

VOLUNTEERS: ASSET v. LIABILITY

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Volunteerism is a long held and valuable institution of the American way. Community “self-help” is a long held tradition that still serves us well today. However, not all volunteers are equal. In parlance of many human resource managers, you hire your problems.

Without question, volunteers are an important component of many organizations. School parent teacher associations and sports programs are staffed by volunteers. Scouting programs, youth groups, food banks, home owners associations and church organizations are just the few of the types of groups that are dependent on volunteers.

Other organizations such as volunteer fire departments, search & rescue teams, animal rescue groups, Red Cross and the United States military are organizations with highly trained volunteers.

Who are these volunteers? This is a question that anyone who manages volunteer organizations would do well to know. When it comes to liability, the law knows no bounds and the best of intentions can quickly be destroyed by the realities of today’s litigious world.

The strength of any volunteer organization is its leadership, management and volunteer force. By working together, volunteer organizations can often overcome the bureaucratic world accomplishing great things.

To obtain the best volunteers an organization must recruit and retain them. Good volunteer organizations have low turn-over and few discipline problems. They are respected by their community and public officials. They keep their financial house in order and avoid mission creep. These successful organizations often have waiting lists of new potential volunteers.

What does it take to have a successful volunteer organization? The quick answer is passion, commitment, time and dedication to the organization’s mission. To achieve this success dedicated and talented leadership is essential with positive and engaged oversight. These elements coupled with a structured hiring process will lead to a successful organization.

How many times have you been in a meeting or group event where a leader is needed? Do you volunteer or wait for someone else to stand up and take the position? What about that situation where no one wants the job and it is given to the only person who expresses interest. Is this a good idea? Is the organizations reputation worth the risk of giving control of it to someone who no one knows anything about? What about the person who is just a little too interested or overzealous? What about the person who is more interested in a uniform or title than the job?

Today’s organizations cannot afford to omit pre-employment backgrounds of their management, employees and volunteers. Do you think what a person says on his/her social networking could

have an impact on your organization? What about convicted felons? What would a community donor think if they found out that a non-profit leader was convicted of embezzlement, owed back taxes, had civil liens or a bankruptcy? What about a person who is prone to being sued?

Volunteers are an important component of our community and should be encouraged. However, not all volunteers are beneficial. People with Borderline Personality Disorder can destroy an organization. Drug and alcohol abuse is clearly problematic. Should someone with a conviction for DUI be driving your organizations vehicles?

How many times have we read about leaders of non-profit organizations getting into trouble for embezzlement, sexual harassment, criminal activity or over stepping their mission? Could these events have been prevented? You bet.

It is regrettable, but there are those who move from one group to another looking for self-promotion. These people are frequently attracted by an organizations uniform, authority, public standing or other accoutrements. Some fraternal organizations have significant ceremonial activities that are attractive to some who are more interested in the toys than the mission.

Within the Wildland Residents Association we have a structured vetting process for our volunteers. It includes an application, documentation of education and training, physical agility test and a release to conduct a formal background check.

The background starts with the interview process. Does the applicant's paperwork match what is being said? Does the training and educations claimed match the certificates? Can the current and past employment history be verified? These simple questions have weeded out over 75% of our applicants as volunteer firefighters.

Without question we need volunteers but not at the expense of taking just anyone who wants to join. "Why do you want to volunteer?" is the first question we ask and it is amazing some of the answers that are given. Those who are not committed to giving back to the community with passion and commitment can be quickly found out.

Anyone who lies, omits details or fails to disclose is not someone you want in your organization. If an applicant lies once, they will lie again. What would happen to your organization if you had such a person within your ranks? Don't be naive and think some people will not lie to become volunteers. To do so is at the organization's peril.

If you are an organization who handles money you need to be particularly careful. The same holds true if you provide services to children. There is no room for questionable people in such environments.

One of the many positives of an aggressive recruitment policy is the attraction of quality volunteers that such a process produces. Good people want to work with good people,

particularly when it involves their discretionary time. No one wants to give their time away to a dysfunctional organization.

Good people are critical to any organization. Ensuring that you can recruit and retain good people requires structure, a policy, backgrounds and training. This process will go a long way to making any organization a model for others and a true service to the community. Don't hire your problems - recruit your successes.