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VOLUNTEER MANAGERS

AN IMPORTANT INVESTMENT RATHER THAN AN UNAFFORDABLE EXPENSE

Informal volunteering has been part of Lebanese culture for a long time. People spontaneously help relatives, friends, and neighbors in need without expecting any financial return. It is one of the meanings of *wajbat*, or social obligations. In the past, many community projects were completed on a volunteer basis (*awni*) — whether it was building a mosque, church or school, digging an irrigation ditch, or preparing food for a wedding celebration. With the increasing needs in society and broader national institutions, however, it is necessary to formalize volunteering.

In Lebanon, all NGOs, public and private schools, and municipalities must have a minimal number of volunteers. NGO volunteer boards and parent committees of schools are comprised of volunteers, and most elected members of municipal councils serve voluntarily. Some of these institutions also have additional volunteers who help them implement their programs and projects, ranging from a handful of volunteers who help occasionally to institutions that engage hundreds, even thousands, of volunteers for major programs or special events.

And yet few institutions in Lebanon have a volunteer manager — a person who is designated as responsible for some or all of the main components of volunteer management (preparation, recruitment, selection, placement, orientation, training, supervision, evaluation, and recognition). That same individual would also be responsible for representing volunteers in the institution's strategic planning process and staff-volunteer relations. This article discusses these key components of volunteer management and gives a few examples and recommendations for Lebanon.

Responsibilities of a volunteer manager

Preparation/planning

A volunteer manager can assess if the institution is ready to engage volunteers.

• Do the institution's administrators have a clear understanding of what tasks should be delegated to staff and volunteers? Engaging volunteers can not only save money, but can also expand the diversity of human resources and spread awareness of the cause.

• Does the institution have clear volunteer policies including specific requirements regarding age, time commitment, skills needed, codes of dress and behavior, record-keeping processes, and insurance coverage?

• Does the institution have the funds needed to cover the expenses of a volunteer program? While a volunteer, by definition, does not get paid, a volunteer program does have expenses. These might include the out-of-pocket expenses that make it possible for those with minimal income to volunteer, as well as equipment, supplies, space, and the time of paid staff. There are additional costs involved to provide recognition to volunteers such as certificates, gifts, or an appreciation event.

• Do paid staff understand the value of volunteers in expanding their own productivity without fearing that they will be replaced by volunteers? And can they suggest volunteer positions that they would train and supervise?

Recruitment

Once the institution is ready, a volunteer manager can list and update all the institution's volunteer opportunities on its website, Facebook page, or through an online service. The listing can provide information about potential volunteering positions, application forms, and contact information. Along with such general listings, a volunteer manager can do targeted recruitment for specific roles, appealing to appropriate university departments, professional schools, websites, Facebook pages, and organizations. Where and how to find an artist to paint a mural, an accountant to prepare tax forms, or a large group of people to clean a beach will be very different.

Other considerations:

• Can the volunteer manager divide a major task into smaller tasks that many people can do?

• Can a task be done away from the institution, potentially opening the pool to virtual volunteers anywhere in the world?

• And how inclusive does the institution want to be in terms of the age, gender, education, experience, religion/sect, abilities and disabilities of its volunteers?

• Does the institution only want those who commit to being long-term volunteers for the institution? Or would it be willing to engage high school or university students who help for only a limited number of hours to fulfill a community service requirement or add a line on their college or job applications?

Note: Those who are fulfilling requirements to graduate are technically not volunteers until they complete the requirement because they do not fulfill one of the criteria of volunteering — that it is done of one's own free will. But it is an important learning experience for which both the student and the institution can benefit.

Selection and placement

An important task of a volunteer manager is to develop procedures for matching volunteer opportunities with the needs, skills, interests, and availability of potential volunteers:

• Who receives the volunteer applications, reviews them, and chooses which should be passed on to which other staff?

• Who interviews the potential volunteer and makes the final decision on placement?

• Are recommendations or referrals required?

• Is there any other method in place to screen volunteers to be sure to avoid any risks of health or safety? This is especially important when working with vulnerable beneficiaries/populations like children, the elderly, and those with mental or physical disabilities.

Orientation

Once selected and placed: Is there a general orientation for new volunteers, explaining the mission, vision and programs of the institution and its volunteer policies and procedures? For small institutions, this may be done informally and individually, but for large institutions they may even have such an orientation at regular intervals throughout the year. Is there a volunteer agreement and a handbook with information about the volunteer assignment, clear procedures the volunteer and supervisor must follow, and a list of volunteer rights and responsibilities? This can help avoid any misunderstandings about mutual expectations.

Training and supervision

Training provides the volunteers with the skills and knowledge they need to do their specific tasks within the institution, and may prepare them to increase their responsibilities as they gain experience and demonstrate their commitment. This should be coupled with ongoing supervision and is usually done by the staff member who the volunteer works with. This can also be coordinated by the volunteer manager, who checks that everything is going well, maintains a file and records of hours or projects the volunteer has engaged in, and otherwise oversees the process.

Evaluation

Finally, it is important to evaluate the volunteer, the supervisor, and the volunteer program itself. Volunteers should be evaluated, and they should also have the opportunity to evaluate their volunteer experience. Evaluation can help improve the program and determine whether volunteers should be promoted to positions of more responsibility.

