

SIX KEY FACTORS IN MANAGING VOLUNTEERS

By Dawn Kepets-Hull

Volunteers are a vital portion of the workforce of many organizations. In fact, some organizations would not be able to sustain themselves if it were not for the tremendous effort put forth by their volunteers.

The cultivation of personal relationships is one of the most important aspects of a volunteer manager's job. Once the manager becomes sensitive to the volunteer's motivational, developmental and job-related needs, and the volunteers develop a sense of trust in "their staff," a good, mutually productive working relationship can begin.

This article focuses on six key factors in volunteer management as they pertain to the operation of Youth For Understanding (YFU), an international high school exchange organization. YFU has offices in over 29 countries. YFU-U.S.A. has about 2,000 volunteers (in addition to 5,000 volunteer host families). They are supervised and supported by approximately 50 paid regional staff members located in ten regional offices around the country. Each regional office, with an average of five paid staff, has between 150 to 250 volunteers to manage. The U.S. national office, located in Washington, D.C., has a paid

staff of around 40 who administer all aspects of YFU's program.

Some of YFU volunteers' responsibilities include

- recruiting U.S. host families, matching international students with these families,
- providing support to both the host family and international student to maintain a good relationship and address any problems that arise,
- orienting both families and students,
- interviewing American students who want to study abroad,
- acting as local public relations staff,
- coordinating alumni activities, and
- conducting training sessions for other volunteers.

Because the organization's revenue comes primarily from fees paid by American students going abroad and international students coming to the United States, the role of the YFU volunteer is crucial to the financial sustainability of the organization.

Factor 1: Job Descriptions

YFU has developed 13 written job descriptions for individuals interested in becoming volunteers with the program. Before making a commitment to volunteer, each individual decides which "job" would be the most appropriate and interesting. These job descriptions are useful in defining specific responsibilities of a given volunteer position, clarifying expectations of the organization with regard to the volunteer's involvement and assess-

ing a volunteer's performance over time.

The job description also provides an appropriate means for suggesting that a volunteer, who has not been able to perform the duties attached to a chosen position, reassess his or her involvement with the organization. Job descriptions are an effective tool in monitoring the quality of volunteer participation, and they enable the organization to maintain the standards with regard to the service provided.

Factor 2: Motivation

What motivates a volunteer? To keep a volunteer interested in working with an organization, it is essential that a volunteer manager understand the motivating forces behind the individual's involvement. If one consults Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the categories of "belonging" and "self esteem" best coincide with the needs of the volunteer.

YFU volunteers have indicated a variety of reasons for their involvement with the organization. Some say they want to learn about another culture. Others want to share their own culture with students from another country. Some want to make a contribution to society by promoting peace and understanding. Still others are interested in building a network, getting to meet people, and simply having fun in their community.

It is important to acknowledge the reasons why a volunteer is participating and to recognize the time, effort and significant contribution that each individual

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Volunteers make presentations to high school students, and also get publicity about local exchange students.

makes to the organization. YFU volunteers work around the clock, sometimes during their normal working hours, to seek advice on how to handle an adjustment problem, to assist with an emergency health situation, to comfort a homesick student, to try to explain cross-cultural differences as a mediatory in a host family/international student dispute, to explain YFU's overseas program to interested American students and their parents, and to arrange educational and social events for students and families.

Factor 3: Recognition

The YFU volunteer is the "frontline" of the

organization. YFU volunteers need to be recognized and thanked continuously for all of the time and energy they devote to the organization. Appropriate recognition helps to satisfy Maslow's hierarchical need of "self-esteem." At annual volunteer training conferences, volunteers receive international flags, one for each international student they have placed or American student they have interviewed. Some regions also award certificates for efforts made to work through very sensitive adjustment situations, for years of service with the organization, for recruitment of new volunteers, or for special community involvement.

According to Janet Simoni, regional director of YFU's Southeast Regional Office, for volunteer recognition to be effective, it must be an on-going process—not just an annual recognition event. It is important to maintain phone contact with volunteers to acknowledge their individual contributions.

In addition to YFU-specific contributions, regional office staff try to keep abreast of volunteer birthdays, births of children and grandchildren, marriages, illnesses, unusual family situations, and deaths giving support or kudos as called for. Special acknowledgements at these times help to satisfy the need that Maslow describes as "belonging." YFU volunteers are, in essence, the "extended family" of the regional office.

Factor 4: The Volunteer Management System

How does one best manage an extended family of approximately 250 who are spread over a seven-state area? YFU has developed a very effective system of volunteer field managers who are located in areas with concentrations of volunteers. Field committees are formed in these areas. In the Southeast Regional Office, for example, a field committee could consist of three to 25 volunteers.

YFU's volunteer field managers are frequently managers by profession. They act as an extension of the regional office and are able to provide "on-site" support for other non-manager volunteers. Because they have more frequent face-to-face contact with volunteers than the regional office staff, the field managers are able to keep the regional office informed about important situations that may be taking place in a volunteer's YFU or personal life, which may have an effect on the volunteer's work for the organization.

Thus, it is important for the office to maintain a personal relationship with each volunteer. The volunteer field managers help to make this relationship possible with the volunteers they supervise on behalf of the regional office.

How can the regional staff best influence the work of its volunteers? In 1959, J.R.P. French, Jr. and B. Raven developed a taxonomy that classifies managerial power into five distinct types, including authority, reward, coercive, expert, and referent power. The latter, referent power, is particularly applicable in managing volunteers. It is defined as subordinate loyalty to the leader and desire to please him or her.

