Risk Management Culture and Your Volunteers



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We've been obsessed with "culture" in recent weeks. At a conference I attended in Toronto in mid-August Nancy Axelrod, governance guru and founding President of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center told an audience of nonprofit CEOs that "culture trumps strategy." Nancy's comments reminded me that no matter how carefully a nonprofit's leaders construct risk management policies, a culture that ignores volunteer discontent or takes volunteer views for granted will lessen the effectiveness of even the most thoughtful approach to managing risk.

A respected colleague, Linda L. Graff, explains a four-step process for creating a "risk aware culture" in her terrific book titled *Best of All: The Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement*:

How to Create a Risk-Aware Culture in Your Organization

- **Communicate**: Create opportunities to talk about risk. Help volunteers understand that risk is a normal part of doing business. Help them to become conscious of risks in their day-to-day environment. Encourage identification and reporting of risks wherever volunteers work throughout the organization. Make sure that employees feel comfortable reporting risks related to volunteer involvement. Communicate that risk management creates a safer working environment for all.
- **Educate**: Enhance risk identification skills through ongoing training, case conferences, in-service sessions, supervisory meetings, performance reviews, etc. Help volunteers to understand the full range of risk control options available in their own area of the workplace, including the small things that everybody can do to increase safety. Help them to know what issues should be reported, and to whom.
- **Appreciate**: Reward everyone who identifies and reports risks. Make risk management a competency area and build it into the volunteer performance management system. Announce successes, publicly acknowledge and reward volunteers' efforts to make the workplace and the organization's services safer for everyone. Attention to risk management and good risk reduction ideas could become the basis of a special annual volunteer recognition award.
- **Implement**: People need to see that their efforts bring results. Follow up on all suggestions. Implement risk control strategies and report back to the risk identifier on actions that have been taken.

In our forthcoming book, *No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management—5th Edition*, we explore numerous facets of volunteer service and risk. From the work required to recruit, screen and train volunteers to the deployment of volunteers as key staff in a nonprofit's programs, recognizing and managing the risks associated with volunteer service is critical to ensuring mission fulfillment.

In the section on volunteer screening, we explore the importance of reference checks. The book includes the following suggested questions to ask a reference for a volunteer position.

General questions:

- In what capacity have you known the applicant and for how long?
- Would you rehire the applicant? If no why not?
- How does the candidate handle frustration and criticism while on the job?
- Was the candidate punctual and reliable?
- Please describe any examples of instances where the candidate did not meet your expectations.

Questions for applicants who will be working with vulnerable clients (e.g., children, the elderly or persons with disabilities):

- When and where have you observed the candidate working with young children/the elderly/persons with disabilities?
- What is the candidate's philosophy about discipline?
- In your opinion are there any reasons why placing our vulnerable clients in the care of the applicant would expose our clients to undue risk or harm?
- Would you place your own child or elderly parent in the care of this applicant?

Question for applicants for mentoring positions:

- Would you be comfortable having the applicant assigned to mentor someone in your family?

If you are interested in learning more about this topic, you can order the book here.

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