Approved for release by NSA on 12-01-2011, Transparency Case# 63852

Volunteering: A Fresh Approach

STATUTORILY EXEMPT

Editor's Note: This paper was awarded Third Prize in the 1988 Human Resources Management Association Literary Contest.

This paper explores an unusual way to develop, prepare, and complete an NSA office annual report. A chronology of the project, an interview with the manager who spearheaded it, volunteers' answers to questions I sent to them after the report was completed, and my conclusions are presented.

I wrote about volunteering because (1) it is an unusual way to accomplish the task, (2) the outcome was successful, (3) this information may prove useful to someone who may be assigned to prepare a future annual report or similar project, and (4) someone who is considering offering to volunteer may be inspired to do so.

The benefits and risks of such a venture to both the manager and the volunteers are discussed. Conclusions about this activity are presented as two sets of questions – one for project managers and one for future volunteers to ask themselves before undertaking an activity of this sort.

INTRODUCTION

NSA annual reports vary greatly. Some offices prepare huge pieces of documentation, covering every statistic and detail of the previous year's activities. Other offices choose a more informal, narrative approach to describe their previous activities. Some offices prefer a mix of the two. Staffs are usually requested to prepare these reports, but in this particular instance, the staff person required to do the report sought volunteer, rather than appointed help.

If you are a manager who needs a fresh point of view on a document or report, consider using volunteer help. Or, if you are a person who can enhance a project and would like to try something a bit different from your normal workload, consider volunteering if you ever have the chance. The two of you can help each other considerably, have fun during the process, and generate a better product.

Last year, for the first time in my 14 years with the government, I was given the opportunity to volunteer. I responded to that opportunity and feel that documenting that experience might benefit others who may wish to consider this approach in the future.

CHRONOLOGY

My volunteering experience unfolded as follows:

8 July 1987

The following message appeared on my computer terminal screen:

"M... has given me a task to put together an Annual Report. The traditional way to do this is to get the staffs together, give them

pieces of the report to write, gather up the input, etc., etc., etc. What I would like to do is to gather up a group of people who are interested in putting something together that everyone would want to read. I think I would like it to tell people who we are, what we are, what we do, how well we do it, what our future plans are, etc., etc., but I want the people to write it.... Obviously some data must come from the staffs, so their inputs will be made available. I think it should include our people achievements, our business achievements, our new endeavors, those tasks we have completed, some demographics to give us a picture, and include some goals that our seniors need to take on as objectives to make our organization a better place to live, to work, and achieve personal goals while we're achieving our organizational goals. I think it should include opinions from our seniors, our middle managers, and the younger folks like you and me. My challenge to you is to give some of your time and creativity to this tasking by volunteering to be part of a team effort to put out this report. It can't interfere with your job or your supervisors will be all over me. You can also see that I have some ideas of my own, but I'm flexible. I need people who can write, people who can interview, people who can type, people who can use computers to make displays, people who can market things, people who can collect data, people who can do layouts.... If you're interested, give me a reply."

10 July 1987

I replied to the message,

"I'd be happy to take what the other folks write and make it readable and interesting. I have experience with informal, memo-type stuff from other reports I've done. I think your approach is great and I hope people volunteer."

21 July 1987

The following on-line message appeared from the project manager:

"Thank you for responding to my call for help. Can we get together on 3 August at 1300 to talk strategy?"

Thirteen people volunteered and met with the project leader on 3 August. We began discussing our ideas on format and content and sources of reference information. We agreed that the report should include photographs of people, some statistics, some narration on 1987 accomplishments, and some quotes from people from each division. The volunteers enriched the manager's skeletal ideas.

At this stage, one volunteer was going to do all the writing. However, that changed.

