



HOW TO KEEP VOLUNTEERS FROM QUITTING – A TWO-ACT PLAY

*“I’m sorry; I can’t take this anymore.”
“Wait! Don’t go. We can work it out.”
“It’s too late. Goodbye.”*

Soap opera? No, it’s a scene in a nonprofit organization office where there is poor communication about goals, roles and responsibilities of volunteers and staff. This little drama is playing in every town, and there’s never even a smattering of applause. Have you ever heard comments like these, from volunteers?

I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing. I keep getting taken off my task, and assigned something else. I don’t mind helping out in a pinch, but I’m starting to feel like I’m being pulled in all directions.

I like to work hard, and I want others around me to work hard, too. For the life of me, I can’t tell what Julie does that supports the organization’s mission. And she probably wonders the same thing about me. At least she’s getting paid!

If you’re a volunteer manager, and have heard comments like that, you’re lucky. At least you had some warning signs! More often, good volunteers just get frustrated and quit. After all, it’s an unpaid job, and there are plenty of nonprofits looking for good volunteers. Much better to keep the situation from getting to the point of frustration. How? Try “mutual” volunteer position planning and performance evaluation. Here are the basics:

The players -- Current and past volunteers, volunteer managers, other paid staff, board members, community partners. Cast the players that work best for your organization.

Act One – Training

- Just as volunteers must be trained for their assigned responsibilities, staff members also are required to participate in training on how to work with volunteers.

“Oh, no! One more thing to do!” he cried.

“Don’t worry,” she said soothingly. “It counts toward your required staff development hours.”

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- The staff discusses the nature of each volunteer position, how it serves the organization’s mission, and which departments should be involved in the volunteer’s work.

“My department is busy. Can’t they just work in the Volunteer Department?”

“Hello? We don’t have a Volunteer Department. Best practices are to treat volunteers as much like paid staff as possible.”

- The staff – often with assistance from current and past volunteers, board members or others – develops performance standards and objectives for each volunteer position, and determines how performance will be evaluated. At this point it’s understood that volunteers are not “community property,” but have clearly-defined responsibilities. Not that those responsibilities can’t change over time, but any changes are agreed upon by senior staff.
- Written results of the evaluations will be retained for future volunteer and staff references, placements, recognition, information about needed training, new volunteer program ideas, etc.
- When a new volunteer comes on board, he or she meets all the key staff, so the volunteer understands what each department does, and how his or her own work fits into the big picture.

Act Two – Performance evaluation

The questions to ask:

- What has the volunteer accomplished, based on the performance standards and objectives?
- What is working well, and not so well?
- What changes in the standards do we need, if any?

Take time with the volunteer to go over the performance evaluation, so he or she understands what’s succeeding and what needs work. Hold volunteers accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities.

“But they might quit! I’m sold on this new system now, and I’m sorry for all those times I pulled volunteers off their tasks so they could do the work I didn’t want to do. But what if we criticize them and then they get mad and quit?”

She looked into his smoldering eyes. “What if we don’t criticize them, and they keep making the same mistakes?”

“I hate it that you’re so much wiser than I am!”

“You’re a foil. It’s a standard kind of character in a drama. You don’t get to change.”

Take the drama out of volunteer engagement. Have performance standards, make sure the paid staff buys in and treats volunteers like the true human resources they are, and hold volunteers accountable for their performance. That’s how you retain good volunteers.