



Volunteers: Recruit, Place, & Retain the Best

Using simple techniques, you can tap into the talents and productivity of both paid and volunteer staff.

By Keri Schwab

David was an out-of-work computer technician who wanted to build up his teaching skills and make community contacts. Unemployed and lonely, he thought a volunteer teaching position in a computer lab would build his resume and provide networking opportunities. The head of the computer lab was thrilled to welcome David as a volunteer. Able to build and fix computers, David could explain the inner workings of a machine in a relatable and conversational manner. Unfortunately, David could also explain everything else ...by talking, and talking, and talking. Students would listen politely for awhile but eventually walk out. Management considered removing him from the position and sending him to a solitary office job. Luckily, the volunteer coordinator came up with a better solution, as we'll see later in this article.

Most nonprofit managers have worked with well-meaning volunteers who make mistakes, cause problems, or aren't reliable. Such a volunteer can do more harm than good. But giving up on volunteers isn't the answer. You need techniques to recruit, place, and retain volunteers in ways that will bring the best people on board.

Recruit

You can avoid volunteer problems from the get-go by recruiting the right people.

Market to those who already have the skills your organization needs.

- **Use targeted marketing.** Instead of casting a city-wide net, market to those who already have the skills your organization needs. For example, a girl's fitness program seeks out volunteers through ads with sport leagues and commercial gyms. Women with an interest in fitness will be in tune with the organization's mission and have the knowledge necessary to be successful volunteers.

- **Reach out to the unemployed.** Consider advertising alongside classified ads that correspond with your organization's focus.

- **Contact new graduates.** For example, a nonprofit accounting organization obtained a list of freshly-minted CPAs and signed up a dozen to help provide tax assistance to low-income families. The new CPAs gained work experience while the organization fulfilled its mission.

- **Be choosy.** Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, advocates an application process that emphasizes selectivity.¹ The more coveted and valuable a position appears, the harder applicants will work for a place on the team. You can indicate selectivity directly, via a statement on the application, or indirectly through a list of challenging questions for potential volunteers to answer. Implying the importance of the position sends a

message that only those serious about the job should apply.

Place

Placing volunteers in the right positions is crucial to their longevity and satisfaction. To speed up the placement process, you need two key pieces of information.

- **Ask about volunteers' prior experiences.** What were their best and worst assignments? What are their favorite household duties? What hobbies do they enjoy? Once you have a picture of volunteers' skills, you can fine-tune job placement and training to play to their strengths.

- **Ask people what excites them most about volunteering** and what they hope to gain from the experience. Their answers will help you decide which of three needs motivates them most—achievement, affiliation, or power.² Pinpointing their greatest need will help you place them in appropriate positions. Many mothers, for example, volunteer at their children's school because they crave affiliation with other mothers. Placing them in isolated positions stuffing envelopes will leave them dissatisfied. But encouraging them to collaborate on projects will satisfy their need for social interaction and belonging.

Retain

You know how important rewards are in retaining volunteers. But do you choose the right rewards? Here are some ways to do so.

- **Probe into what volunteers like** and what they look forward to. Of-

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fering more of what they love is the best reward of all.

- **Challenge volunteers** with interesting work. Provide training and the chance to learn new things. Fulfilling their needs for growth, interaction, and success is a meaningful way to show appreciation.

- **Remember that ceremonies and thank-you plaques can be empty gestures** if you don't add details about why each volunteer earned the reward. Link rewards to specific job duties and achievements. Make it clear that you've paid attention to volunteers' performance and that you truly appreciate each person's unique contribution to your organization's success.

- **Photograph volunteers** while they're performing their jobs, working on projects, or helping with special events. Then create a bulletin board filled with those photos and notes from paid staff thanking volunteers for specific things they've done. You can also use the photos and thank-yous on your Web site.

- **Help paid staff appreciate the value of volunteers.** Train them along with volunteers to emphasize teamwork and support. Create a mentoring or buddy program, pairing each volunteer with a paid staff member. Building solidarity will improve everyone's morale, productivity, and satisfaction in working together, for the success of the entire team.

Discipline

If volunteers behave unacceptably, how do you reprimand them without

Provide a list of challenging questions for potential volunteers to answer.

causing hurt feelings? Use these techniques to lessen the pain of the discipline process.

- **Preempt problems** with regularly scheduled reviews of all volunteers. Such reviews can be a great chance to tell volunteers, "We appreciate you." Use this opportunity to praise work well done and make any needed corrections. If such reviews are standard procedure, volunteers will know such sessions aren't punitive and will likely feel pleased that management cares enough to pay attention.

- **Use the sandwich method**, in which you enfold a critique between two compliments. Begin by praising the volunteer, then gently bring up the behavior you want to change, and close with another compliment.

Offering more of what people love is the best reward.

- **Point out that mistakes are part of the learning process**, and discuss what can be learned from the current situation. Describe errors you've made and how they've helped you grow.

- **Change the parameters** or situation in which the volunteer works. Remember David, who was great at repairing computers but not so great with people? The volunteer coordinator knew that David wanted to teach and that he wouldn't be happy in an isolated position. So she played to David's machinist mind and set strict "operational time limits" on his computer class. With her help, David rewrote the class outline so that he, like the machines he loved repairing, could work efficiently during his allotted hour. Only if students approached him after class did he discuss subjects not in the outline. This solution worked well for everyone, and David is still working happily in his volunteer job. ■

Footnotes

¹Collins, Jim, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Harper Collins.

²McClelland, David. C. & David H. Burnham, "Power Is the Great Motivator," *Harvard Business Review*, 54(2).

More Volunteer Insights

A variety of *Nonprofit World* articles focus on motivating volunteers to give their very best. Begin with this sampling (available at www.snpo.org/members):

- **How to Create a Staff-Volunteer Team** (Vol. 18, No. 4)
- **Are You Boring Your Volunteers to Death?** (Vol. 24, No. 3)
- **Earn People's Loyalty: Here's How** (Vol. 17, No. 5)
- **Managing Your Volunteers: 19 Ways to Work Wonders** (Vol. 25, No. 6)
- **The Key to Building Productive Teams** (Vol. 21, No. 4)
- **How to Attract the Best Volunteers** (Vol. 14, No. 4)
- **Regular People, Spectacular Results** (Vol. 23, No. 4)

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