Volunteer Retention and Feelings of Connection

by Rick Lynch

Retaining volunteers is both an indicator of and a key to success in volunteer management. When volunteers keep coming back, it is a sign that the program is being managed in a reasonable way. The return of trained and seasoned volunteers gives the Volunteer Program Manager more time to be creative and effective in carrying out the mission.

At its simplest level, volunteer retention is purely a matter of making volunteers feel good about their assignment and themselves. If the experience is satisfying and rewarding, the volunteers will continue to want to participate. This is even more likely to be true if the assigned task boosts the volunteer's self esteem. When this experience pervades the volunteer program, a positive, enthusiastic climate is created which, in turn, encourages people to continue to volunteer.

In our book *Volunteer Management* (located in the Energize Online Bookstore at http://energizeinc.com/total/volmm.html), Steve McCurley and I refer to the research on self-esteem conducted by psychologists Harris Clemes and Reynold Bean. In their many books on this subject these authors report that people with high self-esteem are individuals who simultaneously satisfy a variety of motivational needs. One such need is a positive sense of connection with other people.

The Importance of Feeling Connected

People who feel connected are those that experience a sense of belonging--a sense of being part of a relationship with others. In a highly mobile society, where friends and loved ones may live hundreds of miles away and the next door neighbor is sometimes a stranger, this need often goes unmet. People are left with feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction, and loneliness. The psychologist William Glasser points out that the need for connection often exceeds the need to survive, in that most people who try to commit suicide do so out of loneliness.

A sense of identification with a work group can meet this need and can result in healthier, happier individuals. Volunteers who feel a positive sense of connection with the staff and volunteers of their agency will tend to feel good about the experience and will want to continue to volunteer.

Unfortunately many non-profit and social service organizations inadvertently act in ways that dilute the connections that volunteers feel with the agency. Some of these actions are subtle, others are more blatant. All have the effect of making the volunteers feel separate from and different than paid staff. In such cases, the good feelings that volunteers might have about being an integral part of the agency are reduced, and the likelihood that they will elect to do something else with their leisure time increases.

Over the years, I have collected a long list of such disconnecting factors. For simplicity, I have divided them into categories. These categories overlap with and support each other.

Things that Disconnect Volunteers

Susan Ellis, one of the Publishing Editors of *e-Volunteerism*, once said: "Volunteer is a pay rate not a job title." One of the many implications of this insight is that volunteers should not be regarded as different from paid staff in any way except their compensation and their hours. As we will see below, however, there are plenty of perceived differences that distinguish volunteers from paid staff, differences that work against a feeling of connection.

Differences in Resources
In most agencies, volunteers do not have the use of dedicated workspace and equipment. They have no place to store work, to hang their coats, or to place personal items with which paid staff often decorate their workplaces. In some agencies, they have no access to e-mail. Often, they are given no place to park their cars. As a consequence, volunteers are made to feel that they are visitors to the agency rather than an integral part of the team. Of course, these "perks" are expensive. Individual distribution would not be cost-effective as most volunteers do not visit the agency on a daily basis. Not every volunteer can have their own office, computer, and parking space. But many agencies have found it possible to provide resources that volunteers can share, such as a desk, file cabinets, a computer, and their own e-mail accounts. Volunteers that receive these resources feel much more valued and consequently more connected.

Differences in Access to Information
Another reason volunteers can feel detached is that they are not given the same information as paid staff. Management rarely shares information about problems or new directions with volunteers, involves them in decision-making or invites them to staff meetings. Being removed from the transmission of information makes volunteers feel separate and different from paid staff. When volunteers learn new things about the agency through the media and other secondary sources, they feel very disconnected.

