

Avoiding the Bait and Switch

Make sure your promises to prospective volunteers match reality

BY HILARY ANNE HAGER



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Don't promise a sunny volunteer experience if your agency can't deliver it.

Culture can be communitywide or nationwide, and within the world of animal shelters, individual organizations have their own cultures, their own atmospheres, ways of doing things, and sets of shared values and goals. Organizational culture is often heavily influenced by the organizational mission, but equally influenced by the people who work there.

It's common practice for volunteer managers to clarify the mission, vision, and values of their organization as they help prospective volunteers decide whether to become a part of it. Less emphasis is placed on the common culture of the people already working in the organization—and the two

cultures of employees and volunteers are often worlds apart.

Shelters are organized to help animals, but it's the human animal that can often have the greatest effect on the working environment. Each organization has a rich undercurrent of individual personalities, experiences, and interpersonal skills and styles that can affect a volunteer's experience. Every animal organization engaging volunteers should aim to create a vision for successfully incorporating them into the organization's work. Will volunteers be seen as vitally important partners who add value? Will the organization commit to developing a professional volunteer program—one managed by dedicated staff?

Will the organization's appreciation of volunteers be incorporated into communication at every level?

These are all essential steps in building an effective volunteer program. The organization's leaders must set the tone and take the lead in making this happen, ensuring that it filters to every level of staff in order to make it a reality.

Sometimes there's a disconnect between the organizational picture the volunteer coordinator paints when she recruits and trains volunteers and the experience that volunteers have in their work. Program managers might speak about the importance of volunteers, and how essential they are in carrying out the

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organization's mission, but if the rest of the staff who work with and oversee volunteers don't embody and express those values, or show that they're committed to building relationships with them, the positive words of the volunteer manager may come across as a bunch of hot air.

For example, if the relationship between staff and volunteers is marked by conflict, tension, or even animosity toward volunteers, the organization will have difficulty retaining them. The goal is to create a more healthy environment in the long term, but if new volunteers are likely to experience tension, organizations should select those people who can handle it. It's critical to be honest with ourselves about the environment into which we're inviting volunteers.

In addition, many people working with animals think of themselves as "animal people" rather than "people people," and might not have had any training or experience overseeing volunteers. People who haven't been trained in supervision and aren't able to provide clear feedback and communication are not the best fit for managing volunteers, but sometimes those staff members are the only option. To create an organizational culture promoting volunteer involvement, work with those staff who perhaps don't have a natural affinity for interacting directly with people, in order to give them the skills they need to succeed. Leaders should be clear that staff is expected to work with volunteers, whether it comes naturally or not.

Gimme Some Truth

In an organization where people pay lip service to the value of volunteers but the culture itself doesn't reflect those values, volunteer coordinators often won't be able to make good on their promises that volunteers will be appreciated and treated as partners. Coordinators don't directly supervise the staff, and can't ensure that staff meet their expectations for how volunteers are treated. Volunteer program managers frequently get put in the position of lobbying other managers and supervisors to ensure their staff treat volunteers appropriately.

Whether they work in a truly volunteer-positive environment or one that's still struggling to make the employee/volunteer gears mesh effectively, it's vital that volunteer co-

ordinators be honest with prospective volunteers about what to expect, and select volunteers who can thrive in the environment as it is, not the environment as the volunteer coordinator hopes it will be. No one wants to tell volunteers to expect to encounter unfriendly or impatient staff, but if that's likely, it seems only fair to prepare them.

I have found that truth is the best policy. Tell prospective volunteers that you're recruiting for the program you have, not the program you hope to have. Let people know that

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while staff may truly appreciate the contributions of volunteers, they're often too busy to stop and engage in small talk above a quick "thank you."

In my shelter, we find people who are well-trained up front and who are able to work with little or no direct supervision. Our staffing structure requires this—but not every individual wants to participate in that kind of program. If they need or want more interaction with and direction from staff than they're likely to get, I encourage them to look elsewhere. I want volunteers to be happy and to have long careers of service with my organization. But if it isn't a match, I want them to find another organization where they can be involved and love what they're doing.

I also feel it's my job as a volunteer manager to bring in volunteers who will, through their actions, remind the staff each and every day that the volunteer program is the best thing that ever happened to the shelter. If I bring in volunteers who are disruptive, who aren't able to follow directions, and who make work harder for staff, I am reinforcing the notion that volunteers are more trouble than they're worth. I

make sure volunteers are going to be able to perform at a high level. When they do, the staff is delighted, which makes them even more supportive of the program. I explain my strategy to volunteers and let them know we'll give them the tools they'll need to succeed.

