



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

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Motivating Volunteers

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Roles of Volunteers

Volunteers are an important resource for many organizations. Across the United States, volunteers work in 4-H and Master Gardener programs. They volunteer for environmental groups and health organizations. They help the United Way and the American Heart Association. Volunteers give their time to religious and educational institutions. They serve cultural and art groups, social services, and agencies meeting the needs of communities.

Volunteering can improve life satisfaction, particularly in older people who may have more free time on their hands, or who may be filling a void in their life left by the loss of a loved one, or by retirement. Volunteering allows people to become part of a volunteer network.

Volunteers fill important roles within organizations with dwindling staff and diminishing financial resources. Demands for services are always increasing.

A manager of volunteers can enhance the volunteer experience by providing necessary training to build skills that meet the goals of the volunteer.

Working with Volunteers

Why do people volunteer? Understanding the different motivating factors for volunteers can help a volunteer administrator work more effectively with a volunteer, assigning tasks, organizing/conducting meetings, and recognizing/rewarding accomplishments.

A volunteer administrator must adapt different styles of management to the various needs of volunteers. An effective manager must recognize and fulfill these needs and accomplish the goals and tasks of a program.

Volunteers are individuals with unique feelings, motives, and ambitions. Managers need to respect volunteer individuality and keep volunteering rewarding and stimulating.

What inspires people to action? Some volunteers simply get pleasure from volunteering, while others want to work with peers. Some want to further knowledge. Often volunteers learn new job skills. Some volunteer to pass the time.

Motivators

Usually behind volunteering is one of the following motivators:

- Achievement
- Power
- Affiliation
- Recognition
- Altruism

The achievement-motivated person looks for situations requiring top performance in which they can excel. This person likes to out-perform others attaining unique accomplishments and enjoys striving for lofty goals. They want to do the job better, figuring out ways to remove obstacles.

To work well with the achiever:

- Ask for their help in setting the work pace and methods
- Give them challenging tasks that require efficiency
- Allow them to learn new skills or material
- Give them clear feedback on their performance

People seeking power want to have impact, influencing others with their ideas. They want to win arguments and get others to do things their way. They seek ways to influence through communication.

To direct power-motivated volunteers:

- Give them opportunities to direct others
- Allow them to implement changes
- Have them interact with coworkers/volunteers and with supervisors
- Let them control their work pace
- Ask them how jobs should be done
- Give them tasks that need managerial skills

Being around other people is important to volunteers with an affiliation motive. The social aspect of volunteering appeals to them. They want to build friendships and to be respected. They like being with others, want to help people, and care about others' feelings.

For success with affiliation-oriented volunteers:

- Let them work with people
- Find tasks that require cooperation
- Give them off-task time to interact with their coworkers
- Allow plenty of relationship building time and activities

For those motivated by recognition, prestige and status are important. They prefer clear ending, short-term tasks. They enjoy public relations.

They want to be connected with popular projects. They want to advance to new tasks, so desire timely completion of work.

When volunteers are motivated by recognition:

- Give work that can be completed quickly
- Let them be in positions of high visibility, on radio, TV, or in the news
- Award them with plaques, certificates, and public announcements of their achievements

Altruistic people pursue attainment for the general good. They have high ideals and values. They are concerned about interests that benefit the public. They care about accountability.

To work well with those motivated by altruism:

- Include them with others of similar values and goals
- Have them work with highly committed people
- Provide volunteer opportunities that revolve around accepted community concerns and the mission of the agency

Volunteer Expectations

A volunteer expects certain things from the organization with which they choose to participate. These include:

- Consideration, patience, courtesy, cooperation
- Clarity, tasks they are capable of performing, relevant information
- Professional treatment, private constructive criticism
- Appreciation, sincerity, recognition, positive work experience

Volunteers appreciate accomplishing tasks competently. This builds confidence. A wise manager emphasizes tasks that build competency reinforcing learning with positive appraisal.

Obstacles to Success with Volunteers

A volunteer manager must avoid burn out of volunteers. Burn out is more common among enthusiastic volunteers who become leaders and have unrealistic goals. Underutilization of a volunteer's skills by a volunteer manager also discourages individuals.

Common obstacles include:

- Neglecting to ask for help from a volunteer
- Assigning tasks without giving clear direction or training
- Making the volunteer feel unimportant or unnecessary
- Using volunteers for busy work
- Having low expectations of a volunteer
- Forgetting to thank a volunteer for their contribution

Success with Volunteers

For success with volunteers:

- Find out their needs
- Give them jobs they enjoy and from which they can learn
- Involve them in program planning and decision-making wherever possible
- Show them their experience is valued
- Reward volunteers from the moment of initial contact

Job satisfaction is the pay a volunteer receives. The work needs to be meaningful, interesting, and allow for personal growth. Social interaction is important. Recruitment is only the beginning of a volunteer program. Retention is vital to program success.

How Volunteers Relate to an Organization

A manager of volunteers must realize that motivations change over time. Initially a volunteer chooses an organization based on a preconceived idea of how that organization will fulfill their desires.

As volunteers meet others who work in the organization and as they do work themselves, they get a clearer picture of the values, constraints, and traits of the organization. They change their expectations to meet the more accurate reality.

The effective volunteer manager builds flexibility into programs to meet these changes, allowing volunteers to grow, do new tasks, and meet their changing needs.

A volunteer manager geared for success with volunteers allows for personal variations in time, interest, and energy from individual volunteers.

A good manager allows and encourages growth for each volunteer. Volunteers want supportive feedback as well as recognition for a job well done.

Rules need to be easy to understand and limited to those that are necessary to ensure smooth functioning within the organization. A volunteer manager must share the vision of the organization with all volunteers and serve as a liaison between the organization and the volunteers.

Talk with volunteers to see what is important to them. Work with volunteers regularly to keep up-to-date with their changing needs.

The goal for a volunteer administrator is to attract willing volunteers, then keep them productive, and keep them satisfied with the volunteer experience. By keeping the magic in that experience, not only are volunteers' needs met, but also organizational needs.

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