

VOLUNTEERS AND INTERNS

VOLUNTEERS are the cornerstones of many, if not most, non-government organisations. Many owe their origins to persons who cared enough about a cause, an issue, a community service to give of their time and resources to make something happen. Often volunteers are used to supplement paid staff; if salaried personnel have not been funded by the NGO, then the volunteers are the staff. Finally, volunteers are the organisation's most direct liaison with the local community in which the group operates; they are the NGO's agents for reinforcing its objectives and goals before the general public.

The NGO's chief concern in dealing with volunteers should be to find ways to maximize their usefulness to the organisation – in other words, how to make volunteers more responsible and actively involved. Here are a few suggestions:

- SET GOALS AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE USE OF VOLUNTEERS. Survey staff and/or board members to determine specific needs for volunteers. Determine annual goals, i.e., what the NGO expects for the year in terms of increased volunteer involvement and commitment – and review those goals periodically during the year to see how well you are doing. Place a priority on planning.
- DEVELOP VOLUNTEER "JOB DESCRIPTIONS" AND/OR TRAINING PROCEDURES. Volunteers will not feel comfortable unless they are well informed and briefed about the NGO and about what is specifically expected of them. Training may be necessary for those volunteers unskilled at assigned tasks. While it is important that volunteers be well informed, at the same time they should not be overwhelmed with reams of material on either the organisation or their tasks. Information needs to be summarised so it is readily understandable to volunteers.
- TREAT ALL VOLUNTEERS AS IF THEY WERE PAID STAFF. This means they should be assigned real responsibilities, and they should be held accountable for their assigned tasks.
- DEVELOP A RECRUITMENT STRATEGY FOR VOLUNTEERS. Identify the points of view and talent needed within the organisation, list the kinds of individuals who might fulfill these requirements, and then plan a recruitment strategy to find specific persons – e.g., via personal contact, newsletter, public service announcements, news articles.
- SHOW APPRECIATION. Provide all possible credit and thanks for volunteer activity – e.g., thank you notes, newsletter features, recognition dinners, special awards.

- • KEEP THE DREAM ALIVE! The specific objectives and programme of the NGO are what attracted its volunteers in the first place. In the absence of incentives and commitment or reassurance of the organisation's capacity to work effectively toward meeting long-term goals, volunteers will lose enthusiasm and interest .

The nature of volunteers is changing. They are becoming more aware, better informed, more selective about the things they are willing to do. The organisation that appreciates all facets of volunteer talents is the one which will win their allegiance.

VOLUNTEERS AS NGO ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORS. Furthermore, the role of volunteers is changing. For example, citizen volunteers associated with non-government organisations are now being recruited to perform monitoring functions critical to the study and management of the local environment. Such monitoring and collection of environmental data enables government agencies to gather information which might otherwise be unaffordable. NGO volunteers can also function as "watchdogs" for environmental enforcement, alerting responsible authorities when irregularities or unlawful activities might otherwise go undetected.

For NGO volunteer monitoring programmes to be successful, it must first be determined what information is needed and who needs it. These determinations will depend on cooperation between the NGO, government officials, other groups in the private sector, and perhaps researchers. Once established, the credibility of the information collected by volunteer monitors becomes critical. Quality control must be maintained, and field training for all volunteers is essential. But when these programmes are in place, they become important to the NGO not only for the data generated but for maintaining motivation and positive feedback for participating volunteers.

INTERNS. Many NGOs have successfully used interns to augment their personnel requirements. Internships are any kind of carefully planned and monitored work or service experience. U.S. Peace Corps volunteers or those from the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) programme are two examples of "internships" which have been successfully utilised by many Eastern Caribbean NGOs. As with other volunteers, interns (1) must be assigned tasks important to the NGO and which have been carefully structured and (2) must be supervised and held accountable for their work.

Many North American universities are looking for placement opportunities for graduate-level student internships in the Caribbean. Island Resources Foundation (IRF) is in contact with many of these academic institutions and can serve as a "broker" between the school and Eastern Caribbean NGOs. For example, Sheri Furlott, an international development doctoral candidate at American University in Washington, D.C. has just returned from an internship arranged by IRF with the JEMS Progressive Community Organisation in St. Vincent.

If you think your NGO would benefit from the services of an intern, please contact IRF. Be specific about your needs, the skills required of the intern, and when these services are required. Note: some interns linked to an academic programme are only available during the summer months; others are available from a month up to a year or more.