



# Supervising SHIP Volunteers: *The Distance Problem*

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One of the characteristics of the SHIP volunteer system is that volunteers work in the community, often on their own, and almost always without daily face-to-face contact with either their supervisor or even with other volunteers.

This may not seem highly significant to you, but reflect for a moment on how different this is from what most people are accustomed to in a work situation. This physical distance can, if you are not very careful, create a sense of separation in outlook between the volunteers and those who supervise them. This separation, while small in appearance, is quite significant in practice. Anyone who has ever worked in a separated environment realizes the increased potential for frustration, inefficiency, dissatisfaction, and occasionally even outright revolt.

So, here are some thoughts for dealing with this separated management system and making the best out of what is an always difficult situation.

1. The increased complexity of managing volunteers at a distance is based upon logistical and interpersonal grounds. The logistics of dealing with individuals in locations apart from our own are quite formidable. People are harder to locate when you need them; communication more often gets delayed, distorted, or goes awry; people do not have access to the same resources, equipment, and support. People in isolated or separated settings will naturally have more communication problems than those who gather in one spot. The smart supervisor will simply plan for this difficulty and adjust to compensate. Generally speaking, processes will take longer, will include a greater chance of misunderstanding, and will need to be managed more carefully.
2. Interpersonal problems also abound. We are accustomed to dealing with people on a face-to-face basis, so communication at distance always seems unnatural and works less perfectly. It is hard for a supervisor to trust what they can not see, so there is always doubt that volunteers are doing what they are supposed to. At the same time, volunteers find it difficult to take orders from a person who isn't on the front line to experience conditions, so it is hard to give proper credence to their directives. Volunteers may also often feel left "out of the loop" in decisions that affect their work.
3. All long-distance supervisory relationships work better when there is a sense of bonding or connecting between headquarters and field staff. Volunteers work better when they feel closely connected to the organization when part of their identity is wrapped up in being a member of the organization. We work more effectively with those with whom we have a sense of shared experience and with those with whom we think we have a personal relationship. In the usual work situation, this feeling will often develop naturally over time; it will only happen with long-distance volunteers if you continually strive to create it.



4. Strive to achieve a sense of personal contact between supervisors and the field. People are more likely to communicate with those that they know and more likely to forgive errors in communication. They are also more likely to feel comfortable being supervised by those with whom they have some personal knowledge rather than some “faceless” being from above. We are more likely to trust and work well with people when we have a sense of “who they are” and think they know us and value us enough to look after our interests as they do their own.
5. Connecting is strengthened through adding the personal touch to communication. Being interested and concerned in another’s personal life, remembering birthdays and anniversaries, or remembering and asking about family members, are ways to show a separated volunteer that you value them as a person, not just as a worker.
6. The kind of person who works best in a long-distance relationship is a self-starter. This is a volunteer who is internally motivated rather than externally goaded, who is proactive rather than reactive, and who makes decisions instead of waiting for instructions. This volunteer takes the initiative and doesn’t need to rely on others to give him orders. There are two problems with such a volunteer. First, they are hard to find. The vast majority of people in our society are reactive rather than proactive. Second, the very traits that make them desirable can also make them a supervisor’s worst nightmare. These volunteers are comfortable with the freedom and responsibility but may begin to behave as though this implies complete autonomy over their work activity. They may give higher priority to their own goals than the goals of the program. They may commit their considerable energies in the name of the program to tasks that bring the program disrepute.
7. Allocate your time and attention according to your experience with each volunteer. Direct more attention to those who have shown the need for monitoring or re-direction, but do not ignore the good performers simply because they are not causing problems. If you ignore them, they may eventually cause problems just to get your attention. New volunteers will commonly need more attention and communication as they are finding their way in the system.

It is important to note that these types of difficulties are commonly caused by the structure of the more complex system, and not necessarily by the personalities involved. We are simply more accustomed to working nearby. We find it “natural” to adopt behavior based on working next to our co-workers, and we forget that working with those who are not just “down the hall” can be a quite different managerial situation than what we are used to. In many cases, the structure creates problems despite the best intentions of those involved. In some cases, those same best intentions can worsen the situation, since some “good” management techniques that work in the normal office setting can have exactly the opposite impact in a long distance management situation.

A supervisor in a long-distance system must work hard to reduce this distance, and to establish a working environment that offers a sense of bonding and teamwork, better communication, and a feeling of control for all parties involved in a long distance work relationship. 