The Role of the Volunteer Administrator

Volunteer administration is a very unique position in any organization. It requires odd work hours for the administrator to be able to meet the public in order to recruit volunteers and promote the agency, and to orient and train volunteers when it’s convenient for them. The position of a volunteer administrator is equal to that of a department head within the organization. Volunteer administrators require the same skills as any other organizational manager and they often supervise more people than anyone else in the organization. These “workers” have widely varying work schedules and locations. They are usually the only staff member with responsibilities both inside and outside of the agency. Inside, they work with paid staff to determine needs and place volunteers; Outside, they recruit volunteers and interpret the agency’s mission/vision to the public and to potential funding organizations.

Volunteer Administration Roles

While the main role of the volunteer administrator remains the day-to-day management of the volunteer program, the role encompasses many other responsibilities critical to the success of the volunteer program. These additional roles include:

- Creating a shared vision for the organization
- Advocating for the volunteers in the organization
- Serving as the in-house expert on volunteers
- Helping create a volunteer-oriented organizational culture

Creates a shared vision for the organization

Because of their knowledge of the volunteer program, volunteer administrators are in a unique position to help create the vision for the organization. They are most likely the only one in the organization with a clear idea of how volunteers can contribute to the organization and how they should be incorporated into the agency’s vision. Their unique intimacy with the volunteer program also makes them the primary communicator of the agency’s vision and the volunteers’ role in achieving it. It is the volunteer administrator’s job to communicate the agency’s vision to the volunteers and explain their role in achieving the vision. Conversely, they must also communicate the role of the volunteer program in achieving the agency’s vision to the other paid staff.
Advocate for the volunteers

The volunteer administrator also advocates for volunteers within the organization. They help paid staff understand the role volunteers play in achieving the organization’s vision. Because paid staff are frequently disconnected from the volunteer program, the volunteer administrator communicates volunteers’ accomplishments and resource needs to them. It is especially important for volunteer administrators to advocate to upper management. Lack of support from upper-level administrators is usually not intentional; they simply do not know what support is required of them. Part of the advocacy role may also include confronting inappropriate attitudes, responding to inappropriate requests for volunteer services, and correcting misinformation about the volunteer program.

In-house Volunteer Expert

Volunteer administrators are essentially the in-house volunteer expert, helping all staff members understand the role of volunteers and how to effectively work with them. This may involve helping other paid staff envision possible roles that volunteers might fill in their department, as well as creating written job descriptions for each role. They must assist paid staff with situations that arise in volunteer supervision and plan for the regular evaluation of the volunteer. The volunteer administrator must also help in the development of agency policies as they relate to volunteers.

Creates the Organizational Culture

The volunteer administrator is responsible for creating an organizational culture where volunteers are appreciated and supported so that they can be successful. They accomplish this through the previously mentioned roles: helping the paid staff understand the roles and contributions of volunteers, securing the necessary resources for volunteers from upper management, and advocating for volunteers whenever necessary.

Approaches to Volunteer Management

According to Fisher and Cole (1993), there are two basic approaches to volunteer administration: the personnel approach and the program management approach.
Personnel Approach

In the personnel approach, the volunteer administrator works with staff in other departments to determine their volunteer needs and works to fill those needs. They do not directly supervise volunteers in this approach, but they do recruit, orient, and train volunteers to fill roles in various departments. The volunteer administrator also teaches the paid staff members who will be working with volunteers how to properly supervise and evaluate the volunteers working in their areas. As an example, the volunteer administrator of a zoo would recruit volunteers to work in the gift shop, as exhibit interpreters, as animal caretakers, and docents. All of these volunteers would work under the supervision of a paid staff member from that respective department. The volunteer administrator would screen the volunteers to place them in the most appropriate department and provide a basic orientation to the zoo, its facilities, and zoo policies.

Program Management Approach:

In the program management approach, the volunteer administrator directly recruits, trains, supervises, and evaluates all volunteers in the program. In such cases, the administrator may be a program manager and the role of “volunteer administrator” is only part of their overall job description. For example, a county Extension educator in youth development is responsible for organizing all phases of the youth development program, from organizing local youth clubs and school programs to event management. The Extension educator identifies volunteer needs, and recruits, trains, supervises, and evaluates all volunteers.

References