To continue with the idea of an extended family, the regional office staff can be most effective if they are able to cultivate the loyalty of their volunteers. Loyalty must develop over time. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that a low turnover rate of regional staff is a key factor in effective use of referent power.

As volunteers establish relationships with the regional staff, and vice versa, loyalty develops. Because a "personal" relationship then develops, the volunteer will assist with a situation, in part, as a favor to the regional staff person. The more comfortable a volunteer is with a regional staff person, the more effective and efficient the working relationship will be. Volunteer management is a very personal business, and by nature of this fact, it consumes a lot of time.

In other situations, such as handling a difficult cross-cultural adjustment problem, preparing to deliver an orientation to host families/students, or matching a specific student with a host family, expert power is very applicable. Again, it takes time for the volunteer to build a sense of trust in and respect for a given staff member's task-relevant knowledge and competence. However, once established, expert power is effective in giving support to the volunteer and in maintaining the quality of the program.

Which models of organizational behavior can be applied to volunteer management? In "Evolving Models of Organizational Behavior," published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, March 1968, Keith Davis describes four models, including autocratic, custodial, supportive and collegial. The two latter models are applicable to YFU's volunteer management system.

The supportive model emphasizes the manager's primary role as one of providing psychological support and indicates that individuals are more content and productive when they perceive that they are working in a supportive environment. In the 1940s-50s, Rensis Likert and his associates explored the "employee-oriented supervisor." Likert's description of the support model can be applied to YFU's approach to volunteer management:

The leadership and other processes of the organization must be such as to ensure a maximum probability that in all interactions and all relationships with the organization each member will, in light of his background, values and expectations, view the experience as supportive and one which builds and maintains his



Ken Music Photography

Educators sometimes become Youth For Understanding International Exchange volunteers after seeing how much their students gain from exchange.

sense of personal worth and importance." (*New Patterns of Management*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961, pp.102-103)

The supportive model also addresses the volunteer's need for affiliation by cultivating a sense of personal worth and importance in the volunteer. As the individual's personal needs are met, the organization hopes that he or she will be motivated to work toward the organization's goals and objectives and remain an active volunteer for a period of time.

The collegial model is also particularly applicable to the work of the YFU volunteer. Most YFU volunteers work out of their homes with no direct supervision. They must be self-disciplined and personally responsible for completing assignments. Each volunteer must feel that he or she is making a worthwhile contribution to the organization, which in turn contributes to the development of the volunteer.

In the collegial model, it is important that each volunteer feel needed and wanted. Regional staff spend substantial time ensuring that this feeling is enhanced. An effective regional director is not seen as a "boss" by volunteers, but as a member of the extended family. The regional staff and field managers work hard to preserve an enthusiastic feeling among volunteers, and morale is measured by the volunteer's commitment to the task and to the field committee.

Factor 5: Managing Burnout

Just as volunteer retention is important to the organization, so is burnout an important issue to address. There are a number of factors that contribute to burnout. These factors include over-stimulation, personal problems, mismatch of volunteer to job description, insufficient training, regional staff turnover, and insufficient regional or field support.

Over-stimulation may result from a shortage of volunteers in a given area, or a very difficult and time-consuming situation with a host family/international student. Or it may be the result of over-enthusiasm on the part of a new volunteer, which sometimes results in the need to give support in too many situations at one time.

Regional staff turnover, insufficient training, and lack of regional or field manager support may lead to frustration on the part of the volunteer. In the former case, frequent change in staff positions requires that the volunteer "prove" himself or herself all over again, and decide whether this new staff member is to be a "trusted" expert. Insufficient training leads new volunteers to feel overwhelmed, and lack of support requires them to be more responsible than they want to be.

An effective volunteer manager tries to nip burnout in the bud. This can be accomplished if the manager has a good sense of what is going on with a volunteer

personally. It is important for a manager to be aware of what each volunteer's "case-load" is and to try to recruit an appropriate number of volunteers in a given area. Field managers are relied on heavily by regional office staff to indicate specific situations where burnout may occur.

If burnout has occurred, there are a few routes a manager can take to correct the problem. Trula Duane, former regional director and current program director for American Overseas Admissions at YFU's U.S. national office, has a few suggestions for treating burnout. She says it is always important to acknowledge the problem with the volunteer and discuss the causes.

Duane believes that a change of roles (a new job description) can often help to rejuvenate a volunteer. A suggested sabbatical from volunteer responsibilities can give volunteers time to reassess their primary interest in volunteering and to decide if they want to continue in the future. And, sometimes, said Duane, it is just as important to acknowledge all that the volunteer has contributed to the organization and allow him or her to say good-bye.

Factor 6: Human Resource Development

Human resource development means providing training and education for the volunteer. YFU's on-going process of training and educating both new and more experienced volunteers needs to serve a number of purposes, so the organization has developed a comprehensive training program for volunteers that enhances their skills in a variety of areas, such as cross-cultural communication, problem-solving and effective presenting. Through training, volunteers develop confidence in the work they do for the organization, and they are able to provide higher quality service to YFU participants.

Improved volunteer performance with host families, for example, means that families will receive the assistance they need and may decide to host again in the future. (Assistance is non-financial, since all YFU host families are volunteers.) As host families are difficult to find, host family retention is a very important factor in the sustainability of YFU's exchange program.

Training also provides the volunteer with the opportunity to grow personally. Skills acquired at YFU training workshops can be transferred to the volunteer's professional career, and in some cases may lead to promotions or new professional positions. ■



A volunteer host family in North Carolina found hosting a Norwegian exchange student to be fun and educational.

Photo by Susie Fitzhugh



Intercultural training makes Youth For Understanding International Exchange volunteers better able to assist families and students.

Photo by Valda Perry