

How to PREVENT VOLUNTEER BURNOUT

What An Expert Says

By Martha Bramhall
Interviewed by Donna Hill

Q. What is volunteer burnout?

A. Volunteer burnout is a mental, emotional and physical condition that manifests itself in a variety of symptoms. Most notably, the volunteer experiences a shift or change in perspective. The volunteer is markedly different from that person who came in with high intensity and eagerness to work. He/she came to the position with a strong commitment and now is sloughing off. Volunteers who burn out shift from idealistic enthusiasm to the cynical and negative. For example, a hot line volunteer who normally fights over who will answer the phone first may shift and start saying, "It's your turn; I took the last one."

Q. Why do volunteers burn out? What are the common causes?

A. People volunteer for complex reasons, and many of those reasons are tied to their emotions. People who volunteer are particularly connected to the mission of the organization. Also, people who volunteer don't have a lot of training in the particular field they're working in. So their attitudes, values and expectations of what they will get out of this work are very idealistic and often unrealistic.

And when you have people who are connected to the mission without a clear sense of realistic expectations, you have people who are very prone to burning out. An example would be a person whose mother

died of a rapidly moving cancer and decides six months later to volunteer for the American Cancer Society. That person is volunteering to work through grief as well as to help cancer patients. If this person doesn't understand that some of it is grief work, there's a good possibility the volunteer could burn out because he

VAL interviewed Martha Bramhall, once a burnout victim herself, on the symptoms of volunteer burnout and appropriate cures and prevention steps to take. Bramhall is a licensed clinical social worker and burnout consultant in the Washington, D.C. area.

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or she isn't going to get what he or she expects from the volunteer work.

The common causes of burnout are lack of reward, too much work, not meeting expectations, lack of training, inadequate supervision and direction, lack of funds to accomplish goals, too many difficult tasks. Lack of reward is a big factor because the volunteer is not getting the reward of a paycheck.

Q. Who is more likely to burn out?

A. Certain personality types are more likely to burn out than others. These people are the leaders, the high achievers. They have difficulty admitting to limitations; they tend to push themselves too long and too hard, and refuse to compromise along the way. Their work most likely involves empowering and motivating others, and they tend to measure their success or failure through the success or failure of others. Ironically, this type of individual is also the one most likely to volunteer.

Q. What are the physical and emotional symptoms of burnout?

A. Volunteers who burn out feel overwhelmed. They feel tired though

they are getting plenty of rest. They anger more easily, and things that didn't used to bother them start getting on their nerves. There's usually a change in their eating or sleeping behavior. They feel an increasing sense of responsibility with an accompanying sense of feeling incapable of doing the task.

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People who used to talk a lot tend to be silent. They feel exhaustion in five spheres: first, emotional, intellectual and physical. Then, they feel an interesting sense of social isolation when in fact they isolate themselves because they can't stand the thought of answering anyone else's needs. At the same time, they describe a sense of existential loneliness. Finally, they feel spiritually depleted and ask themselves, "What's the use?"

Q. How is that different from "rust out"?

A. When a volunteer starts "rusting out," he or she is getting bored. The overwhelming feeling is, "I'm really bored with this; I want you to give me something else to do; I need variety." The reactions of burned out and rusted out volunteers may appear to be similar. The volunteer who is burning out may say, "Maybe I need to do something else because I'm so overwhelmed by this." With rustout, the volunteer may also feel the need to do something else, but if you talk to him or her, you discover that the volunteer is not being challenged by the assignment.

Q. Are there any signs to warn you that a volunteer is in danger of burning out?

A. Anything you see that's a real shift in the original way the volunteer came to you is important to look for. Generally, volunteers start out with high enthusiasm for the task. If you

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see a shift in perspective to the negative or cynical, that volunteer is in danger of burning out.

Listening is the first step toward understanding, reducing and preventing burnout. As a volunteer administrator, it’s very important that you ask people how they’re feeling about their work, how the work is affecting them emotionally. You should ask that all the time and develop ongoing training or group sessions to get that information.

Q. How can staff attitudes affect volunteer burnout?

A. Staff can help by being hospitable rather than hostile to volunteers. Volunteers will be looking to staff for approval. They are not volunteering to face hostility. But if staff are really hostile to volunteers, you’re likely to have burnout in the organization.

If staff are hostile and you can’t do anything about it, let volunteers know the situation so they don’t get a lot of mixed messages, or come in with unrealistic expectations.

