

REQUIRED VOLUNTEERING: Contradiction or Congruity?

By Joy Peters

Joe is caught shoplifting. It's his first offense, and he has no other police record. Rather than serving time in jail, he is sentenced to 100 hours of community service.

Susan attends a parochial high school and must complete 30 hours of community service to graduate.

Beth is working towards a degree in special education. She is required to participate in a student internship program in which she must volunteer in the community to gain firsthand experience.

More and more, these thumb-nail sketches depict the eager "volunteer" who calls for a placement. In fact, as high as 30 percent of the individuals who are volunteering in my agency at any given time are motivated by other than altruistic sentiments.

Webster defines a volunteer as "one who enters into or offers himself for any service of his own free will." The graduation requirement and court-ordered sentence stretch the concept of free will and throw an additional ingredient into the volunteer pot—that of external motivation. In light of these examples, where the motivation is somewhat reflective of the mother who "volunteers" her son to do the dishes, the question is whether this external factor detracts from the essence of volunteerism. Does the requirement contradict the traditional spirit of the action, or can a broader definition of volunteerism bring the requirement into congruence with the concept of giving of self to help another?

The changing motivations of volunteers certainly require a change in use in terms of how we manage our non-paid staff. It is

reassuring to recognize that in spite of the transition in volunteerism, the results are often the same. Many times, a court ordered volunteer who finds fulfillment in completing a graduation requirement frequently feels good because he has helped a child improve his sports skills. Because of this underlying reality—that regardless of whether the volunteer is internally or externally motivated, he can and does receive personal satisfaction—the goals of volunteerism are achieved. It is still people helping people. Individuals are offering their skills to other individuals or agencies without attaching a price tag, and the dividends remain high.

So how should we respond? As managers of volunteers, should we react in a slightly cynical manner when a prospective volunteer admits to other than the purest motives? Should we throw up our hands in horror and lament the passing of the true spirit of volunteerism?

Perhaps a better approach is to accept these changes. Recognize that there will be fewer volunteers operating out of purely selfless motives. The trend is definitely moving in the direction of people seeking volunteer positions as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Rather than viewing this as a contradiction to the essence of volunteerism, let's broaden our perspective and expand the definition of the volunteer. Let's include not only those who provide a service of their own free will but also those who are guided by other reasons to seek service placement. Regardless of the initial motivation, the remuneration is the same: personal satisfaction. By capitalizing on this trend and turning it into a positive factor, we have the opportunity of tapping the potential of many individuals who otherwise we would have little chance of enlisting.

Broadening our definition of volunteerism does not mean changing our goals,

however. The goal of a good volunteer program must still be to "man the trenches" and meet the needs of the agency. While this goal must continue to be uppermost, because of the changing motivation of volunteers, we must also seek to fulfill their specific needs if we are to retain them.

As a first step, probing the individual's motivation and perception is essential. A relaxed interview provides the best atmosphere for uncovering the "hidden agenda" that indicates a volunteer's true motivation. The interview is also an appropriate time to determine the individual's attitude towards volunteering. Discovering these feelings is particularly critical when placing a volunteer with a requirement attached. Does the volunteer see the obligatory placement as an imposition on his or her time? Or is he/she fulfilling the requirement with a sense of anticipation?

The second step is obvious: making a suitable placement that meets the needs of the volunteer *and* the agency. If we only consider the needs of our agency, we will find ourselves mechanically fitting people into slots, and the results will be disappointing. Just as a young child becomes frustrated by attempting to force the wrong puzzle piece into a space, our goals will be hindered by a lower level of productivity and a higher incidence of absenteeism among our volunteers if we drop them into the first available vacancy without considering their needs. People contribute their best when they feel in tune with what they are expected to do, and this means careful placement.

As managers of volunteers, we must expand our vision and accept the age of the "required" volunteer. It offers us a dynamic volunteer force whose requirement poses no threat to the very essence of volunteerism—that of reaching out in service to others.

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