Confidentiality is often the excuse for keeping volunteers outside of the loop. One home for emotionally disturbed children, for example, kept the treatment goals of each child secret from the volunteers because such information was supposed to be confidential. As a consequence, staff members were frequently upset when volunteers did things that worked against a treatment goal. This led to conflict between volunteers and paid staff because staff saw volunteers as "screwing everything up." When the agency allowed volunteers to be aware of the treatment goals for the children and to attend staff meetings where the children's progress was discussed, everything changed. As a result, volunteers could play an integral part in the progress of the child, conflicts between volunteer and paid staff diminished and most importantly, the children's progress increased.

Volunteers should have equal access to the same information afforded staff at other pay rates. Paid staff members sometimes object to this, and argue that volunteers cannot be trusted with information. The argument appears to rely on the theory that there is something about being unpaid that makes a person inherently untrustworthy. There is no evidence to suggest that volunteers are any less trustworthy than other staff persons. If they are treated with trust, people, paid or unpaid, will react in a trustworthy fashion.

Differences in Status
In many programs paid staff members receive benefits and/or status related distinctions that volunteers do not enjoy. In the extreme, there are "staff only" signs prohibiting volunteers from entering certain areas or from doing certain things. In one animal shelter, for example, one staff

person insisted that "Volunteers are not allowed to pet the puppies." Distinctions also include not having a uniform or having a different uniform than that worn by paid staff. In some agencies, paid staff wear nametags or business cards bearing their names, and volunteers either have none or have nametags or cards that simply say "Volunteer." In some programs, staff members are given porcelain coffee cups while volunteers use styrofoam cups. Occasionally, staff members receive discounts on items or events that volunteers do not. Another status-related difference is that volunteers sometimes receive a shorter and less complete orientation and training than paid staff members. In one organization with which I worked, volunteers were actually charged for training that employees received for free. Status distinctions also result in the exclusion of volunteers from staff functions. These include both formal functions such as staff meetings and informal functions such as social gatherings. Volunteers who, for example, may not be invited to the staff Christmas party, lose their sense of connection with the agency and with those employed by it. Oddly, recognition events can contribute to a sense of being "other." Typically, there are no such events for paid staff. They are designated only for volunteers. Volunteers are frequently disappointed to find that staff members do not attend these volunteer recognition events. Status distinctions extend even to the paid staff members who work with the volunteers. Frequently, the Volunteer Program Manager is one of the lowest status positions in the agency. When agencies pay this person less than people in other management positions, equip them with hand-me-down computers, and give them undesirable office space, they devalue the volunteer program. Such actions communicate to all that volunteers are of less value than paid staff. In their search for a sense of connectedness, volunteers may seek out and bond with each other. This substitute for agency inclusion can cause more harm than benefit. The bonding between volunteers who are distanced by the organization is often accompanied by a shared sense of injustice, a desire to band together to comfort each other for the unfair treatment. This creates an "us versus them" mentality that is inherently divisive. Status disparity is not an insurmountable problem and can be rectified through conscious acts of sensitivity to the feelings of all who work within an organization. A simple example would apply to the recognition events referred to above. Instead of isolating volunteers for these events, agencies could try having staff recognition events that honor both paid and unpaid staff. Such events would bear three advantages: · paid staff would get formal recognition for their achievements (something that rarely happens anyway);

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- paid staff would attend the event; and

- volunteers would gain an enhanced sense of connection and equality.

Differences in Authority
Volunteers are sometimes regarded as the "low persons on the totem pole," and consequently are given little freedom to make decisions. This problem is often fed by a lack of direction. Volunteers who do not know what to do or how to do it lack the information and training needed to make the appropriate decisions about their work. When that happens, volunteers are in a very confused state. Consequently, they are perceived as individuals unable to make sensible decisions and are therefore never given the opportunity to do so. The cycle results in inefficiency, frustration and wasted time and energy. At a hospital in Southern California, I talked to a group of teen volunteers who came to the hospital and spent most of their time sitting

and waiting to be told what to do. To them, volunteering was an excruciatingly boring experience, relieved only by the sense of resentment they felt at having their time treated as of little value.

