Techniques of Supervising Volunteers

US Army Corps of Engineers

I want to take a few minutes to tell you about one of the most important jobs in the volunteer program—the supervision of people.

A volunteer supervisor has direct influence on productivity and performance. More supervisors fail for lack of ability to deal with people than for lack of technical skills. Effective supervision depends primarily on the ability to get employees to do what you want them to do with enthusiasm.

With volunteers, enthusiasm is built in and the supervisor's role is to nurture, sustain and integrate it with technical know-how and administrative skills.

This booklet has some ideas and techniques that you may find helpful in working with your volunteer program.

You are the key to making the organization run smoothly.

Colonel, Corps of Engineers
District Engineer

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Techniques of Supervising Volunteers

Purpose

This fieldbook relates to supervision of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers volunteers, how to compensate them, and tips for administration of a successful program.

A Review of Supervision

The supervision process accomplishes a task through a team effort with a team leader. Supervision requires communication; that is, it is a two-way process. Actions of the team leader must result in desirable reaction on the part of the employee or volunteer.

Challenges in supervision will always come up because we are human. Anticipate problems—"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." The task of managing and supervising paid employees and volunteer workers is basically the same, but there are some primary differences.

One of the most obvious and important differences is that volunteers are not paid in money. Innovative ways must be used to "pay" them. This process is simply a way of fulfilling human needs. This vital aspect of volunteer supervision should be kept in mind at all times.

Common Supervisory Challenges

Volunteers come to work for all reasons except for the need for a paycheck. Therefore, a reorientation of thinking must occur to disregard the paycheck normally emphasized and to regard all of the other reasons people work.

A paper, "Motivations of Forest Service Volunteers," by Glenn E. Haas, Assistant Professor in the College of Forestry and Natural Resources at Colorado State University attributes the following reasons why people volunteer. "To enjoy the scenic beauty, to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature, to be able to work outdoors and to experience the peace and tranquility of nature." A predominant theme threaded throughout the 10 most important motives relates to the desire to enjoy and work in a natural environment. Other themes threaded throughout the 20 most important motives relate to socializing with new and different people, learning and having a change from one's day-to-day personal and social pressures.

Working with volunteers is not the same as permanent employees. Volunteers are seeking a quality experience, while permanent employees are seeking such rewards as financial security in addition to a quality experience. Managers need to ask prospective volunteers why they

want to volunteer and the type of experience they are hoping for. This simple action will help identify volunteer motivations and is important in planning a recognition/reward program.

Lack of Enthusiasm

Since volunteers come to work for other reasons besides pay, it is critical that they see and feel enthusiasm for their work. Think of an enthusiastic supervisor and recall how this enthusiasm made you feel. Volunteers need an enthusiastic supervisor, as well as an interesting work experience.

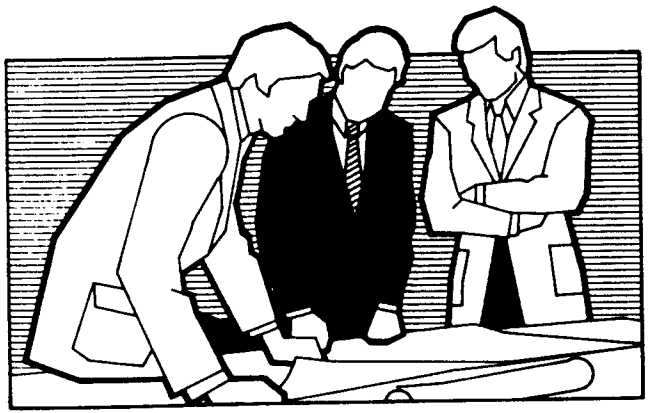
Poor Atmosphere

We can agree that atmosphere in the workplace is important to all of us. The difference is that paid people will "stick it out;" volunteers will quickly leave. The atmosphere of an organization has many aspects including encouragement, concern, support, and recognition. Probably the most important ingredient of creating a positive work atmosphere is mutual respect.

