

USING HUMAN RESOURCES SKILLS TO IMPROVE YOUR VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT by Patty Wells

Most people who've supervised employees in the 9-5 world are taken aback when they're confronted with working with volunteers. We're used to a paycheck being a major motivator and somehow feel that if it isn't a paid job it completely changes the rules. It doesn't. There are plenty of human resources concepts that can help you. Luckily, many of these concepts are a combination of common sense and the Golden Rule and are accessible to you. The trick is to decide what you can use and what you can vary to suit your needs. Too much paperwork and formality and your volunteers won't want to play with you. It'll be too much like work. Too little and you can't run a convention.

Everything I suggest is designed to help a committee person succeed. In the 9-5 world, it costs money and productivity to have an employee fail. In the convention world it costs people points and good will points when someone fails. They're very comparable situations.

OBJECTIVITY

All human resources texts refer to the need for objectivity when appraising performance. At a job you develop a relationship with fellow employees that makes it more difficult to deal with their work performance separately from your personal interactions with them. This is even more critical when the committee person you're supervising is part of your social group and may be a long time friend. So how do you objectively deal with friends on a committee?

AGREED ON LIST OF TASKS

Most writings on human resources stress that you can't evaluate an employee's performance without an agreed upon set of criteria of what the job entails. For most jobs, this is the job description. Most convention groups, ours included, have never reached the level of organization needed to have developed formal job descriptions. What we have done instead is to collect information on the tasks associated with most jobs and to make a timeline for the entire convention. Highlighting deadlines for a specific committee position gives the volunteer some understanding of what the job consists of and when key or multiple deadlines happen. Locating the crunch times and amount of work required can help a person decide that they can't do this job. An example would be a college student who sees from the time line that the program schedule needs to be done during finals week. They probably won't take the programming lead position. You and they are much happier to know this now rather than when it develops into a crisis.

Any kind of list of tasks gives you an objective starting point for your next step.

CLARIFICATION OF THE TASKS

You don't need to do this with the person who's held the same committee position for 5 years. But any time someone is taking on something new you should discuss it. Do they understand what the tasks entail? An example would be a bulk mailing of program questionnaires. Do they know that they are preparing the bulk mailing (including all the nit-picky postal regulations) as well as writing the questionnaire, producing a camera ready copy of it, and getting X number of copies made.

WHAT HELP DO THEY NEED TO DO THE TASKS

Using the example above, what does the person need. For the person doing this job for the first time it doesn't always help to ask the question that non-specifically. They may not know what

questions to ask. You might say: "Do you have the help you need to get this job done? Do you have copies of previous questionnaires? Do you have a machine to produce the questionnaire on and are you anticipating doing a similar or different style from last year's?" This is a good question. It makes them think about how they want to do their job. It gives them more ownership of the task at the same time. You can think of additional questions that might need asking. Please note that this does imply that as a supervisor you need to know enough about general duties of the job to ask good questions. It doesn't mean you have to have done the job, you just have to have done your managerial homework.

GET THEM THE HELP

Often times, this is as simple as having them speak to the person who did the job last year, or suggesting someone outside the group that they can talk to. An example from Westercon 43 was our Art Show. Linda Pilcher ran a very successful art show, even though it was her first. We are indebted to Gail Butler for helping to advise her pre-con and to a host of people at con who had done art shows and agreed to volunteer.

Adequate volunteers is, indeed, the next area you work on with someone new to the job. Ultimately we all recruit for. However, you can suggest how much help they really need to do the job well. This is something we all underestimate. Can you suggest people or types of people for them to recruit, e.g. out-of-towners who've done a job, their friends, coworkers, spouses.

CHECK DEADLINES IN ADVANCE

You're set the person up to succeed as well as you can. Now check their deadlines. Ask how a task is coming along at the meeting prior to the task deadline. Ask again then if the person needs more help. If there is no conveniently set meeting you might give them a call a week to two weeks in advance. Again, let me stress that you don't do this with every one. If they're done the job well before, or have already been checking in with you it will only annoy them to have an offer of help that they don't need. But a person new to the task usually wants the help, whether they admit it or not.

FEEDBACK AS YOU GO ALONG

Job appraisal articles all stress the importance of feedback throughout the year. Tell anyone, whether they are new to the job or have done it for 10 years, when they are doing a good job. Everyone can use the praise, or they can feel like they aren't doing a good job. Never assume that someone knows they are doing well.

