

VOLUNTEERS

By the fifth year of Sandra Harris's tenure as executive director of Parent/Child Stress Services she had assembled an excellent team of staff, independent contractors, and outside organization service providers. She and her board were pleased. But now there was a new set of challenges that she had not anticipated and it concerned her volunteers. Parent/Child Stress Services had been established by a group of individuals and in the early days they contributed their time in running the organization. Many of these original founders continued to provide their services to the organization for free. But as Parent/Child Stress Services grew, some of these people had to relinquish their jobs to paid workers and the transition was not always handled gracefully. A number of the volunteers who had worked in the office were not happy about being displaced by paid staff (many of whom they found arrogant and uninformed about the organization's history) or by independent contractors (who, they believed, brought no new skills to the organization). They resented the fact that all of these people were now being paid for what the volunteers had always done for free. Deep down, some wondered whether their many years of volunteer efforts had been appreciated.

At the same time, Sandra Harris had identified many new kinds of activities for which volunteers were needed—fund raising, phone counseling, and basic data collection for research projects. But many of these areas required people with particular abilities or specialized interests and she did not know whether to try to convince the existing volunteers to undergo some retraining or to attempt to locate other individuals who were already sufficiently motivated and knowledgeable to move into these areas.

Part of the problem was that Sandra Harris had been so focused on the needs of her organization that she had not thought about the volunteers themselves. If she had done so, she might have been better prepared to handle the psychological needs of her existing volunteers and she might

also have been better equipped to recruit and retain new people who would be enthusiastic about working for her organization for no money.

Why do people volunteer? Volunteers themselves have provided a host of reasons:

- Sense of self-satisfaction.* Many people like to use their free time in ways that bring them personal satisfaction and allow them to develop a positive self-image. Some volunteer because they want to feel needed, others like to keep busy in a way that is useful, and still others want to earn the respect of their peers and friends while doing something useful for the community.
- Altruism.* Many people from all economic strata believe that helping others is a necessary part of a complete and good life. Often this impulse grows out of religious beliefs or family traditions and upbringing. In some cases, where individuals have little cash to spare, volunteering provides the only way to express such altruism. In others, volunteering may be combined with the giving of cash.
- Companionship/meeting people.* Another important reason why individuals volunteer is to meet and mix with other people. Volunteering can allow them to widen their circle of acquaintances and develop personal bonds that can spill over into other parts of their life. Individuals who move to new communities, older people who have lost a spouse, even adolescents and young professionals looking for a more active social life, may all look to volunteerism as a way to widen their circle of friends.
- Learning about a field.* Some individuals who have an interest in a particular field see volunteering as an excellent way to learn more about it, particularly if training and learning opportunities are built into an organization's volunteer program. Those who want to learn about foreign countries, current events, religious traditions, the arts, or a host of other fields can do so through volunteerism.
- Creating/maintaining an organization.* Some volunteers are entrepreneurs who devote their energies to creating nonprofit organizations and helping them grow and thrive. Pride in their organizations' success and continued expansion is often a prime motivating factor in their volunteer activities.
- Developing professional contacts.* In some organizations, volunteering can put one in touch with important members of the community. Some people use volunteer jobs as a way to make contacts that may lead them to clients or other kinds of business or professional associations and opportunities.

- Getting ahead in the corporation.* Many profit sector corporations view employee volunteer service as an important way for the company to make a contribution to the community. Young executives and other company representatives are encouraged to volunteer; those wanting to move up the corporate ladder know that a volunteer position can be a real asset on a résumé.
- Getting training/experience.* For some individuals, a volunteer position is a route to finding a paying job. Young people, people who have been out of the labor force for some time, or people wishing to change professions will sometimes use volunteer opportunities as a way to further these personal goals. They may learn a task, gain a marketable skill, or secure a recommendation for future employment.
- Providing entry to a particular organization.* For some people who have a strong interest in working or serving on the board of a particular nonprofit organization, volunteering provides an important entry point to becoming involved. Volunteering may be the necessary first step on a ladder which eventually leads to a paying job or a seat on the board.
- Social panache.* There is much prestige associated with certain organizations and their volunteers represent an elite group within the community. Associating with these volunteers carries a certain degree of status and marks a person as being part of a desirable social group.

Meeting the Needs of Volunteers

Board members and staff of nonprofit organizations must consider the motivations of prospective volunteers if they want their help. Unfortunately, both are often too focused on their organizations' needs. "We need door-to-door fund-raising volunteers." "We need someone to donate legal help." "We need volunteers to read the newspaper to patients." "We need people who will help learning disabled children with their reading." This identification of volunteer jobs is important, of course, and a detailed description of what is involved in each task will make the actual assignment of volunteers a great deal easier when the appropriate time comes. What is lacking however, is an understanding of volunteer needs and a clear concept of how particular tasks can fulfill those needs.

Why should an organization focus on the needs of volunteers? Very simply, if it wants to be able to recruit and retain people to work for no money, it must figure out another means of providing them with satisfaction and fulfillment. In the case of Parent/Child Stress Services, Sandra Harris failed to think about this and she was chided by one of her trustees who told her, "Volunteerism is a quid pro quo business. The organization gets something, but we don't get it for nothing—we have to give something

back. A volunteer wants meaningful responsibility and wants to be taken seriously. The minute we take a volunteer for granted, we are in trouble.”

Sandra Harris had been so focused on the needs of her organization that she failed even to provide recognition to those volunteers who had worked so long and so hard and whose jobs were now being taken by paid staff and independent contractors. Awards luncheons, mention in the organization’s annual report and press releases, framed certificates of merit, or other clear indications of the organization’s appreciation would have gone a long way toward meeting these individuals’ need to feel appreciated.

