

Learning About Volunteer Burnout

(It Can Improve Your
Retention Rate)

By Laurel Stulken Dean, Ph.D.

W

hen you lose a volunteer, you not only lose a valuable resource, but you also lose the time you have invested. You must make new time to start the placement process over with a new volunteer. Knowing something about volunteer burnout can improve your volunteer retention rate.

Before you can begin to deal with the problem of volunteer turnover, you must clearly define the problem. Of the volunteers who leave, what percent left for one of the following reasons: employed full time, moved out of the area, cost of volunteering too high or burned out?

There are many reasons why volunteers leave an organization. Many of them we cannot control, i.e., moving to a new community, children no longer eligible for membership, volunteer job and new paying position conflict with specific hours. Thus,

managers of volunteer programs need to recognize that a certain percentage of volunteer turnover is totally out of their control. Once that percentage is defined, volunteer administrators can quit worrying about why those volunteers leave. Instead, you should realize that every year there will be a certain number of "replacement" volunteers to recruit.

There are several reasons, however, why volunteers leave an organization that a volunteer administrator can change. In a 1984 survey conducted by the California Cooperative Extension Service, the following were some of those controllable reasons cited by volunteers who discontinued service to the organization with which they had been involved:

- Support lacking from others (staff and volunteers) in the organization.
- Poor relationships with other volun-

teers and staff—general interpersonal problems.

- Lack of orderliness and honesty.
- Too busy with school, family, work.

The 80-20 Ratio

Is 80 percent of your time and efforts producing 20 percent of your results? If you have been attacking the wrong problems or spending time with the wrong volunteers, that is probably true for you.

As you evaluate your volunteers' work, you will likely find that 20 percent or less of your volunteers are producing 80 percent of the results. Which volunteers are you likely to miss the most if they leave the orga-

Laurel Dean is a 4-H youth specialist in the area of staff development and training at the Cooperative Extension Service/University of California, Berkeley.

nization due to burnout? Certainly one of those highly involved and productive volunteers.

Which volunteer is likely to be a candidate for burnout? Again the highly involved and productive volunteer.

So, if you believe in the 80-20 ratio, develop a plan of action that clearly defines that 20 percent of your time and energies will be directed toward training and supporting those volunteers who produce 80 percent of the results.

the heart of the burnout syndrome. A person gets overly involved emotionally, overextends himself or herself, and feels overwhelmed by the emotional demands imposed by other people. Once *emotional exhaustion* (one aspect of burnout) sets in, people feel they are no longer able to give of themselves to others. They want to reduce their contact with people to the bare minimum required to get the job done.

The development of this detached, callous and even dehuman-

Feeling negatively about others can progress until one feels down on oneself. At this point, a third aspect of burnout appears—a feeling of *reduced personal accomplishment*. With this feeling of failure and reduced self-esteem, depression may set in. Some will seek counseling for what they believe are their personal problems. Others will change for what they believe are their personal problems. Still others will change their volunteer jobs often to abandon any kind of work that brings them into stressful contact with people. Volunteers will either leave the organization or begin affecting others with their negative attitudes.

Maslach says we tend to see people as the cause of burnout rather than thinking in terms of *what* is causing burnout. Instead of focusing on just the people involved, we need to focus on the *situation* in which they find themselves.

"What sort of tasks are they expected to do and why?" Maslach writes. "In what setting do these activities take place? What limitations or constraints exist for them because of protocol, rules, standard operating procedures, and so forth? *Such a focus allows for the possibility that*

“Once emotional exhaustion sets in, people feel they are no longer able to give of themselves to others.”

Volunteer Burnout

Just what is "burnout"? It has all the signs of lack of motivation, but is that the case?

According to Christina Maslach, University of California, Berkeley, "Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind. It is a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing extensively with other human beings, particularly when they are troubled or having problems. Thus, it can be considered one type of job stress. Although it has some of the same deleterious effects as other stress response, what is unique about burnout is that the stress arises from the *social* interaction between helper and recipient."