It is worth noting that some psychological studies have suggested that delayed praise is much less effective than telling good job after a task well done. On the other hand, criticism immediately after an unsuccessful event is less likely to be useful than waiting until later. Give them time to recover, but talk about ways to do better well in advance of the next similar task or event.

DELIVERING EFFECTIVE CRITICISM

In human resources argon, this is often referred to as "the counseling process". That's a little too euphemistic a term for telling somebody that there's a problem with their performance. But you can make it as constructive as possible by your own attitude and tone of voice positive. ("We can solve this problem together" is a useful subtext.) The least threatening way to approach it (for both of you) is to always deal with specific goals or tasks that aren't being met or accomplished not "what's been done wrong". All of the above steps are there so that you

have a better chance of being able to do this and have sidestepped as many pitfalls as possible in advance. Now you run into a problem you haven't been able to avoid. What do you do?

1. Identify the problem in the objective terms, e.g. the program questionnaire is two weeks late.
2. Identify the cause of the problem. Ask them what they see as the problem. What factors are producing the problem?
3. Identify alternatives. What can we do to overcome these factors, what other alternatives are there?. For example, they may need more help, or they may not have the information from someone else to do the job, e.g. they can't reach the treasurer to get a check for printing, or the GOH won't tell them what they want to do. Identify a better course of action. Will extra help do it? Can a deadline slide until finals are over? Can you or they troubleshoot with a person not supplying needed assistance? Set a new deadline for these actions to occur with the person.
4. Learn from the experience. What can you do differently in the future to avoid this? What would you do differently if you could do it over again?

Keep it oriented to objective problems. If it drifts into personal areas, e.g. "Joan is impossible to reach, I can't do my job because of her", take it back to objective criteria.

Ask them for their ideas. Run interference between committee members only when necessary. Most of them have to work together sooner or later. But if tempers are running high, it may help diffuse an issue if you intercede and make everyone's positive intent clear, e.g. the treasurer was away for the weekend. Perhaps next time asking for a check further in advance would help.

ALTERNATES TO FIRING

Nobody wants to fire anyone, especially not a volunteer, especially not a friend. Make sure a person knows a problem is occurring, and keep them invested in solving it. Extra help, splitting off part of a job, a break to deal with a personal crisis, a change in who they interact with, additional training, any of these may solve the problem.

Discussion of the problem will often lead the person to realize that they need to be reassigned or need to make a change. You can suggest a job that won't involve the time commitment of their current job. Keep it objective. They aren't bad, they just don't have the time, energy, skills, etc. needed for this job now.

FIRING

Occasionally none of this works. If there really is no other solution remember the following:

1. Be direct, and absolute. Sugarcoating a statement only drags out a discussion that's uncomfortable for you both. ?
2. Announce, don't argue. They should be aware of a problem at this stage or you've communicated very poorly. It does no good to re-argue a situation that has already been decided.
3. Don't try to help. They aren't going to listen to you at this point. You aren't going to be at your most helpful either.
4. Follow up with the volunteer. In a paid job, the employee receives a termination letter. You don't usually need this with volunteers, but you do need to clean up any logistics needed, e.g. getting keys returned.

SUGGESTED READING

Professionalization is one of the recurrent themes running through our committee's discussions of the future of running conventions. The hotel industry is getting tougher to deal with; as conventions grow the issues of fiscal control and training staff become more critical than ever.

One of the ways we can become more professional is keep expanding our knowledge with some of the literature available. We mesh well with some other non-profits or small businesses that are facing some of the same issues we are. With this in mind, I've put together a highly idiosyncratic annotated reading list for your perusal. It offers additional sources of information on some of the program topics we are presenting. For accessibility, I've leaned towards recent (or recently reprinted) books. For cheapness, I've leaned toward trade paperbacks. Where possible, I've indicated the retail price of the book in parentheses.

Thanks to Ben Yalow for suggested readings on the history of fandom. Many of these readings are out of print, but are likely to be spotted in a Dealer's Room.

