

The Implications of Gravy

A number of years ago I conducted a workshop in a rural area on volunteer recruitment. As we discussed why some people are reluctant to volunteer, one participant observed: "People don't like to volunteer for us because they don't like to get the back of their cars dirty." She went on to explain that she ran a homebound meal delivery program that had to use a certain type of food container with a lid that did not fit properly. As a result, gravy splattered onto the back seats of the volunteers' cars.

The rest of the group and I questioned why these containers couldn't be replaced or fixed, but the woman said she had no options. Another participant raised her hand. "We had the same problem," she said. "Now what we do is send the gravy out in thermos bottles. Not only does it keep the volunteers' cars clean, but our clients receive gravy that is still hot."

I was delighted. We had used our brains and found an easy, inexpensive solution to the first woman's problem. Or so we thought. She replied, "Oh, we could never afford thermos bottles." Then I shocked everyone by saying: "Then I suppose you don't deserve to recruit any volunteers."

In effect, my trainee was saying she would rather continue to search for volunteers willing to have the backs of their cars soaked with gravy than to fix the real problem. After all, this was a rural area with no more than 15 delivery routes a day. What could it have cost for enough thermos bottles? Was there really no merchant or civic-minded person who might donate 15 thermos bottles to this cause if asked? Couldn't a volunteer provide a thermos for his or her own route?

By the end of the day, all was well. The woman had acknowledged that what she had expressed as a volunteer recruitment problem was, in fact, an institutional obstacle that also hurt recruitment.

Does your organization have a gravy problem? That is, does it throw obstacles in the way of volunteers? Consider some of the ways nonprofits make it hard for people to volunteer even while they're told they are wanted and needed.

Inflexible scheduling: While many organizations allow individual volunteers to select their most convenient work schedules once "on the job," the initial

screening interview may be offered only from nine to five on weekdays. Or new volunteer orientations may be scheduled only in the mornings—or only in the evenings. Ditto for training sessions, especially if they're offered only once or twice a year at set intervals. So the volunteer faces the burden of juggling his or her available time before deriving any satisfaction from the work itself.

Limited assignment options: The more variety in potential volunteer assignments, the easier it is to find ways to engage a wide range of prospects. Conversely, offering only an option or two gives people the choice of compromising their interests and skills to help you...or going elsewhere to volunteer. Do you have short term as well as ongoing volunteer roles? Are there ways people can test the water by helping you once or twice? How creatively can you respond if someone offers you a skill you didn't expect?

Unrealistic assignments: The gravy story is an example of unrealistic expectations. There are other ways we place unreasonable demands on volunteers. We may want the recording secretary to take minutes, type them personally, and mail them out—all from home. This implies that the volunteer not only knows how to take minutes, but has the clerical skills and the necessary equipment available to do the entire job. Another volunteer may be expected to handle all the financial and administrative recordkeeping for a special event, and also to recruit other volunteers to help on the day of the program. This requires "left side/right side of the brain" talents which may be contradictory. Some volunteers are turned off because they continuously feel inadequate to the whole job and unrecognized for the subtasks they can do well.

Actual and hidden costs: Are there out-of-pocket expenses expected of every volunteer? Comparatively small costs such as feeding parking meters or vending machine snacks can add up over time for volunteers who survive on fixed income or parental allowances. Not so obvious may be the need for a volunteer to purchase work-appropriate clothing, subtle pressure to contribute to holiday funds, or feeling obligated to buy something for a client (which may actually not be something you encourage at all). Ex-

amine the annual amount of money volunteers spend on your behalf. Can any of this be reimbursed or covered in some other way? If not, you may be inadvertently sending the message that only well-to-do volunteers need apply.

The concept of membership: In some settings, it is not enough that volunteers give their time in direct service. In addition, all volunteers are expected to "join" the organization or some special group such as an auxiliary. This may entail yet another cash expense, and also carries the burden of additional obligations, mailings, and still more meeting invitations. Evaluate what the purpose of such memberships really is. Is there a clear benefit to the volunteer? Or is the real motive to add to the membership roles of a group struggling to keep current? As more volunteers seek short-term, product-oriented assignments, the concept of membership (which almost always operates on an annual basis) may have little relevance.

Resistance to diversity: "Diversity" is today's politically correct goal. While most organizations are genuine in their desire to attract multi-racial and multicultural volunteers, they do not expect to change the way they do business. In other words, organizations want volunteers (and employees, too) to look diverse, but to do the same work in the same ways as in the past. Volunteers who are different in background, income, or education may also bring new approaches to their assignments. For example, working "by committee" is a very traditional, Anglo-Saxon way to organize people. A Latino neighborhood group or African-American church guild might operate with a different structure and be equally productive. How open is your organization to alternative methods of getting work done? Do you adapt to the needs of volunteers or expect volunteers to adapt to you? Is there room for compromise?

There are other diversity issues to consider. For example, there may be tension between new volunteers and veteran volunteers if the newcomers are much younger or come from the corporate world. Members of an "advisory council" recruited for their expertise may soon find no one actually wants any "advice."

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