Emotional overload and subsequent emotional exhaustion are at

“Maslach says we tend to see people as the cause of burnout rather than thinking in terms of what is causing burnout.”

ized response signals a second aspect of the burnout syndrome—*depersonalization*. They begin to develop a poor opinion of people, expect the worst from them and may even actively dislike them.

the nature of the job may precipitate burnout and not just the nature of the people performing that job."

Frederick Herzberg, in his studies and theory of motivation, stated,

Helping volunteers realize that they are not alone in feelings of emotional exhaustion, frustration or lack of achievement will reduce some of the stress they are feeling.

"The nature of the job itself is very relevant to one's motivation." Herzberg calls other factors, such as the environment or setting in which the work occurs, the type of supervision, and rules and regulations "hygiene" factors. Improving these "hygiene" factors will not contribute to a volunteer's motivation. However, if these "hygiene" factors are dissatisfying to a volunteer, he or she will appear to become demotivated. The symptoms of "burnout"—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a feeling of reduced person accomplishment—will begin to appear if the *situation* in which volunteers are working is dissatisfying.

It is the job of the volunteer administrator to identify the volunteer's motives and place the volunteer in a position that will fulfill both the individual's and the organization's needs. In addition, volunteer administrators need to provide the type of supervision that will create a satisfactory situation in which to work as well as provide the training that will enable their volunteers to control the situational causes of "burnout."

What To Do

To reduce volunteer turnover due to burnout, the volunteer administrator can initiate steps in three areas: (1) improvements in the job itself, (2) helping the volunteer develop per-

sonal skills to deal with burnout, and (3) social and organizational approaches.

Volunteer Job Improvement.

Each situation needs to be evaluated individually.

- Is there a desirable match of job to volunteer based on the volunteer's motives?
- Is the job one that could or should be divided into two or three jobs?
- Can the job be simplified?
- Are their meetings to be attended or reports to submit that could be eliminated?
- Are there rules and regulations (real or imagined) related to the job that could be eliminated to allow more freedom and creativity?
- Would this volunteer function better in a position where he or she had less contact with people *or* contact with different people?
- Are we, the administrators, guilty of constantly allowing job spillover? Just when a volunteer thinks he or she has completed a task, do we add a new one with barely a thank-you and time for the volunteer to enjoy a feeling of satisfaction?
- Do we provide the volunteer with adequate information and resources to do the job?

Developing Personal Skills to Deal with Burnout. Some of the

skills that will help people learn to handle burnout themselves are

- Setting realistic goals
- Working smarter—not harder (organizational and time management skills)
- Doing the same thing differently
- Breaking away (it's okay to take time off)
- Taking things less personally
- Taking care of self physically and mentally
- Accentuating the positive
- Resting and relaxation
- Improving interpersonal relations skills
- Learning how to deal with different people, how to deal with conflict.

As volunteer administrators, we need to include in our volunteer orientation and training package those competencies that will help them personally deal with and control their involvement. We need to teach volunteers to pace themselves, to realize that it's okay to say no and to set realistic goals.

Social and Organizational Approaches.

The companionship of colleagues is a very positive method of helping people develop their own personal skills as well as a means of giving people an opportunity to get help, comfort and gain insight from their peers. Helping volunteers realize that they are not alone in feelings of emotional exhaustion, frustration or lack of achievement will reduce some of the stress they are feeling.

Informal get-togethers of volunteers and staff, regular phone calls or visits where volunteers are allowed to express their feelings and concerns without judgement or comment are but a couple of ways to foster colleague companionship.

So, begin by identifying the 20 percent of volunteers who are producing 80 percent of the results in your organization. Set aside at least 20 percent of your time to work closely with those volunteers. You will then be able to get to know these people and their motives, and soon will be able to recognize when signs of burnout are occurring. You will also be able to provide the type of supervision, orientation and training needed to help these volunteers succeed and control the situation in which they are working.