All Volunteers Take One Step Forward:
The Management and Motivation of Library Volunteers

by *Arleen Myers*

> *A leader is best*
> *When people barely know he exists*
> *Not so good*
> *When people obey and acclaim him*
> *Worse when they despise him*
> *But of a good leader*
> *Who talks little*
> *And when his work is done*
> *His aim fulfilled*
> *They will say*
> *"We did it ourselves."*
>
> — *Lao-Tse (c. 565 B.C.)*

This poem, while applicable to managers in private corporations and public agencies, also is true of leaders in nonprofit groups. Many organizations have come to depend heavily on their volunteer work force, and the responsibilities shouldered by these unpaid workers have a great impact on the success of the company. Since volunteers operate out of a sense of personal obligation and not with the expectation of financial reward, managers must develop special techniques to harness the variety of talents and aspirations that come their way in the form of volunteers.

Church libraries are a unique type of volunteer organization in that there is usually no professional paid staff, and interested volunteers, while eager, are generally unskilled. The question "Why do you want to work in our library?" is often answered "Because I love books." This is not an inappropriate answer, but

it calls for special training methods to organize volunteers into an efficient, consistent, and happy work force.

Management of volunteers in nonprofit groups

Before seeking out new volunteers, the organization should have clear goals and an understanding of what positions need to be filled. Recruiting techniques used in nonprofit organizations include speakers, social functions, media publicity (radio, television, and newspaper), paid advertising and direct mail, and person to person contact.[1] A March 1988 Gallup Poll revealing how volunteers found out about the positions that they would later fill shows the effectiveness of some of these methods:[2]

Asked by someone:	40.4%
Participated in an organization:	39.3%
Family or friend benefited:	27.6%
Sought on their own:	19.2%
Saw an advertisement:	5.3%

There are many ways to publicize volunteer opportunities in the library and call attention to the existence of the organization itself. According to the above results, there is no substitute for personal interaction with an organization or current volunteers to stimulate interest.

The personal and professional characteristics of the "typical" library volunteer have changed drastically in the past few decades. For this reason, libraries can no longer be passive filters of whatever volunteers float their way. They must rethink their strategies and become active recruiters, seeking out human resources in non-traditional locations. The Denver Public Library did exactly this. After two years of declining volunteer labor, the DPL began contacting senior citizens groups, linking up with judicial systems to obtain people doing community service work, and seeking out minority groups and people with disabilities. The library was able to obtain support from businesses who would supply teams of volunteers, and this liaison provided not only a valuable service to the library, but a sense of camaraderie within the volunteer group.[3]

Once an applicant pool has been created, interviews should be held to determine the potential volunteer's suitability and applicable skills. Turning down unqualified volunteers is a task requiring much grace and tact, but one that must be done. The volunteer coordinator must not feel pressured to accept all "free" labor simply because it is available. Agencies that operate according to the high standards for personnel and productivity found in most com-

mercial ventures have higher success rates than those which are run in a less professional manner.[4]

Training employees consumes a large amount of time in any organization, and volunteer agencies have become adept at getting new volunteers up and running in a very short space of time. One reason for this is that "Nonprofits must spend more time breaking down jobs into their component parts.... They draw up specific job descriptions for volunteers, hand them over, and then get out of the way."[5] Between the handing over and the getting out of the way, however, some sort of training must take place. This may take the form of a quick orientation, or a weeks-long course of formal instruction. Regardless of the length of the program, it must equip the new volunteer with the skills necessary to perform the assignment with comfort and accuracy.

Motivating volunteers is the most crucial aspect of volunteer management. Recruiting techniques will fail if volunteers project a negative image of their working conditions, and no amount of training will correct poor work practices that are the result of apathy. When the incentive is not a paycheck, the bonds that hold people in their positions are weaker; therefore, the personal benefits must be greater. In order to motivate their volunteers, leaders must first understand that each volunteer has a different reason for wanting to devote time to a particular cause. Some act out of the altruistic impulse to contribute to society. Other volunteers want a chance to sharpen or stretch job skills, or to try out a new career without the risk that a formal change entails. For others, volunteering is a way to get a jump on a new line of work by building up a resume and gathering recommendations[6] Other reasons include a desire to create new friendships, or to become a "watchdog" to investigate whether or not a group is operating according to its publicized purpose.[7]

