



IMPROVING THE PAID STAFF/VOLUNTEER RELATIONSHIP

ASSESSING YOUR SUPERVISORY SKILLS

By Nancy Macduff

Volunteers who are treated in a professional manner tend to become more professional. They see themselves as part of a professional team and not merely as free labor. Their self-esteem is enhanced. When people feel good about themselves and the work they do, their productivity increases.

Volunteers viewed as "volunteer-staff" work "hand in glove" with paid staff to achieve the goals of the agency. The two groups are mutually supportive. This spirit of teamwork and high morale is dependent in large measure on the style of supervision selected by the professional staff in a volunteer agency. The management team conveys attitudes to paid staff and volunteers through its perception and application of management principles.

Individuals with direct supervisory responsibility should be trained. Training volunteer supervisors and paid supervisors together says a great deal about the agency's philosophy of supervision. It can also build the team spirit.

No one supervisor has all the traits listed in the "art and science" checklist. When possible, they supplement their skills by bringing in other staff or volunteers who complement their personal characteristics. That is team building at its best.

The characteristics of a good supervisor are part of the personality. There are,

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however, principles of supervision that can be learned, measured and improved.

Volunteers Must Understand What Is Expected of Them

Volunteers need to have a full understanding of the organization and how it works. They especially need to see themselves in relationship to the whole—like those maps in shopping malls that show the entire complex with an arrow that says "You Are Here." The volunteers need to understand "where they are."

Volunteers' most immediate needs are related to the job they will be doing for the agency. If a volunteer has been asked to serve on a board or advisory committee, there would be an orientation session to help them understand their job and the expectations of staff, clients and other volunteers.

Once the volunteer understands the job, he/she needs to be told how the quantity and quality of work will be evaluated. Good supervisors should never let volunteers guess how they will be evaluated. There should be no surprises. Good supervisors spell out expectations.

Coaching

Modern American businesses are using a new term to describe the ongoing guidance people should have in their work. They use "coaching" to describe the process of continually providing information, offering techniques to do the job more effectively and suggesting steps for improvement.

In this context, coaching is used to describe the encouragement and direction that are akin to parenting. It is an apt word to describe the supportive nature of supervision.

Recognition

This is the one function of supervision that

supervisors perform least well when rated by volunteers and staff. Most agencies are good at formal certificate and award programs, but it is the small thank yous and pats on the back for a specific job that are the most meaningful.

Constructive Criticism

Volunteers want to do a good job. They appreciate hearing from supervisors how to correct mistakes or improve on new skills. Adults are more apt to change through a process of positive suggestions, rather than by hearing the negative. Supervisors need to find ways to support desired behavior and let volunteers know when their behavior is not up to standard. If a volunteer is chronically late, for instance, the supervisor could start by suggesting a schedule change. If that fails, then perhaps a conversation about the problems causing the delay is in order. The supervisor is focusing on the problem but not shaking a stern finger at a hapless volunteer.

Opportunity for Growth

Volunteers need to be advised by the supervisor about growth opportunities within the agency, including employment. Supervisors should offer volunteers the opportunity to try new things. For example, if the manager of the volunteer program is establishing a short-term task force to evaluate recruiting, a supervisor might recommend one or two volunteers to serve on that committee. If that is successful, the volunteer could become a member of a standing committee.

Some volunteers are happy doing one job. A volunteer should not be rushed into a new job until he or she is ready. Supervisors should provide opportunities and freedom for them to say no.

Good supervisors persuade; they do not coerce.

Safe and Healthy Environment

All volunteers deserve to work in a safe and healthy environment. Good supervision requires an attention to lighting, ventilation and equipment. It is critical that safe working conditions prevail.

Supervisors of volunteers should periodically evaluate their skills. This can be done through self-testing, standardized tests, use of a consultant or by taking classes.

An honest appraisal of skills can lead to developing an improvement plan. Supervisors who want to improve their skills need to write measurable objectives and check them periodically.

Tips for Good Supervision

1. Know all you can about your volunteers. The more you know about their strengths and weaknesses, the better your ability to supervise. Outside factors have a way of interfering with the volunteer job. A knowledgeable supervisor can help volunteers with problem-solving, but only if they know what is going on!

2. Learn to give orders. Good supervisors find ways to outline clearly their ex-

pectations. The goals should be measurable and observable. This needs to be done directly, but in a non-authoritarian manner.

