Art and Science: Creating the Perfect Recipe for Volunteer Success

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As an avid fan of the Food Network, I love watching experienced chefs blend ingredients in a seemingly nonchalant manner. A pinch of this, a handful of that, and always—salt to taste. And of course everything looks mouth-watering at the end of the show. But when the featured chef is demonstrating how to bake a cake or other pastry item, I've noticed how they carefully measure and sometimes even weigh the ingredients before adding them to the mixing bowl. I've heard an explanation of one distinction between "cooking" and "baking" described as the difference between art and science. When I think about the world of volunteer management, and the myriad risks that arise when dedicated volunteers are recruited and deployed, it occurs to me that both art and science are required.

An Artful Look at Volunteer Risk Management

Most aspects of volunteer risk management depend on personal taste and appetite—including the culture and circumstances of your nonprofit. If your volunteers are children in a service-learning program then you will address matters of safety in a much different way than you would with adult volunteers who are using power tools to help with a renovation project. There are a number of ingredients in risk management that are necessary, but require customization based on your circumstances. We describe two of these ingredients below.

- **Involve your volunteers**—The most effective risk management strategies enjoy ground-up support from the get-go. Unveiling new risk management strategies without first gaining support and input is a truly risky strategy. And the fact is volunteers are a terrific source for insights on both the risks you face and the strategies that are most likely to work. For example, during a brainstorming session with volunteers who provide in-home services to elderly clients you may learn that volunteers are fearful about getting lost in unfamiliar neighborhoods. The same group of volunteers will be the most creative source of ideas for addressing this concern.
- **Don't make promises you can't honor**—Nothing turns an exuberant volunteer into the source of repeated complaints faster than the organization seeming to fail to live up to promises. Don't oversell the role your prospective volunteers will play in mission-fulfillment and never promise opportunities that may, or may not materialize. The same is true with your risk management policies. Make sure that your nonprofit can live with and practice the policies it embraces.

Measure Twice, Cut Once: The Science of Volunteer Risk Management

While there are nuances of effective volunteer management that depend on the culture, mission and programs of your nonprofit, there are some aspects that must be followed like the directions for an angel food cake: don't mess with the recipe.

- **Provide explicit direction**—Volunteers want to succeed. And, generally speaking, they want to meet the high standards set by your volunteer program. To help them do so, you need to provide explicit direction about what you expect and what is required to volunteer in your program. You may expect an ongoing commitment of five hours per week, or a minimum level of weekly contact between a volunteer mentor and his or her mentee. Whatever you require, say so. Unless you're recruiting volunteers from a group of psychics, it isn't fair or appropriate to assume your volunteers will be all-knowing.
- **Ensure widespread communication**—Do what you can to get your critical volunteer policies in the hands of the people who need them most—your volunteers. A set of policies gathering dust in the office of the director of volunteers is of no use out in the field, on site, or where services are delivered and risks arise. Many nonprofits have developed volunteer handbooks as a way to capture core policies in a single location. Some groups give paid and volunteer staff time to read the manual and require that they initial each page. Others also post these policies on a Web site. There is no single "best method" for distributing information about volunteer service requirements and expectations. For many organizations multiple communication methods are necessary to get the word out. And always make certain that volunteers have plenty of opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification.
- **Monitor policy implementation and revise policies that aren't working**—Solicit feedback from your volunteers about your risk management activities and policies. Doing so will help you determine what's working, what's unclear, and what policies need to be changed or scrapped. Got complaints?! Turn complaints into progress by involving those who complain in updating and revising policies. • Get help—It's a sign of strength—not weakness—when you reach out to outsiders for help developing or updating your volunteer risk management program. Obtaining an independent review of your policies before you implement them is an excellent risk management strategy.

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