4 September 1987

Our leader wrote, on-line:

"Thanks for the comments on what I sent you. Seems to be the consensus that each office writes up its own - especially since there doesn't seem to be a set of organizational objectives...please use the memo as a guide and write up something that can be included

in the report. Please run it by your office chiefs before you give it to me. You may need help re data from the staffs so I told the Chiefs that that would happen.... Let's meet in M.'s office on Thursday, 17 Sept. at 0900. I'll leave it up to you to get together by office and spread the work. For those of you who are the only office rep. - thanks. Some office staffs put together status reports that might be directly usable for what we're looking for so talk to them before you start working on something by yourself."

Note that the structure of responsibilities was changing. Now each volunteer would write up his office's accomplishments rather than one person writing the whole report. The volunteers were encouraged to use their resources and delegate tasks. The manager also used proper administrative channels and provided some data and assistance to the group.

We went to work. A draft of the document was available in late October and the completed 1987 Annual Report was published in November.

3 December 1987

Praise came, on-line:

"I want to share with you the kudos, compliments, and praises that the Chief has been getting in response to the distribution of the Annual Report. His boss asked that copies be sent to all of the deputies as well as the Director's office and M. has gotten back many kudos from these people. Please take time to pat yourself on the back (smile while you're doing it). Thanks."

PROJECT MANAGER INTERVIEW

After the report had been published, I interviewed the program manager to query his thoughts about the volunteering process. When I interviewed him I asked why he had requested volunteers.

He answered, "It just sort of came to me. I knew what I didn't want. I was afraid of getting a bunch of bureaucratic people. I think volunteers are younger, and I wanted a mix of ideas. I could have tasked people, but I know what you get out of that. I think you get a truer picture from volunteers, who seem to be freer with their opinions and who don't know each other. In a volunteer group you have more commitment right away. You get things much faster because of this commitment."

The program manager also said that his boss "made him nervous but never asked him what he was doing." He made the point that if someone plans to undertake a project with volunteer assistance, he or she needs a supervisor who isn't too bureaucratic and allows it to happen.

I asked him why he felt that people volunteered to help him. "Because they have ideas to express to someone outside their immediate organizational chain," he replied.

The answers I received from a questionnaire I sent to the volunteers substantiate his thinking. Nine of the thirteen volunteers responded. Selected answers and my comments follow.

VOLUNTEER QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Why did you volunteer?

Reasons included ". . . because it would give me a sense of contribution," "I thought I could be helpful and wanted to try something different," ". . . because it sounded like a task that a person could really sink his teeth into . . . ," ". . . a new experience . . . ," ". . . to serve the needs of my particular organization," ". . . to gain experience," ". . . to contribute to a good product," ". . . I felt I could make some positive contributions."

I think the people who responded as they did in the above paragraph met their expectations. Everyone who volunteered had a sense of contributing, because everyone made a positive contribution. I'm certain that some of the volunteers had never interviewed before, had never written paragraphs about their entire office's mission, had never selected shots for a photographer to take, and had never discussed report format. Various writing styles were integral to the report in which every office in the organization received "equal billing."

Have you ever been asked to volunteer on a project like this before? If so, how many times?

There was a real mix of volunteering experience here. Five of the people had never been asked to volunteer before. Four people had volunteered previously. One of the people who answered "yes" said she had volunteered many times. Another person on the committee who wasn't exactly a *volunteer* was willing to do more than was required of her. Her contributions could have been given more attention.

Did you receive satisfaction from volunteering? Explain.

The report had not been distributed when I queried these people. Some were reserving judgment until they saw the final product. Others were satisfied simply with the process and their involvement in it.

"Absolutely. My satisfaction is derived from contributing, in a small way, to the successful outcome of the report. I'm being somewhat presumptuous in assuming that the report will be well received by most people. I do feel that the objectives were achieved and that the end product is something that is both informative and interesting to read." "More satisfaction is achieved when there is a tangible end product . . . ." "I truly believe that volunteers *always* get more satisfaction from choosing to help rather than being told they *must* help." "Yes. However, I would like to see the results . . . ." "The work itself was thoroughly enjoyable. Support and cooperation received . . . unbelievable." "I also think my own talents were put to use in this project . . . ." "Yes, because I think the report was very well done."

