

RELATIONSHIP OF VOLUNTEERS AND PAID STAFF

This is the most delicate and yet the most essential component of a Volunteer Programme. It must be cultivated if the programme is to succeed. The following points are worth considering:

1. Staff must be involved from the beginning in planning a volunteer programme especially when it interfaces with staff activity.
2. Staff must be educated as to the supportive role of the volunteer, and staff and volunteer roles clearly defined with distinctive job descriptions, so staff do not feel their jobs threatened.
3. Staff should not see volunteers as an opportunity to opt out of mundane jobs, but as a means of having additional resources to do the team assignment.
4. Volunteers must be thoroughly trained, and staff must be assured of this. Staff must be encouraged to accept volunteers as reliable and efficient members of the team.
5. Any problems between volunteers and staff must be dealt with through the co-ordinator and a staff person in authority. The co-ordinator needs to represent the rights of each group to the other.
6. Staff should be involved in assessment and evaluation of the Volunteer programme.
7. Orientation for staff should include an understanding of the role of the volunteer and the reasons why volunteers offer their services.
8. Staff members must be willing to explain procedures thoroughly to volunteers and must be careful not to have higher expectations of volunteers than they would have of colleagues.
9. Volunteers must realise the importance of reliability, commitment and co-operation when working with paid staff.

VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION

Volunteers must be encouraged to work co-operatively with paid employees and other volunteers

Fulfilment for volunteer work usually comes from interpersonal relationships rather than tasks.

The organisation responsibility is to keep an atmosphere that enhances job satisfaction for volunteers.

THE BASIC DILEMMA

Being a volunteer employer isn't easy. You and paid members of your group work side by side, you make decisions together on committees, often through a consensus approach that makes no distinction between workers and bosses. You are equals, you share the same commitment to the organisation and the same goals. You may be friends.

It is important, though, that everyone understands the rights and obligations that attach, by law and by the employment relationship, to workers and employers. To ignore the basic power imbalance between workers and employers, ie. the employer's legal right to hire, fire and manage workers, is only possible so long as the two are in total accord. Add any element of conflict - personality discord, poor communication, inadequate job performance, financial worries - and the employment relationship begins to challenge the professional and collegial bonds that tie the group together.

So the dilemma exists. On one hand the group and their worker(s) are bound inseparably by a common goal. On a day by day basis there are few distinctions between worker and bosses, and a harmonious and unique work relationship (in comparison with most other employment situations) develops. But when it comes to employment matters you all have to accept that you are not equal. You are not even on the same side. This realisation may sometimes change the chemistry of the worker-employer relationship.

MOVING VOLUNTEERS TO PAID EMPLOYMENT

When volunteers move to paid employment, their attitude may change. You must deal with this and other member's attitudes promptly.

When a volunteer becomes a paid member of an organisation, the other members may have resentment or other negative feelings. The paid employee may in turn feel guilty. For instance, she/he may believe colleagues should also be paid, but no funds are available. She/he may feel guilty about having a 'privileged' position.

In the worst case, their self esteem and enthusiasm may diminish; leaving them isolated from the rest of the team.

Employer attitude may also change. When the employee was a volunteer, you may have placed less pressure on him/her to complete tasks. You may now supervise the person more closely, place more demands on them or have less empathy for them because they are now being paid.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION – MANAGING CONFLICT

Conflict is a fact of life, no matter how well trained the meeting participants are, how clear the objectives are, and how sensitive everyone is to the dynamics of a discussion. Conflict occurs because people have different values, functional responsibilities, information, and needs. When disagreement threatens the primary objective of a meeting, conflict cannot be ignored; it must be managed.

The following six guidelines should help at a Conflict Resolution Meeting:

- 1 Summarise the disagreement**
Be objective and focus on issues, not personalities. “She is saying we can do it in six months and he maintains that it will take more than a year,” rather than “He’s very cautious.”
- 2 Confirm the accuracy of the summary**
Ask those involved to confirm or correct the summary; “Is that a fair assessment of your positions?” Confirmation sometimes leads to resolution without further intervention”.
- 3 Discuss the effect of the primary meeting objective.**
This can provide motivation to resolve the disagreement: “I’m concerned that we are not going to make a decision today if we cannot resolve this issue” (Place the responsibility back on the ground).
- 4 Reconfirm points of agreement.**
This helps to focus on area of agreement and clarifies the issues in dispute “Are we agreed that we must have a system in place by year end?”
- 5 Clarify different point of view**
Have all individuals or subgroups stated their points of view?; Occasionally, you will find that opponents have been saying the same thing differently and are actually in agreement.
- 6 Involve the group in resolving the disagreement**
If the conflict stems from different information, get more data. If the conflict results from differing opinions about the same information search for a win-win solution. If the issue is relatively unimportant and time is tight, compromise may be in order.

It is really important to deal with the issue while it is small and only a ‘niggle’. If your organisation has open channels of communication then you will be able to deal with issues as they arise and not allow them to simmer. By sweeping issues under the carpet they will build into something much bigger and often unmanageable.

Conflict is a very important feature of all relationships. It can serve as a safety valve that helps to release emotions that may have build up due to many different types of demands but there is negative conflict and positive conflict. Some people look on conflict as a valuable management diagnostic tool. It raises issues and often produces light as well as heat. It is negative conflict that you need to be aware of. This does not usually disappear – instead it festers like a boil and finally ignites.

FURTHER READING

Seizing the Moment II Community Work Training Advisory Committee (Nelson)

Managing Your Voluntary Agency in New Zealand 1993 – NZ Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organisations

Conflict Management – North Shore Community and Social Services Inc.

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Phone (09) 486-4820

Fax (09) 486-4823



Visit North Shore Community and Social Services Inc.
Mary Thomas Centre, 3 Gibbons Rd, Takapuna



Write P.O.Box 33 284, Takapuna, North Shore City



email nscssc@xtra.co.nz

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