confusion about this among ministers), recognizing that giving of oneself is typically so much more costly to givers than giving money, most of his people much prefer to help by giving money rather than giving of themselves. Again, in the absence of all of the just-right job enrichment opportunities, a money "second-best" option can do a lot.

By the way, you can readily see where that puts the minister from the standpoint of the "magic" idea of "participation." Given the facts of life he must deal with, trying to get more help from more and more people at some point becomes turning his organization over to "friendly enemies."

And you can see, too, how much better off he is than you are. His success does not depend on his getting work out of all of his "volunteers." Because, in other words, he can be quite comfortable with members who want mostly to be left alone, one of his treasured assets in a sizable group around him who are content to pay their money and "leave the driving" to someone else.

But you, you're just like the shop-floor supervisor from this standpoint. With the people we're thinking about here, you -- like the factory boss -- usually don't have the option of deciding whether you will take their money or get help from them. Your success depends, as the minister's does not, on getting effective work out of as nearly as possible every member of your volunteer force if you run a volunteer program. And that is why a

key dimension of that job probably has to be keeping many volunteers away from your organization. In short, participation really works only when it is a genuine two-way street -- when those who want to help and those who want help find each other. And note again here that the matter of whether those who say they want to help really do comes quickly to front and center.

The Blind Leading The Blind?

Now on occasion when I talk about some of these things, I get pointed backtalk. And so -- let's be sure what ground we are standing on as we move forward.

To be sure, this backtalk asserts, giving of oneself is more difficult than giving money. But people who come to us as volunteers are already one long step past that; they are ready to give of themselves as we want.

Now if any reader believes that, may I earnestly urge upon you second thoughts! Here again you are at a large disadvantage by comparison with the minister. And may I tell you a church-related story to illustrate.

The plates were being passed by the ushers -- gathering offerings, a significant fraction of which would go for missionary support. One parishioner, when offered a plate, whispered to the usher: "I never give to missions." The usher promptly whispered back: "Then please take something out of the plate, sir, it's for the heathen."

Precisely that is what you are often up against out in the world of managing volunteers. The helping organization must position itself to be helpful to the needy. It is then more uncomfortable than strange that many of those who offer themselves as helpers of the needy are themselves too much in need to be as helpful, as even they no doubt would prefer. This is not to suggest that the needy helping the needy is the same thing as the blind leading the blind. But there are parallels.

Refugees From Discipline

Two cases in point to illustrate. First, one of the key difficulties we have with our volunteers is the problem of disciplining. Not, of course, disciplining in any sense of punishing. But they do need to do what they do so it will help with what the organization is all about -- and that is a very important discipline.

Interestingly enough, however, many people who seek opportunities as volunteers are already refugees from discipline. Thus, they may be escaping from housework, the job of maintaining a home -- which can be, as we all well understand, quite disciplining. Or they may be refugees from "paid" employment, because the expectations of salary-paying employers are too demanding.

Is this not, in both of these instances, much like the blind leading the blind? For one of the things volunteers most need to be helpful, a willingness to be disciplined in the interest of being useful, is precisely what they often do not have. And observe how difficult this irony really is. Refugees from discipline often offer themselves as volunteers because they do not have one of the resources most needed in that work.

Our Deenriched Work World

There is another kind of situation in which the needy are in need of precisely what is not there for them. We do do a lot of thinking these days about job enrichment. Probably, too, people are doing much more deciding about their lives than ever before on the basis of quests for enrichment. In other words, they come into our organizations to escape deenrichment in other realms of their living. And what if they thus come to us wanting much more of something than is there for them?

When, for example, complaints are registered about too little job enrichment, we are already talking about some parts of your organization. Which is to say that even apart from the enrichment needs of volunteers, there is not enough enrichment for our "regulars." Furthermore, "regulars" are much better situated to scramble for the too-little enrichment that is already there than are volunteers. Partly on the basis of the skills required, but also in part on account of having more organizational leverage, paid people can ordinarily outmaneuver unpaid ones.

Please note that I am neither scolding nor complaining. The fact is that we live in a world in which people's feelings about the kind of work they would like to do is significantly out of balance with the kind of work that is out there to be done. And it is not at all surprising that the task of managing volunteers gets painfully caught up in that imbalance.