The volunteers were proud of what they did. They received praise from their various offices when their coworkers read the report. A report such as this lends itself to the volunteering process. People didn't get tied up with it for a long period of time.

Would you volunteer again for a project like this?

All nine of the people who answered my questionnaire replied "yes." One person expressed some hesitation if she were very busy, but said if she were asked personally she probably would volunteer anyway. Another person cited, "I believe the team effort put forth by all of the participants made this not only an interesting but an enjoyable experience."

This seemed to be a very positive experience for most of the volunteers. I heard no complaining at the meetings. Everyone seemed to feel a sense of contribution.

What benefits, if any, did you gain from this experience?

Responses included, "I gained an insight into how much pride everyone has in our organization and in their particular jobs." "The benefits were psychological, providing . . . a sense of contribution, a product that you could touch and feel and one that would be noticed." "Exposure, self-satisfaction, patience, and perseverance."

Two of the people responding did not answer this question. I found it interesting that the benefits people felt they had received varied. Some of the benefits related more to people, others related more to the mission and the product.

Why do you suppose volunteers were called for?

Answers: "Being assigned an *extra* task usually causes resentment due to the time and energy needed to fulfill it. Being able to volunteer means you are willing to make the time and put forth the extra effort. Management realizes you don't get your best work from people who feel put upon, so they asked for volunteers." "The people *tasked* to do it didn't have the time or the resources (both people and available info) to complete the task in the time allotted. Or . . . management wanted a broader base of information to draw from." "Volunteers typically exert more *energy* than draftees." "You can't expect people to take time from their jobs and do something that's not required of them. People volunteer to get involved. Some or most people are too busy with their own jobs to do a little extra." "Because it was a type of action that cut across our organizational structure and did not fit neatly into our normal administrative procedures. By using volunteers, people who wanted to do it were involved, rather than staffers tasked to complete an action." "To ensure that participants are motivated by an interest in doing the job well, rather than simply *punching a ticket* or keeping a boss off their backs." "Cooperation is better. Persons volunteering are usually experts in their respective areas. Volunteers' normal workloads are fairly flexible." "I think they wanted different types of people from different job areas in the hopes of getting different ideas and opinions."

Several useful tips for the manager who is thinking about using volunteers appear here – volunteers assure more outside knowledge, a larger perspective, a better job.

What are the risks involved in volunteering?

People noted, "Your work load is increased, more of your time is committed, and your supervisor may not realize how much of the above is involved . . . ." "Possibly being seen by others as not having enough work to do. Possibly irritating supervisors who may want the individuals working on office responsibilities instead. Also possible that the volunteered effort can consume more time than expected and compete with normal responsibilities." "If the project fails, or isn't completed, etc., the negative recognition or stigma that goes along with a job poorly done doesn't do much for your professional reputation . . . ." "Volunteers eventually become draftees. If the task is group oriented, there's always the risk of group incompatibility." "The minority of volunteers do the majority of work . . . ." Two people felt that no risks were involved.

CONCLUSIONS

The answers to the questionnaire and my observations from participating in this activity led to two sets of questions – one for the person who plans to ask for volunteer help and one for the future volunteer.

If you are considering using volunteer help, ask yourself these questions before you decide.

1. Will my boss be amenable to this idea and let this happen?
2. Will this project benefit from volunteer expertise and viewpoint?
3. Is the project large enough for a volunteer group?
4. How will I distribute the work among the group?
5. Will this project merit group pride?

If you are considering volunteering, ask yourself these questions.

1. Can I give quality and enthusiasm to this project?
2. Do I have the time to give?
3. Will my supervisor take a dim view of this action?
4. Does this seem like a worthwhile project for my attentions?
5. How long will I be involved?
6. Is this project being steered well?

May both of you – and your reports – benefit from a fresh approach – volunteering!