

Best Practices for Volunteer Orientation

It's an often overlooked – but crucial – process.

By Shawn Kendrick

Why do volunteers stay with your organization – and why do they leave? One of the reasons volunteers don't stick around is a lack of orientation and training.

If “on the job” training is your main way of acclimating volunteers, it's time to reconsider. Orientation takes little time and sets the foundation for a successful relationship. To get you started, we've pulled together some recommendations and best practices.

Ask Them What They Want

When people decide to volunteer for your organization, they deserve a chance to tell you what they want out of the experience. It doesn't have to be formal. Just a casual conversation can make sure you're on the same page.

This is your opportunity to find out the volunteer's interests and skills. It's also a chance to see how you can help the volunteer grow as a professional and as a person.

This conversation does two things. First, it sets the tone for a reciprocal relationship. Second, it helps you place people in the right assignments.

Avoid Liability

We all hate paperwork. But in today's litigious society it's necessary.

At the very least you'll want to give volunteers copies of a volunteer handbook. Ask them to sign something to show they've received the handbook and understand the basics.

This process insulates you from liability. In addition, it shows volunteers that you have expectations of them and that they need to take your mission seriously.

Encourage Empathy

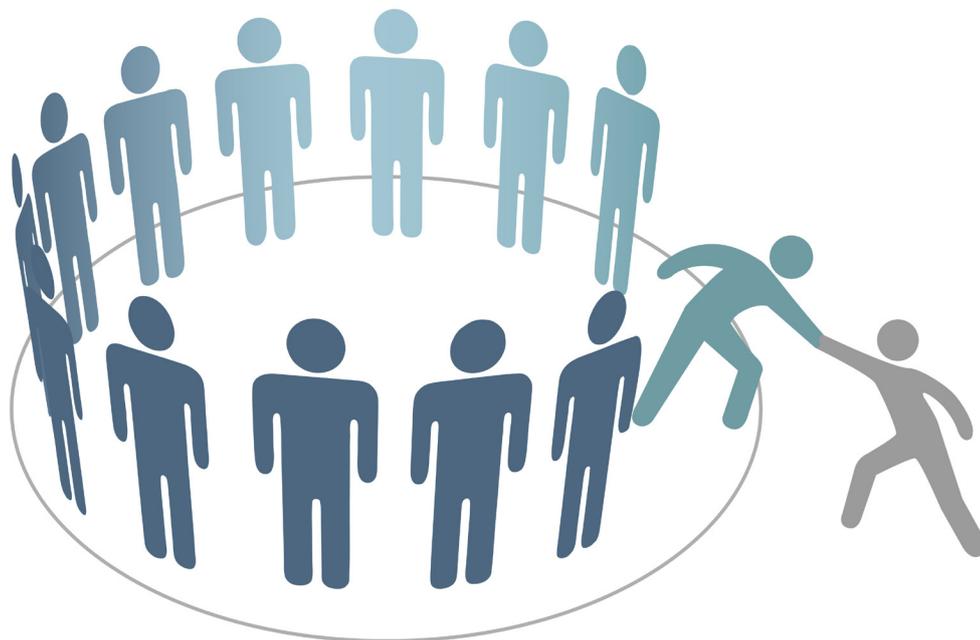
If possible, have new volunteers experience your organization's services as a client would. Explain the circumstances under which a typical client would come to you, then ask them to imagine themselves in that position.

Taking them through the process from the client's viewpoint will add perspective. Even better, it may lead to more empathy and better performance from volunteers.

Find Mentors

When it's time for your newbies to actually learn the job, pair them up with an experienced volunteer or paid staff member. Make sure the mentor is patient, good with people, and has a knack for teaching others.

Having a good relationship with a mentor can seal the deal with a new volunteer. So put serious thought into whom you choose to mentor each newcomer.



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Take cues from the conversation you had with the newbie in the beginning. Find mentors who can help volunteers reach the goals they explained to you in your earlier conversation. Also, choose mentors who will be a good fit in terms of personality.

Give Feedback

Informal feedback from the volunteer’s mentor will be invaluable. In addition, have a formal sit-down with each new volunteer individually after a month or so. Use this time to praise them, encourage them, discuss their goals, and address any issues that may have surfaced. Volunteers will be more confident in their tasks with this insight, which leads to higher satisfaction with their experience.

In It for the Long Term

In addition to a comprehensive orientation, continue to offer training opportunities. Provide training programs to help them understand their jobs and your organization better, as well as to learn about related areas of interest to them. Keep them growing, and they’ll stick with you.

In the end, investing the time will be worthwhile. You’ll have better-trained volunteers who stay longer, care more, and work harder for you. Spending just a little more time on the training process will pay huge dividends. 

Off on the Best Foot

Create a firm foundation for your volunteer program with these articles from the Society for Nonprofits’ Library (NonprofitWorld.org):

How to (and Not to) Put Volunteers to Work (Vol. 18, No. 3)

Managing Your Volunteers: 19 Ways to Work Wonders (Vol. 25, No. 6)

Training Programs Need More than Good Information (Vol. 21, No. 2)

Volunteers: Recruit, Place, & Retain the Best (Vol. 29, No. 6)

Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow (Vol. 23, No. 5)

Motivating Volunteers to Perform (Vol. 31, No. 5)

Free Webinar Recording for Members: Mobilizing Volunteers in the Face of Budget Cuts. Learn how to engage volunteers realistically and effectively, whether revenues decrease or increase.

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management (NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).

Shawn Kendrick holds an MBA from Ohio Dominican University and has over a decade’s experience in the nonprofit and business sectors. He enjoys researching and blogging for VolunteerHub (volunteerhub.com), a cloud-based volunteer management software that offers online registration, e-mail and text messaging, and report generation.



A National Gathering with an Important Purpose

Registration is now open for the 2017 National Summit on Volunteer Engagement – the first time in almost a decade that volunteer mobilization and support – in any setting – will be the total focus of a major conference. With funding cuts, increased service needs, and organizations scrambling for support, the stakes have never been higher. In these politically contentious times, organizations are counting on volunteers to be advocates as well as budget stretchers. And volunteer numbers are on the rise nationally. All of this is exactly why effective volunteer leadership is needed now more than ever.

The conference, to be held at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, on July 26-28, is expected to draw close to 1,000 participants from all over the world. It will include mind-opening exercises to find new answers to map the profession’s future. There will also be special sessions focusing on grant makers and other organizations that support volunteer engagement in nonprofits, providing a unique opportunity for funders and nonprofit leaders alike to learn more about each other’s perspectives, approaches to collaboration, and challenges. For more details and to register, visit mavanetwork.org/2017summit or e-mail conference@mavanetwork.org.