

What Does It Mean to Lead Volunteers?

A pioneer in the volunteer field offers insights and inspiration.

By Marlene Wilson

What do we mean by leadership? This quote from Mike Murray says it all:

A leader is someone who dreams dreams, has visions, and can communicate those to others in such a way that they, of their own free will, say “Yes!”

Let’s examine the critical components of this definition for a moment. Having dreams and visions is not about where we are but where we want to be. That sounds so easy, logical, and even fun, so why don’t we do more of it in the field of volunteer administration? I would suggest it is because we are too busy doing, surviving, and coping. Who has time to dream except at 2:00 a.m.?

Therefore, one of our biggest challenges is to shift our basic paradigm about how we do leadership (not how we talk about it). As you begin your journey as a volunteer manager, make dreaming a priority, not an afterthought!

The Test of a Good Leader

I suggest the test of a good leader needs to stop being “How much have I done?” and become “How many others have I involved?” This entails not doing all the work, but seeing that it is done and done well. This is an enormous and critical shift for volunteer administrators. It is the difference between being a doer and becoming a leader. When you master the skills of delegation and collaborative team building you will begin to have time to dream.

I always find the best way to start dreaming is to ask myself the question “What if . . . ?” and let my imagination and energy combine to romp through the possibilities. For example, my current dream is: What if we truly learned to form and use collaborative, synergistic teams of volunteers and staff among organizations and sectors in our communities? It boggles my mind what we could accomplish!

Motivating Others to Action

The other important concept in Murray’s definition of leadership is to communicate your dream to others so that they voluntarily and eagerly say yes. That sounds like volunteer recruitment, doesn’t it?


Have you ever been motivated to action by a half-hearted, apologetic, tentative presentation? The clearer the vision and the more enthusiastically committed the leader is to it, the more likely it is that people will catch that vision.

People have to see, feel, and experience the excitement and clearly understand how they can help make it happen. This is why a good organization mission statement is your most

“Make dreaming a priority, not an afterthought!”

effective and compelling recruitment message. People want to make a difference, and they need to know what you are doing about a cause they can care about.

Vision Needed

Warren Bennis once defined vision as “a target that beckons.” I have also heard it referred to as “a preferred future.” It is that powerful and compelling dream about where we want to go that mobilizes people to help us get there. Every organization and every volunteer program needs a clearly articulated vision and it is the responsibility of leadership to provide it. 

Marlene Wilson has been in the field of volunteer management for over 35 years. She is the author of Visionary Leadership in Volunteer Programs, from which this article is adapted (available from energizeinc.com).

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