

Managing Risk with Volunteers

Volunteers are a tremendous asset to non-profit and charitable organizations. They bring time, enthusiasm, and skills to organizations and their programs. They can also improve the cost-effectiveness of program delivery. Indeed, many programs would fold if they did not have the support of volunteers.

That said, good volunteers are hard to recruit. As a result, organizations often find themselves accepting anyone who offers to help. But not having standards, procedures, and policies around volunteers can undermine programs and create unintended liabilities.

Managing volunteers effectively is an important part of managing organizational risk. And of course, reducing and managing risk is an important and worthwhile activity for any non-profit or charity that is striving to run an effective operation and preserve both its reputation and its assets. Failure to manage risk can result in damage including injuries to people or assets, financial costs to the non-profit and, perhaps most important, loss of reputation and goodwill. Goodwill is the most important asset most charities have. Without it, it becomes very hard to raise funds, attract volunteers, and implement programs.

Below I have outlined some ideas for reducing risk, particularly those associated with using volunteers. You will note that many risks can be easily reduced without costing lots of money or impairing the ability of the organization to conduct its programs. Bear in mind that the size of an organization and the extent of its resources will have an impact on what is reasonable in terms of risk management.

1. Have a volunteer risk management policy in place, which sets out some procedures and policies to reduce risk.
2. Have the board adopt that risk management policy.
3. Create a volunteer handbook with all policies that volunteers need to be aware of and comply with.
4. Assign someone or a committee to review risk management procedures in your organization, including procedures for volunteers.
5. Have a volunteer coordinator. They can be a volunteer or paid staff depending on the circumstances.
6. Make a list of all your activities and the risks that you face.
7. Prioritize the risks in term of likelihood and effect.

8. Think of ways to deal with risk and decide on timelines in dealing with different types of risk.
9. Different volunteer opportunities may have vastly different levels and types of risks associated with them. For example, a volunteer working in the office does not face the same risks as one working with young offenders in the street.
10. Consider eliminating an excessively risky program or temporarily suspending that program until some of the risk can be dealt with or minimized. Sometimes the board must draw lines about what activities are too risky to involve the organization or to involve volunteers.
11. Have volunteers complete a written application form with all necessary information about themselves including contact information, background, skills, references, consent to check references, etc. (See example at http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/tools/volunteer/review/vol_application.htm).
12. Interview volunteers, preferably face-to-face, to ensure they understand their responsibilities and that they are a good fit with your organization.
13. Have volunteers sign a written volunteer agreement, which states they are not an employee, and includes a code of conduct, risks associated with activity and waivers, and expectations you have of the volunteer, etc.
14. It is acceptable to reimburse volunteers for reasonable out of pocket expenses but if you go beyond that you may risk the “volunteer” claiming that they are “an employee” with all the associated rights.
15. Also be aware of the rules relating to donation of services and specifically that a registered charity cannot issue an official donation receipt for donation of services. For more information, see <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/chrts-gvng/chrts/prtnng/gfts/srvcs-eng.html>.
16. Conduct reference checks on volunteers.
17. If the volunteer will be working with youth or vulnerable people, then consider doing a more vigorous background check, possibly including a criminal records check.
18. Have an orientation program for new volunteers.
19. Train volunteers in their specific duties with an emphasis on risk management.

20. Create a job description for each volunteer position that identifies the title, purpose of the position, scope of position, expectations, reporting relationships, time commitment, length of appointment, qualifications, etc.
21. Check what insurance you have and what insurance you should have. Discuss your requirements with your insurance agent or broker. Insurance can be helpful in covering harm to volunteers and harm caused by volunteers. Some of the policies that may be helpful include commercial general liability, directors and officer liability Professional Liability, Automobile, etc.
22. Respond appropriately to inappropriate or illegal behavior by employees and volunteers. Fire volunteers who seriously misbehave or abuse others. The “bully on the board” or elsewhere can really drain the energy of an organization. It is best to have a policy that deals with how problems will be handled and to apply that policy uniformly. Review the volunteer contract or the code of conduct with your volunteers. In problem cases, consider discussing their shortcomings with them or reassigning them. Termination should be an option when the situation cannot be resolved. Use care and tact when terminating a volunteer.
23. Have plans in place to deal with different contingencies or disasters. Although plans rarely work perfectly, having a plan, training on it and practicing it will make people more likely to understand some of the variables even if they need to adapt the plan on the spur of the moment.
24. Consider the physical aspects of risk. Is the physical space in which your volunteers are working safe? Is adequate security in place? Are dangerous items appropriately stored? Do volunteers have access to appropriate safety equipment?
25. If you use volunteer drivers you should have special policies dealing with them, their insurance, etc. Imagine Canada has some interesting resources at <http://nonprofitrisk.imaginecanada.ca/node/885>.
26. Be prepared to turn away volunteers if you do not require their services or if they do not have the right skills or “fit” with the organization.
27. Do not always assume that because a person is “giving of their time” that they are honest, reliable, or safe people to have as volunteers. People volunteer for as many reasons as there are volunteers and not all the reasons are necessarily going to advance your organization’s goals.
28. With board volunteers have a board manual, a board orientation, and a series of policies covering issues such as confidentiality, conflict of interest etc.

29. Provide guidance and supervision to volunteers. Without these it is unlikely that the volunteer's time will be either useful for the charity or fulfilling for the volunteer.
30. Have policies that clarify the appropriate use of the organization's equipment including vehicles and computers.
31. Risks change and evolve – review your organization and risks every year or two.
32. Governance – properly running your board and organization – is an important part of managing overall risk.

With increasing pressure on non-profits to demonstrate that they operate efficiently, one of the best ways to do more with the resources you have is to make good use of volunteers. It is a win-win-win situation. The volunteer gets the satisfaction of being involved with a good cause and having their time and skills well utilized. The charity gets the benefit of the skills, energy, creativity, and time of the volunteer. And the beneficiaries of the charity benefit because the charity can do more.

Of course, not everything can or should be done by volunteers. If something is important to the charity, then unless you have the volunteers with the correct skill set, time, equipment, and infrastructure to accomplish the task, consider paying for the services. In the long run the charity will be better off. This is true when it comes to specialized service delivery and key ongoing professional services such as bookkeeping and accounting. In these service areas, it is very important to work with people who understand the particular rules and regulations that apply to non-profits and charities. Relying on volunteers who don't have the necessary background can only lead to misery in the long run for both the charity and the volunteer.

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