

The Care and Feeding of Volunteers



Hooray! You've recruited a volunteer! You're thinking:

"Whew! That's done. Now they'll do the task and I can relax and forget about it!"

But wait. What you do or don't do after they say 'yes' directly impacts:

- How well they do the task
- Whether or not they enjoy the work
- Whether or not you enjoy working with them!
- How long they continue as a volunteer
- Whether they ever volunteer for you or anyone in your organization again

The good news: Supporting volunteers is not demanding. A little effort, regular and intentional, goes a long way to success!

Elements of a successful partnership



Training and orientation

Your position description gives them the main details, and you'll show them how to do the task. What else might they need to know? Perhaps it's how to reach you with questions; where to get supplies; where to park; the customs of the office/classroom, etc. Keep your eyes open for what out what they don't know but would be helpful.

Healthy Oversight

- "How's it going?" – Make a point of asking this periodically, with a posture that says you really do want to know. It's likely you'll learn something helpful.
- Annual Review – Just as with any paid job, an annual look at the big picture makes for a better working relationship. Both volunteer and leader need to speak truth in love, expressing what's working well and where we'd like to see improvement.
- Avoid "terminal niceness." Don't ignore problems; be willing to speak the truth in love. Yes, you can fire a volunteer, but the process is long, difficult and can be avoided by addressing problems when they're small. ([See How to Fire a Church Volunteer.](#))

Relationships Matter

Work is always done for and with other people. Enjoying relationships are often key to enjoying our tasks. Think about simple things you can do to build your relationship with your volunteers, and to help the volunteers build relationships with each other and those they serve. Having fun together helps, as does an email on their birthday, or other simple contact outside of the work relationship. Relationships are, or can be, eternal.

Appreciation and Affirmation

Most volunteers aren't expecting a thank you gift. But a simple "thank you" is always appreciated. Telling them how they are making a difference is the most impactful thing you can do. "I heard Susie tell Sally about how you listen to her read." "I was able to tackle this new project because you're doing all that record-keeping for me." "Your work was praised by the team working on school accreditation."

What's your Next Step:

- This week, make a point of asking a volunteer, "How's it going?"
- Next week, make a point of telling a volunteer how they are making a difference.
- For another look at the care and feeding of volunteers, read ["Going to the Dogs?"](#)

A care and feeding story:

I saw a volunteer setting up coffee and donuts on a Sunday morning and asked him, "How's it going?" He said, "Fine." I followed up with, "Is there anything you need?" He rather reluctantly said, "Well . . . It takes a while each week to track someone down to unlock the storage cupboard." It took only a little effort on my part to get him a key to the cupboard. Since he obviously was uncomfortable 'complaining,' if I hadn't asked, he would have hung in there until he got tired and quit, without anyone noticing how a little key would have removed a significant barrier.

Also in this series:

1. Powerful Partnership: What Could the Right Volunteer Do for You?
2. Treasure Hunt: Finding the Right Volunteer
3. Winsome Words: Crafting Effective Recruitment Messages
4. Dig into Data: How to search for Volunteers' Gifts in the Volunteer Impact Database
5. Shared Knowledge: Filling our Treasure Check

Volunteer Engagement: We're on the move!

From ...

- Volunteering
- "Same old" volunteer roles
- Generalized recruitment
- Isolated knowledge of peoples' gifts

To ...

- Serving everywhere
- Creative, flexible, customized roles
- Personalized recruitment
- Shared knowledge of peoples' gifts

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