

Volunteerism

Volunteer leadership and how it affects our professional organization and our field is a topic that needs examination and discussion. Though, before looking at our field I want to analyze volunteerism in a more general sense. Why do people get involved? What are the motivations and outcomes of becoming active in any cause or group?

When I think about volunteering, many examples come to mind. People who are passionate about any cause may become involved in a variety of ways: fundraising, making phone calls, educating the community through disseminating information, even marching in a demonstration. There are many levels of volunteer involvement, some of which are positions of influence and great responsibility while others involve fewer skills and carry less weight in terms of the organization's vibrancy or efficiency. Individuals often get involved not for financial gain, but because they care. There may be other motivations or results that are less overt or quantifiable-- the desire for experience, power, or notoriety. These are not bad in and of themselves, but if they are the only motivators, they may lead to serious problems. Non-profit organizations depend on volunteers to do a lot of their work. This is also true of our professional organizations.

I have been troubled by what I feel is a trend in our profession. All of our committees, boards and councils are comprised of volunteers. It is inevitable that conflicts and problems will arise as these entities do their work. There will be differences of opinion, decisions about standards of practice and policy. Mistakes will be made. When this happens, a common response is that we should not hold these individuals responsible because they are "only volunteers", that they have not been paid, that they have done their best. It would be far better for problems to be openly acknowledged and worked through with whatever help and expertise is available, than for the office holders to be exempt from accountability because they are volunteers.

I assume that people take these positions with the best of intentions to perform the duties as assigned. Organizational issues and

problems are separate from the person who holds the position. The person is not the problem. The problem is the problem. The resistance and the defensiveness that are common excuses do not help us move forward. In fact, the kinds of diplomatic skills that one develops when working through conflict, negotiations and resolutions are exactly the

kinds of rewards that non-profit volunteering can offer and that can advance our field.

How can we change the climate so that affiliate chapters have many people deciding to run for office, where we have a healthy dialogue and choice, instead of the common situation where no one wants to step up, where people are cajoled into accepting a position? How can we foster an atmosphere where we work together for the best interests of our field, knowing that we will come together to solve problems without personal attacks and defensiveness? How can we find the inner gratification that comes with being part of leading an organization or group? How do we grow our skills in decision- making, negotiation and action?

Are my hopes unrealistic? How do you see this issue? Do you have ideas about how to move forward?