

Do Your Volunteer Surveys Miss the Point?

Can you trust the answers to your surveys?
Is there a way to put the results to good use?

By Susan J. Ellis

In any discussion of evaluating volunteer services, someone inevitably will point to the results of a “volunteer satisfaction survey” as ostensible evidence that things are going well. How did we arrive at this method of assessing success with volunteers? Do such surveys reveal anything meaningful about the value of volunteer contributions?

Determining if volunteers are satisfied isn’t wrong, but doing so in a vacuum without gathering other information and feedback leads to doubtful conclusions. The most important subject to evaluate is whether the effort contributed by volunteers has a meaningful effect on the organization’s primary work – and whether volunteers are able to see that meaning.

The Limits of Determining Satisfaction

Volunteer satisfaction surveys are based on client satisfaction surveys, which are designed to tell you how your service recipients feel about their interactions with you. It may be nice to make sure that volunteers feel positive about their work with you, but volunteers aren’t your clients – they’re team members (alongside paid staff) providing service to *others*. They’re the organization’s stakeholders, insiders not outsiders.

Take a look at any volunteer satisfaction survey and critique it honestly. You’ll likely find questions such as these:

- How useful is the training provided?
- Do you feel busy enough? Do you like the assignments offered?
- How does the paid staff treat you?
- Is your work environment comfortable?

The tone is based on a hospitality perspective: Have we been nice to you? Met your needs? Are you happy with us? There are two potentially serious problems with these kinds of surveys.

“Are you determining volunteers’ satisfaction in a vacuum?”

First, asking volunteers how much they like what they’re doing may miss the point. Their satisfaction equates to . . . what? Success? Impact? A volunteer might enjoy an assigned role for all sorts of personal reasons, whether or not the work itself is of real use to anyone! This is why some organizations find it hard to institute change if volunteers have grown accustomed to spending their time pleasantly on tasks that are no longer needed. Asking about satisfaction, therefore, may be the wrong question.

Second, traditional volunteer satisfaction surveys can seem like report cards given by volunteers to the paid staff. After all, who is implied to be at fault if the survey shows that volunteers aren’t treated well? Given the delicate dynamics of employee/volunteer relationships, we shouldn’t frame questions that concentrate on what happens to volunteers, as if the action is all one-way. This issue might be diffused if you also ask employees about their satisfaction with volunteer performance (and treatment of them) but, again, what does degree of satisfaction really tell us?

Assess What Volunteering Means, Not What It Feels Like

A more revealing set of questions might get volunteers to reflect on the content and purpose of their work on behalf of your mission. This will elicit information about how they’re being treated by the organization, but shares responsibility with volunteers for increasing their own effectiveness. Here are some possible questions that lead to such mutual assessment:

- **Are we asking you to do significant work?** If you don’t think so, please explain what might add meaning to your assignment.
- **What do you think are the most important things you do for the recipients of our services?** How do you know our clients value these things?
- **What do you think are the most important things you do to support the paid staff?**
- **Did you encounter any problems this year in doing your work?** Please describe briefly. Were the situations resolved? If so, how? If not, why not?



Does the feedback lead to doubtful conclusions?

- Is there any need or gap in service you've noticed** that might have potential for additional volunteer positions?
- Have you been given feedback or overheard comments** by our clients – positive or negative – that you wish to pass on to us?
- Have we asked you for advice on anything?** Have you provided any suggestions to us? (If not, why not?) How did we receive and use your input?
- What can we do to be more supportive to you** in accomplishing your work?
- What training or access to information** would help you be more effective as a volunteer?
- In just a few sentences or phrases, please tell us how you describe our organization and its work** to your friends and family.
- Do you have a talent or skill that we've never asked you to put to use** in your work for us (but that you'd be happy to contribute)?

These sorts of probing questions aren't conducive to easy multiple-choice check boxes. They require some thought to answer. But the responses will be much more meaningful, both in helping volunteers be thoughtful about the value of their time and effort, and in giving you information to improve volunteer involvement.

Focus on the Results

You can take this all a notch higher by focusing your survey on the results of volunteer service. In other words, ask questions that attempt to prove the impact of volunteer efforts. Such questions would have to be setting-specific, of course, but here are a few generic ideas:

- What have you observed or heard from clients this year** that indicates your services made a difference to them or changed their behavior or circumstances?
- Can you tell whether or not your efforts have had results?** What are the indicators?
- Did you meet the goals we mutually set for your work this year?** How do you know? Do you think they were the right goals?
- Did anything unexpected occur this year** (something that was important to our clients) as a result of your volunteer activities?

The answers you receive to these sorts of questions have far-reaching implications. They'll help position volunteers in

everyone's mind as true contributors to your organization's essential work. This, in turn, improves volunteer/employee relations. You can also use the information in recruiting new volunteers, as it's appealing to get involved with a successful effort.

And here's the kicker: When you can demonstrate that their volunteering makes a difference, guess what? You vastly increase your volunteers' satisfaction with their service! 

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