

Managing Volunteers: Challenges of Non-Profit Organizations

By Jessica Miller-Merrell on June 24, 2011 /



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If you manage a staff at a non-profit organization, more than likely, you will deal with volunteers, which can be both rewarding and frustrating for human resource managers.

Volunteers can be tricky. They aren't paid staff, yet if they perform work for an organization, they have to be managed like any other employee or the jobs they do can go to the wayside. For non-profit organizations on a tight budget, sometimes volunteers make up the majority of the day to day tasks that must be done in order to succeed.

So, where's the line? How do you keep volunteers happy and successful, but still be able to enforce the job they're supposed to do?

Non-Profit Organizations Vs. For Profit Organizations

Managementhelp.org, Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD of Authenticity Consulting, LLC, says, "There's a misconception that there is a big difference in managing human resources in for-profit versus nonprofit organizations. Actually, they should be managed similarly."

"Nonprofits often have unpaid human resources (volunteers), but we're learning that volunteers should be managed much like employees — it's just that they're not compensated with money; they're compensated in other ways."

Managing Volunteers: Defining Roles

Like paid staff, volunteers should have [clearly defined roles](#). Just as some employees do not fit well in certain roles, the same can be true for volunteers. Even though they aren't receiving a traditional salary, volunteers should be recruited carefully, receive training, be supervised and have their performance monitored.

Volunteers can be an amazing resource, but despite even the best intentions, problems arise. Every non-profit has had unhappy volunteers, troublemakers, unfulfilled duties and harsh feelings. But, never forget, everyone wants to do a good job.

Let your volunteers help you solve the problem. They want to do a good job and make a difference. Like with salaried or paid workers, sometimes it's a matter of a volunteer being in the wrong position for their talents.

Finding the Correct Place for Non-Profit Organization Volunteers

Some simple questions can resolve this:

- Does the volunteer have a clear idea of what he or she is supposed to do? If not, provide them with a clear and concise job description and objectives.
- Is the volunteer able to do the job? If not, find another task the volunteer can do. If they are simply physically and mentally unable to do what's assigned, no amount of talking can fix that
- Do they have the right tools in order to do their task? Ask what the volunteer needs in order to complete the task. If it's a money issue and money is tight, engage the volunteer by asking for their ideas for an inexpensive solution.
- Do they receive recognition for performing a task? Do you have a program in place to reward volunteers, even something as simple as a letter of thanks.
- Are they doing what they want? Like it or not, volunteers have a choice. If they aren't enjoying the experience or feel frustrated, they will volunteer elsewhere. If you dump a load of work on a helper every time he or she reports in, sooner or later, they'll stop reporting in.

[Volunteers](#) sincerely want to help and find a solution to problems. Let them help you. Like with staff, meet with this workforce and have honest conversations about what they do and how they feel about their jobs.

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