Engaging Volunteers

Service is the rent we pay for being. It is the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time.

~ Anonymous ~

Once a volunteer has been accepted by an agency and received the orientation, the volunteer administrator (VA) has about 30 days to engage the volunteer or lose them as a volunteer. Because the greatest loss of volunteers primarily occurs within the first six months, it is very important to get volunteers involved as quickly as possible. Volunteers who are not engaged in a timely manner will resign or drift away due to their lack of involvement.

Most volunteers come to organizations because they want to help. Involving them quickly helps the volunteer feel like they are needed and that they contribute to the organization. Volunteers may also give their time because they have specific skills and like to use their talents to help others.

Volunteers are more likely to become involved if there are opportunities that are important to them. The more involved they are, the more “connected” they feel to the organization. To increase this connection, invite them to take action such as attending a meeting, making some phone calls, planning an event, hosting a function, joining a committee, promoting an effort, managing a project, etc.

After a volunteer takes the first step toward involvement, they should be "bumped up" to a higher level of commitment. The new task or responsibility should match what the VA learned about the volunteer during the recruitment phase. This process acknowledges the varying interests, talents, and time availability of potential volunteers and allows them to gradually increase their commitment to the organization. It requires that volunteers have jobs that actually accomplish something, as well as be interesting and challenging.

There is a 60-day "window of opportunity" during which the organization can help shape the attitudes of the new volunteer. If the volunteer does not feel as though they "belong" by the end of these 60 days, the volunteer's participation will begin to fade and they will eventually leave the organization. This fact alone emphasizes the importance of influencing the volunteer's attitude through meaningful involvement.
Steps to Involving Volunteers

- Use the initial orientation to help volunteers connect with each other and with the paid staff with whom they will be working.

- Have a plan. Most organizations have a plan for how to involve volunteers that have been specifically recruited, but what about unsolicited volunteers?
  - Develop a wish list of volunteers. If you had unlimited volunteers, what would you have them do? Develop a brief description of each of those tasks and place in a notebook. When unsolicited volunteers call you office, refer them to the “Wish Book” to see if their interests or talents fit a need.
  - Develop a plan for increasing volunteers’ level of responsibility after the initial task is complete. Increasing responsibility recognizes the volunteer's value and contribution to the agency and increases their commitment to the agency.

- Have a diverse mix of jobs that volunteers can do.
- Make sure that tasks are meaningful and contribute to the agency’s mission and vision. Don’t just give volunteers busy work.

If you don’t have a need for a volunteer at the moment, inform them of future opportunities with your agency and ask if you can put them on your list for future events/needs. If you are overwhelmed with volunteers (a rare event), be prepared to refer them to other nonprofits with whom you collaborate. It is a disservice to accept a volunteer when you can't involve them immediately.

"Everyone has exactly the same number of hours in a day. Be conscious of the value of the time some people share generously with you...and never waste it.” – Susan Ellis (March 2002)

References

