

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

When you design a volunteer management system, you are building the foundation of new relationships. You don't know where those relationships will lead when you start: some volunteers will drop out after a month, while others may become involved for years and could eventually become leaders in the organization. One of the first things to think about before recruiting volunteers is what everyone involved needs from the relationship. Let's take a look at what your organization might need, versus what a potential volunteer might need.

Your organization's needs:

- More hands to get work done
- A larger network of supporters/members to develop the work
- To empower members of the community to address their own problems
- A core team to grow the organization
- A pool from which you can develop new leaders

The volunteer's needs:

- A supportive community
- A chance to contribute to something constructive
- Empowerment and self-expression
- To have a good time
- Work experience that can lead to other professional opportunities
- New skills/knowledge

Creating a volunteer system, with regular practices and tools, is an important way to ensure that the organization runs smoothly even if there are people coming and going every few months. The structure provided by an established system will enable volunteers to be and feel successful.

EVALUATION

With volunteers, periodic evaluations are very important. You need a way to evaluate whether or not they are succeeding as part of your organization, and they need constructive feedback and to know that you appreciate what they are contributing. If someone is getting off track, you need to be able to stop the problem at the outset, before it gets out of control.

Therefore it's important to have private meetings, away from other staff or volunteers. We recommend a check-in meeting halfway through the volunteer's committed term, where the volunteer coordinator meets with each volunteer and asks:

1. How is it going for you so far?
2. Are you doing what you thought you would be doing?
3. What are you enjoying about volunteering?
4. What do you find challenging, or what do you wish was different?

The nature of volunteers is that they come and go.

Most of the people who start volunteering with your organization will not stay forever—in fact, some may drop out before they finish the period they have committed to. This is part of why it's important to have new volunteers joining regularly, and also why it's important to focus on selecting and nurturing people who are involved so that their needs get met, as well as the needs of your organization. To accomplish this, we recommend evaluation meetings, and taking steps to make sure volunteers' needs are met. With volunteers who get REALLY involved, you should also take steps to avoid burning them out.

Let the volunteer speak first, then you share your feedback about how they are doing. It's a good idea to let them go first, because some of what you have to say may be things that the volunteer already knows, and it may be easier for the volunteer to discuss the problem if she has raised it first.

In giving a volunteer feedback, start with the positive feedback before raising the critical feedback. Most people find it easier to hear something critical about themselves if they have heard something

complimentary first. If you can't think of anything positive to say, you can always tell the person that you really appreciate the time they are donating!

If you have to give critical feedback, don't spend a lot of time going over what went wrong—instead, focus on finding solutions that will enable the volunteer to succeed. For instance, if someone seems unable to show up on time, you could suggest that you or another volunteer will call that person to remind them, or give them a ride to the office. Ask the volunteer for ideas for solutions also. People are more likely to actually do something if they feel they have thought of the solution themselves.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

Humans sometimes have conflicts—it is normal. Sometimes people get frustrated when they have to work with one another. It's natural, but it can also be corrosive and destructive of the team if conflict is not managed well. Your organization should have a policy to deal with conflict. Some elements you might consider including in that policy are:

- Encouraging people who are in conflict to talk to one another, face to face, at the earliest opportunity, in order to come up with a solution to the problem.
- No nasty emails. If you see a volunteer is sending emails that attack or are angry at others, tell that person to first try to sit down with the person they have a problem with, and try to talk it through. It is very difficult for most people to discuss anything complex or emotional through email.
- If the attempt to talk it through in person doesn't work, the manager should meet with each side to fairly and objectively hear their side of the problem.
- Then, having heard both sides, the manager should get the two people into the same room and mediate a discussion in which they try to reach a solution. Encourage the two people not to focus on blame, and make it clear that personal comments or insults are absolutely never tolerated.
- Once a solution has been reached, reinforce to both people that you value them both, but that working together collaboratively is essential to the organization, and you expect them both to make a reasonable effort to be part of the team. Keep a close watch after the meeting on how the solution works out.
- If the conflict is between the manager and a volunteer, then you may need to find someone outside of the organization to mediate.