Recognition

Recognition may take many forms: a smile, a recommendation letter from the institution, a certificate, a thank you gift, a picture on a bulletin board or a mention in the organization's newsletter. Some institutions establish a formal recognition program with incentives and organize special events to honor volunteers and give them an opportunity to meet each other. While many volunteers feel shy about being recognized for their efforts, such recognition not only encourages the volunteer to continue, but also encourages others to become volunteers.

Current status of volunteer management in Lebanon:

It would be useful for a comprehensive study to be done on the state of volunteering in Lebanon that evaluates what exists and what changes need to be made. Such a study is outside the scope of this article, but I have been working in the field of volunteerism in Lebanon over 20 years ago and have considerable experience working with organizations and institutions throughout the country. In addition, I did some online research to see if organizations had pages on their website devoted to volunteering. And I asked eight organizations with active volunteer programs to complete a survey about their volunteer programs. Thank you to Caritas Lebanon, Amel Association, NAHNOO, Donner Sang Compter, Sidon Orphan Welfare Society, Makassed Volunteers, Himaya, and Brave Heart Fund.

Twenty years ago, very few organizations in Lebanon had a formal volunteer program. Even now, only a small number of them have a volunteer manager. This person may be paid or unpaid, full time, or part time. This person may dedicate all their time to managing volunteers or they may have additional responsibilities within an institution.

While 20 years ago, NGOs use of the internet was just emerging in Lebanon.

A large number of organizations now not only have websites, but also have various social media accounts, and phone messaging programs like WhatsApp by which they can recruit and communicate with their volunteers. An increasing number of organizations and institutions recognize the value of engaging volunteers in achieving their objectives, and many now have a menu tab "Volunteer" on their website or a more generic tab like "Get Involved" for which becoming a volunteer is one of the options. Fifty organizations have already registered on The Volunteer Circle (www.thevolunteercircle.com), a recently launched platform that lists volunteer opportunities in Lebanon. The challenge for such an initiative will be to have organizations maintain up-to-date listings of their volunteer opportunities.

Of the eight volunteer managers who completed the survey, four are volunteers and four are part-time employees. Only two are focused only on volunteer management in the organization. The rest also engage in other management work for the institution. Only three have training in volunteer management, while most think it would be helpful. Seven of the institutions have volunteer applications and six have volunteer manuals, while one has a printed copy of the rights and responsibilities of the volunteers that is handed out and signed by new volunteers at the beginning of their first training session. It should be noted this is not typical of Lebanese NGOs, but only for those active in volunteer management.

> When asked to list the three biggest difficulties they face as a volunteer manager, a few of the answers concern the pressures on their own time, but most are concerned with actual volunteer issues:

- **Placement:** Matching volunteers with adequate/suitable tasks,
- **Reliability:** Ensuring that volunteers fulfill their time commitments and follow organizational policies,
- **Retention:** Ensure volunteers are motivated and happy with their work,
- **Management:** Conflict resolution, communications, and keeping records of tasks and progress,
- **Capacity building:** Ensuring that young volunteers are learning as much as possible from the activities they are participating in.

A few institutions in Lebanon are particularly notable for recognizing the value of investing in a full-time, paid, trained volunteer manager. Caritas, Makassed, and the Red Cross have such volunteer managers. In all these organizations, volunteer managers focus on youth volunteers, not only for the service the provide, but also their own development. The Children's Cancer Center of Lebanon has had an unpaid volunteer manager and some paid and unpaid assistants with both youth and older volunteers. And Ain Wazein has had a volunteer manager for a long time for its Elder Care Center who manages both its largely senior core of volunteers and various visiting youth groups who want to spend a day helping seniors.

Most organizations and institutions in Lebanon, however, do not have a person designated as their volunteer manager. And volunteer managers that do exist are generally unpaid, part-time, and responsible for a variety of other tasks in addition to volunteer management. Furthermore, they are generally untrained, and rarely have a role in the organization's strategic planning.

Recommendations

Ideally, all Lebanese institutions that engage (or want to engage) at least 20 volunteers in a year should designate a volunteer manager for the institution and invest in that person to give him/her the training, support, and status to do the job effectively, whether they themselves are volunteers or paid staff.



The volunteer manager should develop professional expertise in volunteer management through benefitting from rich professional literature on volunteer management. This includes books and articles on volunteer management in general as well as those on specific concerns within the broad field of volunteerism, whether in terms of different types of volunteers (corporate, youth, elderly, virtual), institutions (educational and service institutions, NGOs, public agencies), or issues (recruitment, risk management, staff-volunteer relations). They can also attend training programs and conferences, share experiences with other volunteer managers and participate in online discussion groups.

There is also a rigorous international certification process managed by the Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration (http://cvacert.org). Its textbook, *Volunteer Administration: Professional Practice* by Keith E. Seele, now in its third edition, addresses the full body of knowledge needed by professionals in the administration and management of volunteers, whether they manage volunteers for a non-profit organization, service institution, or public sector agency.

For NGOs, service institutions, educational institutions, and public agencies in Lebanon, designating a volunteer manager should be considered an important investment rather than an unaffordable expense, since the time and effort of an effective volunteer manager can be multiplied many times over by the contributions of volunteers.

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