Difficult Volunteers

Collision Between Perception and Reality May Require an Attitude Adjustment

By Susan M. Chambré

Several years ago, I spent a few days reviewing the monthly magazine of a New York City-based nonprofit organization that provides information and services to people living with AIDS. On one of the days, I shared a conference table with a tall and somewhat frail man. Soon after he arrived, he struck up a conversation. He said he was living with AIDS, lived alone in an efficiency apartment and volunteered for the agency several mornings each week. During gaps in the conversation, he occupied himself by slowly and patiently removing pennies from a large glass bowl. One by one, he counted the pennies and put them into wrappers. Mostly, though, he chatted with me and with the staff members who were working in the office. At the end of the morning, he said it was time for him to leave but he would return in two days. I sensed that he felt the morning had been successful. He was quite cheerful, certainly more cheerful than when he arrived: he had gotten out, done something useful and had some human contact.

After he left, I noticed that he really had done very little. The sum total of his work was two completed rolls of pennies. The large bowl of pennies seemed as full when he left as when he arrived. I would have found such a modest achievement to be enormously frustrating. But for him, the day was productive: He was "fighting AIDS" in his way.

This encounter vividly illustrated the executive

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director and volunteer director's belief that this agency's volunteer program was one of its services, one way it helped its clients. And, the encounter was a reminder of the myriad meanings of volunteer work and the kind of tunnel vision resulting from thinking about volunteers as "unpaid staff."
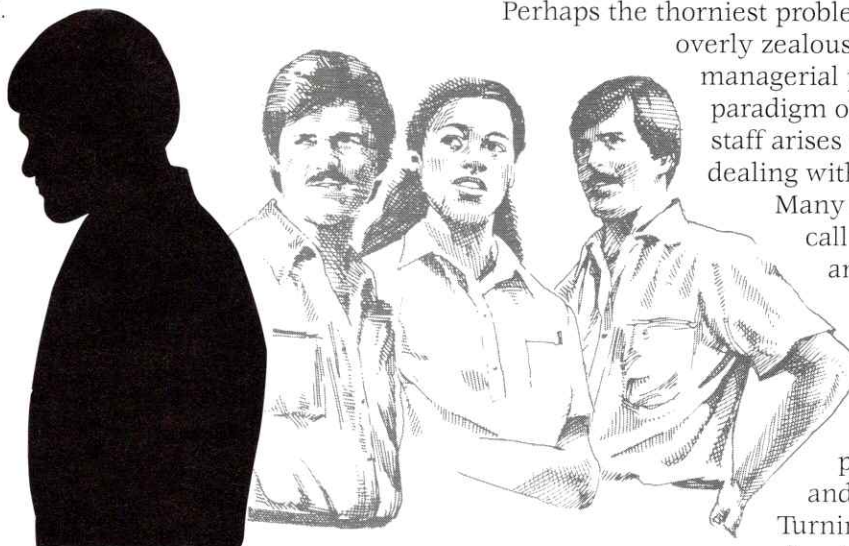
Perhaps the thorniest problem arising out of the overly zealous application of managerial principles based on the paradigm of volunteers as unpaid staff arises when one thinks about dealing with difficult volunteers. Many of the limits of what I call the "workplace analogy," the idea that volunteers can be managed using the same methods as paid staff, lead to a definition of some people as unproductive and difficult volunteers. Turning the lens, and reframing the meaning of volunteering, this article offers some perspectives and recommendations on ways to use a broader image of what volunteering is about to consider ways to deal with "difficult" volunteers.

Not Unpaid Staff

Much of the literature on nonprofit and volunteer management views volunteers as unpaid staff who are hired, trained, supervised and, if necessary, fired. An unstated assumption in many discussions is that techniques developed to manage paid staff are easily adapted to working with volunteers. Yet, this anecdote and some books and articles on managing volunteers indicate that there are considerable differences in the nature of the relationship between volunteers and the organizations that "employ" them. These differences render many basic principles of personnel management inappropriate

for volunteers. This is symptomatic of a larger problem among nonprofit organizations. According to David E. Mason in *Leading and Managing the Expressive Dimension: Harnessing the Hidden Power Source of the Nonprofit Sector,* nonprofit organizations often focus on achieving the objective, measurable aspects of their mission rather than also promoting features of organizational structure and culture that foster the emotional and expressive aspects of people's participation. Mason implies that there is greater interest in training people to manage nonprofits rather than to lead them, whereas elements of both are necessary.

