

The Wide Gray Lines - Managing Volunteer Boundaries

“Good Fences Make Good Neighbours”

- Robert Frost “Mending Wall”

The contemporary gurus tell us we have entered the Information Age. It might as readily be called the Age of Blurred Boundaries. In every realm boundary issues seem to be simmering if not on a full boil. Resource disputes between Aboriginal and mainstream communities are heating up and no easy resolution is in sight. Mergers and acquisitions leave many people wondering what organization they will be working for tomorrow. Trade agreements are dissolving economic boundaries. In the world of medicine xenotransplantation stirs controversy. The ever expanding Inter-Net blurs boundaries between nations and people. The complexity at times can be overwhelming as we attempt to keep abreast of new developments.

The non-profit world is not exempt from this phenomenon of blurred boundaries. As government funding has diminished more and more non-profits look to active partnerships with other non-profits or for-profit organizations to meet funding and service delivery needs. The recent controversy over Wayne Gretzky's role with the Arthritis Society and the makers of Tylenol illustrates how easily, with even with the best of intentions, one can stumble into a boundary issues dispute.

Internally, most non-profit organizations are now compelled to make more and more use of community volunteers to increase or simply to maintain their service delivery. For some organizations this has meant making a substantially more serious commitment to their existing volunteer programs. For others it has meant entering into a whole new arena for their organization. Fifteen years ago, Wood's Homes, a treatment centre for troubled children and their families in Calgary had no volunteer involvement other than the members of the Board of Directors. Today, more than two hundred people are involved as volunteers in a wide range of capacities.

Volunteer roles can be divided into three general areas: leadership, service delivery and support. Board members work alongside senior staff. Program volunteers provide services that complement and even duplicate the work of professional staff. A whole range of other volunteers support the organization through their efforts on various committees and fundraising efforts.

A multi-faceted volunteer program has some tremendous advantages because of the web of connections it creates between the non-profit and the community. It enhances the community's understanding of the non-profit and the employees of the non-profit become more sensitive to the values, strengths and needs of the community.

While every volunteer represents a means to acquire valuable support he or she also represents a point of potential conflict. A satisfied volunteer may be the best emissary for an organization but an angry and alienated volunteer can jeopardize an organization both internally and externally. The external damage caused by such a person can be particularly severe because the organization may not even be aware of the damage that has been done. The disenchanted volunteer may well discourage other potential volunteers and donors who have no other connection with the organization. For the other volunteers and employees of the organization it can be draining and demoralizing to work through such a situation. A negative experience can erode their enthusiasm for working with volunteers which will ultimately diminish the resources available to the organization.

A volunteer program presents a multitude of opportunities for boundary confusion and conflicts. A doughnut is now a Canadian icon and the food of choice at so many volunteer events so it seems only appropriate to use the accompanying “Doughnut Diagram” to illustrate the six distinct boundaries where such disruptions can occur. The following descriptions provide examples of how easily and how often such clashes can occur in voluntary organizations. Every volunteer coordinator can probably provide instances from their own organization.

I) Volunteer Leadership / Staff Boundary

The boundary that arguably presents the greatest potential for disastrous conflict is the boundary between senior staff (typically the Executive Director) and the Board of Directors. Executive directors in the company of other executive directors may recite a litany of woes when it comes to their relationship with the board of directors. One executive director of a small southern Ontario social service agency found his every decision challenged at board meetings by the new board chair. After twenty-five years on the job he felt like a bewildered and belittled intern. The new board chair's perspective was that he was only exercising due diligence in his new role. Obviously, prior definition of roles and expectations would have gone a long way towards preventing this crisis.

A novel situation developed in a small town in British Columbia. The part time executive director of a small agency held another job in the school system. In that position she found herself supervising the president of her board of directors. Most ironically he was accountable to her for work time he missed while taking care of duties related to his role as the agency president. This example illustrates the special challenges of working with volunteers in a small community where human resources are that much more limited and people play many parts.

II) Volunteer Leadership / Support Volunteer Boundary

What are the implications when a major donor or representative of a major sponsor decides that he or she would like to sit on your board of directors? If you are so fortunate that you have more candidates than places available at the board room table to what extent can you provide the individual with a seat and still respect the democratic process of your organization? What happens if he or she runs for election and is defeated?

If the individual does get on the board the positive side may be that it will strengthen their relationship with your organization. On the other hand what if there are organizational issues that develop, such as a serious dispute between board members, that you would rather a major supporter was not aware of? One of the concepts of a board, like a caucus or cabinet, is that issues can be discussed freely and openly but once a decision is made the board speaks as one. Is it more difficult to have such discussions when people with divided loyalties are present? Can the individual take on a split personality and be both a board member and a supporter?

Going the other way across this boundary what happens when a member of the board proposes to make a significant contribution but it in some way breaches your code of ethics or policies? Would you accept a share of a board member's lottery winnings even though your organization frowns on gambling and has refused to apply for government grants drawn from gaming revenues?

Some boards require that board members make a financial contribution to the organization. How do you define what is a reasonable contribution? Does this create inequities and problems if you are expected to have clients sit on the board who can ill afford to make a financial contribution?

III) Volunteer Leadership / Program Volunteer Boundary

Are there limitations on who can apply to be a program volunteer with your organization? What happens when the president of your board decides to apply to become a program volunteer and at the same time will be voting on staff salary increases? Big Sisters and Big Brothers of Calgary and Area faced this exact situation. The possibility of limiting who could apply to be a program volunteer quickly generated an absurdly long list of anyone with a prior association with the organization including board members, major donors, their family members and family members of staff. The final conclusion was that anyone was eligible to apply but the staff maintained their professional duty and right to reject any applicant who was deemed unsuitable.

