

## Three Ways to Stronger Volunteer Engagement

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Dedicated, passionate volunteers are the lifeblood of your organization. They perform countless roles to assure vital work is accomplished and your mission is put into action every day. To achieve the best results, volunteers need the tools and training to be effective from day one and regular affirmation that they are a valued part of the organization. Following are three ways to strengthen your volunteer management program:

### 1. Be an Organization Where People Want to Volunteer

- **Define the Volunteer Experience:** Provide a volunteer job description in writing. Make sure it clearly identifies volunteer duties, responsibilities, and expectations. Articulate the time commitment and skills required. Establish reporting mechanisms and a single point of contact.
- **Recruit Early and Often:** Volunteer recruiting should be an ongoing process. Don't just recruit when you *need* volunteers.
- **Identify Volunteer Ambitions:** Why does the individual want to volunteer? What does the volunteer hope to gain from the experience? What would make this an especially great volunteer opportunity?
- **Demonstrate Value:** Communicate the importance of the volunteer work to other activities of the organization and the overall mission. Discuss what volunteers will gain by being a part of your organization's success.

### 2. Start New Volunteers on the Right Track

- **Prepare in Advance:** Know what resources are required for volunteers to serve effectively. Prepare a work plan to make the most of your volunteers' time.
- **Make Volunteers Feel Welcome:** when new volunteers start, be sure to introduce them to staff, give them a tour of the office, and be available for their questions.
- **Orient & Train New Volunteers:** New volunteers are excited to serve. Show them how to convert their enthusiasm for your mission into successful results in their position.

- **Convey Ground Rules:** Volunteers frequently serve as a point of contact between your organization and the public it serves. They must represent your organization accurately with clear understanding of applicable policies and procedures when interacting with the public. Make sure you relate important rules before your volunteers get started. How should they respond to inquiries for sensitive information? To whom should they refer inquiries they are not comfortable handling on their own? What should they do in case of an emergency?
- **Establish Realistic Time Requirements:** Determine the time commitment that is realistically necessary to fulfill the volunteer position and communicate it openly. Specify if the position is ongoing or a time-bound project. Often potential volunteers hesitate to commit to volunteer service for fear that there is no end in sight. Set a date when you can evaluate the volunteer experience and assess whether to recommit, change/increase responsibilities or conclude the experience.

### 3. Support the Volunteers Who Support You

- **Establish Clear Expectations & Get Feedback:** Even if there is a negative volunteer experience you may extort value from an exit interview to learn what went wrong and what changes you can make to improve the volunteer process at your institution. Was the objective of the volunteer assignment successful? Did the volunteer have a fulfilling experience? Would the volunteer serve your organization again? What was most rewarding? What was most disappointing?
- **Keep Volunteers Informed:** If there are changes in your organization that affect volunteer positions, let them know immediately. Describe why the changes are occurring and what the impact is on volunteer roles and responsibilities.
- **Recognize and Reward:** The number one reason volunteers discontinue their service is because they feel their contribution/time is not appreciated. Remember that the volunteer position at your organization is only one of many responsibilities that your volunteer must fulfill on a regular basis. Unless volunteers complain that they are too often appreciated, find a way to express greater thanks for their help.

For individuals who have been with you for years and spent untold hours serving your organization, a special token of appreciation is in order. For some, a plaque is appropriate. Some volunteers appreciate public affirmation while others prefer a charitable contribution be made in their honor. Be aware of social and cultural differences among your volunteers. Find out how your volunteers prefer to be thanked and recognize them appropriately.<sup>1</sup>

For additional resources to strengthen your volunteer management program, visit the resources section of the MCN website at [www.mcn.org](http://www.mcn.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Birnbach, Sheila. *Developing Future Leaders*. October 20, 2005. Atlanta, Georgia.