Retaining Volunteers

Retaining volunteers is the key to success for any volunteer program. You have invested significant time in identifying, recruiting, and training these volunteers. If you cannot keep volunteers involved in your organization, you will have to begin the process over again. Retaining volunteers requires less time and effort than constantly recruiting and training new ones. In time, your supply of “new” volunteers will run out and the importance of retaining volunteers will have been learned the hard way.

Keys to Retaining Volunteers

- Make sure they are getting their motivational needs met through their volunteer experience.
- Provide an environment that will make a volunteer feel good - one that increases their self-esteem, where they feel good about their job and want to come to “work.” Remember Herzberg’s Motivation Factors of achievement, recognition, and having important work to do.

Factors that Influence Retention

Connectedness - is feeling a sense of belonging, a sense of being part of a relationship with others. A sense of identification with a work group can meet this need, producing healthier, happier, individuals. If the following is present, connectedness is felt: a common goal, common values, mutual respect and trust, and the strengths and weaknesses of the group are balanced.

Structure - volunteers like to be a part of an organized group that has structure, but allows for flexibility.

Reward - volunteers like to be rewarded appropriately for a job well done. A good program will emphasize positive rewards.

Responsibility - volunteers like the feeling of being their own boss and not having to double check all decisions.

Power - a sense of effectiveness, a feeling that the volunteer is making a difference. Volunteers need to work on things that matter. If it is not immediately apparent to the volunteer that the task they are working on is meaningful to the outcome, explain it to them in that context. Make volunteers responsible for the results. It gives them a sense of being in charge of something meaningful.
Risk - volunteers like a sense of challenge and permission to take calculated risks.

Warmth - the feeling of good fellowship in the work group atmosphere is also important. It helps if a program has a prevailing mood that is friendly and informal, without cliques.

Support - a good program fosters a sense of mutual support; helpfulness on the part of managers and others in the group.

Standards - the emphasis should be on doing a good job.

Uniqueness - a feeling that a volunteer is special in some way, that they have a unique set of talents and qualities to contribute.

Conflict - a difference in opinion shouldn't be considered a liability. Problems should be aired and resolved, not ignored. Other opinions are heard and valued.

Evaluation - volunteers deserve to know where they stand so the experience is a growth experience.

**Strategies for Retaining Volunteers**

- Focus retention efforts on critical points such as the first six months.
- Help volunteers through this re-evaluation time find new opportunities to meet new motivational objectives.
- Give volunteers a great place to work. Environment should be warm, friendly, supportive, and effective.
- Get volunteers involved as soon as possible. If they are underutilized, they may feel they aren't making a contribution. When in doubt, ask them what they want to be doing.
- Give them what they don't have - ask yourself what volunteers want out of their jobs that they don't get from their current paid job. Try to give them more challenging work in the areas they feel unfulfilled. During the interview ask...
  - What do you get out of your current job?
  - What do you not get to do sufficiently in your current job?
  - What would your ideal job look like?
  - What would you do in your ideal job, and what would you not do?
- Set goal expectations at an appropriate level—not too high or too low.
- Treat staff and volunteers equally.
• Celebrate the accomplishments of volunteers in the context of their contribution to the goals of the group.
• Praise them for individual qualities.
• Be consistent with recognition.
• Look for opportunities to promote interaction among group members. Involve people in the decision making process.
• Engage volunteers in new experiences together.
• Encourage volunteers to express themselves, give them the authority to think, explore alternative ways to achieve their results.
• Give them challenging assignments and take advantage of their individual strengths.

**Strategies for Short-term Volunteers**

• Provide several entry-level, short-term jobs for volunteers who just want to sample the organization. Once they are in, you can encourage them to explore more long term jobs that provide enjoyment and interest.
• Always have jobs available for episodic volunteers.