The Care of Volunteers [and Employees]
By Barry W. Szymanski, Lawyer

Much has been written about how to recruit, manage and terminate volunteers. But, over the years that I have worked with EMS and other volunteers, I have noticed very few articles on how to care for them – to be considerate of them.

Perhaps because I am an attorney and am contacted when there are problems, I have noticed that volunteers in EMS and fire departments are often treated with disdain. Why do I say this? Because as a lawyer I am contacted by volunteers who feel empty, tossed aside, or stepped on. That is not what they initially tell me when we meet. What they do say at the beginning of our conference is that they want to sue their department. Their initial reasoning is that they think that they were harassed, unfairly treated, or discriminated against. They feel hurt, are angry, and they want to sue for damages. They want revenge. After they tell their story to me, what unfolds does not often rise to the level of the proof required for a legal action – but what does unfold is that they were brushed aside [to put it mildly] by management and supervisors, and often [to put it more actively] stepped on.

There appears to be a lot of callous management out there. Giving supervisors the benefit of the doubt, I think that some managers are simply clueless on how to care for, and be considerate of, volunteers. No one cared for them, so they have no models to rely on. Some managers may feel that because ‘we have an annual dinner, what more is needed?’ or ‘s/he was sure super sensitive!’ or ‘we can’t give strokes for every little thing done.’ While an annual dinner may be a reward for many volunteers, it is not a significant reward for others. It is too often forgotten in the pace of everyday life at the station that each volunteer is important to the organization.

Why Do Individuals Volunteer? People volunteer because they want to make a difference. In addition, especially in EMS and fire, there is also the hope for excitement not to be found in any other arena. People also volunteer because they like the camaraderie. They feel that they will find a sense of solidarity in an EMS or fire department. Some will use their volunteer time to learn more about a field that they want to get into – perhaps full time EMS or fire services. Others, because they want to fulfill a sense of community involvement. But, regardless of the reason, volunteers, consciously or unconsciously desire, and need, a sense of accomplishment, and they need recognition. In short, they want to feel appreciated.

Job Descriptions and Policy and Procedure Manuals. Whether your organization has volunteers only, or, in addition has full or part time employees, job descriptions and policy and procedure manuals are extremely important. I cannot over emphasize this. Volunteers, as well as management and employees
need to know what they are getting into. If a person volunteers to drive an ambulance, that is their interest. However, the organization may have determined that a driver is also required to know where various equipment is stored, how to properly unpack and repack it, and be CPR and defibrillator trained. The person intended to drive only may not want to go through with all of that training. Job descriptions, for volunteers and others, and policy and procedures make it clear what is expected.

After a volunteer has accepted responsibility for the tasks listed in a job description, the managers of a department should not add to their job description without asking. Supervisors may be used to dealing with employees, and feel that they can simply mandate added tasks. A supervisor in a volunteer department may be an employee at his or her full time job and feel that ‘that’s the way it is done.’ Not true for volunteers! If someone is donating their time, it is not fair to add to the responsibilities they have willingly undertaken. For example, a person may join knowing that they will be on an ‘On Call’ crew once every five days. Then it becomes once every four days, then three days, then every other day. That is not what they envisioned when they signed up. And, if not an emergency situation, is unfair and a burden to the volunteer.

All organizations should have job descriptions. However, if your department does not have written job descriptions, it is easy to get them! All you have to do is to ask the people who are currently doing the jobs to write down what they do every week. Then you summarize and organize what they wrote.

Policy and procedure manuals lay out what is to be done. They are also the benchmark of what is expected. This cuts two ways – what must be done to accomplish a task, and what is not necessary.

Job descriptions and policy and procedures are basically lists of who is to do what tasks, and a list of what is to be done to finish a job. Simply, what is expected of a named person. Take the simple task of cleaning the kitchen at the department. Who is responsible for the refrigerator and all of the stuff in the back that has funny stuff inside the plastic ware? Who is responsible for ordering coffee and other necessities? For mopping the floor? Taking out the garbage?

Another benefit of job descriptions and manuals is that they can be studied by a volunteer at home. This saves the time of supervisors who themselves are most probably volunteers. The time of supervisors, is also a department and personal resource and is to be respected. Manuals therefore are also an information source. They reduce the questions needed to be asked.

Team Building. If you have volunteers and employees, or volunteers only, management must concern itself with building and maintaining a team. This does not occur by accident. As an attorney dealing with organizations for over three decades, I can assure you of that. If left to themselves without the care
and feeding of people who care, organizations will devolve into disorder. And, legally, turmoil leads to legal problems. As a lawyer I would rather consult with a department which thinks it has some problems, than retained as a lawyer to deal with already filed legal problems – and often the bedlam of factions which result.