Where it exists, this problem has its roots not only in the way volunteers are regarded but in the way volunteer jobs are designed. Volunteers need to have their work defined with clear areas of responsibility and should be able to come to their assignment knowing what they are supposed to accomplish. With this knowledge, they can assess the situation and make a decision as to how to carry out their goals. Even the most inexperienced volunteers should not be deprived of the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process. If they are inexperienced or unsure of the correct course of action, less seasoned volunteers can be encouraged to recommend a course of action to their supervisors.

Volunteer authority can also extend to the ability to make minor purchases for items required for work. Such authority says loudly to the volunteers that they are trusted and valued by the organization. It gives the opposite sense of having information kept from them. Rather than dividing, authority gives volunteers a sense of being part of the organization.

Authority should extend beyond the boundaries of knowing what to do and how to do it. True authority vests in the recipient the ability to exercise creativity in carrying out the desired goals. If volunteer jobs are designed so that volunteers have clear goals to achieve, they can be encouraged to come up with new approaches to achieving them. If this idea makes staff nervous, this creative authority can extend simply to give volunteers the ability to recommend new approaches. In this way, staff members can grant authority and encourage creativity without losing the confidence that volunteers' creative ideas will not create disaster.

Different Rules
Formally or informally, volunteers often operate under different rules than paid staff. Leaving early, arriving late, taking personal telephone calls at work, and the like cause volunteers to distance themselves from paid staff.

The relaxed standards for attendance and conduct result in both benefit and detriment to those who take advantage of them. Clearly, these standards can be regarded as some of the advantages volunteers have over paid employees. But when volunteers live down to these lower standards, they diminish their standing in the eyes of their paid counterparts. Paid staff members sometimes complain that volunteers are allowed to get away with things for which paid staff would be disciplined. The result is a cycle that leads to all sorts of disconnecting behaviors. Paid staff look down on those who do not appear to take their jobs seriously. Volunteers who get the impression that paid people have a low estimation of them feel alienated and consequently are not likely to stay around very long.

Differences in Expectation
A frequent mistake is not to demand much of volunteers in the erroneous belief that this will attract and retain volunteers in large numbers. But if the volunteer job is one that anyone can do, and if the expectations are low, then volunteers will feel that neither they nor the group to which they are connected is very special.

Volunteers are often held to a lower standard than their paid colleagues. Sometimes, in fact, there is not much of a standard at all, because volunteers often lack clearly defined job descriptions. This, coupled with the fact that they may get less supervisory feedback than paid staff, means that volunteers feel that their work is less valuable than that of others in the agency. When people realize others have low expectations of them, their self-esteem suffers.

Volunteers also feel low expectations in the all too common case where they arrive at the agency to discover there is nothing for them to do. An individual who offers willing of their precious time, will automatically feel profoundly devalued when they are given nothing of value to do.

The expectations for volunteers as a group are just as crucial as are those for each individual volunteer. People with a sense of connectedness have a sense of "we" as well as a sense of "I." The more special the "we" is, the more special the individual feels as part of the group and the greater the self-esteem that is generated. High expectations for group performance translates to high group esteem and ultimately a positive sense of connection for each individual member.

To foster self-esteem and the connectedness of their volunteers, some agencies hold their volunteers to the same standard applied to paid staff. They clearly define the desired outcomes of the volunteers' jobs and give them feedback as to how they are doing. By defining the job in terms of desirable outcomes, they enable volunteers to assign tasks to themselves. Again, the implications of Susan Ellis's dictum come in to play: If you treat volunteers as though they are a separate category, they will feel they are separate from the agency.

Differences in Regard
Agencies also sometimes give volunteers a sense of separation by regarding them as "just volunteers." This happens in a great many subtle ways. For example, paid staff may not know their names or remember the days that they are expected to work. Volunteers who perceive that the people with whom they work do not even care to know who they are will definitely not feel connected to the agency to which they have offered their time and energy.

