Values for Volunteer Viability

Recent research points up ways to create a high-performing, value-driven cadre of volunteers.

By Joni Reid

A new study and review of the literature validate a central truth: When you pay attention to your volunteers' values, you'll be rewarded with a group of people who are fulfilled, passionate, and productive in achieving your organization's goals. To do so, follow these steps:

Clarify Organizational Values

First, make a list of your organization's values. This value inventory would make a good exercise at a board meeting, staff get-together, or retreat. Place each value into one of the following categories:

- **Core or intrinsic values** can be expected in all of the holder's interactions.
- **Peripheral or secondary values** are specific to given interactions.
- **Means or instrumental values** help you realize core and secondary values.
- **Ends values** are tied to a future goal.

> Leaders shape the organizational culture by modeling important values.

Next, rank your core values in order of importance. According to Milton Rokeach, known for his extensive study of values, you should consider values as part of a hierarchy.[1] At the same time, understand that most actions will be based on a number of entwined values.

Once you've identified core values, write them down in a way that makes it clear which are the highest priority. Give this list of written values to staff members, post it throughout your offices, and add it to your Web site. Be sure all employees embrace these values and model them in their daily work. If compassion is a core value but paid staff members don't make an effort to empathize with volunteer staff, you can be sure that volunteers will recognize this disconnect and lose motivation.

Understand Common Volunteer Values

You can assume that all volunteers share at least one value simply because they've chosen to donate their time: the value of participation. They may choose to participate for a variety of reasons—a desire for acceptance, status, security, or a sense of significance, for example. Because you know participation is important to them, you can reinforce that value by encouraging their input, including them in activities, and giving them opportunities to be a part of teams and collaborations.

> We conducted a study to pinpoint volunteers' highest values

What else do volunteers value? To answer that question, we conducted a study in which we asked volunteers at a small nonprofit organization to list their three most important values.[2] Here are the ones they specified:

- compassion (named by 85% of participants)
- teamwork (80%)
- empowerment (75%)
- social justice (75%)
- leadership (40%).

Later, when study participants had a chance to discuss their answers, the majority agreed that compassion, empowerment, and social justice were values they'd held before volunteering at this organization, while teamwork had become a top value since then. Since teamwork was one of this organization's core value, the volunteers had seen its benefits firsthand. It had thus developed into one of their highest values.

It's also notable that the three respondents who didn't list compassion (or a component of compassion, such as a concern for others) as an important value all held volunteer positions that didn't require direct work with clients. That suggests that leaders did a good job of assigning volunteers to jobs that incorporated their values.

Pinpoint Your Own Volunteers' Values

The key to making values work for your volunteer program is to give deliberate attention to volunteers' values and blend them with those of your organization. The best way to do so is to conduct an initial assessment as part of the recruitment process. Many assessment tools are available. Here are two examples:

1. Basic Value Assessment. The most frequently used value instrument is the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS), available on the Web at various sites, including that of the College of Business & Economics at Western Washington University (wwwcbe.wwu.edu/kristityran). Another is the Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI), also online at a number of sites, such as www.psychpress.com. Developed from 80

years of research on motivation, it asks people to prioritize the following 10 basic values:

- **recognition** (desire for attention, approval, praise)
- **power** (interest in success, accomplishment, status, competition, control)
- **hedonism** (attraction to fun, pleasure, recreation)
- **altruism** (concern about the welfare of others and contributing to a better society)
- **affiliation** (enjoyment of social interaction)
- **tradition** (concern for established standards of conduct)
- **security** (gravitation toward certainty, order, and predictability)
- **business** (interest in corporate and material success)
- **culture** (love of art, music, and other creative expression)
- **rationality** (desire for knowledge, preference for analytical problem solving).

2. Assessment of Work-Related Values. Emily Morrison, in *Skills for Leadership: Working with Volunteers*, suggests asking volunteers to choose values that were important to them when performing paid and unpaid work in the past, using the following list of work-related values:

- **independence** (affinity for working alone without much direction by others)
- **self-expression** (interest in expressing yourself by using your natural talents)
- **service** (desire to help others)
- **leadership** (interest in supervising and guiding other people)
- **social relationships** (enjoyment of doing things with others)
- **reward** (expectation of a payback such as money or privilege)
- **achievement** (focus on personal

advancement and growth)
- **recognition** (a desire to be respected)
- **interest** (a desire to work on tasks you find absorbing and stimulating)
- **accomplishment** (a liking for measurable results)
- **variety** (a penchant for doing new things and a dislike for routine)
- **security** (a liking for tasks that are comfortable, familiar, and easy).

After volunteer prospects have finished one or more assessments, you'll have the basis for a meaningful discussion. You can talk with them about the values they've identified, how those personal values mesh with your organization, and which volunteer jobs would put those values to best use. During this conversation, it will become clear whether the volunteer is a good match for your organization and, if so, what types of assignments will be most appropriate.

Work with volunteers to create job descriptions that are true to what they value most. Build their values into the tasks you plan for them. Volunteers are most likely to remain passionate about your organization's work if you show genuine interest in matching their values with the right organizational roles. These efforts require that you reflect values such as respect, empowerment, equality,

efficiency, diversity, and risk-taking.

Continue to Underscore Values

When orienting volunteers, continue your conversation about the volunteers' personal values, how their values support your organization's value system, and how these values will enhance the job assignment.

Keep volunteers' values in mind, too, when you provide training. If training supports people's values, they're more likely to accept the learning points and retain the information.[3]

When it's time to review and evaluate volunteers' work, values should again be a major part of the discussion. Ask people if they've been able to exercise their personal values in their jobs and if there are other ways you can support their values. Assess their understanding of and commitment to the organization's core values. Elicit their suggestions for clarifying and strengthening those values.

Also, be sure to tie organizational rewards to the volunteer's personal values. If learning is someone's highest value, provide access to educational opportunities online, in the classroom, and at conferences and seminars. If leadership is on volunteers' priority list, give them opportunities to lead. If they crave recognition, feature them in your organization's newsletter, on your Web site, and in the media.

Find ways to reflect and reinforce values throughout volunteers' work. When you make a concerted effort to do so, you'll reap great returns at very little cost. ∎

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Footnotes

[1]*Nature of Human Values*, Free Press.
[2]This qualitative study included a purposeful sample of 20 active volunteers in a small human-service agency. The 20 respondents represent one third of the organization's active volunteer base. The mean length of time with the organization was 1.44 years (with the shortest length 2 months and the longest 3.5 years). Information was collected through a group exercise in which respondents were asked to write down their three most important values. Following this activity, respondents were asked a series of 10 open-ended questions to solicit their opinions about values.
[3]"Good Communication that Blocks Learning," *Harvard Business Review,* Vol. 72, No. 4.

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