

Making the Most of Your Volunteers: It's as Easy as ABC...

Anticipate your needs well in advance. The people who are inclined to say “yes” to you are also saying “yes” to others. Consider your volunteer needs early. When is help required? What tasks are involved? What skills and talents are needed? Plan in advance and communicate the tasks and timeframes with as much notice as possible.... and see your “yeses” grow.

Be appreciative of whatever a volunteer is willing to give. Volunteers have their own agendas. They have busy lives, talents they want to contribute, real jobs, long hours, other commitments, and families to raise. Be open to personalizing volunteer opportunities. Offer chances to help on a one time, once-a-month or take-home basis. Find ways to use the time and talents others offer on their terms.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. In real estate, it's location; in volunteer management, it's communication. Keep volunteers “in the know” about events, results, successes and the specifics associated with their work. While it's seductive to use email as an easy way to share a consistent message to the masses, also be aware of the power of the person touch. However you choose to do it, just stay in touch.

Develop your volunteers. Some volunteers get involved to expand their knowledge and learn new skills. Even if that's not their motivation, personal development is a nice side benefit of volunteering. Offer workshops or training on relevant topics. Invite key volunteers to attend conferences. If budget is a concern (and isn't it always?), simply forward articles of interest.

Engage hearts as well as minds. Capturing a volunteer's mind is only half the battle. When you capture their hearts as well, you forge a strong emotional bond between the volunteer and the cause. Build a sense of passion by doing such things as: connecting volunteers directly with those who benefit from their

efforts so they can see first-hand the impact of their work; encouraging people to share their ideas and allowing volunteers with ideas to run with them.

Feed them. One of the best ways to a volunteer's heart is through his/her stomach. Breaking bread (or bagels, doughnuts, etc.) is a time-honored means for creating a human connection with others. It's a low-cost courtesy that goes a long way toward communicating value as well as motivating and encouraging involvement.

Give meaningful feedback. Information about how they are performing, helps volunteers calibrate their efforts, improve their results, and feel connected to the organization. While it is tempting to let performance problems slide because "after all, they are just volunteers," this does a disservice to the individual and the cause. When there is a problem, speak with the individual privately and as immediately as possible. Share the specific behavior or issue you have observed and outline the consequences to the individual, others and the organization. Offer alternatives that will be more effective.

Have fun. Given the importance of the cause, it's easy to start taking ourselves too seriously. Finding ways to enjoy each other's company and laugh together helps to combat the stress that comes with the intensity of many volunteer efforts while building stronger bonds between and among group members.

Invite people to participate. "Mass market" appeals generally do not generate the results that a personal invitation will. Frame your invitation based upon the individual, his/her experience, and how you anticipate the person contributing to the cause.

Just do it... **NOT!** The quickest way to extinguish the flames of volunteer commitment is to jump in and do others' jobs for them. When things aren't getting done – or aren't getting done properly – it's tempting to just take over. While doing so may be the post expedient way to accomplish a task in the short run, it has damaging long-term effects. People feel robbed of empowerment and trust. Rather than learning how to perform better, they come to rely on you to do their work for them.

Kee**p your commitments.** Volunteers deserve to expect that they can count on you to do what you say. Follow up on action items. Arrive on time. Call when you say you will. Making good on your word demonstrates respect and value.

Let **others share in the leadership.** Identify and leverage leadership potential early. Allowing others to lead and take responsibility for key tasks or initiatives builds a sense of ownership and commitment. Unless you are in the enviable position of having more volunteers than work (and who is experiencing that?!) this helps to spread the workload, begin the succession planning process, and build long-term success of the organization.

Make **yourself available.** People are willing to volunteer countless hours of their time to your cause. But, the quid pro quo is frequent access to you. Show how much you value others and their contributions by making yourself available. Be visible to volunteers. Respond to emails and voicemails in a timely fashion.