Many of these differences come from the fact that volunteers do not come to work each day. In many programs, in fact, volunteers work away from the office and are rarely seen at all. As a consequence, their paid colleagues do not get to know them. Some do not even learn their names or recognize their faces. When they meet, they may fail to initiate basic connecting behaviors such as smiling or engaging in conversation. In such circumstances, volunteers are bound to feel invisible.

One idea to reduce this problem is to put pictures of all paid and unpaid staff on a bulletin board. Then if someone sees a volunteer and doesn't know who they are or what they do, they can go to the bulletin board and find out. Such a device helps to connect people. It also gives everyone a strong sense that all are equal (unless there is a separate section for volunteers).

Another difference in regard stems from the time-honored tradition of developing volunteer jobs by asking staff for jobs they would like to see done by volunteers. In such circumstances, staff frequently tend to identify things they personally don't like to do. A perfect example is the odious job of filing. Although filing is certainly a legitimate job for a volunteer, volunteers should not be confined to such tasks. If such a pattern develops, paid staff will begin to assume that

volunteers are people who are there to do the useful, ancillary services that no one else wants to do.

To counteract this scenario, it is critical that Volunteer Program Managers make every effort to develop high value jobs for volunteers. Ask staff the question: "What valuable thing could be done here that no one on staff has the skills to do?" Answers to this question will lead to highly skilled jobs for volunteers, job in fields such as graphic design, computer programming, public relations, strategic planning, or accounting. When agencies begin to involve volunteers in these fields, all volunteers get more respect.

Individuals who are paid to provide highly professional services sometimes view volunteers as the people who do low-skilled work. Sometimes this misperception is attributable to nothing more than semantics. If we ask these people to "volunteer," they may picture themselves doing menial or unskilled labor. They tend to react quite differently if they are asked to contribute their services on a "pro bono basis." The term *pro bono* is one that has a positive connotation in the minds of professionals. If paid staff are encouraged to consider volunteers as the agency's "pro bono workers" they may ultimately treat the volunteers with a higher level of regard. I have often thought that volunteer programs would get more respect if the manager's title was "Director of Pro Bono Resources."

Creating a Positive Sense of Connection
Positive feelings of connectedness can be enhanced in volunteer programs by many leadership actions, some of which have been referred to throughout this article. Here are some of the most powerful:

Seeking volunteer input. Ask volunteers for their ideas about how the agency might improve. Volunteers often see many opportunities to enhance the services or the internal systems of an agency. In fact, because they are often new to the agency, they are uniquely suited to recognizing such opportunities. Their view is less constrained that that of paid staff, who tend to take the systems for granted and accept them as given. Volunteers, coming in from the outside, sometimes look at the way an organization does things and think "That's dumb. I wonder why they do it that way?" Oftentimes, however, volunteers do not air their views as they fear that their insight is based in ignorance of facts they don't yet appreciate. Counteract this reticence by asking them for their input. If you can then help them be champions of their good ideas and get the suggestions put into practice, volunteers will inevitably develop a profound sense of identification with the agency. After all, it is "their agency" if some of the agency practices came directly from them.

Creating a mutually validating climate. A validation is a statement that praises a person's positive characteristics. Some examples of validations include:

- I admire your work ethic.

- I'm impressed at how pleasant you are after a hard day.

- You sure are smart.

- I love your sense of humor.

- You are so good at solving problems.

- I like the way you stay calm in the face of conflict.

- You are such a caring person.

Such statements can be made at any time, without the volunteer having done anything in particular. They are recognition not for the work volunteers do but for the kind of people they are.

Validations are very powerful statements. People are not used to hearing such comments. Some of us have been trained not to make such statements to another person. Oddly, it is often the case that people who feel totally uncomfortable saying something like "You always come up with good ideas," have no difficulty saying "You are a brainless idiot." As a consequence, keep in mind that a little of this goes a long way; and it is easy to overdo it.

