



# Motivating Volunteers to Perform

By Stephen C. Rafe

How to get volunteers to honor their commitments and feel fulfilled.

**W**e hear so much about recruiting and retaining volunteers. However, we don't hear much about activating and acknowledging. That's what this article is all about.

“Don't keep volunteers in the same role for more than two years.”

The kind of volunteers a nonprofit organization needs are those who appreciate being needed, who have an opportunity to contribute to something they value, and who receive satisfaction from being able to make a difference. More than just names on paper, or faces in a meeting, those who fit this category are prepared to work — when the “right” factors are in place.

So, here we'll examine three aspects of working with volunteers that are essential to their success — and yours. These are: Recruit, Retain, and Recognize.

## Recruit

As a leader, your words, your actions, and your attitude are always being scrutinized by others. Say, for example, you want members to volunteer for an activity or project. If you stand before them with bored, “here-we-go-again” posture and voice tones, you're not likely to excite anyone into signing up. The value you place on the endeavor will often dictate the quantity and the quality of the response you receive. Attitude, coupled with the right words and actions, makes a major difference in the success of any venture.

An important part of recruitment is acknowledgment. The volunteer steps forward, shows an interest, wants to know more, but then never hears another word as new priorities overtake the leader's agenda. Or, at best, the volunteer receives a “thank you for volunteering”

e-mail and is directed to contact you — or someone else — “for further information.”

Putting the onus on the prospective volunteer this way can communicate various messages — none of which are likely to be well-received. The volunteer could interpret the message as “I'm too busy to contact you and meet with you.” Or, “I'm more important than you are.” Or, “This activity is a low priority for me/us.” And you can probably add to the list.

Instead, if it's important enough to announce the need for volunteers, let them know who will contact them and how quickly. In many cases, it's quite appropriate to designate someone who will be following up with them. You don't have to do everything yourself. In fact, that's one of the shortcomings often found in leaders of volunteers.

The first step is to make sure there's a “good fit.” Will the individual's time and talents be sufficient to the task? If not, can the time and task be adapted or modified? Can mentoring be provided in the initial stages? Are there other ways to help this person and this project succeed?

From there, the next step is personal contact. The individual who makes the connection with the prospective volunteer should do so by phone or face-to-face. While e-mail may be fine later on, it's not a good idea for the initial contact.

At the meeting, focus on the need, outline the responsibilities involved, and explain how success will be measured. Explain the tasks involved, the duration of the assignment, and the level of support — both people and funding — the volunteer will have available.

Especially, don't "sugar-coat" the assignment. Be candid: If the job has some downsides, let the volunteer know about them. You don't have to be overly negative and you should avoid being critical of others in doing this. Just be honest and open.

Most of all, in your initial conversation make sure to provide the volunteer with ample time to ask questions and to get answers — even if your answer is "I don't know, but I'll find out and get right back to you on that."

In that conversation, and in all future meetings, always set the focus on how the volunteer will be helping the greatest cause possible in that situation — how they can help make a difference. *Never* position the volunteer as doing you a personal favor. No matter how well you know the person, doing something for *you* will never even come close to replacing the value of doing something for a cause the individual believes in.

People who volunteer out of a sense of commitment and service are far more likely to be motivated to follow through than those who volunteer out of a sense of obligation.

**Suggestion:** Create an all-encompassing list of jobs that volunteers can do within your organization. Invite all members to identify the ones that interest them and number them according to their level of interest or priority. Title it something like "Skills and Talents Service Inventory." Make it available in a convenient location and call attention to it whenever appropriate — such as placing a copy in your new-members' welcome packet.

## Retain

Develop "understudies" for each role. People come and go for a variety of reasons. So be prepared.

Also, don't keep volunteers in the same role for more than two years. They may grow stale or even become authoritarian or territorial about their role (or be perceived as such by others).

Their continued presence may also deny them opportunities for new challenges and further growth. And it may deny upcoming volunteers the chance to move into roles with increasing responsibility, challenge, and potential for intrinsic (self) satisfaction.

One of the quickest ways to lose volunteers is to plunge them into a task without providing adequate instruction or support. Even if they seem qualified based upon their knowledge and experience, they'll need guidance — at least initially.

For example, anyone in any task will need to know what's expected, what's acceptable and unacceptable, how approvals are obtained, and much more. Handing over a file folder and saying "Here you go. I'm sure you'll do fine" is never appropriate.

Take — or at least "talk" — volunteers through all steps of the processes they'll need to know about and understand. If possible, let them understudy the person who presently holds that position. If that's not possible, at least remain at their side, literally as well as figuratively, until they feel comfortable with moving forward on their own.

Then, remain in contact as they proceed and progress. Stay in touch. Provide constructive input — including goal-focused, positive criticism — whenever needed.

## Recognize

Ask. Listen. Act. Reinforce. Four key words in a leader's action vocabulary.

Stay in touch with each volunteer who leads an activity and encourage committee chairs to do the same with each of their volunteers.

**Ask** them what they're working on and how they're progressing. Ask if they need any additional help or support (not from you, necessarily).

**Listen** carefully to what they have to say. Provide feedback that demonstrates that you've heard them.

**Act** in ways that show enthusiasm for their assignment. Share how it fits in with the "big picture" for your organization. Let them know how their role is important to the overall success. And, most of all, act in a timely and appropriate manner upon any commitments you make to them.

**Reinforce** the importance of their efforts. Most volunteers who are truly service-oriented need little recognition. For them, the satisfaction comes from helping, from contributing to a job that needs to be done, and from the feeling that they're appreciated and are making a difference. Reinforcing those motivations helps to keep ego out of the mix so that people aren't signing up merely for personal praise and attention.

To ensure the proper mindset among volunteers, keep their eyes upon the prize. Let them know the direction in which your organization is heading and why that's important. Talk to them about how each task becomes a part of the whole. Focus on the organization's vision and mission.

Be grateful. No job is too small; no person too insignificant. Let your volunteers know that you believe in them and their work. Make sure you reflect that belief in your words, your actions, and your attitude. Show your appreciation wherever and whenever you can.

A simple "thank you" or a "good job" will often be sufficient for the right volunteer in the right job. However, some form of public recognition may be appropriate. Recognizing good deeds properly calls attention to the value of the deeds, and the volunteer's role becomes implicit. This gives you yet another way to keep the recruitment process going in the most positive direction possible. 

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