



Human Resources Q&A: Reducing conflict between staff and volunteers



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Our volunteers are an important and integral part of our organization and we have had many of them over the years. The trouble is, our staff and volunteers often clash. What can we do to improve relations between the two?

It is natural for people to have conflict whether it is between volunteers, between staff, or involving the two together. We are, after all, only human. When it comes to staff and volunteers, there can be many different reasons for this conflict. Fears and friction can grow when people are unclear about their roles and how they fit into an organization. Without a structure in place to support understanding and open communication between staff and volunteers, chaos can ensue.

The structure I am referring to is much like the structure you have in place for your paid staff. Both staff and volunteers need to have a sound understanding about the playing field, who is who on the team and the rules of the game. All of these things need to be communicated clearly and effectively to both groups.

If the components of your volunteer program have not recently been revisited at a strategic planning session, then consider reviewing these items in line with your overall planning next time. Some of the components of your volunteer program may be similar the HR structures you have in place for your paid staff, and may include the following:

- 1. Volunteer philosophy.** Describe how volunteers are a benefit to the organization, how they fit into the organization's mission and their purpose in the organization. I recommend staff be involved in the process of developing this. Ensure it links to the mission, vision and values of the organization.
- 2. Communication plan.** Develop a plan for initial communication as well as ongoing communication. Inform staff about new volunteers and volunteer programs and inform volunteers about new staff, new clients, changes in routines, etc. Having the communication plan outlined, including paths of communication and timing for release of information helps ease the stresses on the individual in charge of this important component of your program.
- 3. Problem solving.** Outline clear steps that describe how volunteers are to handle conflict within your organization. This can be developed in collaboration with both your volunteers and staff.
- 4. Person in charge.** Designate one person responsible for the overall organization and maintenance of the volunteer program.
- 5. Outline roles and responsibilities.** This supports your efforts to find the right volunteers, train them for their role and keep them on track. It also lets your staff and volunteers understand the boundaries between staff and volunteer workloads.
- 6. Training.** Yes, train your volunteers. They need to be embedded into the organization just like your staff if you want them stay. Your staff can be involved in this process, further supporting their understanding about the roles and responsibilities of your volunteers. Involving your staff in the process also gives volunteers the opportunity to get to know your staff better and allows them to meet and form relationships right at the start of a volunteer's placement.
- 7. Performance management.** Managing the performance of your volunteers helps keep them on track and reinforces your staffs understanding of volunteer responsibilities.
- 8. Recognition.** Be clear about what warrants and what does not warrant recognition and ensure your volunteers are recognized not just for a job well done, but also for their consistent commitment to participating in your organization on an ongoing basis.

Volunteers tend to leave an organization when they don't feel valued. Involving your paid staff in the process of volunteer management also helps staff recognize the ongoing value brought to the organization by volunteers. Of course it is important that staff are also recognized on an ongoing basis as well — but that's a column for another day.

Having structure in place helps your staff and volunteers understand each other's roles and value. It also gives them a platform for communication. Having guideposts in place assists with managing difficult situations or complaints and can help maintain harmony between staff and volunteers in the organization.

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