

## Interviewing Volunteers

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*Notes from a May 2009 presentation by Jill Friedman Fixler<sup>1</sup>*

Jill Friedman Fixler has interviewed over 3,000 volunteers. She believes the art and science of our work is in how we vet and screen people. It's a conversation. It honors the volunteer to be part of a process that says: "We're matchmakers. We want to make sure that you are right for us, and that we are right for you." That's where great placement happens.

We are trained to live in our heads in how we make management decisions. And because we are such nice, good people, we make a lot of decisions in our heart. But she wants us to focus on the fact that great decisions about volunteers also take place in the gut. We all have it, but we tend to overrule it.

- "This person has a PhD in philosophy, but there's something that *really* bothers me about her."
- "This person is inappropriately in my personal space. He is right in my face."
- "This person said something that didn't sit well with me."
- "This person is unusual in a way that I don't think our culture would tolerate."

One's "gut" is not about racism or a discomfort with diversity. *[That's an issue that would need to be addressed independent of volunteer management!]* We want to be an open door to our communities. We want to put the face of our communities in our volunteers. We want to reflect diversity in recruitment, but we don't want to move past the "ew" factor. Every time Jill moved past here "ew" factor, she made a bad choice. There had been boundary issues or something inappropriate that she'd failed to take seriously.

Volunteers bring their own motivation to the workplace. It's not about the paycheck. It's about the joy of the work and how they bring themselves to it.

Let's talk about interviewing steps. Interviewing is not just about what is said. It is also about the **verbal and non-verbal cues**. If the volunteer is wringing his collar when you ask him a question, that's a cue. You have to pay attention to how they look and how they are responding. If she backs up her chair when you ask her a question, that's a cue. That's why team interviewing works really well. One of you can ask the questions while the other observes.

An interview is about evaluating **characteristics and fit**.

Offer choice. Give the candidate **time for self-evaluation and decision-making**. Often, we are so delighted that they've shown up, we just accept them right on the spot. And when we do that, we don't give them the chance to say: "Mmmm, not so much..." They'll tend not to show up for the first shift, or the second one. We can avoid all that craziness by giving them a chance to percolate on it and get back to us. We need to take a pause to let them decide – even though we are very grateful and we need them – and then demonstrate that they have follow through.

**Evaluate the interviewing/screening process** for continuous improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Watch the video at [http://www.ifpmedia.org/volunteer/gi\\_2009/fixler7.html](http://www.ifpmedia.org/volunteer/gi_2009/fixler7.html)

## ***Interview Goals:***

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Candidate</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Motivation</b> Volunteers already have a motivational style; you want to uncover it to assess fit.</li> <li>• <b>Skills</b> What are the skills that you would gladly share with us if it fit strategically with our organization?</li> <li>• <b>Expectations</b> Do their expectations meet ours? Both parties need to be clear about what they want and need.</li> <li>• <b>Fit</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Growth areas</b></li> <li>• <b>Areas to avoid</b> Find out what they don't want to do.</li> <li>• <b>Availability</b></li> <li>• <b>Fit</b></li> <li>• <b>Choices</b> In volunteer work, people want to celebrate their freedom of choice – something they may not have had a work.</li> </ul>

## ***Three Primary Motivational Styles (McClelland & Atkinson):***

- **AFFILIATION:** Common to Greatest Generation and Silent Generation. They are social beings. They wither if you put them in an office by themselves. They are motivated by being with other people. That's what brings them to the work.
- **ACHIEVEMENT:** Likes to see things that move and move quickly. Wants influence over outcomes. Wants assignments with a beginning, middle, and end. Delighted with results. Characteristic of Baby Boomers and Echo-Boomer Millennials.
- **POWER:** Motivated by a desire to influence (e.g., Board member). Movers, shakers, leaders.

Candidates want to see: Are you professional? How quickly do you respond to them? Do you give them opportunities to grow independent of their skills and background?

## ***High Impact Interview Questions***

What you ask and how you ask it can really make a difference. When you are screening across "everyone" (first interview), you ask the same questions so you can compare apples-to-apples. In a second interview, you (or their prospective supervisors) can ask clarifying questions.