Training should aim to allow volunteers to be as self-directed and self-supporting as possible, so they're not interrupting staff or making staff jobs harder.

There is never an excuse for staff to behave inappropriately toward volunteers. But volunteers are less likely to be offended or put off by brusque behavior if they understand the context of the staff's work, and why some employees are perhaps too busy completing other assigned tasks to stop and chat. Volunteer managers have to find ways to bridge the gap between staff and volunteers to foster understanding and appreciation.

Betsy McFarland, senior director of the Companion Animals department at The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), and the author of the book *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organizations*, says in workshops she teaches she tries to address the "us versus them" tension that sometimes arises between staff and volunteers. Staff members often feel that volunteers don't appreciate the fact that employees can't simply go home after a difficult incident such as being urinated on or bitten by an animal, or yelled at by a patron. Volunteers, meanwhile, often think that the staff doesn't appreciate that they have full-time jobs elsewhere and are helping the shelter by choice.

McFarland says the challenge for volunteer directors is to facilitate a more understanding environment. There are a variety of ways to do this; in my old shelter, we created a video called "A Day in the Life" that showed (at high speed and with music) the average daily routine of a staffer, including cleaning, feeding, assessing behavior, receiving animals, and overseeing adoption visits. It was cute and fun, and helped give volunteers a better understanding of how involved and varied the staff's work is, and also the level of professionalism that is required. In my current shelter, all prospective volunteers spend one hour observing the front counter of the shelter, watching as animals are

brought in or adopted out, witnessing the range of conversations that take place over the counter or over the phone. This helps them to better understand the environment and the realities of working in a large, open-admission shelter.

Likewise, staff needs to be made aware of the elements of the volunteer program, so they can understand what volunteers are learning and what's expected of them. Staff should be required to attend volunteer trainings; in my experience, the trainings often include more explanation and sit-down time for volunteers than staff get as a part of their own orientation. In addition, if the training is well-designed, staff might be surprised at what all volunteers are expected to know, and might even learn something new!

To further create a friendly culture between staff and volunteers, McFarland recommends recognizing the work of both. Volunteer recognition ceremonies, for example, can be broadened to recognize a team effort between staff and volunteers, or volunteers and staff can recognize each

other to build a team atmosphere and break down barriers. Even if a collaborative and appreciative relationship with volunteers isn't the default mode for individual staff, or isn't yet a routine part of organizational culture, the volunteer manager can take the steps to create an environment where those relationships can grow, and the organizational leadership must make it clear that it's the expectation of each and every staff person moving forward.

Creating a Good Fit

Volunteer program managers should also give some thought to what attributes and characteristics help ensure people are well-suited to working in the organization. Communicate those traits to prospective volunteers so they can self-screen and decide if they are a good fit. The relationship between the volunteer and the organization must be mutually beneficial, and knowing what you're looking for will increase the odds you might get it. Too often, we don't articulate and specify what we want, then get upset or disappointed

when we don't get it. Taking a more thoughtful and deliberate approach will serve all parties more effectively.

In my organization, we have a document called "About Our Volunteers" that includes a clear outline of the qualities we're looking for and why they're important. Volunteers need to understand their commitment; be flexible; demonstrate the ability to follow directions and handle conflict effectively; be solution-oriented and receptive to feedback; use good judgment; be safe; and be prepared for some of the dirty (meaning difficult and sad, and also literally dirty!) work the shelter has to do.

We share this document with prospective volunteers at the orientation, and we invite them to assess their fit. Volunteer trainers also use these criteria to assess volunteers. Being this transparent and specific really helps get prospective volunteers thinking and gives us a concrete way to determine a potential volunteer's suitability as they go through the process of becoming a member of the team. It also provides a basis for giving guidance if



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we discover later that people aren't performing in the way we expect them to perform.

Each organization can take internal steps to create an environment that welcomes and appreciates volunteers. These include specifying supervision of volunteers as a part of staff job descriptions. If staff will be expected to work effectively and collaboratively with volunteers, questions about applicants' experience performing such tasks should be a part of the hiring process. Staff members' success in working with volunteers should be included in performance evaluations.

