

The Withering Volunteers: Bring Them Back Alive

Does your organization really need volunteers? Is there a way to assure their success?

BY NICK LEVINSON

Do you wonder why you lose volunteers? When you don't want volunteers, your paid staff members readily cooperate; you get no volunteers. When you do want volunteers, your paid staff members undercut you. Their economic security is at stake. They're being paid what you agreed their work was worth. They in turn determine that volunteers, being paid nothing, are worth nothing. They find something wrong with all volunteers, except those who present no threat to their jobs.

Paid staff want no competition. Is that a surprise? To solve this problem, follow these steps.

Commit to Using Volunteers.

First, dedicate yourself to the idea of integrating volunteers into your organization. If you think volunteers aren't worth the trouble, think again.

Work worth doing needs resources. Ideas are vital. Time is crucial. Space is handy. Knowledge keeps you on top. Judgment puts you out front. People supply all that and more.

People bring judgment, knowledge, space, time, ideas, and money. Often, they have it. Often, they know where to get it. When they don't know, they'll find out.

Get people. Get infinitely more done than you ever could without people.

Win Staff to Your Side.

Once you've dedicated yourself to the idea of using volunteers, communicate your hunger to your staff members. First, alleviate their fear that volunteers will threaten their jobs. Make it explicit that you won't ever replace your paid staff with unpaid volunteers, and explain why.

That means you'll have to analyze your own reasons. Why do you pay any staff at all? What are you getting in return for a check? It's not just skill. Accountants volunteer. Lawyers volunteer. Skill alone isn't your reason.

You pay staff to get what they wouldn't give you for free—their time, obedience, and dedication. Volunteers may have limited hours to give you; they often have

surprising work styles and unpredictable, independent reasons for pitching in. They work hard, yes, but not like staff. They have different relationships with you than your paid staff do.

Paid staff, precisely because they are paid, deliver what volunteers don't. Once they understand this, much of their resistance to volunteers will dissipate.

Screen Applicants: Plan to Accept Them All.

When you hire, you're spare with the budget. You hire exactly one. The rest you send home, with your regrets.

Volunteers you can take in hordes. You'll usually reject none.

Don't try to get just the right type. You'll be wasting time with your search. Later, you can refine how each volunteer is integrated. All mature businesses refine details later.

Be sure all potential volunteers know your mission. As long as they're comfortable with it, they're okay. They have abilities. You have needs. Match them up. Get more done.

When staff complain that volunteers don't want to do what's needed, make lists of what's needed. Ask volunteers what they'd like to choose. They'll perform better with what they select. I've stuffed envelopes. A judge did, too. Some work is dull. If it's important, we'll do it anyway. We'll do it because we're in sync with the organization's mission.

Coordinators Are Nearly Useless— Promote Them to Use Them.

Absolutely do not get a volunteer coordinator.

The volunteer coordinator pleads with the staff, "The volunteers are coming at 2:00; doesn't anyone have anything for them to do? They'll be bored!"

This does not inspire.

Can you blame the coordinator? If staff members don't come up with ideas, the coordinator won't have anything to coordinate. That looks bad. The volunteer coordinator is at the mercy of employees who object to using volunteers.

Revamp the role entirely, and fast. Every department is to use volunteers directly. Tell them that. Force the issue, with no way out, and continue building expectations.

Volunteers don't need agents. There's no need for an interpreter.

Change the coordinator's title to deputy to make your intent as clear as a rainbow and to provide audible clout. Have your deputy walk into every department, create new jobs in each one, and drop new volunteers onto the staff's shoulders. Make it impossible for the staff to say no. Once the point is made, they can bargain over the particulars, but they can't refuse an expanded workload or the personnel to complete it.

Expect Success To Get it.

If you expect failure, that's what you'll get.

Don't lower standards for volunteers. The paycheck doesn't alter whether someone has skills and good judgment. Use them.

Don't praise an extraordinary volunteer as a star. People prefer common examples as models. Focus instead on raising productivity at the median. Organize the work in different ways. Ask volunteers for their suggestions. Some things they don't know; some things they know well. Allow personal variations that still fit your needs.

Don't Compete Against Your Own Volunteers.

Competition creates a win-lose situation. No one can win unless someone else loses. A volunteer looking like a winner scares too many people. Staff can't afford to be losers in front of you. So they set out to win. To win, they defeat the volunteers.

Don't let this happen. Instead, create a win-win situation by rewarding the staff for gaining volunteer productivity.

Let Insecure Staff Test New Methods.

Give your staff learning room. Experimentation is healthy. More than one menu will feed a cat.

Cut your employees extra slack when they're learning to incorporate volunteers into their work. Be particularly demanding when your staff do the work themselves. They'll get the idea.

Change the Hands-On Methods.

Be up front about your needs when you recruit. Don't understate the commitments just to get a "yes" from a prospect. You don't need drop-outs, and you don't need a bad reputation.

Not a drop of busywork is to be allowed. There's no time for that.

Encourage staff to do the same drudge work they give to volunteers, at the same time, together with them. Don't leave volunteers feeling they got schnookered into garbage that the better people wouldn't touch. Either the work's not vital or it is. Project leaders should do the work, too. They can continue to supervise and support. The morale pays off in productivity all around the table.

Good volunteers can manage each other. That'll extend your management infrastructure. And it'll be a great example for staff.

invent Every Way You Can.

Forget that you're closing for the night. If volunteers can offer two more hours, take advantage of it. Give them something to do at home. Or stay open longer. Special time slots are a good convenience to those whose own hours are limited, but don't restrict volunteering to just those slots.

What if No One's Volunteering?

If there aren't any volunteers knocking at your door, should you put the idea of volunteers out of your mind? No, there's still something you can do—you can dream!

If seven volunteers walked in right now, what would you ask them to do? Come up with half a dozen projects, simple to complex. Do it again tomorrow. It's excellent practice. Then, when real volunteers show up, you'll have tons of concrete tasks to shell out.

Remember, it Pays.

Donors pay for accomplishments. They'll pay for your ability to harness volunteers' energy to solve the world's problems.

And you know what more revenue means. ■

Editor's Resources

Ellis, Susan, "How to Create a Staff-Volunteer Team," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4.

Ellis, Susan, *Volunteer Management Videotape*.

Mitchell, Mark & Donald Yates, "How to Attract the Best Volunteers," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 4.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Volunteer Management, Leadership Series*.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

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