1. What are your three greatest achievements? *[Jill would respond: her family (long-standing marriage and raising a son), her faith, and making a difference through work that she loves. What that tells us: She's a people person. She has stick-to-it-tiveness. She is loyal and dedicated. She is grounded and has balance in her life. Family is a high priority. And by her delivery, she expresses authentic joy. She's a nurturer who can work in systems. In other words: The response to one question tells you a lot about the candidate.]*

2. Which do you prefer and why? *[This question gets to the motivational style.]*
  - a. Volunteer with other people or working alone? *["Affiliate"]*
  - b. Assignments with a beginning, middle, and end or ongoing assignments? *[Achievement]*
  - c. Becoming a member of a team with influence or assignments where you are a leader and decision maker? *[Power]*
3. Problem solving
  - a. Describe your program and ask the candidate what he or she would do to improve it. *[There's no right or wrong answer. See how they think and problem solve on their feet.]*
    - i. If someone has been waiting in your lobby, ask them what they'd do to improve it.
    - ii. If you are looking for a marketing director, ask them to look at your website and provide suggestions for improvement.
    - iii. Invite them to story time. Then ask: How would you make that better?
4. Situational Question *[You describe a real situation, and you ask them to tell you what they're going to do about it.]*
  - a. "Your volunteer project is to develop a new literacy program for the organization. What would be your first 5 steps? Who would you engage to help you and why?"
5. Experiential Question *[Avoid questions for which there are yes/no answers. We want the real person to show up.]*
  - a. "Describe a work/volunteer experience where you were the leader of other people. What went well? What didn't go well? What would you do differently next time?"
  - b. "Describe the worst supervisor you ever had. Why did that person not work for you? What didn't happen for you? What do you wish you had done to make it better for yourself?"
6. Skills Question
  - a. "What skills are you proficient at that you are willing to share with the organization, if we can make it possible for you to do so?"

When you ask unexpected questions, the real person shows up. If the answer is too perfect, probe.

Keep yourself safe. Do not interview strangers behind a closed door. You don't know who those people are. It's another reason to tag team. Moreover, never turn down an interviewee behind a closed door. You say: "Thank you very much. I'll be getting back to you."

We are not a human services organization. It is not our job to take care of the volunteer.

Part of the “fit” is environment/culture. Describe it and what it means for a volunteer. Let the volunteer decide whether or not he or she wants to work in that space and take that position. Can they handle it? You honor them by your honesty.

When you understand your own culture and needs, you set in motion the process of deciding. So instead of saying “*so glad you are here, let’s go*”, you going to give prospective volunteers the chance to think about it.

- If you have decided that someone is a “no go,” end the interview by saying: “I’ll get back to you.”
- If you are interested and you’ve talked about a potential position, then you are going to say: “We’ve talked about some positions. I’m going to think about it, and you’re going to think about it, and you’re going to call me back.” The burden is on them, and it’s the first step in understanding what their follow through skills are. One-third or more will not call you back. You’ve let them off the hook. They don’t have to say no to you. They’ve decided it’s not right for them. They’ve forgotten about it, or they’re too busy. At the end of the day, you’ve invested 30 minutes in the process and you’re done. And that’s great.

When they call you back, they are demonstrating follow through and responsibility. If they don’t call you back, they don’t want you, and they don’t want to tell you that. We give them the opportunity to decide if they are a fit with your culture and if they find the opportunity appealing.

### ***Special Characters***

The rambler	Talks incessantly	Interrupt, redirect, or end
The quiet one	Would let you do all the talking	Probe (“Tell me more about that...”), rephrase; don’t ask yes/no questions
Off-topic responder	Goes off on tangents	Go back to the question
Inappropriate responder	Provides unusual answers to straight-forward questions	Pay attention to the “cues”; interrupt, end early

Jill Friedman Fixler is a nationally recognized trainer, facilitator, public speaker, and coach in volunteer management. She is the author of *Boomer Volunteer Engagement: Collaborate Today, Thrive Tomorrow* and *Boomer Volunteer Engagement: Facilitator’s Tool Kit*.