STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

What Works

Leaders Without a Paycheck

New York Cares uses volunteers to recruit and retain other volunteers

By Victor Wishna

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Summer 2003

STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, **www.ssireview.com**

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Leaders Without a Paycheck

New York Cares uses volunteers to recruit and retain other volunteers *by Victor Wishna*

It was all planned ahead of time. The volunteers were supposed to meet at a New York City subway station and then walk over to the animal shelter. Once there, the shelter would pair each animal lover with a dog to walk, giving the cooped-up mutts a much-needed opportunity to get out, stretch their legs, and strain a bit at the leash.

And it probably would have happened exactly as planned, except for one problem: When the volunteers arrived at the subway, their team leader – also a volunteer – was nowhere in sight. The volunteers, who didn't know where to go, eventually gave up and went home.

The incident illustrates the risks associated with using volunteers to supervise other volunteers – a hallmark of the highly successful volunteer placement agency New York Cares. In this case, New York Cares swung into action, taking the volunteer "team leader" off of the dog-walking project, and replacing her with another volunteer who had already completed his training, and was waiting in the wings for the opportunity to help. Indeed, while using team leaders comes with its own set of challenges, the strategy has been one of the keys to the organization's success.

New York Cares volunteers know they can turn to team leaders with questions, complaints, and problems. Team leaders understand the importance of camaraderie.

"It's definitely a balancing act," says Jessica Shevitz, leadership development manager, who recruits and trains team leaders.

Team leaders are at the heart of how New York Cares was able to assign some 54,000 volunteers to work at 650 social service agencies, schools, homeless shelters, and other nonprofit organizations, providing more than 210,000 service hours last year. Founded in 1987 by a group of young professionals frustrated that there were few volunteer opportunities for people with demanding work schedules, New York Cares provides a wide range of projects in the morning, evening, or over the weekend; some projects last only a day, while others run the course of a school year. Some team leaders oversee teams of four volunteers, while others supervise teams of up to 30. New York Cares selects the team leaders from those who have volunteered. Program managers work individually with the 350 volunteers who participate as team leaders every month, helping them troubleshoot.

Perhaps the most obvious benefit of using volunteer supervisors is that many organizations that need volunteers don't have anyone to oversee them. "If we were to try to have a paid staff member at every one of our projects, we simply couldn't exist," says Jeanette Gisbert, director of volunteer relations. "With volunteers who are trained to do what professionals would do, we are able to help so many more needy clients."

Team leaders help structure projects, run orientations, pair volunteers with specific tasks, and schedule. They also recruit volunteers and in some cases, encourage them to step into team leader roles. But one of the greatest strategic advantages is psychological: As volunteers themselves, they are empathetic peers, and they work harder to address what

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NEW YORK CARES

Shevitz called "that cast aside feeling" that some volunteers have.

"Sometimes, paid staff, can be guilty of treating the volunteers like ... volunteers," says Norah Peters-Davis, a sociologist at Arcadia University in Pennsylvania who has studied volunteerism. "They don't treat them like professionals, like peers."

Paid staff for instance, may not give volunteers the kind of feedback on their performance and positive reinforcement that they ordinarily give to fellow staff members.

"But if you've got a volunteer managing volunteers," Peters-Davis added, "then they really understand what it's like to give up time without being paid, the complications of that, and that it takes a different kind of commitment."

Shevitz herself provides a good example of this. Before joining the New York Cares staff full time, she served as a volunteer team leader at the Door, a New York City nonprofit that helps primarily black and Hispanic youth with career counseling, training, and job placement. In addition to conducting mock job interviews with the students, Shevitz supervised three others who volunteered with her. After one recent session, a volunteer e-mailed Shevitz, concerned that she had not done a good job. Shevitz immediately replied, reassuring the volunteer that she had done excellent and important work, and asking her to show up for the next session.

"Sometimes volunteers don't feel the connection they thought they'd feel," explains Shevitz. "If someone calls them the next day and says, 'I'm still thinking about the good job you did the night before,' it helps with retention."

Team leaders are often more willing to personally shepherd volunteers through situations that are outside their comfort zones. For instance, team leaders might accompany nervous volunteers on the subway en route to a South Bronx homeless shelter, or sit with new volunteers struggling to connect with ailing nursing home residents.

As volunteers, team leaders understand the importance of working to build camaraderie. They get hands-on advice on how to do this at quarterly events and seminars covering everything from "conflict resolution" to "volunteer management, recruitment, team building, and retention." At a recent team leader workshop, Shevitz presented tips on how to motivate volunteers, which included using the word "team" in introductory e-mails and thank you notes; introducing the project partner to the volunteers; giving volunteers additional information about community demographics and needs; and planning team activities outside the project – such as group picnics or mid-week lunches or dinners.

The biggest drawback to using volunteer leaders, Shevitz says, is that sometimes – as in the case of the dog-walking project – they are not reliable. Each of the 350 monthly projects has a team leader. And while team leaders are all prescreened and matched with projects that interest them, there are inevitably a few that are poorly organized or just not good fits.

Last October, for instance, the director of a soup kitchen began complaining about a team leader appointed by New York Cares. According to Shevitz, the team leader was a stickler for rules in a setting that required flexibility and compromise. At one point, the team leader got upset because there weren't enough dish towels; another time, he panicked when eight volunteers showed up instead of 10. In March, after several complaints from the director about the leader's inability to take direction, New York Cares finally pulled him from the project.

"Sometimes, paid staff can be guilty of treating the volunteers like volunteers. They don't treat them like professionals."

New York Cares tries to avoid such problems, first through screening on the front end. Only people with at least three months of New York Cares volunteer service are eligible to become team leaders – ensuring that all supervisors have a track record with the organization. Training is also a key; after an initial interview, volunteer leaders take part in a two-and-a-half hour training session, focusing on their responsibilities before, during, and after a project. They learn how to ensure projects have structure, how to conduct an orientation, how to pair volunteers with specific tasks, and how to set a workable schedule. They are also taught how to run sessions for feedback and discussion of progress.

Despite the challenges, New York Cares believes they have hit on a model that works. The approach has already been replicated in 28 cities across the country, from Hands On Atlanta to San Diego Cares.

"There are times when an organization says, 'If you want the job done, you've got to pay someone to do it right,'" Executive Director Ariel Zwang says. "But [I believe] nonprofits should think hard about the responsible roles that volunteers can fill." □