

Section 1: Organizational Support

Think about instances in which you succeeded at increasing support of volunteer involvement. If you have not been successful, analyze the actions of colleagues who have obtained more executive attention, funding, authority, etc. Certainly, you will find some common denominators that provide a guide to how you can be effective in garnering organizational support for your volunteer program.

Volunteer managers often struggle with getting support from their colleagues. They often ask themselves, “Why can’t my peers or leadership see the fantastic power and potential of community volunteers?” Below are some misguided reasons why organizations can’t or won’t support volunteers:

1) Volunteers will sap the agency’s budget. Volunteer programs are certainly not free, so there’s no point in saying they are. On the flip side, the return on investment they generate can be significant. Help address this fear by being clear about the budget it takes (in both staff time and other costs). At the same time, share the research that says volunteers donate 10 times more often than non-volunteers to a nonprofit organization. Work with your development staff to be sure that volunteers are tracked and accounted for as donors. Also, be sure to track the in-kind resources they generate and share it.

2) Volunteers will sap the staff’s time. However, the value they generate in supplementing the work of staff can be phenomenal. Help calm fears by being clear just how much staff time will be needed. Also, demonstrate their worth by estimating both the dollar value of the services volunteers add to the mix and the concrete outcomes they have helped bring about through their participation.

3) Volunteers will replace paid staff. Although volunteers have amazing skills and experience, they can rarely, if ever, replace paid staff for two reasons: 1) most don’t have the time available to commit to the consistency a paid position requires, and 2) paid staff have to deal with organizational stress that volunteers simply won’t put up with. There are differences between what motivates volunteers and what motivates staff. Volunteers want to make a difference in the world through partnership with an organization. Staff wants to make a difference in the world as part of an organization. It’s a subtle line in the sand that most volunteers don’t want to cross.

To help allay any fears in this regard, make sure your volunteer program policies and procedures clearly delineate between the role of volunteers and the role of paid staff. Work with paid staff to identify projects and activities that have been on the back burner for too long and help them understand how volunteers can help bring the lagging project to fruition. As you see success, share it with others who are still resistant to working with volunteers.

4) We will lose control, and our organization will lose effectiveness. Most likely, no organization has suffered because they have utilized volunteers, even if ineffectively. To help alleviate fears, talk with staff to better understand the specific areas they are most worried about. Handle those first. Then, make sure you have volunteer position descriptions that describe clear lines of supervision and directly relate to your organization’s mission and program’s outcome goals. Be sure your volunteer policies and procedures clearly outline volunteer ethics rules (confidentiality, conflict of interest, communications, etc.) and how any transgressions will be addressed. Finally, consistently and concretely communicate what volunteers have accomplished.