Love Is Not Enough

This circle of often-uncomfortable relationships can then be completed by two kinds of summary observations. Why do people say they want to help when that is really not quite so? And why do they try to team up with organizations that may not have very much of what they want?

Some things here are explained by the fact that people often do not understand very clearly what they do want -- and we may be living in a world which makes that an especially large problem. Moreover, the complexities of that world surely make it difficult to know what might be available to a volunteer "out there somewhere."

More crucial to these interactions, however, is a very hard fact of life. People say they want to be helpful when they really may not, because when the chips are down, it is the boss, the organization, that must define what "being helpful" means. And is that not, after all, another way of describing what we all think of as "do-gooders" -- people who earnestly, if naively, want to be useful in ways which likely will not be very useful! How often, in this connection, we remind ourselves of Goethe's turn of phrase: "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions" -- and of Theodor Reik's classic book Love Is Not Enough.

In short, it is easy enough to understand why a large gap could develop between what organizations need and what volunteers want to give them. (Remember the young Navy lad who wrote in his first letter to his mother after going to sea: "Dear Mom! One of the reasons I so wanted to get in the Navy was because in the pictures I saw the ships were always so clean and shiny. Now I know why that is.") And it is then no play on words to emphasize that when that gap gets quite wide, volunteer wishes really do move off toward taking rather than giving. And remember, that is what "Red-Eye Rule of Motivation Number Five" is all about -- people who are more interested in receiving rewards than earning them.

You, As A Con Artist

And now -- counting down toward a conclusion -- let me get much more positive about some things. What kind of business are you in from the standpoint of getting more out of volunteers? And I think I know exactly how that should be said. When you find out what the other fellow wants, you must "con" him into joining forces with you.

Now I know it would be easy for you to let the word "con" turn you off. But let's not let words get in our way.

What, after all, are the skills of the "con" man? There are two of these. He must get victims to see the future in a particular way; and victims must take on the contagion of his enthusiasm for that future.

Now, really, don't you do precisely the same thing?

Many people have a very limited capacity to see clearly what might be. But just as an antique dealer must be able to "see in the rough" how a piece of furniture will "finish out," so must you see clearly the future your efforts are pointing toward. Therefore you, just as the "con" man, are in the business of showing people a future they want to be a part of.

There are also people who, though they can see what might be, nevertheless cannot get up a head of steam behind it because success seems so doubtful. That is where enthusiasm comes in. Just as "con" victims must absorb

enthusiasm from the "con" artist, so must you give your volunteers a shot of yours. And by the way, that is the beautiful thing about enthusiasm; it grows when and only when it is shared, and the more it is shared the larger it becomes.

And so -- aren't you, quite literally, in the "con" business? Remember, leadership is defined as letting the other fellow have your way -- for his reasons. In this world in which everybody and his brother has to be more and more in the "volunteer" business, aren't we really in competition with one another to see who can do the better "con" job?

Of course I am teasing you a little about that. There is one difference -- though not, repeat not, in the skills that are needed. Whereas the "con" man is "selling" a future he knows will not happen, you are "selling" one that just might come to be -- if you get the help you need.

In short, what you are doing is manipulating perceptions. And you need have no fear of that word "manipulation." For the fact is that no work of man can be accomplished unless it is "seen" and believed before it is even begun. It follows that what you can achieve by "adjusting" the way people "see" things is perhaps limited only by your imagination. And that says that the key to what you can accomplish in this realm is creative thinking.

And two things more -- very briefly!

First, helping people move more surely toward the future they prefer turns out to be, in large part, helping them "find" their "better selves." Indeed, that is one of the principal joys of working with volunteers -- it is so often a "better self" that is trying to put in an appearance by way of a "helping"/volunteer activity. And isn't it interesting to reflect that, really, "finding" a "better self" is what job enrichment is mostly all about.

Second, I do suggest that you think of your "con" skills as a "secret" weapon. For most of us are funny folks. Though we want very much to be a part of a future we need others to help us see, we nevertheless often resent being "pushed"/"hard sold." Is that not a fancy "Catch-22?" We want to be "conned" as we work to realize our "better selves" -- but we don't want to "see" it happening.