Neutralize **obstacles and politics.** Most of us have enough problems and politics at home and work. We don't seek them out in our volunteer efforts. As a result, minimize these debilitating factors to the greatest extent possible. Energy that is invested in addressing obstacles and politics cannot be invested in your cause. Help your volunteers by identifying and troubleshooting issues proactively. Seek out the resources others need. Identify process and interpersonal issues early and take constructive steps. Squelch rumors and gossip.

Outline **clear expectations.** Most people come to a volunteer opportunity wanting to do a job well. One of the ways we undermine this desire is by failing to provide a clear sense of what the job or task involves. Take the time to really think about the task. Outline specifically what must be done and how it links to the bigger picture of your cause. Detail the steps involved, resources required, milestones and deadlines, and the outcomes or deliverables the volunteer will be responsible for. Setting clear expectations paints a picture of what effective completion of a job or task looks like... and sets your volunteers up for the greatest possible success.

Publicize successes. Don't be afraid to toot your own horn. People want to be involved in something that's exciting and successful. Letting others know what you are doing and what's going well is an effective way of drawing additional volunteers to your cause and energizing those who are already involved.

Quantify their value. According to 2005 Independent Sector research, the estimated value of a volunteer hour is \$18.04. Multiply this by the number of hours volunteered and the magnitude of this resource comes into clear focus.

Recognize their results and effort. According to a Gallup poll of nearly 5 million people, 65% of Americans receive no praise or recognition in the workplace. Volunteer managers are also frequently guilty of overlooking this powerful tool for increasing motivation. Find meaningful ways to recognize individuals who contribute. Some appreciate public praise while others are motivated by a quiet pat on the back. Determine what works best for each person. Then, craft a brief message that focuses specifically on the person's actions, behaviors or results and how they have contributed to the mission or cause. "Thank you" goes a long way.

Share the spotlight. Little is more demoralizing to volunteers than investing their time and talents only to have someone else take all of the credit. Make sure to always acknowledge those who contributed to the effort. Share any glory or acclaim because volunteer managers can accomplish very little without the unwavering support of the volunteers they lead.

Treat volunteers like the treasures they are. Most non-profit organizations would not exist without the commitment and dedication of volunteers. Yet, many volunteers report feeling taken for granted and being treated like fixtures or cogs in a wheel. Balance that sense of treating them like "family" with thinking of volunteers as honored guests... and behaving accordingly.

Understand their motivation. People volunteer for a variety of reasons. Some believe deeply in the cause. Others are looking for affiliation. Still others want to use a talent productively or to develop new skills. Some aspire to

leadership while others want nothing more than an anonymous chance to help. Understanding what motivates each volunteer provides you with a basis for constructing an experience that meets his/her needs, generates enthusiasm and contributes powerfully to your cause.

Value differences. It's easy to unconsciously populate your volunteer effort in your likeness. Without being aware of it, we are frequently drawn to others who are similar to us. Yet, this homogeneity can breed out new ideas, perspectives and approaches. Work diligently to be inclusive. Look beyond the "usual suspects" to include others who may bring a range of differences to your effort.

Write a note. Draw on the art and power of the handwritten note. In our technology-based world, a handwritten note of thanks cuts through the clutter and gets your volunteers' attention. It communicates that they are important and that you care. And, you'd be surprised by how frequently people will keep and look back at these notes... each time reinforcing their connection to you and your cause.

X-ray for unique and hidden talents. Your volunteers are a treasure trove of talents and skills... some of which might not be immediately visible. Get to know people and learn about what's unique to them. What have they done? Where have they worked? Uncover special skills, experiences and talents... and put them to work for your organization.

Yield to the opinions/wisdom of volunteers. According to author, Frederick F. Reichheld, when people "feel like they are throwing pennies down a well and they never hear a splash, they are going to stop throwing the pennies. We have got to show them that we are listening." Listen to your volunteers and find ways to act on the feasible ideas and opinions they share. In the process you'll see more buy-in, greater commitment, and a lot more of those "pennies."

Zero in on what's most important. By maintaining a clear focus on your priorities, you'll always be able to help others understand the vital mission of the organization and find ways to contribute to what is most critical to your success.