

Designing Volunteer Work from a New Perspective

By Susan J. Ellis

One of the most crucial skills a volunteer program manager can cultivate is creative volunteer work design. What you ask volunteers to do is fundamental to recruitment, volunteer/employee relations and ultimate program impact. Volunteer work design requires "task analysis," the ability to divide larger projects into discrete, assignable tasks that can be done in short periods of time by a variety of people in a logical sequence that leads to completion. This takes practice!

A common mistake is to begin with the wrong question: "What can a volunteer do?" The answer will be affected by whom you picture when you hear the word "volunteer." If you think of teenagers doing community service, your approach to volunteer work design will be quite different than if you envision low-income senior citizens.

Instead, ask the right question: "What needs to be done?" Not everything on this list will be appropriate for volunteers, but you will have a much more diverse starting point. First you create volunteer assignments that truly address needs and then you recruit people who are attracted to those assignments.

Even more important, do not limit yourself to assigning all volunteers to assist the paid staff. While selecting certain activities in employees' job descriptions to delegate or share with volunteers is reasonable, this is ultimately a limiting way to determine potential volunteer contributions. It also opens the door to conflict between staff and volunteers, since you are blurring the lines between the roles and functions of both groups and establishing a hierar-

chy in which volunteers are always "assistants."

A more creative model for designing volunteer work is to start with the unique characteristics that volunteers offer. These characteristics are inherent in being volunteers and are quite different from what employees bring to the mix. Considering volunteers' unique attributes will lead you to develop assignments that are both integral to the work of the agency and expand the service provided to clients/consumers. Let's examine six such characteristics:

'Luxury of Focus'

Paid staff must be equitable in their division of attention to all their cases, projects, clients and visitors. They can rarely drop all other work and devote themselves totally to just one person in need or just one activity for hours at a time. But that's exactly what volunteers can do! Volunteers have the luxury to concentrate all their time and efforts on whatever they were recruited to do. This may mean giving lots of attention to one student, monitoring one piece of legislation or researching and writing one report. In fact, you can recruit several volunteers to focus on the same single need.

Ironically, this is one of the features of volunteer work that maximizes the part-time scheduling of volunteers. If an employee can find, say, 30 minutes a week to devote to a project, but a volunteer with "only" two hours a week on site can focus all his or her attention on the same task, the organization has actually quadrupled the amount of work on that project.

Perceived Credibility

No matter how sincere or competent paid staff may be, at one level they are perceived by the public as spokespeople for their employer who will tow the company line as necessary. Volunteers, on the other hand, can be more credible to certain audiences because they do not have the vested interest of their livelihood at stake to influence their point of view. This is an obvious benefit in fund-raising or political advocacy, but it also is important to all sorts of public education activities. Messages such as "always use condoms" or "don't take drugs" are more likely to be heard when a motivated volunteer, rather than a social worker, is making the pitch.

Availability

For the most part, we hire staff to work pre-determined shifts of time, within traditional expectations. But client needs often become most pressing at times other than "office hours." Volunteers, particularly those who are employed full-time themselves, can be recruited to work at times not generally expected of employees. This means volunteers are more able to help in crises, with recreational (especially weekend) services, or after-hours on-call needs. Distributing blankets to the homeless at midnight, transporting residents to Sunday religious services, or serving breakfast at 6 a.m.? Your regular paid staff cannot fill all these roles, but volunteers can be recruited to do just these sorts of things.

The Skills Factor

We hire employees along a narrow set of criteria. They are a pretty

Mentoring Adds Up to Success for Student

By Mary Anne Hess

Sheldon that to be successful he has to go to college. He's good at and interested in construction, in wood-working. He's got real talent."

It's that kind of attitude that Sheldon's father, Chezoyia Phillips, appreciates about LeVan. "When Ben started coming, Sheldon's level of responsibility came back," Phillips remembers. "My wife and I and Sheldon's grandparents were trying to instill that in him. Ben supported that. Ben showed Sheldon concern and buddyship. He didn't try to make him into a bookworm. Sheldon felt he was being helped by a friend."

"Sheldon loves construction. Maybe he'll build a city someday. Ben didn't try to alter that interest. Maybe Sheldon could be a blueprint reader or even an architect. His level of interest is so great. But, Ben let Sheldon know that the guy who drives the backhoe is also an integral part of the operation. He told him there's nothing wrong with doing that. He also taught Sheldon not to limit his goals."

What's Next

Graduation from Monroe brought an end to LeVan's formal relationship with Sheldon, who's a ninth grader at Edison Tech this fall. "I'm sad to leave Sheldon," says LeVan, who'll be mentoring a new Monroe student during this school year. "I'm going to miss him terribly. I want to protect him. This is a big transition period for him. It's hard. You really don't know what the fruits of your labor will be. You go into the relationship with blind faith that something will come out of it."

Logistical Realities Prove Challenging

From her own experience, Carol Armstrong, community affairs coordinator for EDS in Rochester, says the majority of mentors at Monroe Middle School find it hard to let go after two or three years with a child. "I'd say 95% of the cases grow close. There's a bonding there. There's a sense of pride that they've made a difference in a child's life, that what they've contributed will follow the child through high school."