This is a very simple approach to conflict management and the one that we use; some situations are much more complex, and may require multiple meetings, or difficult decisions by the manager that involve separating people who cannot work together.

It is the job of the manager to create a positive and constructive work environment. Managing conflict between people is the least fun part of the job, but it is the one thing that cannot be delegated.

The key in most situations is to tackle the problem as soon as it comes up. Don't procrastinate or hope it will just go away. If a problem is addressed in a calm and fair way early on, you have a much better chance of resolving it with a minimum amount of effort than if everyone avoids dealing with it.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF VOLUNTEERS

Here are some tips on how to make sure that your volunteers have a good experience with the organization and are equipped to continue making positive contributions.

1. Give volunteers recognition and let them see their impact. Most people need to feel recognized for what they do, especially if they are donating their time (but even if they are not). You can do this by throwing a party to thank volunteers, listing their names on your newsletter, annual report, or website, celebrating their anniversaries as volunteers with the organization, and giving volunteer awards. Informal recognition is important also: saying thank you, taking a volunteer out for tea or coffee, giving them a good recommendation if they apply for a paying job, or just pointing out in a meeting what someone has

accomplished. Small acts of recognition will buy you a lot of goodwill from someone who is working hard for little or no pay.

2. **Help to build connections among volunteers, and between volunteers and other organizations.** One of the main reasons people volunteer is to make new friends and connect with a community. Building those community connections also helps you to build the base of your organization. Create opportunities for volunteers to meet one another and work collaboratively. If you are going out for lunch or coffee with staff or visitors, invite volunteers to join you. If someone interesting is visiting your organization, invite volunteers to come into the office to meet that person for a chat over lunch.
3. **Give volunteers a chance to build their skills.** Find out what skills or knowledge would be interesting or useful for volunteers, and create some opportunities for learning. This could take the form of a workshop, or you could just partner one volunteer who is interested in a subject with another volunteer or staff person who knows a lot about that subject. Create a space in the office to share books and reports and other information that comes into your office that volunteers can read. Give volunteers an opportunity to represent your organization by attending public meetings or discussions.
4. **Give volunteers an opportunity to have input.** We strongly recommend a monthly meeting where volunteers and other members can evaluate recent projects, and discuss next steps. Volunteers are working at the grassroots, and they may see things about the organization that the directors never see—this is the opportunity for directors to learn from them. Treat everyone with respect and listen to what they have to say, even if what they have to say makes you uncomfortable. Some people may feel uncomfortable sharing their opinions in public—creating a suggestion box, or a work diary that anyone can write in, is a way to let people share their thoughts more privately. We especially recommend inviting volunteers to your annual strategic planning meeting, if you have one, and actively soliciting their input at the meeting.

AVOIDING BURNOUT

Burnout is a problem at all nonprofits and grassroots organizations. If your volunteers complain all the time, if they seem lacking in energy, if they seem pessimistic and unmotivated, and if they stop showing up for tasks, it's possible that they may be burned out.

The nature of this work is that people make huge personal sacrifices, giving their own time, energy, money, as well as the time and energy and money of their loved ones. These are not infinite resources, though unfortunately the need is infinite, and it is natural that after a while people get tired and depleted, and want to do something else.

Volunteers in particular are likely to get very enthusiastic in the beginning, over-commit themselves, and then become disillusioned or tired and quit. Some of this is the nature of the work, but we should encourage people not to be martyrs for a cause. Burnout can be avoided—or at least, slowed down.

Set realistic goals | The quickest way to burn people out is by overloading them with tasks, or assigning them projects that are too large. Be sure that you are gathering input from volunteers, especially in the beginning, about how long it takes them to do certain tasks. If it takes longer than they have committed to work for the organization, you need to adjust the task so that they can do it in the time they promised to spend. Some people work faster than others, and while you can push people to work faster, you may also have to adjust to reality.

