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Church Volunteer Administration Similarities and Differences

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[Editor-generated] Abstract

The author discusses her perceived need for coordinating the volunteer services freely rendered by members of churches. She compares and contrasts church-based volunteer management with volunteer management in any formal organization. She concludes that the same management principles from the business world that are applied to volunteer management in non-profits should also be applied to volunteer management in churches.

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In an article which appeared recently in VOLUNTARY ACTION LEADERSHIP, Alice Leppert refers to voluntarism in the church as a 'half-awake giant', with churches and their members emerging as change-agents in community affairs. Ms. Leppert also mentions that "there is a volume of activity within the typical congregation which rightfully can be called volunteering". I would like to speak to that contention. Based on two years as a Coordinator of Volunteers in a church and many more years as an active church member, I have readily observed that there is a notably unrecognized need for coordinating the services freely rendered by the membership in the programs of the church.

Considering the fact that the number of paid staff in most churches ranges from two to seven or eight and the number of volunteers involved in any week could easily run from 50 to several hundred, perhaps it is time to consider the church as an agency, just as one would consider a hospital, a library, the

Red Cross or any of the hosts of other agencies in the community which uses volunteers. *The contribution of its members to the life of the church deserves the same fine quality of administration that those other agencies are being encouraged to provide for their volunteers. Churches have survived a long time with their present systems of volunteer involvement. Perhaps the time has come to look at those systems and question whether there is a way to improve them.*

While there are a number of ways in which administering a volunteer program in a church is different, there are many ways in which it is very much the same as in any other agency. With the church's great dependence on a volunteer work force to keep its programs going, the same principles of good administration very much apply. So often churches have been guilty of calling on the same core of members to do the bulk of the work. With a Volunteer Coordinator on staff, the responsibilities can be spread out

among many people. Moreover, the intentional matching of the tasks to be done and the resources in persons is sharpened and focused.

In my own church of 3000 members, there are 900 jobs where volunteers carry responsibilities in areas such as being choir members, Sunday School teachers, ushers, acolytes, Altar guild, Church Council, executive committees of various church organizations, persons to count offerings, special greeters on Sunday mornings, etc. After a year, with a Coordinator of Volunteers on staff, at least 200 more members were involved in the church's internal volunteer programs. For example, the same persons were previously expected to count the offerings for both services, which means being on hand 4 to 5 hours. The Coordinator of Volunteers recruited enough people to make separate teams for each service for each Sunday in the month, thus doubling the number of persons involved in that one responsibility alone. The captains for those counting teams had previously been Church Council people. The Coordinator of Volunteers, with approval from Church Council, recruited other individuals to serve as captains – once more expanding the responsibility among a larger portion of the congregation. This also relieved Church Council to invest more time and energy in the managing of church affairs. (A side benefit is that this involvement of even more members provided a wider field of potential for recruiting Finance Committee people.)

Adhering to the principle of recruiting for a specific period of time, with the continuation in that responsibility being renegotiable

periodically, the Coordinator of Volunteers surveyed several different groups to give them an opportunity to be relieved of duties, which may have become a burden to them. This meant exposure to the possibility of having to do a mass recruiting if many of these volunteers chose to 'get out'. The opposite happened, however. In one group, out of sixty phone calls, only four asked to be relieved of duty; three said they'd stay with it for another six months; and the balance willingly signed on for another full year. The response seemed to reflect an appreciation for the businesslike approach of negotiation.

Another principle that has been made very clear in this situation is that volunteers have a right to expect assignments equivalent to their abilities. This means letting people know that it is perfectly okay to say "no" when asked to do something they really are not interested in or capable of doing. Many people feel obligated to say "yes" when the church asks anything of them. They also feel very guilty if they cannot do what is asked, even when the reason is legitimate. By promising to call again – and then doing so – the Coordinator of Volunteers has helped people realize that it is perfectly acceptable to be honest about accepting or rejecting an assignment.