Clear Chain-of-Command

"Chain-of-command" generally means "Who is in charge of me?" or "Who cares about how I am doing?"

All employees and volunteers must know who will be giving them direction. They must know to whom they should report problems or ask questions. It may be easy to overlook this with volunteers. A clear chain-of-command is even more important to volunteers because



the agency/volunteer relationship is one based entirely on human values.

Total Staff Involvement

This is mostly a matter of communications with appropriate paid staff. Reactions from paid staff can usually be avoided if they are involved in the planning process.

Sufficient Funding

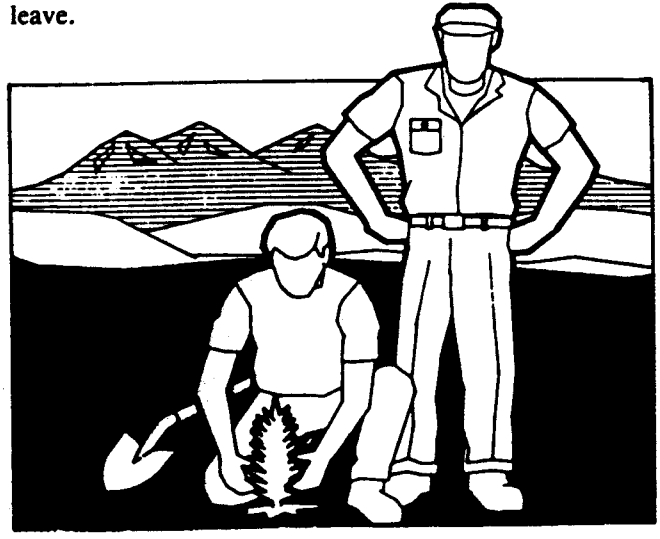
Volunteer programs are not free. Volunteers receive no salary, but the proper management of a program does cost money. Funds are needed for supervision, equipment, training, travel and recognition. If you are going to be successful in operating a volunteer program, you should budget for these costs.

Sufficient Program Management Time

Successful volunteer programs are also characterized by sufficient planning time. It is equally important to devote a significant amount of time to volunteer recognition. Time devoted to these activities will more than pay for themselves in terms of increased productivity.

The Importance of Good Supervision

Very often there is a tendency to leave the supervision of volunteers to paid staff who are not normally in a supervisory role. It is important to remember that these employees should receive adequate training in supervision and leadership roles. Remember that paid employees will endure a poor supervisor. Volunteers will not; they leave.



Special Opportunities in Supervision and Management

Support from Entire Team

It is important that everyone in the work group or unit support the volunteer program. Involve paid staff even though volunteers are not working in their specific area. Keep all members of the staff informed about success, opportunities, special challenges and program direction. Emphasize the volunteer program as a team effort.

Much can be done in the planning stage. Prepare paid employees by working them into the program. Be open and give strong support to those who will supervise volunteers.

It is critical to achieve a balance of attention between paid workforce and a volunteer group. The importance of maintaining this balance of attention and support increases as the size of a volunteer group increases. Favoritism of one group over the other creates resentment which can destroy a program.

Use paid staff for basic program management, coordination and support. This is recommended because of the odious nature of the paperwork, reports and plans required to implement the program.

Program Pitfalls

Ineffective management, poor supervision, and negative attitudes all combine to make an unworkable program. Although each of these facets can separately drive volunteers away, together they can do worse. If a program is truly deficient, volunteers will get disillusioned and leave with ill feelings.

Volunteers are members of an informal group and they will share their feelings. The reputation of the agency unit will be damaged. If you can't do it well, don't do it at all. A poor volunteer program can have serious, lingering negative results.

Need for Program Publicity

Managers create awareness through publicity. Program publicity generates a broad base of public support and is the primary means of recruitment. Program publicity will also bring attention to and recognition of the group.

Facilities for Volunteers

Have necessary preparations been made to accept the services of volunteers? Is there a place for them to work; supplies for the job? Before a volunteer comes to work, be sure to have an office, a desk or a work station ready. At the minimum, have a plan where the volunteer can help which will result in a work place.

