



## ASK the experts

# How to Create a Staff-Volunteer Team

# Q:

Please give me suggestions for the best ways to create a more team-like atmosphere between paid staff and volunteers.

# A:

Recognize that most paid staff have never been trained to work with volunteers, but they “don’t know that they don’t know” how to do so. Everyone expects the relationship to be easy and based mainly on common sense—till things get tense.

First, make sure that supervising volunteers is not a burden. Pay attention to staff concerns such as these:

- There’s not enough room for volunteers and paid staff to work in the same space.
- Paid staff members don’t know enough about the credentials of volunteers.
- No one is sure who is accountable for the work.

Deal with these concerns. Then make sure you’re recruiting the most qualified people to fill volunteer

roles. Watch your scheduling so that an employee doesn’t have to be interrupted several times in the same day by a new shift of volunteers. Offer to help in the training of newcomers, perhaps by buddying them up with experienced volunteers.

The most important thing is to offer training to both paid and volunteer employees on how to work together. This training should be a mix of classroom-type courses and individual coaching. Clarify roles and limits of authority (on both sides). Explain the chain of command. Develop a procedure for voicing criticism and giving praise.

Teamwork also comes from small, daily actions. Consider doing the following:

- Credit, by name, both paid and volunteer staff who contribute to every project.
- Thank staff supervisors, as well as volunteers, for their support.

- Arrange some casual time together. Once in awhile bring in cupcakes for a unit to share during a coffee break.
- Include volunteers in planning meetings and regular staff meetings, whenever possible. If volunteers can’t attend, ask them to contribute brief written reports or questions to be added to the meeting by their supervisors. Then let them know what happened during the meeting.
- Use bulletin boards creatively. For example, start a silent discussion by posting index cards with questions or comments. Then ask everyone, paid and volunteer, to respond with their own thoughts on cards you hang by the board for this purpose.

There’s no mystery to strengthening the relationship between paid and volunteer workers. All the principles of good human relations apply. Things break down when we ignore the situation and expect people to define their own terms. Give training and guidance. And listen—without being defensive—when staff members raise concerns. They may be right. If they’re prejudiced against volunteers, however, take on the role of in-house educator.

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