Since none of the above reasons include monetary compensation, the volunteer manager should draw on motivational leadership techniques that foster feelings of personal satisfaction, using a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. The most important of the extrinsic rewards is recognition. This can be given in a variety of ways: positive feedback immediately after completion of a particularly difficult or important task, letters of appreciation, notation of volunteers by name in publicity materials, awards ceremonies and other events that honor volunteers, and small gifts.[8] "If volunteers don't feel appreciated, they have no reason to stay; their urge to serve humanity can be fulfilled just as well by another agency."[9]

Intrinsic rewards are created by the job itself. Volunteers want experiences that give them a sense of accomplishment and the feeling that they are filling a need. The barcoding project at Broome Community College contained both these elements. Over the holiday break, 95 retired and current BCC faculty, staff, and students barcoded 65,584 titles in preparation for automation. Factors leading to the success of the project included widespread publicity, incentives such as T-shirts and snacks, and achievement indicators such as progress charts and certificates of appreciation. Volunteers could see the results of their efforts.[10]

A good manager will ensure that volunteers are assigned tasks compatible with their aptitudes and interests. Worthwhile work and ongoing recognition are the two factors which most strongly influence volunteer satisfaction.[11]

Since the only rewards received by volunteers are emotional ones, their managers need to make the organizational climate as friendly as possible. In Motivation and Organizational Climate, Litwin and Stringer, as quoted in Wilson,[12] have identified nine factors that determine this climate:

- Structure – is the atmosphere rigid, or informal? how many rules are there?
- Responsibility – how much decision-making freedom is the volunteer given?
- Reward – how fair are the recognition practices?
- Risk – is the volunteer expected to "play it safe," or encouraged to take chances?
- Warmth – how much cooperation and good feeling is there in the group?
- Support – is there mutual support from above and below?
- Standards – are goals high and yet still realistic?
- Conflict – are problems brought into the open and dealt with immediately?
- Identity – is there a feeling of being a valuable member of a team?

A volunteer's performance should be evaluated routinely. Empowerment occurs when the volunteer realizes that he or she can have an impact — positive or negative — on the organization. The sponsoring agency in return receives a source of feedback from a viewpoint that is somewhere between that of the general public and the full-time staff.[13]

Volunteers have traditionally received "kid glove" treatment, especially when working alongside paid staff members. These attitudes, however, are changing. Stay-at-home mothers no longer comprise the majority of the volunteer work force. Professionals who work full time are joining the ranks, and they will not spend what little leisure time they have on organizations that do not use their energies well. They prefer that the structure and standards found in their full-time jobs also be present in their volunteer work. Volunteers and salaried workers often list the same reasons for doing a particular job, with the only difference being "money" as a motivator for the paid workers.[14] In order to keep their unpaid work force happy and effective, managers must understand that volunteers desire the same discipline as do salaried employees.

Management of volunteers in church libraries

"People find themselves living today in a demanding, yet uncertain, world. Hunger, unemployment, violence, environmental pollution, the spector [sic] of nuclear warfare, and disregard for the sanctity of life make this a time of anxiety, even fear. A carefully selected collection of materials, organized so as to be readily accessible, can offer parishioners the spiritual nourishment, inspiration, and motivation to better live the life to which God has called them, secure in His peace."[15]

This, then, is the raison d'être for church libraries. Many begin as resource centers for religious education and evolve into complex organizations that provide not only research materials but devotional guides, self-help books, and family entertainment that includes audio and video tapes as well as books.

Many organizations depend on volunteer labor to supplement salaried and wage employees, but few depend on it so completely as church libraries, which often are run completely by people with a desire to serve but no formal library training. As Hannaford says in "The Church Librarian: an Essential Volunteer."[16]

"Even a very large parish rarely, if ever, budgets for the staff position of a trained librarian. Church funds are somehow stretched to provide for the utilitarian and the aesthetic. But there is no line-item

for a parish librarian; the service of volunteers is a necessity."