Misconceptions about Volunteers

Volunteers Threaten Paid Jobs

One fear which becomes a threat to a program's success may be the perception by paid employees that volunteers will put them out of work. Employees with these fears can destroy an otherwise good program. Counter these fears by early involvement of all employees. A continuing process of updating and positive reinforcement of paid staff will help.

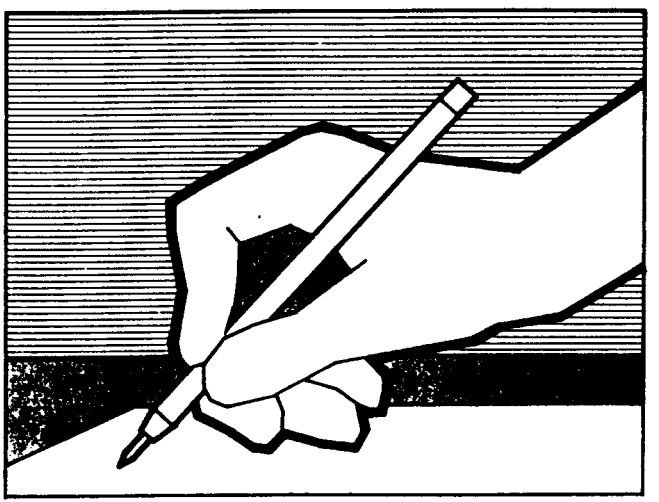
Volunteers Are Outsiders

Paid employees can effectively band together to exclude volunteers. If kept separate from the paid workforce, volunteers can easily become discouraged. Try to mix volunteers in with the rest of the team. Let volunteers know often they are valuable and that their ideas and suggestions are welcome. Include volunteers in staff meetings, as appropriate, in trips, and training.

Volunteers Can't Be Depended Upon

Volunteers are dependable. The Corps and other volunteer-using organizations had a record of excellent dependability with groups and individuals. These pointers are offered to help ensure or improve dependability. These tips are:

Get a written commitment and make proper assignments. The purpose of a written commitment to



accomplish a task is to make sure the volunteer understands what is expected. You simply agree upon a task or project.

Making the proper assignment greatly improves the chances of success. Groups are more likely to succeed in long-term projects which require a substantial commitment. An Adopt-a-Trail program is a good example. People doing the work may be different at each session, but the organization is always there meeting its commitment. Make an annual review to ensure that the group wants to proceed and its commitment.

It is best to assign individuals to projects which are of relatively short duration, are of limited scope, or have a clearly defined end point. A good relationship with individual volunteers can be ruined unless a termination date or a renewal date is clearly agreed upon. Give volunteers a place to graciously exit.

One way to increase the dependability of individual volunteers is to have two or more volunteers jointly commit to share responsibility for a task. For instance, two volunteers may agree to staff the visitor center on weekends or evenings; as individuals they would not be willing, but by working they have some flexibility. When using this technique, the supervisor should not attempt to schedule the volunteers. It shall be made clear that scheduling is their responsibility and someone has to show up at the agreed time.

Volunteers Will Create Many Problems

When the volunteer program was started, many comments were received from employees and supervisors that volunteers would only add to the already long list of problems that they face. "Volunteers may have bad accidents." "Volunteers may steal our equipment and supplies." "Volunteers may . . ." In fact, experience has shown that volunteers cause no more problems than employees and, in most cases, they cause less problems because they really want to be there. Fears about volunteer behavior are usually not justified.

Special Procedures and Techniques

The Volunteer Interviews

To properly use volunteer's talents, it is essential to know who she/he is and what she/he wants and expects. The job interview is used to determine the individual's suitability for the volunteer job. It also identifies what the volunteer expects from the experience.

Suggestions for a successful volunteer interview:

1. Determine the capability of the person or group to do the job to our standards. (Capability is a measure of skill.)

2. Determine the apparent willingness of the person or group to complete the job or to continue with it for an acceptable time. (Willingness is a measure of desire.)