If your department has both employees and volunteers, one of the major difficulties for departments that I have worked with occurs when the department realizes that it must hire and pay employees to work the day shift when there are fewer volunteers to respond to calls. Often the employees who apply for the paid day-shift jobs are those who were, and continue, to serve as volunteer EMT’s and / or firefighters on evening shifts. The difficulty is that these individuals are both paid and volunteer members. To compound the problem, during the paid-day-shift these individuals may have lieutenant status, and in the evening are simply grunts.

Feedback. Personally, I worked part-time for many years for a state agency. Every year we would receive the department’s form written request to provide feedback to the agency on what can be improved and how. One year, one of the members of our group actually believed that management really wanted to know. He wrote over 17 pages in response. It was excellent. He summarized what all of us had talked about over coffee for the past years. As you can guess, nothing, [repeated for emphasis], nothing was ever done with any of his great suggestions. We all knew better. He did not. He poured his soul into that missive. He signed it and never even received a thank you. What is the message to you managers? If you ask for feedback, then do something about it. If you don’t want to know, then be fair and don’t ask.

Respect and Flexibility. When working with volunteers it is important to constantly recall the First Commandment of Volunteers, which is: THEY DON’T HAVE TO DO WHAT THEY VOLUNTEERED FOR. They are volunteers. They are not employees. What they do does not pay their mortgage. Since human beings are not like fruits and vegetables which can be imported from other countries, you are limited to the people in your community who have volunteered. Don’t burn them out.

Burnout. People get exhausted. You have seen your co-employees burn out. In the paper company TV show The Office there are burnouts. We’ve all seen them. In an ideal world no volunteer should feel used up -- because their initial motivation is different from employees. But even if we don’t live in an idyllic world, that doesn’t mean that management should not work to avoid exhaustion among their volunteers. What ought a supervisor look for to see the signs of burnout? Probably the best test is to observe if the volunteer no longer enjoys what she or he is doing, and is not happy with volunteering anymore. This first test covers all of the collateral behaviors: failure to do a good job, telling others that she or he doesn’t care, showing irritability, or even becoming argumentative with co-personnel, and / or attendance and tardiness problems.
If the supervisor is a friend of the volunteer, he may find, if the volunteer is open, is that the volunteer feels empty, unhappy, betrayed, unenthused, unsatisfied, and not willing to spend as much time as they used to at the department. These feelings carry over from scheduled work time to ‘fun’ time.

What Can the Department Do? The first is respect. Volunteers are human. Volunteers want to make a difference with their spare time. This is not their main job. They have families. They have a life outside of the department [or at least they should].

If a person has been a volunteer for some time, has her or his supervisor taken the time to know them? To find out what motivates the volunteer? To know how do they feel about what they are doing? Now? A year ago? Why did they volunteer? To find out, if the volunteer is failing in some area, why?

Everyone of us wants to achieve. If we sense that we are not doing a good job, we feel unsuccessful. This is especially true of volunteers. Each needs to be specifically told that she or he is doing a good job.

The Second Commandment Of Working With Volunteers is that, ‘A volunteer always has the right to say no.’ For EMS and fire departments, we can modify this commandment by adding, ‘. . . at least, because of emergencies, well in advance.’ I add the ‘well in advance’ because you can’t have a person fail to show up when scheduled, or say no at an emergency EMS or fire scene, but common sense should guide you on understanding this Second Commandment. So, avoid the major mistake that many managers make, which is to take advantage of their volunteers.

Just as with any employment situation where you must provide proper equipment to do the job, you must provide help when an employee or volunteer needs rest, relaxation, or even consultation with a chaplain or counselor. Any work environment can overtake the best of us. Managing and supervising demands many skills. Of these, the most important is to monitor your volunteers.

Therefore, be realistic in what you expect. Because volunteers do not receive a paycheck, they expect other rewards in return. Management and supervisors have to remember how to sincerely and regularly reward their volunteers, and to know what the motivations of their volunteers are.

Bad Management. One significant task of management is to watch for and monitor those supervisors who, let me say it simply, lord it over the people they are in charge of. These may be supervisors who may just have a bad management style [which is curable], or have the wrong paradigm of what it means to be a manager [this is also curable], or are people who like to have power and control over others and will do so to the detriment of both the people
they are in charge of as well as the department, and ultimately the public [this is not curable]. The TV show The Office well illustrates all of these management styles! Both new and long-term supervisors can manifest these dysfunctional management styles.

Legal Stuff. I have been in the practice of law for 36 years. At some point, but not yet, I will become wise. But in my journey I have come to realize that many of the legal matters between volunteers [and employees] and departments is due to lousy management skills which supervisors should have learned in kindergarten: to say please and thank you; to realize that we all have to stand in the same food line; and not to fight in the school yard. If volunteers are respected for what they do, and not overtaxed, and appreciated, the department will avoid burn out. A good volunteer should leave with a smile and know that she and he did a good job. That ability to have some fun and receive satisfaction is often all they need. Many departments fail to fulfill the essential needs of their volunteers and employees. And that is sad. Abysmal management and supervisory skills often result in legal problems. If not, then the result is volunteers who simply leave by ‘voting with their feet.’

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