As this shows, the head librarian is usually a volunteer as well. He or she may be selected or approved by a board, committee, or minister chosen to oversee the library outreach. Responsibilities include planning for library needs, overseeing day-to-day operations, maintaining records, supervising and training assistants, and publicizing library programs. Many would refuse such a demanding job even with pay, and the stresses inherent in the position demand special tactics that supplement general nonprofit managerial techniques for recruiting, training, and motivating workers.[17]

Since the recruiting pool generally is limited to the congregation, person-to-person contact is the easiest and most effective way to solicit new workers. There is a tendency to want to accept all who express an interest in volunteering, in the name of being "nice." This concept is as deadly to a church library as to any other organization. Potential volunteers should be interviewed by the head librarian to assure that their goals and assumptions about the library are correct and that there are not other areas of ministry where they might be more effective.[18]

After volunteers have been recruited, they should be given a thorough orientation to introduce them to their fellow volunteers and the inner workings of the library. A handbook outlining expectations, responsibilities, and other information of use to a new volunteer should be provided. Questionnaires can be used to assess the new volunteer's current knowledge of standard library practices and terminology.[19]

Since the church library generally enlists workers who have little or no experience in the field in which they are volunteering, access to training materials becomes very important. The Church and Synagogue Library Association provides many publications to aid churches in organizing and operating their libraries, and Catholic libraries can refer to resources offered by the Catholic Library Association. Meetings with other church libraries are an effective means of information and support.[20]

Burson lists five major sources of ongoing training that should be made available to volunteer library workers: on-the-job training, in-house training clinics, reading programs, visits to other

libraries, and library workshops offered by outside agencies.[21] On-the-job training allows the volunteer to learn tasks and responsibilities in a hands-on environment and to experience all aspects of library operations. During this time, instructions should be given clearly and job descriptions thoroughly defined. In-house training clinics provide more in-depth information in a group setting. Sessions may explain new methods or refresh old ones, discuss a particular aspect of library work, or provide a time of social interaction for volunteers. Reading programs are organized to encourage library workers to become familiar with materials available in their library. Visits to other libraries provide inspiration for new programs and procedures. Workshops are often offered by religious bookstores, college libraries, church denominations, and library associations. These provide an opportunity for more formal training and interaction with other library volunteers.[22] Correspondence courses are available from a variety of sources, including the University of Utah and the Philadelphia College of Bible Correspondence School, for those who desire in-depth and independent training.[23]

Motivating employees in a church library requires many of the same techniques used in other nonprofit organizations. Awards ceremonies, special dinners, and evaluation sessions all provide opportunities for recognition. If money is not allocated in the church budget for special events, volunteers can hold fundraisers such as bake and book sales to generate additional income. While a little attention goes a long way in keeping volunteers motivated, there are other aspects of volunteering that a manager should consider. Open communication allows workers to ask questions, express doubts, suggest changes, and resolve

problems in a non-threatening atmosphere. Workers should be given the opportunity to develop their skills and not be expected to remain uncomplaining in the face of continuous mundane work. Routine tasks should be structured in such a way that the worker is able to see end results. Giving a volunteer responsibility over a particular area increases interest and skills. A manager who wishes to successfully lead his or her volunteers must be sensitive to personnel needs, committed to his or her role, informed about available resources, and open to ways to improve services.[24]

Church library managers need to be aware of situations which are unique to church libraries and affect efficiency and morale. These include the ties of volunteers to the organization (church) exclusive of their role in the library, and the temptation to use "inside information" concerning a book's circulation history or reference questions asked as a basis for gossip about members of the congregation.

Knowing library patrons on a personal basis outside the library setting may enhance the church library volunteer's abilities to answer reference questions and suggest appropriate materials, but it also provides an opportunity for unwelcome gossip in the form of "I wonder why Mr. X is checking out all these books on Y?" As part of their orientation and training, library volunteers should be informed that even as volunteers they are expected to maintain professional standards of privacy for library users. In any volunteer setting, the feelings of the volunteer must be given careful consideration. If a worker leaves or is asked to resign under adverse circumstances in a secular group, he or she simply leaves the community of the organization. With a church library, however, the ex-volunteer is still a part of the religious community, and care must be taken not to add strain to what may already be an embarrassing situation.

There are many ways that volunteers can be utilized in libraries, but their duties in church libraries often extend far into what would be the realm of "professional" duties in almost any other type of library. They select and accession materials, catalog, type cards, and read shelves. In addition to technical services work, church library volunteers can prepare bulletin boards, give book talks,[25] tell stories, and build bookshelves. This all-volunteer force need not worry about usurping the authority of any professional staff (as they might working alongside paid employees in a

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larger organization) and so are able to cultivate a wide variety of skills in a nurturing environment. Many of the skills used by managers in major nonprofit corporations are applicable to the small church library, and proper use of such techniques creates not only satisfying volunteer experiences but a beneficial resource center for the congregation as well.

References

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