Communicating volunteer contributions. When work is done well, leaders should do more than privately compliment the volunteer(s) who accomplished it. Leaders at all levels in the agency should spread the word about positive volunteer achievements. They should talk about the values and standards of the organization and what it means to be part of the group. When a volunteer makes a good decision (assuming things are set up to allow volunteers to make decisions at all) the Volunteer Program Manager can say something like "That was the right thing to do." She or he can then tell other volunteers about this, saying something like "That's the kind of thing we do in this agency." Such a statement makes everyone feel very connected and proud to be part of the organization.

Addressing volunteers by name. One of the most fundamental ways of producing a feeling of connectedness is as simple as calling volunteers by name. This cannot be accomplished unless staff members understand the importance of learning the names of their volunteers. In situations involving large numbers of volunteers, recognition can be aided with mnemonic devices such as nametags or a bulletin board with the names and pictures of all paid and volunteer personnel.

Invitations. Another fundamental means of creating a feeling of connectedness is to invite volunteers to attend and participate in work-related and social functions. Any kind of social or work related invitation will have this effect. Invite volunteers to parties, meetings and training sessions. But don't stop with attendance. Invite volunteers to participate in these functions and to share their ideas. Invitations are a great connector. They communicate esteem and respect. They also reinforce the importance of the volunteer's role in the agency.

Keeping volunteers informed. We can also help volunteers identify with the agency by making sure they know the purpose or mission of the organization and, above all, how their work relates to achieving that purpose. Nothing is as fundamental to a team's effectiveness as a common sense of what the team is trying to collectively achieve. Staff and volunteers should see themselves as equal partners in pursuing this goal. At one hospital, for example, volunteers are told that the mission of the hospital is to reduce the suffering of patients. These volunteers are also told how their work applies to that mission--so the hospitality cart volunteer knows he helps to cheer people up and reduce their anxiety; the person who transports specimens knows that she is helping to find out what is wrong with the patient so that their suffering can be treated; and the person who gives information to visitors knows that she is helping to cheer up the patient by

directing their loved ones to them. When people see their work as directly related to the mission, it gives them a sense of purpose and a sense of identification with the work of the whole organization.

Encouraging volunteer creativity. As noted above, volunteers should have the same opportunity for input as paid staff. It is not enough, however, to listen to the input without using it. Adopting this input may require abandoning established, comfortable methods for untested waters. Organizations that are willing to take the chance and learn from their volunteers unleash a tremendous amount of innovation and service improvement. The testing and experimentation that results from this innovation is by itself a potentially bonding tool. People who engage in new experiences together experience a sense of connectedness. By insisting passionately on constant innovation and improvement, leaders encourage people to try out new ways of doing things. When the new techniques and methods are experienced by teams, the sense of connectedness is enhanced even more.

Volunteers who feel that they have a role in the decision-making process develop an enhanced sense of connection with the group. To encourage and foster volunteer input, the leader must take great care to hide his or her own biases and opinions. Group members who know what the person in authority wants may tend to support that position and will not, therefore, truly participate in the process. Without true participation, there cannot be a genuine sense of connection. A leader who, for whatever reason, cannot accept volunteer input should be honest with his or her personnel instead of soliciting input that he or she has no intention of using.

Setting high standards. In developing jobs for volunteers (other than for one-shot volunteers whom you don't expect to retain) avoid setting performance standards that are too low. If the expectations are too easy to meet, people will not feel special about their participation. Volunteers should not have lower standards than paid staff.

Monitoring volunteer regard. One of the Volunteer Program Manager's assigned responsibilities should involve monitoring behavior that inadvertently excludes volunteers. The Manager should, for example, take note of meetings to which volunteers are not invited, especially if such exclusions result not from deliberate action but instead because no one thought to offer volunteers the opportunity to attend. With such monitoring, managers can take the necessary action to prevent volunteers from feeling like second-class citizens.

