



Summer 2010 Facility to Facility

Project Management Checklist for Leading Volunteers

As our economy continues to be in a state of flux and in our role as community facility providers there will continue to be an increasing role for volunteers in accomplishing a task of some sort. Using some of the principles of project management the following list of considerations are somewhat unique to volunteer efforts, hoping that your efforts as a volunteer project manager may be a little easier.

Regardless of the nature of a project, and regardless of its size, scope, or impact, there are three basic things that every project leader must understand. These three truths are no less critical for volunteer projects, but the very nature of a "volunteer" project - one in which the project team members are not doing the work of the project as part of their "job" - creates some unique complexities in each of these areas.

(1) What are you doing and why?

In a volunteer project, the "what" has the potential to be unclear from the very get-go. Volunteers are often recruited to help with a project such as an event, a publication, or a fundraising effort, without an exact understanding of what needs to be done. And many times, project tasks are assigned to willing volunteers based on who is willing and available, regardless of whether they have any particular experience, knowledge, or expertise in the area in which they've been asked to help. A project leader, in the cases of volunteer efforts, has to ferret out the big picture, but very often has to help define the detailed activities that will be completed as well. Additionally, team members often rotate on and off of volunteer projects, so both the high level and the detailed "what" need to be easily communicated and updated as the project progresses.

When leading a volunteer effort, make sure you've taken time to think through just some of these kinds of questions to help with the "what":

- Who is sponsoring or authorizing this project, and what is their role within the organization and on this project?
- What exactly does the sponsor expect this project to accomplish, and how do they define success?
- Has a similar project been conducted in the past that I could use to help understand and communicate the scope of the project at a high level?

When leading a volunteer effort, make sure you've taken time to think through these particular questions to help with the "why":

- How does this project's success impact the organization?
- What tools can I use to communicate the benefits of this project to the team regularly, to keep the vision, purpose, and value of the project in front of the volunteers and potentially help me recruit new volunteers when needed?

- What motivates my volunteers as individuals? How can I tap in to their interests and intrinsic motivators to maximize the value they bring to the project effort?
- What am I doing to express appreciation to volunteers, as they join the project, as they help complete the work, and as they roll off the project?

2) How are you going to get it done?

As with any project, the "how" involves things like the detailed schedule, time line, discrete activities or tasks, the budget, the resources, and the people that will deliver the project results. Volunteer projects often include some unique challenges with regard to the "how." Budgets are often limited, and some things you might take for granted for a work related project may simply not be available. Getting people together is tough, and virtual meetings and email are more prevalent than face-to-face or even phone discussions. Additionally people may have very different impressions regarding when project activities should occur (in my personal experience, I've found that the people who work the most smoothly together are those who "panic" at the same basic time frames ... a person who is comfortable with the work that gets done in the very last minute is bound to have a rockier time relating a person who likes every 't' crossed months in advance.)

(3) What's standing in your way? (And what are you doing about it?)

Obstacles and hurdles will come - for any project. Many of them can be predicted or anticipated with pretty good certainty, others are less obvious. Effective project leadership requires identifying possible risks and taking appropriate responses taking action to avoid them or planning how to handle them when they materialize. The same holds true for volunteer project leadership. Here are just some possible risks to consider:

- Have I carved off enough time on my own plate to manage this project effectively?
- Have I built enough time into the project plan? Many tasks will take longer (more elapsed time) to accomplish than we think.
- Have I assigned reasonable tasks to individuals? People will spend less time (less actual effort) accomplishing a task than we would like.
- Do I know how to accomplish more with less, or where to go when I need more?
- How will I communicate the project status and activities to the people who need to know?

Not every possible scenario or situation is covered here, but the attempt was to capture those most frequent when leading volunteer efforts. In general, a little extra, focused, planning can go a long way to helping manage the project effectively. And being aware of some of the common challenges of volunteer projects can contribute to more effective planning.