Q. After volunteers burn out, what’s next?

A. Coming to some understanding of what is happening to them is vital to the recovery of people who have burned out. Bring out in the open what happened. Make it clear that this process is not abnormal, that it has happened to many others. Find out why burnout occurred. Ask what were the values and attitudes that

brought them to this point. What were some of the aspects of the volunteer job that led them to be disillusioned? Talk about their frustrations, their expectations. Then talk about their behavior in a nonpunitive way. Tell the volunteer that he or she is a very important and valuable person who’s behaving in a negative way. Tell the volunteer you want to help

resolve whatever problems he or she is having.

Then you can negotiate. The volunteer administrator has the final say on whether or not a volunteer can go back to a job. You may grant a brief leave of absence, telling the volunteer that you value and want him or her and encouraging him or her to come back.

You may decide to monitor the volunteer’s performance for a period of time. Agree that if the volunteer is still having problems, he or she can change volunteer assignments. If the volunteer’s behavior is very destructive, then that volunteer may not be cut out for the work.

Again, it’s very important that the volunteer understands what happened and why. That way you can turn the situation around so it won’t happen again.

Q. Should particular personality types be matched with specific jobs to minimize the possibility of burnout?

A. No. What’s more critical is the groundwork the volunteer administrator does in the beginning. You should first examine the potential for burnout. A good test to use as part of

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the volunteer's initial training is the Potential to Burnout Quiz (see box). Use this as a starting point to talk about burnout.

A lot of volunteer burnout can be combatted by talking about it from the onset. Say to volunteers, "I expect you to feel frustrated and when you get there, come back and talk to me about it," rather than letting them go through this period of frustration without having a sense that this is really not abnormal.

Certain personality types make it especially critical that the volunteer administrator sets the tone in the beginning. When volunteers first start out, you need to note those who are in the glow of idealistic enthusiasm. They are the ones you particularly want to "red flag" and keep an eye on and maybe hold the reins on a little from the beginning. The tendency of an overworked volunteer administrator is to drive these people on.

Q. What skills should the volunteer administrator develop to help prevent burned-out volunteers?

A. Volunteer administrators already have the skills they need to help minimize burnout; they just may need a little refining. To your skills of assessing whether a person would be a good volunteer, add talking to the potential volunteer clearly about expectations, getting him or her to have realistic expectations from the beginning.

To interviewing skills, add the task of interviewing/interacting with volunteers to discuss how it's going.

To initial and ongoing training, add specific training on burnout. You already have the ability to evaluate performance; add evaluating burnout potential. Add to feedback how the volunteer seems to be dealing with situations that can lead to burnout. You can assess a person's needs; add to that assessment how much help each person will need to reduce the potential for burnout.

The volunteer administrator has already faced the unpleasant task of telling a volunteer that he or she needs to change assignments or responsibilities as a last ditch effort; add to that the ability to talk through the behaviors associated with burnout and why those behaviors make it

impossible for the volunteer to continue to do the assigned job.

In other words, all the positive things you've read about being a good volunteer administrator (i.e., providing recognition, ensuring proper supervision, ensuring proper training) are helpful in dealing with burnout. If you beef up your skills, you'll keep more volunteers from burning out.

POTENTIAL TO BURNOUT QUIZ

1	2	3	4	5
Does not describe me at all		Describes me somewhat		Describes me very much

Please rate the following self-descriptive statements according to the above scale:

1. My standards of performance seem higher than most other people that I work with.
2. I consider myself to be extremely dedicated and committed to the mission of my volunteer work.
3. I seem to want more intense interactions in my life than most other people I know.
4. Others tend to see me as highly competent.
5. I tend to be more of an emotional person than an intellectual, rational person.
6. I am generally admired by my peers.
7. I consider myself to be a high energy person.
8. I have difficulty telling others about my imperfections.
9. I tend to be more self critical than self accepting.
10. I believe that if I simply try hard enough, I will reach my goals.
11. I would describe myself more as an extremist than a moderate person in that when I do something, I do it 100 percent.
12. Once I reach a goal, I rapidly lose the thrill of having achieved it and quickly set my sights on another goal.
13. I think of myself as persuasive.
14. Though others may not; I think of myself as an impatient person.
15. I have trouble delegating tasks that I enjoy but know that others could carry out just as well or almost as well as I do.

Scoring Key:

- 15-35 — low potential to burnout
- 36-55 — moderate potential to burnout
- 56-75 — high potential to burnout