

Five Common Missteps in Managing Volunteer Relationships

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At the simplest level, volunteer retention is about making volunteers feel good about their contributions and, therefore, themselves. They want to feel a genuine connection to the organization – to its mission, to the people with whom they work, and to their role in furthering the cause.

What are some of the things we do unintentionally to dilute a volunteer's sense of connectedness?

Not understanding the motivation of volunteers

People volunteer for different reasons. Some want to use and enhance their current skills; some want to develop new skills and have new experiences. Everyone walks in the door with an agenda. We need to use our initial interviews to uncover the agendas. We need to ask:

- Why are they stepping up to volunteer? What are their objectives? How can we help them meet their objectives?
- What paid or volunteer positions have they most enjoyed and why? What ones have they left? What could have been done to make their experience better?
- What do they need to stay involved?

Recruiting and placement has to go beyond consideration for what volunteers can do for us. Their needs are just as important. When we figure out what we can do for them, we're much more likely to attract and keep them.

Making volunteers feel like visitors rather than part of the team

Volunteer management expert Susan Ellis says: "If you treat volunteers as though they are a separate category, they will feel separate from the agency. They are not 'just volunteers'; they are equals." They should be made to feel that they are a vital part of the team.

Encourage staff to learn the volunteers' names. If staff can't be bothered to learn their names, why should volunteers continue to offer their services? Lanyards, name tags, pictures, etc. help, but "genuine connection" calls for making the effort to get to know the people who donate their time. Plan informal gatherings that promote interaction between staff and volunteers where they can share stories and get acquainted.

Also – seek volunteer input when developing strategies and plans for the organization. If you have a "Vision Council" to help set your course, include volunteer representatives.

Not helping volunteers understand how their work makes a difference

Every volunteer position description should provide a statement that connects the volunteer's work to the greater whole. It should also note the expected impact of that work. Effective training and positive feedback reinforce the importance of the volunteer's role.

Brain science research related to young children has proven helpful in volunteer training. When people understand how various risk and stress factors affect the developing brain, it engenders compassion for these vulnerable children. A clear understanding of intervention strategies and how they impact kindergarten readiness provide incentive for rolling up one's sleeves and helping out. Of course, seeing firsthand the baby steps of progress in a child's life is the best connection and reward.

Having low expectations about volunteer commitments & responsibilities

There are all kinds of reasons why organizations are shy when it comes to asking volunteers to make a substantive commitment. Experience may have taught some folks that volunteers aren't sufficiently reliable to entrust them with meaty assignments. Others may feel uncomfortable asking for a significant time commitment when there is little or no financial remuneration. Still others may lack the time, skills, or experience to architect high impact roles.

As Baby Boomers continue to swell the volunteer ranks, the need for truly meaningful, high value volunteer positions will increase. Of course, volunteer coordinators, program directors, and staff will need to hone their interviewing and screening skills to ensure effective matches between organization needs and volunteer interests/capabilities. But with that process well in hand, the organization can:

- Design positions that exercise creativity and encourage innovation in programs, projects, and processes, where appropriate;
- Give volunteers authority to make decisions about how to carry out their goals and let them contribute to the decision making process;
- Develop open communications channels to secure volunteer feedback and solicit their ideas; and,
- Position seasoned volunteers as mentors for staff and/or other volunteers.

All of these actions help volunteers feel valued and increase their sense of identification with the organization. It tells them: "We need you. Your life can make a difference here!"

Failure to give sincere appreciation and recognition

All human beings need to feel appreciated. Sincere expressions of gratitude go a long way toward building long-term relationships. And the best news is: It doesn't take a lot of time to say "thank you."

Sources:

GuideStar: *Volunteers, Part I: What Makes Them Stay?*

Rick Lynch: *Volunteer Retention and Feelings of Connection*

Corporation for National & Community Service: *Volunteer Retention*

US Department of Health and Human Services: *Successful Strategies for Recruiting, Training and Utilizing Volunteers*