Participation in volunteer work is generally un-coerced and often involves an array of complex, changing and even seemingly contradictory motives—a combination of self-interest, altruism, community concern, the desire to "give back" as well as gain "job experience." Volunteer work also is a chance to have good times and do good works, an image vividly described in *Invisible Careers* by Arlene Kaplan Daniels.

To think about "managing" or even better "leading" volunteers, it is important to understand how volunteering is not truly "work" but a much more complex endeavor.

While paid staff are needed because of their ability to perform a particular job, the motives for employing volunteers are far more complex. "Hiring" volunteers clearly reduces the costs of doing business. It permits small organizations to operate on a shoe string and large ones like Girl Scouts and Big Brothers/Big Sisters to extend their reach or, in instances like the Red Cross, to call upon volunteers as a reserve labor pool in an emergency. But cost considerations alone are not the major reason to hire volunteers. Perhaps more important is the fact that volunteers give organizations legitimacy. Volunteers' reputations can enhance an organization's reputation and forge a greater connection between an organization and the community in which it is embedded.

Before focusing on ways to identify and respond to difficult volunteers, it is important to consider briefly some of the circumstances that lead people to become involved in an organization and give the gift of their time. Studies of volunteers' motives suggest that there are a number of patterns or types of volunteers, and these motives and types of individuals intersect and combine in complex ways. Some people are interested in building organizations they feel are important while others are more directly concerned with a cause, and choose an organization involved in it. An interest in "working for free" is shaped by religious convictions or a humanistic sense of what is "right" and what needs to be done. In many cases, people choose to work in settings that are close at hand, sometimes because an organization has provided them or those close to them with a service, and they want to "give back." Finally,

the need for affiliation, for being part of something, cannot be ignored.

It is important to remember that the reasons that lead a person to begin to participate may not be the same things that keep a person involved. Initially, the most common motive is that people want to do something interesting and important. Quite often, they choose to become involved in a particular place because they have been asked to, usually by someone they know. A great deal of volunteering, although studies do not document in a precise way how much of it, takes place within a person's social network of friends and acquaintances. Some volunteering outside of a person's routine sphere is intentional: It brings a person into contact with a profession or line of work they want to enter. Other times, it takes place because of a community service requirement or the desire to obtain tangible and marketable "work" experience.

Difficult Redefined

One purpose of this article is to suggest that the label of "difficult volunteer" needs to be clearly identified. Individuals may be ill-suited to a job, or involved in a situation that isn't right for them, rather than being difficult in an abstract sense. On the other hand, being difficult or having difficulty may be symptomatic of issues beyond the scope of a manager, administrator or another volunteer. Does unpleasantness alone qualify a person as difficult? Might the determination also require that a person is disruptive? What about inefficiency? Is the volunteer I described at the beginning of the article difficult or just inefficient? One could argue he was difficult. He took up valued space that someone else might have occupied. He diverted the staff from doing their work and he wasn't a particularly interesting person to talk to. Many managers might see this person as difficult and try to end his involvement gracefully and tactfully.

To me, the case is interesting and important because of how the leadership in the agency defined his participation. If you asked the man what he was doing at the agency, he would tell you he was a volunteer. For the agency, he was a client. Redefining him as a volunteer and maintaining a fiction of contribution provided a form of centering for the organization that reminded staff (and me, a visitor) of its mission. I think that there was an enormous sense of humanity and compassion in his involvement since this was, indeed, an organization devoted to serving people living with AIDS. Its goal was not only to be an efficient nonprofit organization. For this volunteer, rolling pennies was meaningful. For the agency, he was nonproductive but not difficult. Indeed, the pennies were placed in the bowl just so that a volunteer unable to contribute very much could be occupied, a kind of sheltered workshop for clients. His presence was a regular reminder to the

staff of what the organization was all about and, although nonproductive, he was not difficult.