3. Ask volunteers to help. Getting help from volunteers starts with asking. The more informed volunteers are about the entire operation, the better chance of getting help. They need to be involved in problem-solving and even encouraged to dissent. Supervisors learn the most and make the best decisions by exploring all facets of an issue.

4. Make decisions. Do not stall decision-making. Devise a logical sequence of information gathering and opinion testing. Then decide. If you make decisions promptly, you can change direction if the original course of action proved incorrect. The longer decisions are delayed, the less flexibility for change.

5. Settle grievances. For most managers of volunteer programs, settling grievances is the most difficult supervisory problem. It is especially difficult when two volunteers, or staff and a volunteer, are in dispute. The good supervisor is objective. First, gather the facts. Get the best information from the most impartial people. Second, follow

agency policies. Sticking with written policies can save heartache for everyone. The supervisor needs to move as quickly as possible to a solution. The faster you reach resolution, the sooner the volunteers and staff can return to providing client services.

6. Deal with problem volunteers. Start by checking your own supervisory techniques. What do you know about the volunteer? Do your volunteers know what is expected of them? Have you talked about the problem? Have you explained how their behavior affects the clients and the whole organization? Avoiding the problem is like setting a time bomb in the front lobby for everyone to see! The bomb becomes the topic of conversation instead of services to the clients. It will blow up eventually and then the supervisor has lost control.

7. Maintain a sense of humor. There are few problems in the world that will not benefit from a sense of humor. Even if you are not endowed with a generous sense of humor, look for what is amusing in any problem situation. Knowing when to be serious and when not to be relieves stress and tension for volunteers and staff.

The Art and Science of Supervision Checklist

Directions: Rate yourself on the characteristics of good supervisors.

	<i>always</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>rarely</i>	<i>working on it</i>
1. Know that leading is hard work.				
2. Be interested in people.				
3. Have patience.				
4. Have sympathy and tolerance.				
5. Be loyal.				
6. Accept constructive criticism.				
7. Be tactful.				
8. Objective and impartial.				
9. Dependable.				
10. Cooperative.				
11. Democratic.				
12. Enthusiastic.				
13. Keep a sense of humor.				
14. Use imagination.				
15. Apply common sense.				

Supervision Skills Inventory

Directions: Think about your skills. Rate yourself honestly using the following descriptions:

A = Always S = Sometimes R = Rarely W = Working on it

A S R W

A S R W

VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

1. Develop/use clear job descriptions.				
2. Recruit appropriate people for jobs.				
3. Interview fairly and effectively.				
4. Conduct standardized interview.				
5. Provide coaching/supervision process on ongoing basis.				
6. Evaluate performance regularly.				

PLANNING

7. Set goals that are measurable.				
8. Set objectives with people that are achievable and challenging.				
9. Involve people affected in planning process.				
10. Develop back-up plans.				
11. Integrate budget and planning.				
12. Anticipate problems.				
13. Regularly evaluate plans.				

ORGANIZATION

14. Coordinate functions of various areas of organization.				
15. Delegate tasks.				
16. Analyze and direct work flow.				
17. Try to improve or simplify tasks.				

DECISION-MAKING

18. Participate in problem-solving process.				
19. Seek opinions of others in problem-solving.				
20. Solve problems early.				
21. Establish criteria for making decisions.				
22. Make decisions promptly!				

COMMUNICATION

23. Speak clearly and concisely.				
24. Encourage participation by others.				
25. Listen.				
26. Don't make assumptions too quickly.				
27. Write with clarity.				
28. Understand roles of people working in groups.				
29. Compromise.				
30. Mediate.				
31. Analyze group behavior.				
32. Be sensitive to personal feelings.				
33. Control dysfunctional behavior.				
34. Understand incremental nature of achieving change.				

MOTIVATIONAL

35. Praise specific tasks well done.				
36. Consult with volunteers before making decisions that affect them.				
37. Provide promotion and growth opportunities.				
38. Be fair.				
39. Seek consensus.				
40. Support individuals in face of group pressure.				

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

41. Manage stress.				
42. Work to resolve conflicts.				
43. Seek feedback.				
44. Delegate.				
45. Understand personal motivation.				
46. Manage time.				
47. Accept help willingly.				

Adapted from "Goals for Personal Development Inventory" in J.W. Pfeiffer and J.W. Jones (Eds.), *The 1976 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*, p. 59, University Associates, 1976.