3. Determine the volunteer's time which is available and agree on a tentative schedule for work.

4. Determine if there are problems or personal needs which should be considered. Some items to consider are transportation arrangements and health or physical problems.

5. Determine why the person or group is volunteering. (This may be the most important step in the interview. It is vitally important to know the reasons for volunteering so we can properly reward their efforts.)

Volunteer Compensation and Recognition

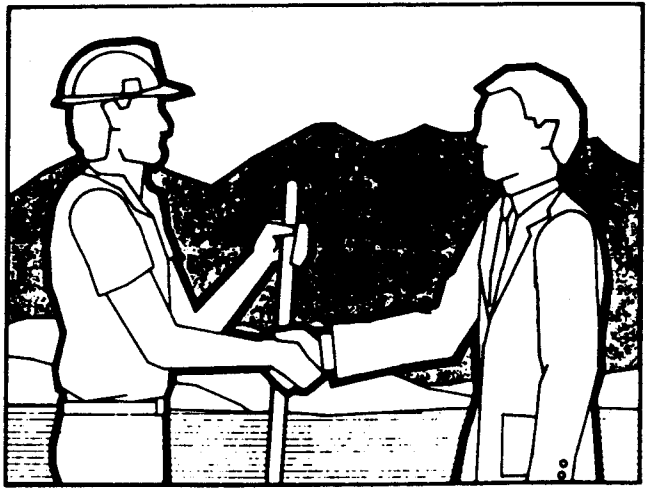
Volunteers are compensated for their work, although the compensation is non-monetary.

For paid employees, compensation includes salary, life insurance, retirement, overtime pay, vacation leave with pay, paid sick leave, health insurance contribution and cash awards for good performance.

With volunteers, their efforts cannot be rewarded with money, but there is a way of "paying" them. As previously stated, there are many reasons motivating people to volunteer. Remember, each volunteer may have a unique reason for volunteering and it is important to learn what it is. Design a compensation package for each individual or each group. Fill their individual human needs. Knowing why people volunteer helps accomplish this goal. Public recognition may be a primary motivator in

volunteering. This desire for recognition may be expressed clearly or it may be an unexpressed need. It may be necessary to ask the volunteers if they would object to public recognition. Some people prefer that their volunteer work is anonymous.

The volunteer must do something deserving of recognition or compensation. Their efforts need not be outstanding, just consistent and acceptable. The recognition given must be steady and meaningful. There are two kinds. Tangible forms of recognition or compensation include letters, certificates, awards, and potluck



dinners. Intangible forms include personal comments about a job well done, friendly gestures, praise, friendship, or simply remembering and saying the person's name. Some examples of other opportunities for recognition include: Volunteer recognition awards like "Take Pride to America" and recognition programs operated by volunteer groups such as the Scout's merit badge program.

In recognizing or compensating volunteers, refrain from recognizing all contributions equally. A small job of limited importance deserves a little recognition. An outstanding job which has national significance deserves a large amount of recognition. It is very important to show each volunteer comparatively how well they did.

For a small project, congratulations or a note posted on a bulletin board may be in order. For very significant projects, publicity on a national scale may be appropriate.

The following list will give you an idea of some of the options available:

1. Radio news coverage.
2. "Hour Magazine" or "60 Minutes" style TV program.
3. Major city newspapers.
4. Internal newsletter published by an agency.

5. General interest magazines (for example, *Sunset* Magazine).
6. Local TV news broadcast.
7. Local newspaper articles.
8. Congratulations and bulletin board notices.

Letters, certificates of appreciation, and other signed documents present an opportunity to tie the value of the volunteer's contribution to agency's hierarchy. For example, a certificate to a group or person for a nationally significant project might deserve a letter from the Chief of Engineers. At the other extreme, a small project could be recognized by the volunteer's immediate supervisor. Projects of intermediate value could be tied to other people in intermediate positions (i.e., Chief of Operations).

