

Hire an Architect, Not a Drill Sergeant to Lead Your Volunteers



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We are celebrating National Volunteer Week by reflecting on some of the challenges (opportunities!) facing volunteer programs in the U.S. Despite differences in leadership styles, we've noticed a striking similarity among volunteer program leaders: many view their role as that of a drill sergeant responsible for developing and enforcing a strict set of rules.

Despite the extraordinary effort devoted to "managing" volunteers, we frequently receive calls from (1) frustrated volunteers, and (2) frustrated managers of volunteers. Volunteers express frustration about inadequate training, ineffective management, and poor communication. They describe arbitrary rules that were unveiled without a word about "why." Conversations with frustrated staff often begin with: "You're not going to believe what one of our volunteers did!"

Two facts emerge from the countless calls from our frustrated friends: volunteer managers are not as effective as their volunteer workforces deserve; and human volunteers are subject to mistakes, missteps and poor decisions when they aren't trained, coached and led by skilled managers.

In the May 2015 edition of the [Harvard Business Review](#), John Beshears and Francesca Gino explain that the patterns and biases that lead to preventable mistakes are hard to change. What can be changed, they write, is "the environment in which decisions are made." What's the payoff by abandoning the traditional drill sergeant approach to volunteer management? And what type of leader is best suited for the task? According to Beshears and Gino, when leaders act as **architects** they can create environments that lead others to make the best possible decisions.

In many organizations, the remedy to underperforming or misbehaving volunteers is to quickly draft a new policy prohibiting the recent behavior.

There are three problems with this all-too-common approach:

1. The misbehaving volunteer is unlikely to recognize that the new policy is really intended for him/her.
2. The crux of the problem—lack of clarity about the volunteer's role in supporting and advancing the mission and vision of the entity—is likely to be lost in the language of the reprimand.
3. The solution to the problem—expressed in "do this, don't do that" terms—doesn't help volunteers avoid

making poor choices in the future.

The community-changing and life-changing missions of public entities warrant a new approach and a new type of leader.

Be the Architect, Not the Army Drill Sergeant

- **Start with Options** - Before drafting rules that apply to your volunteers, focus on how you can help your volunteers make the best possible choices and decisions. Help volunteers think, “what should I do?” instead of telling them “here’s what you must do.” Equip your volunteers to make wise and thoughtful decisions when they are serving on your front line.
- **Make the Connection** - Volunteers don’t flock to service because they appreciate process, bureaucracy, constraints or endless meetings. They donate their precious free time to your entity because they believe in your cause. When explaining the “why” behind your youth protection program, ditch the legalese in favor of a message that expresses the emotion behind your mission: “We are obsessive about protecting children because our mission is to improve their lives.”
- **Simplify the Message AND the Process** - If you’ve volunteered in the last decade you have probably experienced convoluted processes and poorly articulated policies. In their zeal to adopt thorough risk management policies and programs, many entities have “lawyered up.” The result is overly complicated and convoluted messages that are hard to decipher.

While we celebrate the incredible service of volunteers to public entity missions, we owe it to these volunteers to admit that many volunteer programs are structurally weak. Incentives, praise and endless enthusiasm only go so far. Weak programs lead to frustrated, apathetic, and unreliable volunteers. Instead of offering up the customary words of praise to long-suffering volunteers, empower your volunteer manager to be the architect of a program that allows volunteers to do their best work.

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