

# Managing Your Volunteers:

# 19 Ways to Work Wonders



Here's a new look at boosting volunteer productivity.

By Nick Levinson

Without paychecks, won't volunteers snooze or run wild? Won't they disappear without notice, leaving you in the lurch? Won't it be impossible to keep them focused on critical work?

It's crucial to confront these questions and reconsider how to manage volunteers. Most schools teach almost nothing on this subject. Textbooks have little space for it. Fortunately, methods have been developed.

They're not entirely the methods you use to manage paid staff. Carrot-based management (CBM) doesn't work as well with self-motivated volunteers. You need to match potentials with results. Here are 19 proven ways to gain top results with volunteers:

**1. Put them to work in 60 seconds.** Volunteers want to work. If they have to sit around waiting for an assignment, they feel superfluous, and they'll take their talents elsewhere. Find your to-do list, and put a "V" next to every task volunteers can do. Ask people throughout the organization to do the same.

Private thanks are often far more rewarding than public accolades.

Be ready to put volunteers to work as soon as they arrive.

**2. Talk with them right after they start the first round of tasks.** Find out what else they might like to do. Involve them early and often.

**3. Give choices.** Offer a mixture of qualitatively different undertakings.

**4. Encourage initiative and rethinking.** Be flexible in how volunteers do their jobs, and let them analyze their work for better ways. If their idea is better, use it and give them credit.

**5. Exchange undesirable chores.** Actually, people are often willing to do the yucky stuff. They understand the need. But if Paul does all the artistry when Mary has to clean the closet again and again, you're liable to lose Mary. Rotate the mind-numbing boredom. Pair distasteful with stimulating tasks.

**6. Brief volunteers on the larger picture.** This is where many managers, especially lower-level managers, fall down. You must bring your strategy into focus for volunteers. If they know the underpinnings of what they're doing, they'll produce more of what you need.

**7. Dream ahead, and plan more endeavors.** When you have a few moments, think up some ventures volunteers might do. It's an exercise that comes in handy when volunteers show up unexpectedly, wanting to help.

**8. Don't typecast.** Being good at one thing doesn't mean your volunteer can't excel at other tasks. Don't wait for performance to deteriorate. Offer rotation. On the other hand, forced rotations can be just as harmful to output. Making the offer may be all you need to keep the volunteer acute. And specialization does have the advantages of skill enhancement and finer accountability. Balance stability with freshness.

**9. Permit multiple jobs.** One person can fulfill many obligations.

Tight quotas rob you of productivity. If volunteers already doing something ask for more, give them more.

**10. Allow hooking up with several supervisors.** Traditionally, volunteers are dispatched to one department, usually for eternity. Placing most of your volunteers into one volunteer office means they do *less work*, not more. Because they're somewhere else, managers who rely on their services rarely talk seriously with them. They don't discover the volunteers' capabilities. The solution is to order volunteers into all your departments. Managers will welcome them once they see their own output rising and their own earnings enriched, although that'll take time.

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and the output  
is nearly triple.

**11. Provide access to management.** Encourage volunteers to give their input to managers. This access denotes trust and is an invaluable benefit to volunteers. In return, you'll be aided by the creative ideas volunteers add to the mix.

**12. Pitch in yourself.** Roll up your sleeves and do the same work you're asking volunteers to do, especially if it's tedious. Otherwise, volunteers get the signal that they were sent to do what no one else would be caught dead doing. Stop when something requiring your supervisory hat comes up, then go right back to working alongside the volunteers. The best morale-booster for volunteers is to see the paid staff visibly sweating. Boosting morale boosts production.

**13. Spot-check results.** Build spot-checks into the project. For instance, when stuffing a mailing, stuff stacks of envelopes before sealing, so you can check contents in a few random samples. Catch

## Should You Eliminate the V Word?

When you conduct a phonebank to obtain volunteers, don't ask the people you call if they can "volunteer." Some are offended by the word.

Instead, be specific. Try, "Can you come in and call some of our graduates for a survey?" Or, "Do you have two hours to help our clinic this week?"

In an informal experiment, a caller asked for volunteers and one-third said yes. After he dropped the word "volunteer," half said yes. That's a 50% boost.

errors early enough to reduce the costs of rectifying them. Discuss failures and successes.

**14. Invite them back, with a choice of schedules.** The so-called "volunteer night" is an anachronism. You need volunteers whenever they're available. Find out what's mutually agreeable.

**15. Fire if necessary.** Standards must be fulfilled by volunteer and paid staff alike. Value is relative to your potential replacement cost for workers, not relative to what you're paying them. Volunteers who cost you more than the value you're getting back may be fired, just like staff.

**16. Acknowledge volunteers' participation** by giving them titles, just as you would if you paid them. Choose titles that reflect their responsibilities. (Be sure to gain the volunteers' consent before titling them.)

**17. Find meaningful ways to thank them.** Thanks should be proportionate to what each volunteer accomplishes. Private thanks are often far more rewarding than public accolades.

**18. Educate staff on the benefits of volunteers.** Paid staffers often prefer doing jobs themselves, rather than delegating to volunteers, because it's faster in the short term. Teaching takes time, and that frankly delays final delivery. But the do-it-yourselfer can finish only so much. By training a volunteer, spot-checking the volunteer's progress, and doing something else in between the spot-checks, the staffer will finish two jobs. That's nearly twice as much in the same

time frame. Train two volunteers, and the output is nearly triple. Allow training time by planning for the delay in outcomes. Demand greater productivity, which staff will achieve by using volunteers.

**19. Lead by example.** You have to demonstrate that volunteers will produce, and that they'll do it at all levels of skill and quality. Then your staff can emulate your example, gain volunteers' productivity, and bring you their results. ■

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### Editor's References

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Forsyth, Janice, "Volunteer Management Strategies: Balancing Risk and Reward," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

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These resources are available free at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management ([www.snpo.org/li](http://www.snpo.org/li)).

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