

## Volunteers and the Little Red Hen Syndrome By Douglas M. Kleine, CAE, PCAM

We all remember the story of the little red hen. She broadcast an appeal for volunteers, whined when no one responded, and punished everyone for not helping. It was not a successful technique in the barnyard, and it is not a successful technique in co-ops.

Active committees aid in co-op governance in many ways. Their breadth of representation helps in seeing all sides to an issue or opportunity. Their ability to attract knowledge area specialists helps in researching maintenance and repair problems. And the act of participation itself increases civic pride and attachment.

Committees can also go wrong and are often cursed by volunteer leaders and professional advisors and managers. Analysis of committees gone wrong often leads back to early decisions on committee appointments or the inability to find new blood.

New blood, however, needs to be typed and screened. It would be disastrous to infuse type A blood into a type B entity. Likewise, staffing up committees is not about cruising a day labor street corner. Yet many co-ops limit their recruitment to a single flyer or not in the newsletter that may say little as to the job, the skills, and the tools.

Successful committee recruiting requires

- A written committee description that covers scope, authority, and internal processes about how things get done
- Information about the volunteer's knowledge, skills, and abilities as they relate to the committee's work
- Clear communication on the time required and whether it is an ongoing job or one time activity
- A response form or easy reply mechanism to get expressions of interest
- Prompt follow up to all, and if decisions are not immediate, a schedule of when appointments will be confirmed.

Instead of the little red hen's punishment, volunteers need nourishment, encouragement, and reward. There is no such thing as a paid volunteer, however, and when discussion among volunteers, including at the board level, turns to monetary reward, that is a sign that the reward system has failed. The currency for volunteers is not cash, it is recognition, and there can never be too much recognition. And recognition is a two way street. Some volunteers like the public ceremony, some like the plaque for their wall, but some like seeing the result (a new lobby, a healthy reserve fund, a successful vote on bylaw amendments, a new member's handbook) and the knowledge that they had something to do with it.

Volunteer management is an ongoing process, requiring patience, diligence, tolerance, coaching, and numerous other leadership skills. The reward for leaders is much the same as the reward for volunteers--seeing something get done that you could not do alone. And isn't that the underpinning of co-ops in the first place—providing services and amenities that are possible only with the clustering of homes and sharing responsibility?