Other nonprofit organizations have found a variety of ways to meet the needs of volunteers. Two interesting examples show how diverse the approach can be:

THE ART MUSEUM

An art museum in a large city needed volunteers to serve as guides for two special visitor groups—deaf visitors (who required guides who could use sign language) and foreign visitors (who required guides fluent in their language). At first, the volunteer coordinator had a difficult time finding volunteers. As she recalled, “I put ads in specialized publications and printed up some brochures that were distributed at professional conferences where there were many individuals who had the signing skills or the foreign language skills. Some of the inquiries I got as a result of these recruitment efforts were from people who were interested in paying jobs, but few wanted to volunteer. Those who did had work schedules that prevented them from giving us the required number of hours. Some balked at the amount of time they would have to commit to learning about the collection.

“Then, after talking to some of my other volunteer guides, I realized that I had been using the wrong approach. My most loyal volunteers told me that their original motivation for getting involved had been to learn about the incredible collection we have here at the museum. For people with the slightest interest in art, our volunteer training program is a wonderful opportunity to learn from recognized experts—curators, conservators, artists. So, I changed the way I went about recruiting volunteers and I even dropped the word ‘volunteer’ from my pitch entirely. Instead, I said that the museum was starting a series of free seminars on the collection taught by noted authorities. The seminars would have extremely limited enrollments and would only be open to those who had the necessary skills to serve as guides for the hearing impaired or for foreign visitors. I set fairly rigorous eligibility requirements, including a minimum number of hours required per

month. Of course, this just happened to be the same number of hours we require of all our volunteers but I didn't say anything about that.

"Within three weeks, we had more volunteers than we could use and I had to start a waiting list. And those we got were extremely motivated by the seminar. The irony is that we have always required that our guides go through this training because you cannot be a guide unless you know a great deal about the collection. But this was the first time that we referred to the training program as a 'seminar' and promoted our staff as the 'faculty' in our recruitment efforts. Now instead of people complaining about the requirements that we impose on them, they respond with enthusiasm because this is clearly meeting their desire to learn about art. The lesson is that it is extremely important to think about the motivations of potential volunteers before you try to recruit them and it is equally important to meet their expectations once they have agreed to come on board."

HIGH SCHOOL HEALTH CORPS

The High School Health Corps is a United States-based nonprofit organization that sends high-school volunteers to Central America during the summer to assist on public health projects in rural areas. The organization is not affiliated with any religious group and it attempts to stay apolitical in offering volunteer assistance to countries where young Americans will be welcome and safe. According to one of the volunteer recruiters for the program, meeting the needs of the countries is essential but meeting the needs of the young volunteers is just as critical. Not only is it an important strategy in recruitment but it becomes an even more important strategy in retaining volunteers once the rigorous six-month training phase begins.

"Our initial recruitment is done through schools and churches. We have a large group of ministers and principals who know the High School Health Corps and support it. They urge students to consider our program and to come to an informational meeting to find out more about it. They talk positively to the kids about our program. It is described as an exciting challenge and an adventure, a trip to exotic lands, an alternative to a boring summer. But the adults describing the High School Health Corps also say that the program meets the needs of young people in other ways. Kids can develop language skills, they can learn about the health field by actually working beside healthcare professionals, they can involve themselves in an extracurricular activity that may help them with college admissions. By the time kids come to one of our informational meetings with their parents to learn more about the program, they are usually convinced that volunteering will do a lot for them.

"Even so, we do not leave anything to chance. We constantly emphasize the good points of the program but begin to shift our emphasis somewhat. We understand that the parents usually need some convincing too. They are concerned first and foremost about safety and we have a good track record there. But we develop a pitch that will convince both parents and kids that the program will meet the most basic need of a young person—the need to be taken seriously and treated as an adult.

"In fact, at this meeting, we tend to talk less about the fun of world travel and more about the rigor and long-lasting impact of our training, the challenge of working in a foreign land with a different culture and language, and the genuine discomforts of living in a third world country. In a way, we are doing two things. We want to discourage those who are not serious and never will be. But for the others, we want to convey the message that the challenges of this program are precisely the reason that many young people should want to participate. The program gives them more responsibility than they have ever had before. We tell them that it will not be easy but that they will get tremendous positive reinforcement when they meet the challenge. Often, the person who conveys this message is another young person who has already served in the program."

The Volunteer Coordinator

At Parent/Child Stress Services, Sandra Harris admitted to her board that she had failed to address the needs of her volunteers. But she had a valid excuse. She simply had too many other things to do. She also had to confess that in her own mind volunteers were a lower priority in organizing the work force than other groups—paid staff, independent contractors, outside organization service providers.

Sandra Harris's attitude is not unusual and this is one reason that in many nonprofit organizations there is someone who serves as an advocate for volunteers and helps the chief executive understand their importance. In larger organizations or in organizations where volunteers constitute a large proportion of the work force, the individual in this position is a member of the paid staff and may go by various titles such as volunteer coordinator or director of volunteers. In smaller organizations or ones requiring fewer volunteers, the volunteer coordinator may be uncompensated. In either case, a volunteer coordinator—whether paid or not—should have access to the chief executive because a significant part of his or her job has to do with shaping the director's attitude toward the role of volunteers in the organization.

Indeed, a volunteer coordinator must be integrated into the operation of the organization at the highest levels and must be given the full coopera-