One of the tools from the business world which has been applied to volunteering is that of training. In the church setting, volunteers have been recruited for responsibilities with little thought of providing training. Public school teachers often are asked to teach Sunday School; therefore, no training is thought to be necessary. Businessmen are asked to serve on the governing body

of the church and it is believed that they will bring their several skills from business into the managing of the church's affairs. The assumption that neither of these groups needs or wants training needs to be checked out. Also, when laymen are asked to be canvassers in the church's annual pledge campaign, what are the skills they bring? Usually their major qualification is a commitment to the work of the church. But communication, interviewing or sales skills are minimal. These canvassers, given training for the job they have agreed to do, achieve a far greater degree of self-satisfaction for themselves, while being even more effective for the church. Opportunities for training to do the work of the church need to be available and varied.

The task of a Volunteer Coordinator in a church has some unique features. The most obvious is the fact that, unlike almost any other setting, the clients and the volunteers are one and the same. Among other things, this means that volunteers are their own bosses, in that the church operates solely on the financial contributions of its members. Volunteers, then, who are working with paid staff are also in the position of being the boss. It is unlikely that many volunteers in the church even think of it in these terms or would let it affect their work, but in subtle ways it is in the air when volunteers and staff work together.

Another way in which this fact has a bearing on the administration of a volunteer program in the church is that a way must be found to utilize the skills – however limited – of all of those who volunteer. Because the church 'belongs' to all its members, those who volunteer

must be provided with the opportunity to be meaningfully involved. On occasion this can be a problem, particularly when a member feels competent for a certain assignment, but in reality is not. The Volunteer Coordinator then is faced with the challenge of finding a way to use the existing skills and of making the individual feel the importance of an alternate assignment.

Still another unique feature of the volunteer program in a church is that there really are no recruiting problems in the usual sense. All of the members of the church are potential volunteers to be called for any project or program. What other agency has such a readily available recruitment source?

After two years of sensing that this arrangement was not as ideal as it looked on the surface, I recently identified the precise problem: since all staff are as familiar with the potential volunteers as the Coordinator of Volunteers is, they can freely recruit the volunteers themselves. In other agencies this volunteer source is somewhat removed from staff and they find it expedient to work through the volunteer office. In a church, where the function of a Volunteer Coordinator is somewhat foreign, staff tend to by-pass the office to fill their own needs. This complicates the jobs of coordination and record keeping. The major role, then, of the Coordinator of Volunteers in churches becomes one of identifying the variety of skills available and encouraging the use of as many members as possible.

The efficient utilization of volunteers is just as important – though not always recognized – in churches as it is in any other situation. Think of the

amount of time the clergy would be able to devote to pastoral care if they had Volunteer Coordinators to handle the recruiting in their churches.

Traditionally, no matter what size the congregation is, the minister is presumed to know the people and their skills best. When need for volunteers arises, it is the minister who is most frequently asked for recommendations (or to actually make the contact). The minister is the one who meets with and gets to know the new members as they join the church, and is therefore the one most often held responsible for passing these members' interests and skills along to the right group. How helpful it can be to have a Coordinator of Volunteers to take care of these details.

Not everyone who belongs to a church WANTS to work in the church because they have found something there that appeals to them. Usually in the flush of new membership, they are eager to get involved. If that eagerness does not find an outlet, it will drift elsewhere to find acceptance. Involving new members as quickly as possible in the life of the church will help retain them as active, contributing members. To take it a step further, that involvement deserves the same respect and efficient care that community agencies would give it. No volunteer likes to be taken for granted. Volunteers

like to find work waiting for them when they are scheduled to come in. Volunteers like meaningful involvement that meets their capabilities. Volunteers like to feel they have options and choices regarding what they do and how long they will be involved.

What little has been written about coordination of volunteers in churches seems to have taken the stance that the church population is a tremendous potential resource for community agencies to tap for volunteers in their programs. By developing thoroughly the concept of a volunteer program within the church itself, building good management practices and efficiently utilizing those resources for the work within its own walls, the church could more feasibly expand those practices to help in the recruitment of volunteers for other community agencies.

Management principles from the business world are being applied to volunteer administration. We need to carry it a step further and apply those same principles to volunteer administration in churches. It is long overdue, considering the numbers of volunteers in churches.

About the Author

At the time of the article's original publication...

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