Counselor Jeanne Carlivati, who works closely with Armstrong in running the mentoring program at the inner city school, agrees. However, she adds, youngsters have a choice of 12 different high schools, making it impossible to keep formal relationships going beyond middle school. "We have to leave it up to the mentors."

Just keeping Monroe's program going for the past seven years hasn't been easy, she notes. As EDS' operation in Rochester has grown from around 200 to about 1,500 employees in several locations around the area, the original feeling

of camaraderie among mentors has diminished, she says. Many in the original group used to carpool to Monroe—in the days before school policy switched mentoring time from the employee's lunch hour to the child's. Now, mentors come and go for several hours of the day. And, as the number of mentors grows (to a peak of 75 one year), it's harder for school staff to get to know them, says Carlivati.

It's also not always easy to convince young adolescents to spend lunchtime with a mentor, instead of their friends, adds the counselor. "As kids get to eighth grade, lunch becomes an important social time."

Despite any difficulties the adults perceive, "the kids have real positive things to say on our year-end survey," says Carlivati. "On a scale of 1 to 10, they rate it a 10 and even as high as a 12. They often say they'd like the chance to see their mentors even more. For those kids who are connected to their mentors, it's really working."

—Mary Anne Hess

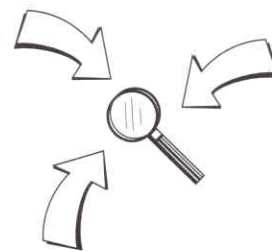
Given what LeVan calls "our litigious society," EDS cautions mentors about getting involved with their students outside of Monroe. Despite the warning, the mentor says he can't think of completely severing his connection to Sheldon, who even attended his wedding last spring.

"I'll keep in touch. You get involved with another human being. They're your friend. We'll just have to

see where our relationship goes."

For his part, Sheldon says he has no intention of forgetting his mentor. "I still got his phone number. I'll call to see how he's doing or to say 'hi.'" ♦

Mary Anne Hess, a freelance writer in Takoma Park, Md., first wrote about the EDS mentoring program at Monroe Middle School in the Spring issue of Volunteer Leadership.



homogenous group: generally between the ages of 18 and 65, have academic credentials to match their job descriptions, and share service philosophies.

The beauty of volunteers is that they don't have to match the staff. In fact, you gain the most when volunteers are consciously and conscientiously recruited because they are unlike employees. A social service agency would never hire plumbers, architects, or bus drivers to do counseling, but such occupations may expand the perspective of the agency and offer clients support from individuals more like themselves than the social workers.

Further, some skills are so specialized that they are not needed as a staff function, available all the time. Volunteers with such skills can be asked to contribute their expertise in small bursts as needed—an approach that is usually preferred by busy professionals with limited time.

There is no skill or talent for which a volunteer cannot be found, given the right strategy and some patience. Develop on-call volunteer assignments for people who speak foreign languages, are able to interpret for the deaf, are skilled in designing forms or surveys or have a great "radio voice" to record voice-overs for your training videos.

Consider, too, that experts can be recruited to serve as program "advisers"—on call to give technical assistance the few times a year you need their special input. Want to gain more media attention but you don't have a public relations department? Recruit a local radio station manager or news reporter to review and cri-

tique your press releases before they go out. This can even be a "virtual" volunteering assignment, completed entirely by e-mail exchanges.

Off-Site Work

If you have limited space for volunteers to work on site, or you are located far from public transportation or in an underpopulated area, maximize the ability of volunteers to accept work they can complete at home or in their place of business, rather than in your offices. This can range from assignments requiring research and writing (include Internet surfing) to physically constructing something such as holiday decorations or adapted kitchen utensils.

Supportive Services

Most clients or consumers have multiple needs and wants, but your organization may not be funded to serve people holistically. Or you are only permitted to work with one individual, even though his or her family is equally affected by the situation. This is where volunteers shine. They can offer supportive services that meet real client needs but add a whole range of services to what you are funded to do. Let me offer five true-life examples that illustrate this point:

- Volunteers in their twenties recruited by a juvenile court system to give a "world of work" orientation to teenage probationers, including acting out skits to show how the youths' manner of sitting and talking can work against them in a job interview.

- A group of mothers with young children recruited to be a "wake-up brigade," telephoning teen single

mothers who needed some friendly morning prodding to get their children to school on time.

- Animal-loving volunteers who could care for the pets of patients who lived alone and were admitted to the hospital for emergency care.

- Accountants who volunteered with a low-income nutrition program to teach budgeting skills to recipients of public assistance.

- Volunteers trained to work in a children's hospital library to help parents of ill children study medical details about their child's diagnosis. They also built up the collection of non-technical but useful books for the lay reader.

In each of these five examples, can you see how the volunteer assignments were extremely valuable, added to the success of the primary service (probation, counseling, health care), but were completely separate from the work of the paid staff?

As you plan for the coming year, gather a group of volunteers, employees, and, if feasible, clients to brainstorm what the recipients of service need that paid staff can never supply. Then create volunteer assignments to fill those needs. ♦



Susan J. Ellis, author and speaker, is president of Energize, Inc., an international training, consulting and publishing firm

specializing in volunteerism. The energize Web site (www.energizeinc.com) is a valuable resource for volunteer program leaders.