Remember, recognition at the local level may be more important to a specific person than all the national publicity you could muster. In all cases, evaluate the contribution, evaluate the volunteer, and tailor the reward to each case.

While doing this, remember to recognize paid staff as well as volunteers. While it is true that paid staff are compensated monetarily, they may become discouraged if only the volunteers receive recognition.

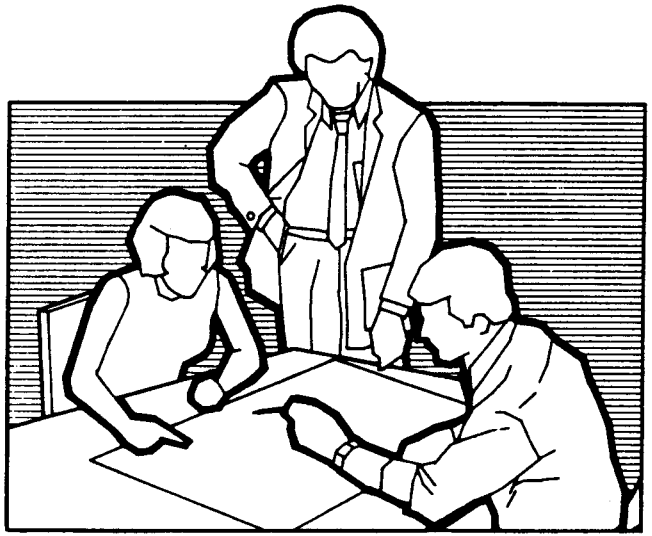
Helpful Administrative Details

Job Descriptions

A detailed job description will help both parties in an agreement understand what is expected. We suggest that every individual should have one. Groups should also have one and they should be equally clear.

Training

Training can improve capability. Properly scheduled and performed, training helps morale and retains good volunteers. Risk management, safety and accident control exemplify the same concern for volunteers as for employees in a safety program. Train everyone to think safety. Have Health and Safety Guides available for all volunteers. Inspect work sites for safe practices. Have volunteers attend safety meetings. Remember that volunteers are considered Federal employees in matters of torts and compensation for work-related injuries. Avoiding accidents will save time, paperwork and money.



Attendance

Volunteers expect supervisors to know what their hours are and be prepared for them when they arrive. Because our volunteers are covered by Workman's Compensation, it is essential to know when a volunteer is working on an assigned project. When a volunteer's presence is required during certain hours (such as at an

information station) be sure the volunteer understands that it is their responsibility to notify the supervisor in advance, if they will be unable to work. If absenteeism becomes a problem, the volunteer should not be allowed to continue work.

Performance Appraisals

Volunteers need feedback on their performance the same as paid employees. Compare performance with what is expected. Nothing will wreck a volunteer program faster than poor performance that goes uncorrected. This is normally a difficult task for management and it is easier if done frequently. Keep it as informal as possible and be sure to reward good work.

Conduct and Adverse Actions

Give people a chance to make corrections and help them to the farthest extent possible. If difficulties cannot be satisfactorily corrected, the volunteer must be transferred or terminated. Volunteers working in public contact positions must represent the agency to the same standards as employees do. Specify their conduct and expect appropriate actions.

Visitors and other "outsiders" will not know the difference between a working volunteer and a working employee. Both must represent the agency equally well.

Nondiscrimination

The law requires us to treat people equitably. Volunteers are recruited regardless of race, color, age, handicap, or marital status. Just remember that willingness and capability are important; nothing else is.

Summary

Hundreds of points have been covered in a very short time. In working toward a successful program, please consider the following:

- Volunteer programs do work. They contribute to our goals and they help the people who volunteer.
- Pay attention to the volunteer program and correct difficulties as they occur.
- Compensate volunteers in a way which fulfills their needs. Be sure volunteers are recognized for their contribution.
- Establish clear and open communications with paid staff and volunteers and be sure they communicate with one another.

A little care and concern will go a long way toward managing a successful volunteer program.