Volunteer Risk Management in Action: Identify the Risks

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Are There Any Risks Here?

The first step in the risk management model is to identify risks in whatever aspect of the volunteer program is being reviewed. The aim at this stage is to create a "master list" of risks.

Consider the component of the volunteer program or service under examination and try to think of what could go wrong. Ask the question "*Are there any risks here?*"

If the answer is "*no*" (very rare), many of the remaining risk management steps may be skipped. But do keep in mind that even if there are no apparent risks detectable at present, things can change and risks can surface in the same setting at some future date. Hence, it is wise for the committee to conduct a periodic review. Setting a specific date for the review will ensure all aspects of volunteer involvement are scanned from time to time for emerging risks.

If the answer to the "*Are there any risks here?*" question is "*yes,*" the risks are recorded on a master list. Big or small, probable or remote, if a risk can be envisioned it should be added to the list. No editing takes place at this stage. The master list will be sorted and subdivided in the next step. The list need not take any special format at this point in the process – it is simply a list.

Remember: Since an organization cannot manage the risks it does not identify, risk identification is an extremely important step in the risk management process, and the risk management team must push into all corners of the volunteer service to identify risks. Here are some tips to help with risk identification:

- **Brainstorming** is a free flowing, unedited, uncensored exercise of idea generation.
- **Foresight** is about anticipation, about thoughtful and prudent regard for the future, and about being open to what *might* be.
- **Fantasy** requires imagination, creative visioning, and a willingness to consider the improbable.

All of these elements contribute to effective risk identification.

Go Looking for Risks

Of all agency operations and functions where volunteers and community service members are involved, ask the question, "What possible dangers, potentially risky situations, or might occur because of, or related to, volunteer involvement here?" Solicit input from a range of sources about what risks might exist related to volunteer involvement. Here are some suggestions about who the risk management team might consult as it begins to search out risks:

- Talk to volunteers themselves since there is no one who knows more about risks in the job than the person actually doing the work. Volunteers and community service members may very well have noticed risk issues and not wanted to bother anyone by reporting them.
- Consult with supervisors of volunteers, other staff in the program area, and even clients – any of these people may turn out to be surprisingly good sources of information about risks.
- Canvass administrative and support staff as well; they often notice things – events, behaviours, attitudes – that other staff miss.
- Consider asking for input from persons who are completely unfamiliar with the operation of your organization and/or its volunteer program since they will notice different things than people who are in the organization every day, and the "more heads are better than one" rule definitely applies here.

Following are other suggestions to help in the identification of risks:

- Review both current and past operations and occurrences, as well as existing policies and procedures, and personnel and operating manuals. At minimum, make certain that all policies and other written materials pertaining to volunteer involvement are in compliance with any pertinent legislation, regulations, codes, licensing agreements, and so on. For example, check the applicability of human rights and other anti-discrimination legislation to volunteers in your province or state. Find out what grounds are covered and make certain that your volunteer application form, your reference checking form, and the questions you ask in your screening interview(s) are in compliance with relevant legislation.
- Canvass current volunteers. Ask them about dangerous or uncertain situations they have experienced in their volunteer duties.
- Systematically examine each aspect of service delivery and all volunteer position descriptions and consider what might go wrong in the various pieces and steps.
- Members of the board of directors are volunteers as well. Assess risks related to their recruitment, screening, training, performance, and discipline and dismissal. Non-attendance, conflicts of interest, breaches of confidentiality, and a range of other issues related to volunteers in governance can pose significant risk and liability exposures for nonprofit organizations.
- Examine safety records, workers' compensation claims, and serious incident occurrence reports. They are good sources of past dangers that may need

additional attention. A sample "Serious Occurrence Report" form is located in Appendix B. Its implementation will help organizations to both deal with serious incidents as they occur as well as track serious incidents over time. Records such as these can be invaluable to risk management teams that are seeking patterns in past events as indicators of current risk and liability exposure.

More Tips:

- It is recommended that organizations consider implementing a "near miss" procedure. This is a mechanism by which staff and volunteers are required to report any potentially serious events that nearly materialized. The "near miss" system creates an opportunity for the risk management team to implement preventive measures before the next "near miss" becomes an actual tragedy. This is where the development of a positive organizational culture about risk identification pays off: personnel are empowered to report events before they materialize into something much more serious.
- In some cases, the team may need to go beyond the details of the incident report and talk directly to the people who have firsthand knowledge of the circumstances to find out why an incident happened and what might be done to prevent a reoccurrence. The team might find [a] sample "Risk Tracking Form" useful in keeping track of the details of incidents that turn up in their investigation.
- Look for risks at the worksite. Go to where clients receive their services, go to all of the sites, projects, floors, clinics, wards, routes, stations, and braches where volunteers and community service workers perform their dutites. Walk the site(s), look around, think about risks related to the site itself and the state of working conditions. Equipment should be examined, buildings inspected, and staff-client and collegial relationships observed.

Combined Risks

Risks can increase exponentially when combined with other risks. The obvious example from everyday life is drinking and driving. The same principle applies in volunteer and community service programs when a more or less risky activity or situation is exacerbated by the presence of one or more additional risk factors. Consider the following illustrations:

- volunteers driving… long distances… at night… and/or in bad weather
- volunteers using a chain saw… from the raised bucket of a tractor
- volunteers handling large sums of cash… at an outdoor fundraising event… with no security personnel on-site
- volunteers visiting clients in clients' homes… volunteers go out alone… into homes where illegal drugs are used or where family violence is a regular occurrence

- individuals for whom the characterization "reckless daredevils" is not far-fetched tend to be the kinds of volunteers who sign up to lead the annual bird migration inventory along the escarpment edge
- the participants in the adventure activities led by your volunteers tend to be very susceptible to peer pressure and dares
- the political climate worsens around the volunteers working in overseas relief efforts and flights out of the country are getting more difficult to arrange

The Factor of "Human Error"

The risk management team must keep in mind that people make mistakes:

> *"Even at their best, human beings make mistakes. They can fail to see the issues or not appreciate the consequences. Plain bad judgment or failure to communicate well – or not at all – is at the bottom of a myriad of problems that confront [organizations]."* [1]

Forecasting and brainstorming ideal scenarios where everyone does everything right is not the right approach in risk management. Fantasize about the setting when it is full of smoke and people are trying to locate the exits; consider how the situation is made worse because half of the participants at the fundraising event cannot get down the stairs, the elevator service was automatically terminated when the fire alarm was initiated, and everyone is beginning to panic; a patient has fallen out of her wheelchair and the volunteer is trying to pick her up.

A familiar instance of human error is the overworked employee who asks a volunteer to do something outside of his or her position description on the spur of the moment, not realizing that the volunteer has not been screened or trained to perform the extra duties. The volunteer, wanting to be helpful, attempts to comply.

While we do not want to be ruled by "worst case scenarios" the process of risk identification forces us to at least consider what worst case scenarios the organization and its volunteers might face.

Note: This post is provided as information only. Readers are cautioned not to act on information provided without seeking specific legal advice with respect to their unique circumstances.

[1] Walton, Jane. 2002. "Risk Management – Are People Your Weakest Link?" Standards Australia International Ltd. Retrieved January 30, 2002 from www.riskmanagement.com.au