Not only should the leaders of volunteer programs scrutinize the views of paid staff members, but they should also monitor the volunteers' own views of themselves. Managers should listen for comments personnel make about the expectations they have of themselves and their co-workers. If people say things like "I'm just a volunteer," or "What do they expect for free?" it should cause alarm bells to ring. People's self-esteem drops when they regard themselves as part of a below-average group. This negative sense of connectedness leads to high turnover of staff and volunteers. Upon hearing negative statements such as this, leaders should try to generate positive ideas for improving the situation. They might ask: "What makes you say that? What can you do to improve this situation? What kind of place would you want to work? What can you do to make this organization more like the kind of place you want it to be?"

Giving volunteers ownership in the mission. When working with staff to develop jobs for volunteers, the Volunteer Program Manager should make sure that volunteers (or teams of

volunteers) have a sense of ownership of a client or project. Volunteers should be able to point to something and say: "This is mine." This possessive relationship could extend to a client or to a program, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters] or a tutoring program. Alternatively, volunteers could claim ownership of a particular product or geographic service area. Only when there is ownership can people be proud of their work. Fragmentation of ownership also generates blame and criticism, and criticism is the prime enemy of connectedness.

Offering sincere and consistent recognition. The Volunteer Program Manager should encourage paid staff to celebrate the accomplishments of volunteers in the context of their contribution to the goals of the group. Recognition must be consistent so that people do not suspect favoritism. Team accomplishments can also be celebrated, giving equal credit to all team members. When recognition is given to a team consisting of both paid staff of and volunteers, the sense of connection is very powerful.

Disseminating volunteer experiences. A sense of shared pride can also be developed by having volunteers write newsletter articles about their experiences. Child Advocates in Houston's newsletter features articles written by volunteers on the subject of what makes them proud to be part of the program. When other volunteers read these articles, it reminds them of why they are proud to be involved as well.

This newsletter idea produces connections in other ways. The author's picture accompanies the article. In a large agency, this helps readers to familiarize themselves with the author in such a way that they can recognize him or her at their next encounter. It also gives the readers something to talk to the author about, furthering the sense of connection.

Having something to talk to others about is a fundamental condition for feelings of connectedness. New volunteers need to be connected quickly to the older volunteers and staff. When a new volunteer joins the agency, the Volunteer Program Manager should tell the others some interesting things about that person so that others can have topics of conversation with which to engage them.

Promoting interaction. Because it is impossible for people to feel connected without interaction, Volunteer Program Managers should look for opportunities to promote interaction among group members. This is particularly important where there are few "natural" opportunities for people to share their common experiences. For example, in befriending schemes and literacy programs, volunteers work with clients on independent schedules. Volunteers work with little daily supervision and rarely appear in the office. Effective volunteer supervisors, knowing that "it's lonely out there," take pains to bring their people together for training, potluck dinners, and other events where they can share their "war stories." Such events are also opportunities for the staff to share relevant information with the volunteers. All this enables volunteers to enhance their sense of connection.

Listen and learn. Lastly, people feel connected best when others listen to them. Be sincere in trying to understand volunteers' points of view. Get to know as much about them as time allows. People feel more connected to a program where they believe that people are interested in what they have to say.

Conclusion

A sense of volunteer connectedness is the goal for which agencies should strive. To achieve this goal, agencies and their Volunteer Program Managers will have to choose, experiment and ultimately employ those tools that will best work within the context of their own day to day operations. The tools discussed in this article are but examples and not all of them will work for every agency. Moreover, many additional tools exist that are not addressed here. We invite you to share with us and with the readers of e-Volunteerism your own tools as well as stories of your success and failures with these tools.

Some techniques that foster a sense of connectedness have, most likely, been introduced as the result of the type of volunteer input and creativity that this article encourages. Many programs are already using some of these tools to make their volunteers feel connected. Regardless of the method chosen, the programs that find ways to foster this sense of connection will be those that will be the most successful in retaining a dedicated corps of motivated volunteers.