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How do I build a stronger volunteer/staff partnership?

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Most strategies for opening up participation by volunteers tend to assume that staff are the primary cause of the blockage. "If only staff would respect and trust volunteers more," we say; "if only they weren't so threatened" and "why can't they delegate more?"

The approach here, by contrast, asks certain questions which suggest that staff are not the primary reason for the difficulty. Planners/implementers of volunteer programs are very likely to be implicated, for lack of adopting appropriate strategies. Our candidate for appropriate strategy begins with this question:

How can we expect staff to carve out meaningful roles for volunteers when staff doesn't even adequately understand their own role?

Yes, most employees have a formal job description. But often what a person actively does is far from identical to the job description as written. At the specific, concrete level, what one does daily is more or other than what may have been articulated at the beginning. Not incidentally, the same is true for volunteer job descriptions. They're neat, comforting to our sense of orderliness, and often substantially mythical in detailed practice.

Once we've absorbed the need to go beyond job descriptions to actual descriptions of the job, we're ready to face a seeming paradox: you can't develop clear and meaningful volunteer jobs without first analyzing in detail what staff are doing and how they feel about it. Similarly, to involve members more meaningfully you must first scrutinize very carefully what elected officers or other group leaders are doing.

So, the first step in developing teamwork between volunteers and employees (or officers) is a process which helps staff clarify fuzzy function areas.

The clarifying process must also be comfortable, and that brings up our second main point:

Volunteers must be seen by staff as strengthening their capability and control rather than stretching it thinner.

Volunteers should enhance staff competency rather than challenge it.

why we propose involving volunteers in the first place. We then proceed (often) to lecture staff on how much additional time and effort they should invest in supervising/supporting volunteers. To this approach, I once heard a staff person react thusly: "Hey, I've already got a caseload of 70 clients. And now you seem to be asking me to add a caseload of 25 volunteers. Are you out of your mind?"

I sympathize. We need a delegation process which puts staff in the driver's seat insofar as possible and, indeed, can be seen by them as enhancing their control of events and challenges. This is not accomplished by coming in, kicking the desk, and saying to staff: "Wow, I've got this great volunteer; wouldn't you like to meet her?" or "How about my getting you a volunteer tutor or two?"

It is not even accomplished by asking staff to submit volunteer job descriptions. As I said, many staff need a better, more specific understanding of their own jobs before they can intelligently decide how volunteers can best help them. So, we err in telling staff to look at volunteers when they should be looking first at themselves.

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