



The Five Essential Things Every Volunteer Deserves

By Gayle Goldin

Throughout my life, I've tried various volunteer activities, many of which have been dismal failures. I'd like to think that the failure rises from good intentions with the wrong organizations.

Yet, while many of my volunteer activities have not led to success (I always seem to be on the losing side of a political battle), a few notable ones have given me great personal reward. I am currently volunteering as a board member of a statewide organization and the experience is one of the best opportunities I could imagine. I know the work that I am doing is making a significant difference and I feel deeply valued by the agency's director and staff.

In order to get to this volunteer happy place, however, I had to start by recognizing when a volunteer activity was likely to be unfulfilling for me. In many instances, I jumped right in without understanding what skills I could bring to an organization.

Now I realize a successful volunteer opportunity stems from a good match between my own interests and an organization that values my contributions. The **first** way to make sure that my interests match the mission of the organization is through their screening process. The **second** component, figuring out if an organization will value my contributions, is a bit trickier. I've come up with a list of **five** ways I think determine if an organization values their volunteers:

Orientation

When I graduated from college, I returned to my hometown and started volunteering through a newly formed volunteer center. The center ran one-time volunteer activities on a weekly basis, ranging from organizing cans in food banks to visiting children at the pediatric hospital. From the sound of it, I would meet many people, learn about various nonprofits in the area, and maybe even find an interesting job.

My friend Lauren and I signed right up. Our first step: orientation. They shuffled us into a conference room with a group of other potential volunteers. A staff person came in, gave a two-minute overview, and then turned on a video. That was it. There was no connection with the other people in the room and no one took the time to connect us with the organization or personally insure we understood the impact our commitment to volunteer activities would make.

In fact, no staff person met with each person individually to even assess if our volunteer aspirations matched with the needs of the organization. **If your organization's orientation involves a small packet with your annual report and latest newsletter, it is time to reassess.**

The orientation is your organization's way of making a powerful first impression that sends the message: we value your volunteering here. Every volunteer deserves to know:



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- Who works here
 - Who is on the board
 - What is the mission of the organization
 - How will my time be used to further goals of the organization
 - Who will I be helping
 - Who will supervise me
 - What should I do if I have a problem or concern and, most importantly ...
 - Where's the bathroom.

Training

If you ask a volunteer to do something that he/she does not have expertise to do immediately, keep in mind that it is **your job** to provide training.

I once volunteered to teach an older person to read. I participated as part of a literacy council where I received about two hours of training. I was then “matched” to my adult learner; we met together weekly for three years. While the experience for me was deeply rewarding, it was also remarkably frustrating. I did not receive adequate training. The volunteer coordinator never contacted me to check-in on my experience. I received no guidance on how to measure my student's progress. I was not given the adequate tools to do the job.

Similarly, while my adult learner did eventually learn to read, I do not doubt that he would have been better served, and learned to read quicker if the adequate tools and training were provided. A mentor would have also been helpful.

Training a volunteer adequately will reinforce the volunteer's commitment and productivity to:

- Build on the mission of the organization and
- Ensure that your clients are receiving the quality of services you expect of your staff.

It also helps your volunteers know that you want them to succeed, will give them pride in their work, and will make it more likely that your volunteers will encourage others to get involved with your organization.

Investment

Every volunteer deserves to feel a **personal investment** in the organization. The best way to nurture that investment is to build that connection from the very beginning.

Find out what brought the volunteer to your organization:

- Do they know someone who uses your services or volunteers with your organization?
- Are they connected to your mission through personal experience?



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- Did they meet one of your staff out in public?
 - Do they want to learn new skills?
 - Can they provide a needed service at your organization that they have the time & talent to do, but don't have an outlet to do it other than your organization?
 - Is this way to meet new people, get a date, or change careers?

As nonprofit staff, we often consider the volunteer opportunity as to what that person can do for us; however, a perceptive volunteer manager who knows that keeping a volunteer engaged is about **what the organization can do for the volunteer**. Build time into your volunteer's activities to introduce them to each other and to the organization's ongoing activities. Let your volunteers know they are part of your team.

Dialogue

Volunteers deserve to have **ongoing communication** with all types of staff people, not just the volunteer director. Open communication among volunteers and staff will help ensure that the volunteer is on the right track, not stepping on a staff person's toes, and receives appreciation for their work.

We all need positive feedback - volunteers and staff alike, but we also all need **mentoring**. Make sure that dialogue involves guidance when necessary. Remember that the dialogue goes two ways - ask for and expect **feedback** from volunteers. Consider their concerns and their viewpoint. If a volunteer needs a piece of equipment or tool to do her job more efficiently, make the investment.

Appreciation

Some people confuse appreciation with public recognition. Certainly, it is nice to be recognized for years of service or for going "above and beyond" on a task, but most of the time, a volunteer will be satisfied with a simple heartfelt "thank you."

In the world of free clinics, many clinic directors will pass along letters of thanks from patients to the volunteer physician who cared for her, or ask patients to take a moment to write a sentence or two of thanks for the newsletter.

In fact, the most important aspect of appreciation is letting your volunteers see the **impact of their work**. For instance, if adding another volunteer this month meant five more clients served, or you saved the organization \$1,000 because you did not have to outsource stuffing envelopes, let your volunteers know.

Volunteers who are invested and committed to your organization are more likely to

- Increase volunteer hours when needed



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- Take the time to ask others to get involved
 - Talk about the organization during networking opportunities, and ultimately
 - Are more likely to donate and help raise additional funds

What it all boils down to is simple: volunteers who feel valued will bring value to your organization.

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Celeste Sauls-Marks

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