Patty Wells

MAKING PRESENTATIONS

How to Present Like a Pro; Lani Arredondo, McGraw-Hill, 1991 (\$12.95)

What's Your Point, Bob Boylan, Warner Books, 1988 (\$13.95)

Both books speak to key points of presentation, use of AV equipment, nerves and effective ways of fielding questions. The Boylan book is a little trendier (cartoons, lots of lists and blank space). However, it does cover the basics in very non-threatening way for those of us who panic at public speaking.

MARKETING

Guerrilla Marketing Weapons, Jay Conrad Levinson, Phume Books, 1990. (\$9.95)

Of the 100 affordable marketing methods it describes, about half could be applied to cons in some way. It has the most of direct mail I've seen. [t also discusses making your attitude toward your customers a major marketing tool. This is an area we tend to address too infrequently.

Marketing Without Money, Herman Holtz, Scott Forman Professional Books, 1991. (\$21.95)

This was the only hardback I thought really cost-effective. It covers direct mail and building of mailing lists as well as PR methods such as press releases, public speaking and use of newsletters.

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Essential Volunteer Management, Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch, VM^systems and Heritage Arts Publishing, Downer Grove, IL, 1989

It would be worth tracking down this obscure publisher who seem-, to only print materials on use of volunteers. This III()[ivation Of volunteers vs. paid employees, setting jobs and job descriptions for volunteers, recruitment. McCurley also wrote **101 Ideas for Volunteer Recruitment** and **Volunteer Management Forms**, I haven't located them, but would recommend looking for them given the usefulness of the book I have read.

Training for Non-Trainers, Carolyn Nilson, American Management Assoc. Press, 1991 (\$16.95)

What few hooks there are on training people are either trendy or mediocre. This one is somewhat better. It discusses one-to-one training, groups, and some basic tips in writing useful training manuals.

HOTEL NEGOTIATIONS

Getting Past No, Negotiating with Difficult People, William Ury, Bantam, 1991 (\$20.00 in hardback, it should hit paperback soon)

By the author of "Getting to Yes" (which is available in paperback). Ury is the only writer in this area that I actually feel like I've gleaned useful techniques from when I've finished the book.

The Art of War, Sun Tzu, James Clavel trans., Delta, 1983.

This centuries old classic has made a major comeback in the MBA section of Powell's and rightly so. It gives you an appropriate mindset from which to work. This book was also suggested by Ben Yalow as his favorite book on the subject.

CONVENTION HISTORY

This Immortal Storm, Sam Moskowitz

History of fandom in the 1930's.

The Way the Future Was, Frederick Poll, Del Rev 1979

Counter-history to Moskowitz's book

All Our Yesterdays, Harry Warner. Advent

History of fandom in the 1940's.

"A Wealth of Fable," Harry Warner, available in fanzine form from Joe Siclari

History of Fandom in the 1950's.

"George Scither's Con Committee Chairman's Guide," fanzine produced after Discon in 1963

The change in scale and prices is fascinating.

Three Worldcons have published proceedings:

Noreascon 1, NESFA press, 1971

Chicon 3, Advent, 1962

Discon, Advent 1963

BUDGETS

Balance Sheet Basics for Nonfinancial Managers; Joseph Peter Simini, John Wiley & Sons, 1990 (\$11.95)

This book is truly basic, but it is all many of us want to tackle if we're not planning to be a convention treasurer.

Finance for Nonfinancial Managers, 3rd ed. ; Herbert Spiro, John Wiley & Sons, 1988 (\$14.95)

For the next level up in interest, topics covered include capital structure, leasing and cash management.

DESKTOP PUBLISHING

Publishing Newsletters; Howard Penn Hudson, Scribners, 1988 (\$12.95)

By the publisher of the "Newsletter on Newsletters", this book discusses design, editorial content, subscriptions and desktop publishing.

HUMAN RESOURCES

If Only I Had Said, Conversation Control Skills for Managers; Charles J. Mergerison, Mercury Business Paperbacks, 1987.

This book stresses recognition of permission giving and territoriality, two realities of working with volunteer groups as well as a useful chapter on summarizing material presented to you by others.

People Skills, How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others and Resolve Conflicts; Robert Bolton, Simon & Schuster, 1987

This is my current favorite of the myriad of effective communications books out there. It uses Carl Rogers as a starting point and contains much useful material. However, any of the communication books available can be useful since the act of reading them makes you think about how you communicate. I find the books that use Rogers, Maslow or Satir as references to be the most practical, as well as being humanistic in orientation.