

Volunteers - No More On-The-Job Training

By Bill Shepherd, CAE, CRAE

Imagine that you've accepted a salaried job for which you have few or none of the required skills. To make the situation even worse, the company that hired you does not offer any professional development and you're expected to learn on the job; and by the way, you have all the responsibilities, fiduciary duties and risks!

It may sound absurd, but that's how many associations treat their volunteers — they recruit them to sit on a committee or board of directors but do not provide the proper orientation and ongoing training. Often, these well intentioned volunteers do not understand:

- The association's governance model

- How decisions are made

- Their role versus the role of staff

- How to debate

Is it any wonder that volunteers get discouraged and frustrated and are not motivated to serve again? We're setting them up to fail. Recruiting volunteers without providing some kind of formalized training is a recipe for delusion on two fronts. Not only do the volunteers become discouraged, but this environment is particularly hard on association staff members, who end up trying to train volunteers on the fly while the staff in turn is being micromanaged and the association is exposed to a variety of risks. This transition frustrates staff, who sometimes feel that they are spending too much time training and babysitting volunteers. This ad hoc approach to the training of volunteers that is so often used is a lose-lose scenario, in my view.

Several years ago the Ontario Real Estate Association and its member real estate boards found themselves in a "volunteer slump." We created a task force to look into the issue. The result was the creation of a volunteer handbook that provided suggestions for recruiting, orientation, recognition and even retirements (yes, even volunteers may need to be let go). However, the missing element was volunteer leadership development and training, so we conducted extensive research to determine how to address this gap.

Let me share one very telling result. First, we asked the association volunteer president and the CEO this question: How much time per year would your volunteers be willing to dedicate to leadership training? The average response was three hours. We then asked all the volunteers the same question, and the average response was seven days! This discrepancy convinced us that we were onto something.

We then developed what we called the Leadership Path, a list of skills required at every level from a committee member to a board member to president. Next came the design

and development of a series of online courses and workshops to equip volunteers with the skills they needed before they actually had to put them into practice. We made sure to cover conflict resolution, chairperson skills, effective listening, strategic planning, parliamentary procedures and governance reviews.

We used our own volunteers as trainers but only after they took our extensive train-the-trainer sessions.

This program has now been operating for more than three years, reaching more than 2,000 volunteers.

We've conducted evaluations with the volunteers and association staff and here are the results of the training, according to their comments:

- > Mutual respect
- > Increased confidence
- > More volunteers willing to serve
- > Improved professionalism
- > Clearly defined roles
- > Improved teamwork
- > Feelings of appreciation
- > Better decisions
- > Understanding of risks

The big winners — besides the volunteers — have been the association staff members. They are thrilled to report that they can now count on volunteers who understand their roles and are able to make better decisions. Staff members spend less time explaining how the association operates and more time implementing the decisions of their volunteers. Things run more smoothly.

Appropriate training and development of volunteers creates a win-win scenario for any organization. Motivated and well-trained volunteers contribute greatly to the morale of the organization and support the ongoing efforts of staff — to the benefit of the entire association and there's no more on-the-job training.

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