You should often revisit your project plan and re-evaluate your goals for each week based on the number of people you have, the amount of time it takes them to do the work, and the amount of work to be done. Do not let one person take on all the work for the whole group; encourage everyone to do their part equally.

Human rights starts at the office | People who are really committed to the work may not be good at taking breaks. They may just work and work without even stopping to eat until they're exhausted. As a manager, what you do will set the expectations for everyone else. If you take a lunch break, others will take a lunch break. If you never leave your desk, your volunteers will feel guilty about slacking off if they need to leave to get a cup of coffee. That guilt will quickly become resentment.

This is about respecting the human rights of people in our own organizations, and about thinking of volunteers as a long-term investment. People will appreciate your consideration and are more likely to return later, and recruit their friends to volunteer, and speak well of you to other supporters, if they believe you honestly have their best interests at heart.

We try to have regularly scheduled breaks that everyone takes together, where we actually leave the office for a bit, and we remind each other to leave the office promptly at quitting time. We take breaks on the weekends and on holidays, and if someone has to work long hours on one day because of a deadline or an important meeting, we encourage them to work shorter hours the next day. We also encourage volunteers to monitor what they are doing and let us know when it is too much, to adjust their work plan if they have a crisis in some other area of their lives (for instance, a sick child, a major exam), or to take a break from volunteering if they just feel burned out and need to do something else for a while.

Help to set priorities | Volunteers may feel pressured to take on more than they can handle. While your organization may genuinely have a lot of work that needs to get done, you need to be able to set priorities. What things really need to get done this week? What things really have to get done today? What things could be postponed until later? Involve the volunteers in setting priorities and help them to break projects down into tasks. When each task is done, then they move onto the next task. Emphasize what they have accomplished before tackling what still needs to be done.

Manage time effectively | If you have a volunteer who is an expert at legal research or at bookkeeping, it probably is not a good use of her time to make photocopies. Before each volunteer comes in, prepare with a list of things for her to do that are an effective use of her time. Ensure that she doesn't waste her time doing something unimportant.

Make it fun | Remember that people are donating their time, and some of it should be energizing and fun for everyone. Cooking dinner together, a group trip to the movies or to an event, or a celebration of a volunteer's birthday—these are all ways to celebrate and enjoy your team. Give volunteers a chance to express themselves, for instance by designing posters or banners or t-shirts together, working on shared projects, or creating a public display that showcases your work and everyone's comments about it. This gives volunteers something to remember their experience—which hopefully was a positive one.

Be inclusive and watch out for cliques | In some organizations, leaders or long-term volunteers who get to know each other will begin to feel a sense of privilege and membership. They may also become close friends with other staff or volunteers, and may socialize together outside of the office. This isn't a bad thing, unless new people feel that it's impossible for them to become "one of the club" and be accepted at the same level. This is the quickest way to kill the organization, by driving away your newest members.

Make sure that the way you select leaders is transparent and accessible. Anyone with the qualifications who makes the necessary effort should be eligible. Be sure that leaders of the organization understand that they need to include everyone in their work and report back to everyone about what they do. Encourage more experienced volunteers to mentor new volunteers, and strongly discourage group social events that do not include everyone.

REMEMBER WHY YOU HAVE VOLUNTEERS

While it is important to meet the needs of volunteers, the main benefit of their work should be to the organization and the community as a whole. In the beginning, when a new volunteer starts work, she may need extra help and support to master basic tasks. But after a few months, if you are spending more time managing a difficult volunteer than it would take for you to do the task yourself, it might be time to question whether that volunteer is in the right job, or at the right organization.

For more of the Nonprofit Survival Guide, visit:

www.asiacatalyst.org

HOW TO MANAGE VOLUNTEERS