This situation was a challenge to the staff to put professional standards before self-interest. It was also a challenge to the volunteer leader who had to go through the same screening, training and supervisory process as all other volunteers. This situation was resolved agreeably but it is easy to imagine a similar scenario that could have degenerated into a difficult impasse.

Many funders urge organizations to have representation on their boards from program volunteers as well as clients. While this can add a valuable perspective to board deliberations it can also add yet another potential for conflict. How much more difficult is it to confront a program volunteer who is not meeting expectations if that individual also happens to sit on your governing board?

IV) Staff / Support Volunteer Boundary

Can a staff member be called on to make a contribution of time or money in your organization? How easy is it for them to say “No”? When the staff at United Way funded agencies are asked to make a donation to the United Way campaign is pressure put on them to contribute? Are they treated with the same regard as other donors?

Non-profit organizations can be voracious consumers of a staff member’s time, particularly the time of senior staff. What are the time expectations of staff in your organization? Beyond the duties of the job description are they also expected to participate in fundraisers and special events? The concept of mandatory overtime is not unheard of in the corporate world. Is your non-profit organization going down the same road? Are your staff becoming de facto support volunteers? It can be a real challenge to set time boundaries for staff when volunteers are giving freely of their time and talent and setting aside their own interests to support your organization. It is in the long term interests of the organization however to set limits on the extra-curricular time demands placed on staff.

V) Staff / Program Volunteer Boundary

Volunteer screening is an ever increasing challenge to the resources of non-profit organizations. The volunteer leaders of the Junior Forest Warden program in Alberta were recently instructed to develop a local screening committee to be drawn from the current volunteers in each local organization. Wisely, most have had a great deal of difficulty with this concept. Is screening friends and neighbours who also volunteer for the organization a reasonable expectation for program volunteers? Questions of liability, confidentiality and professional skills make the task of screening one that may be better left to trained individuals who are appropriately compensated for the job. Of course, the question remains as to how acquire the financial resources for this task and this poses an increasing threat to the viability of many volunteer programs especially those that focus on working with children and youth.

Can a staff member also become a program volunteer in your organization? It can be a very educational experience for a staff member to walk a mile in a volunteer’s shoes. The staff member may gain a whole new appreciation for the demands associated with being a volunteer - an appreciation that could never have been gained through any training seminar. Is there a downside to this scenario? Can a well meaning staff member get “burnt out” because so much of his or her life revolves around the mission of the organization? Does it confuse the organizational hierarchy if the executive director becomes a program volunteer and is then supervised by one of his or her staff?

VI) Support Volunteer / Program Volunteer Boundary

What happens when a great supporter (or his/her spouse, family member or friend) decides the time is right to become a program volunteer? Do you have any difficulty holding them to the same expectations of screening, training and supervision. In a scenario similar to the one described above (leadership volunteer / program volunteer boundary) when the president of an important foundation approached a youth organization to be a program volunteer his application was met with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. If he became a program volunteer he might look even more favorably on the organization. On

the other hand if his experience was negative he might form a negative perception of the organization as a whole.

Crossing this boundary in the other direction - is it reasonable to expect a program volunteer to participate in support activities? Should a hockey coach also be expected to sell chocolate bars or work at a bingo to pay the way to a tournament? Should a scout leader have to participate in the Saturday morning bottle drive when he or she already gives untold hours to deliver the program? Should a Big Brother or Big Sister be even encouraged to participate in the annual Bowl for Kids fundraiser or should a line be drawn that says what you already give is enough? When resources are tight it is tempting to call on those who are already committed and contributing to give even more.

Controlling the Conflicts

The effective incorporation of volunteer resources is critical to the long term well-being of most non-profits. It is ironic that just as volunteer resources are becoming vital to the operation of non-profits many volunteers' time is increasingly infringed upon by the demands of the workplace as well as the ongoing demands of their families. This makes it all the more important that there is a clear understanding among volunteers and staff of each other's role and the boundaries of that role.

A review of your own organization's volunteer program using the "Doughnut" Diagram will help to forewarn you of potential sources of conflict. By giving some prior consideration to the possible scenarios that can erupt at each boundary a difficult situation or even a crisis may be averted. This examination may also help to put some current conflicts in the right context. What may be viewed as a "personality clash" is in reality a clash that results from ill-defined boundaries.

Good policies and guidelines will not cover every circumstance however they will cover many instances that can be anticipated. At the very least they will cause volunteers and staff to recognize that there are important implications to consider when implementing a multi-faceted volunteer program.

Boundaries should not be considered as impermeable barriers but as demarcations that indicate when one is crossing into a different territory other than one's own. One's own territory is defined not just by what one will do but also by what one will not do. When expectations and limitations are well defined the path to achieve an organization's mission becomes much clearer.

This article is one in a series being written by Jim Campbell and Sherry Ferronato, Co-Directors of Big Sisters and Big Brothers of Calgary and Area, as part of the Muttart Foundation Fellowships. The articles explore current issues in the management of non-profit organizations.

SIDEBARS

I) Definition "Volunteer" - An individual who gives freely of their time and talent without expectation of direct financial compensation.

II) Volunteer Roles and Boundaries

III) Angele Poitras, Executive Director of Meals on Wheels in Sudbury, Ontario sums up the challenge for staff and volunteers - "Volunteers need to remember that staff are staff and staff need to remember that volunteers are volunteers". Staff members who are working with volunteers as a regular part of their job would be well-advised to do some volunteering themselves for another organization. It will give them an experiential reminder of what can easily motivate or discourage a volunteer. The results can be surprising.

IV) Do the issues described in this article strike a chord for you? Do you have any similar challenges to describe? What structures and processes have you found to address the issue of Managing Volunteer Boundaries? Front & Centre invites your responses.