

The Difference a Position Description Makes

– in Recruiting, Engaging, Retaining, and Getting the Most out of Volunteers

Position descriptions are a common tool in the workplace. In addition, they can play a significant role in non-profit organizations with regard to volunteers. As a blueprint for clarifying the myriad volunteer roles in organizations, position descriptions also impact recruiting, engaging, retaining, and getting the most out of volunteers. They are the cornerstone of a mutually meaningful relationship.

Role Clarification

To begin, there are many types of volunteers: Board members, committee members, event organizers, service providers, fundraisers, tutors, crisis/help line operators, people who shelve books or who staff the waiting room of a hospital to let you know when your loved one is out of surgery. The list goes on and on. Just as paid staff members need to know the parameters and expectations of their jobs, so do volunteers. This role clarification, articulated in position descriptions, has a strong impact on the volunteer experience for the individuals and the organizations to which they devote their time and energy.

It feels good for volunteers to understand where they fit in organizations and what their contributions mean to these organizations. Knowing the depth and breadth of the expectations as well as the boundaries can help volunteers settle in to their work. It puts the role of the volunteer into the context of the organization.

There are varying degrees of sophistication in the roles volunteers play in organizations. The duties and responsibilities are different for a prospective Board member than they are for a volunteer tutor. The time commitment is different for a volunteer who must train to be a crisis line operator and commit to a certain number of shift hours per week than for someone who works on a one time event.

There are pitfalls for organizations if there is no role clarification. Turnover among volunteers may be significant or volunteers may become a drain on the staff members who supervise them. Dissatisfaction among volunteers, as well as among staff, may grow when expectations and boundaries are not articulated. In some cases, the “wrong” people may be selected as volunteers. It may be that they aren’t slotted into the appropriate volunteer role based on skill set or temperament thus they flounder in what they do or they may be needy themselves and be a drain on an organization. The volunteers may not honor the commitments they make or they may not be a values/culture match for an organization. Finally, it is just plain difficult to recruit when you don’t know what you are looking for.

Position Descriptions and Recruitment

Position descriptions are the blueprint to identify volunteers who will be successful and to help weed out those who may not be a good fit. Position descriptions may be used as a marketing tool to reach out to the community to advertise for volunteers.

The importance of volunteers in an organization is underscored when volunteer managers and organizational leaders draft position descriptions for volunteers. It means that they understand both the significance of the roles played by volunteers, as well as the need to support and value them. It is an opportunity for staff to spell out what is/is not appropriate or realistic for volunteers to do. Position descriptions outline necessary information to clarify rules and regulations so that organizations are safeguarded from “malpractice” by volunteers. Conversely, position descriptions can ensure that organizations don’t take advantage of volunteers or put them in situations for which they are not equipped.

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Position Descriptions and Engagement

Well thought out position descriptions can go a long way in letting volunteers know the attention organizations pay to their interactions with people. Position descriptions can help volunteers slip easily into their roles. Just as position descriptions are blueprints outlining what volunteers do for organizations, they are also blueprints for what organizations will do for their volunteers.

With appropriately worded volunteer descriptions in place there is less likelihood that volunteers will say “not my job” when asked to do different tasks. They may also feel empowered in their volunteer roles because they truly understand all the implications.

Position Descriptions and Retention

Retention can be viewed as maintaining long relationships with volunteers. It may manifest itself in board members who seek to grow into leadership roles, or retired volunteers who are as committed to their weekly tutoring as they were to their careers.

Since attention to retention begins at the time of recruitment – first impressions may be key criteria for decision making. How volunteers are brought into organizations impacts how they feel about being there. The articulated expectations in position descriptions must match reality for this to work. With an understanding of where they fit in organizations, volunteers know who to go to with questions or concerns. Lack of standards may have a broader effect on an organization in terms of reputation and may further impact recruiting more volunteers and staff or securing funding.

Sometimes issues arise in the volunteer arrangement that need attention. Position descriptions are a starting point for evaluating volunteers or even broaching an evaluation conversation, not to mention discussing areas in need of remediation. Indeed, with Board members, position descriptions may provide a framework for dealing with those who don't attend the requisite number of

meetings, or who don't fulfill their fiduciary duties.

Finally, not all volunteers merit retaining. Sometimes it's just not a fit. Position descriptions offer an opening for a thoughtful conversation and a kindly way to remove volunteers who don't seem able to cut it in an organization. They are tools to use to manage this conversation and allow volunteers to save face.

Getting the Most out of Volunteers

Position descriptions portray a mutual commitment to the volunteer experience – the role volunteers play and the impact they can have on the success of organizations as well as the need for organizations to be respectful of volunteers and not use them as an excuse for not having sufficient staff.

Organizations get the most out of volunteers when all the pieces are in place. When expectations are clear, it is possible to ask volunteers to do things that are both mundane and significant. Indeed, often something that may be mundane in the eyes of volunteers is of the utmost significance to organizations.

Conclusion

Role clarification and managing expectations are essential for successful volunteer engagement as experienced by both volunteers and the non-profits to which they devote their energies. Among the significant benefits to organizations that have thought through the roles of volunteers and the appropriate duties for them to undertake is that the organizations' missions are met. All organizations want to be known for their excellence. This can be true when there is an infrastructure in place that allows volunteers to hit the ground running and understand where they fit in and the value they add. By clarifying roles, organizations can also achieve a reputation in the community as being a good place to volunteer because attention is paid to this subtle but important aspect of managing and respecting volunteers.