Difficult volunteers are not always so benign. More than one or two volunteers like him might lead to a level of disruption that might compromise an organization's efficiency. Having several volunteers like this one at one time, all of them rolling pennies or stuffing envelopes, would not have the same effect since part of what might have been good about the situation for the volunteer was the sense that he was part of the agency and was able to converse freely with the staff.

Difficult or Nonproductive?

The first step in deciding how to handle a person whose performance is substandard is to make a distinction between a nonproductive and a difficult volunteer. One clear indication that a person is difficult is that the behavior is disruptive, not just below the organization's standard of quality or efficiency. A person who violates basic rules needs to understand and conform to the guidelines and expectations of an organization, otherwise he or she might have a negative effect on the morale of other volunteers. Distinctions need to be made between actions that are inappropriate and those that may have negative consequences for the organization's operation and reputation. Violation of confidentiality, for example, simply cannot be tolerated.

It is also beneficial to consider whether the volunteer is difficult because of situational factors, the job itself, or if it is a call for attention or help. If a volunteer finds a desk chair to be uncomfortable, it may be possible to change the chair, but the complaint might mask deeper issues, like a need for support or attention. Sometimes, a person may not be good at reading social cues and needs to be more carefully socialized into a situation, needing to be told more about the expectations, requirements and the culture of the situation than most volunteers.

It might also be possible to redefine the volunteer's job, utilizing the person's strengths and working around the weaknesses. Another penny-rolling story comes to mind. For many years, my children's parochial school employed the services of a volunteer who also put pennies into wrappers. In this case, she was rather efficient and, I was told, simply had no need for human contact. In fact, she would become extremely anxious if the pennies were not immediately available when she arrived. Rolling pennies was not make-work in this situation; it was needed because the students give charity, mostly pennies, on a daily basis. For her, the task alone was satisfying. Again, however, her idiosyncratic performance was not inconsistent with the school's culture which stressed the importance of charity and compassion for an individual who might not conform to standards of efficiency. Indeed, after she left, I learned that she had been replaced by a penny-counting machine.

Quality Control

A volunteer might also be difficult because the job is inappropriate. Sometimes, a job is too hard and a person might be better off doing something else. It is also possible to redefine a position, an option that might in the end improve the quality of an effort and even the quantity of volunteers. One illustration was the flexible definition of "friendly visitor" in a hospital where I did research several years ago. In most places, the friendly visitor is expected to come once each week for a minimum number of hours. In fact, the counting of hours is often the only measure of a person's value to the organization. For some, visiting on a weekly basis is too demanding. In my work as a participant observer on the AIDS wards of a long-term care city hospital, I met two volunteers who visited the hospital every few weeks on an irregular basis and probably stayed as long as they wished. They had a particular bond with many of the patients, since they shared a common past history of drug addiction and a current history of abstinence. For some volunteer managers, these two people would have been inappropriate and probably difficult since they did not stick to a regular schedule. In effect, they came and went when they pleased. I observed that patients did enjoy the routine and expected visits of the volunteers, but were always happy and surprised to see these two women who were cheerful and caring. In fact, their unexpected arrival may have made their visits even more special, more like an unexpected friend or relative who visits, and less like a stranger whose job it is to visit on a set day at a set time.

In a rational system, volunteers should have a schedule. But, their irregular schedule was not disruptive to anyone except to a standard of rational organizational behavior. Seeing these two women also taught me an important lesson about the leadership of the volunteer director who was sufficiently creative and flexible to attract and encourage volunteers like these two women.

Ultimately, volunteers give the gift of their time. Nonprofit managers have an obligation to accept this gift graciously and, when it is disruptive or counterproductive, need to refuse the gift with sensitivity and compassion. ∎