Organizations must also clearly identify their expectations for how staff should interact with volunteers. It's not enough to simply expect staff will know how to do it best; it has to be defined and shared with staff so they're clear on what's expected of them. At a minimum, staff should be asked to smile and greet volunteers pleasantly. They should acknowledge volunteers and be expected to greet many of them by name—one of the reasons name badges on volunteers can be so helpful, especially when there are large numbers of volunteers or rotating schedules. Each staff person should also be in the habit of saying goodbye to the volunteers when they're done with their shift, and to thank them for their service.

Staff should also be able and willing to provide feedback to volunteers as needed. Each organization will create its own system, of course, but unless the volunteer coordinator is on hand every minute to provide direct supervision to all volunteers, it's likely that other staff will be directly overseeing the work volunteers perform. It's also just as likely that there will be times when volunteers need guidance or an explanation about why a particular task needs to be done in a particular manner.

I assume that volunteers are there because they want to help, and that they want to help in a way that is actually helpful. Further, I assume that if they're ever doing something that isn't helpful, they want staff to let them know, rather than not being told and having the staff redo everything the volunteers have just done. I communicate those assumptions to volunteers during orientation. I explain that if they would rather not know when they're doing something wrong, my organization might not be a good fit for them.

No matter how well-trained volunteers are, it's possible, if not likely, that they will at some

time make a mistake. The staff directly overseeing the volunteers' work should be expected to provide support as needed in the moment, whether it's to explain what needs to be done and how it should be completed, or to request that a volunteer not do something or do something differently. It might be something as innocuous as putting laundry away in the wrong location, or it could be something more serious, such as giving incorrect information about a particular animal or the adoption process. Staff must be able and willing to let the volunteer know when they're doing something incorrectly, and give them the tools to do it right.

It's most effective for staff to explain the "why" of the request ("The laundry needs to go in that room because ..." or "Actually, the information about that cat is here ..." or "Please refer people to the front counter to answer those questions because..."), rather than just stating the preferred action. The explanations are more likely to stick with the volunteers. This is also where effective training comes into play, to minimize the amount of time staff has to spend correcting and re-directing volunteers. It's also important that volunteers be willing to find out that they're wrong; if they're not receptive to feedback and take it poorly when staff requests they do something differently, it's clear they're not a good fit for a program where things need to be done a particular way.

Those corrective conversations can be challenging, even for well-seasoned supervisors. They can be even more challenging for line staff who have never been trained on the subject. Shelters should offer training on effective feedback, including role-playing and providing specific strategies to help staff provide advice graciously and effectively. Staff may not come to the organization with this set of skills, but there's no reason they can't acquire them. Staff should also have a means of sharing specific concerns about volunteers with their manager or the volunteer program manager. Staff should never feel as though incompetent volunteers are being inflicted upon them, and volunteers who make their work harder should not be allowed to continue in the program. If those situations arise, shelters need to take a hard look at the program; if volunteers who are not a good fit are disruptive to the program and are affecting the staff's ability to work, changes to the volunteer screening pro-

Resources

For additional information on creating a welcoming environment for volunteers, check out animalsheltering.org/volunteermanagement, where you'll find some of *Animal Sheltering's* previous Volunteer Management columns, including "Building a Successful Volunteer Program," "Take Time for Training," and "Leading Change at Your Shelter."

To see the document that Everett Animal Services in Washington state uses to help prospective volunteers gauge their fit with the program, go to animalsheltering.org/aboutourvolunteers.

cess need to occur to ensure the organization is bringing in the right volunteers.

It's impossible to overemphasize the importance of bringing in the right volunteers. Some environments, however, are so fraught with conflict and so emotionally charged that it will be challenging to find people who can not only tolerate being there, but also thrive. Volunteering in animal care environments is simply not the same as volunteering in any other type of organization—whether because the staff feels the pressure of being understaffed or under-resourced, is suffering from burnout or compassion fatigue, or simply because of the overwhelming number of animals and people in need. Sometimes, even other volunteers can present a challenge to new volunteers entering an environment; it's not just staff who can seem unwelcoming or unappreciative. Volunteer managers have to keep an eye on and attempt to manage all facets of the program, and smooth as many of the obstacles as possible, but they can't do it alone.

Effective leadership needs to pursue changes on an organizational level in order to create an environment that is welcoming and conducive to highly effective volunteer involvement. Culture and organizational transformation takes time. In the meantime, as the organization moves toward its goals, volunteers should be met with frank conversations to prepare them for the multiple situations they will encounter. **AS**