

Volunteer Management in Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations recognize that their most significant assets are their people, the board, staff, and volunteers whose know-how and hard work make the organization successful. Strong leaders have strong staffs. Effective boards nominate and recruit strong board leaders to serve. People committed to the mission surround themselves with competent individuals who share their vision. In short, organizations are made up of people. The quality of the people and how well they work together define the effectiveness of the agency.

Volunteering has long been a shared principle in the United States, with individuals each year giving their time without any expectation of payment. While these volunteer activities may be performed with the fundamental intention of helping others, there is also a common wisdom that those who give of themselves also receive. To volunteer simply means, to be motivated and give one's time or energies to work towards a project or cause that you are interested in.

Volunteers play a central role in the life of a nonprofit agency. Because of their commitment, these nonprofit agencies can keep the cost of providing vital services lower than they might have been. When volunteers are treated with respect, are shown appreciation and are assigned meaningful work to do, they become a valuable resource.

Contributors of time (volunteers) provide important human and financial resources that nurture, sustain, and bolster nonprofit sports and recreation organizations, programs, and special events. It

is very evident that in many JCC & YMCA youth sports programs; volunteers serve as coaches, timekeepers, officials, mentors, and counselors.

The nation's nonprofits are under pressure from a tight economy, a leadership drain (as Boomers retire), and are facing higher staff turnover rates than many other industries. Volunteers are a resource for tackling these challenges. Nonprofits are not encouraged to use volunteerism as a strategy to replace permanent staff. Instead, nonprofits are encouraged to incorporate volunteering into their strategic mission.

People have a desire to make a difference, give back to communities, help others, and belong to a greater cause. Many times, individuals may be searching for a career path but they aren't totally sure what interests them and what they will commit themselves too. Some people haven't ever felt a belonging to someone or something so they volunteer to be a part of something bigger, be loyal to a specific cause, and make an impact on others and in their own lives. Many reasons for volunteering can be as simple as "my friends are doing it" or they just want to meet new people and have a good time. Volunteers may be looking for a job and need to bulk up their resume or they want to impress the people they already work with. The reasons are endless. The important thing nonprofit leaders and staff members must understand is how to keep the attention, work ethic, and contentment of volunteers at a very high level.

Volunteering is at the core of the work of a JCC & YMCA. Volunteers keep our neighborhoods strong; they build playgrounds, teach children to read, serve on boards, and help make the nonprofit agency grow and prosper. Volunteering has a meaningful, positive impact on a nonprofit

agency. But did you know that it can have many benefits for the volunteer as well? Here are some reasons why individuals choose to volunteer: Volunteers can be called upon to deliver vital services. Volunteers are called upon to provide their expertise. Real estate agents, graphic artists, marketing or finance experts, attorneys, pediatricians, printers and a host of other professionals have been known to donate their services to nonprofit organizations. There is no doubt that people who share the agency's values can be asked to contribute their professional time to the cause.

Recruiting Volunteers

In order to recruit volunteers, it is fundamental to give some thought to why people would want to work for your organization. Individuals volunteer to serve on boards of nonprofit organizations for many different reasons. Most volunteers offer their services to advance the existence or mission of the organization, and strongly believe in its work and purpose. People also serve on boards because they believe in the organization, but they also want to gain personal benefits from their volunteer efforts. The reasons for board service range from a desire to serve to a need for personal gain.

Volunteers are the backbone of many JCC's & YMCA's. Unpaid workers may assist with clerical work, they may provide technical assistance and consulting, or they may help steer the organization as members of the Board of Directors. Even though volunteers provide their services for free, they require careful recruitment, training, management and supervision as do paid staff.

Volunteers can also be the lifeblood of an organization, but putting them to their best use is challenging. Staffs that are responsible for managing volunteers are often not trained in the differences between employees

and volunteers and in what motivates them. Volunteers, unlike employees, are not paid and don't receive promotions. Their motivations instead include things such as the desire to give something back to the community, interest in repaying benefits they've received from an organization, or simply the opportunity to meet and interact with others who have similar interests. To motivate volunteers, program staffs need to find ways to make the work fulfilling and to facilitate social interaction, as well. Providing program staff with that understanding is critical to ensure that the organization runs smoothly and that both staff and volunteers are satisfied in their roles.

Managing volunteers is an important role. Sometimes it's hard to attract quality volunteers, and it can be even harder to retain them. JCC's & YMCA's rely heavily on volunteers. Recruiting, training and maintaining volunteers can be a challenge. Attracting and keeping volunteers involves implementing an effective screening and matching process and providing effective communication with volunteers as well.

Although it may be tempting to accept anyone interested in volunteering, this policy does not help the volunteers or the organization. Finding volunteers who are a good fit for the organization may take time, but is essential for finding volunteers who are most likely to stick around. Asking for references should be a required part of your screening process, especially if the volunteer is working with infants, toddlers and young children.

The recruiting process for a volunteer needs to be the same as the recruiting process for a potential employee. Edward A. Schirick, president of Schirick and Associates Insurance Brokers in Rock Hill, New York, where he specializes in providing risk management advice and in arranging insurance coverage for camps suggests the importance of treating volunteer workers just as you would an employee. Mr. Schirick suggests that a job description needs to be fashioned for volunteer roles that suggested the proper knowledge and skills as well as job tasks that will be included in this position. After this has been done, a volunteer

application needs to be drawn up that includes questions such as work history, volunteer experience, certifications, and references. These questions are designed to give the staff person in charge a better indication of what kind of person a potential volunteer may be.

The most essential step in the recruiting process comes after the application process. Even though a prospective volunteer may look good on paper, a background check will truly give the staff leader an idea of what kind of individual that a person may be. Operation TLC, *Making Communities Safe* is a volunteer management and background screening program designed for National Recreation and Parks Association members. It ensures you attain the most qualified volunteers to support the safety your community needs “approximately 5% of volunteers can't pass a comprehensive criminal background check and over 13% of all crimes are found outside the state of current residence” (Pfahl, 2008). Therefore, it is very important that a comprehensive national criminal background check takes place on all prospective volunteers. This will allow the manager to immediately eliminate any potential volunteer that has a criminal history. If volunteers are going to have access to organizationally owned vehicles, a motor vehicle record check also needs to take place. “All volunteers at the Southern Indiana YMCA must complete a background check in addition to a criminal background check”, said Joe LaRocca, CEO. When screening volunteers on their pasts, it is very important to treat every volunteer equally and fairly, as well as obtain permission to conduct these checks.

You can gain volunteers by many different means. You can bring them in through promotional materials, incentives, word-of-mouth, signage, and organizational ties. Promotional materials advertise your event and should state the reason or cause for the event. According to Saul F. Levenshus, President & CEO of the Barshop Jewish Community Center in San Antonio, Texas, “we use our website and monthly newsletter to encourage volunteer participation.” If the organization has a building, the display of signage that advertises the volunteer opportunities could be successful if the design is appealing and inviting.

You may gain volunteers, if it is a cause that others support. If someone will benefit in some way by volunteering, they will do it. Kenny Hoerter, CEO of the Northeast Branch YMCA in Louisville, Kentucky says, “word-of mouth can be very effective as well, especially if your volunteers spread the word that they are volunteering, others may want to help out too”. Another big way that people volunteer is through organizational ties. You can attract volunteers to work at your event if you are supporting an organization that they support as well. This creates a win-win situation and is highly affective. The Northeast YMCA in Louisville, Kentucky organizes a seasonal volunteer recruitment campaigns with one big one in the summer and a smaller effort other times of the year which consists of internal signage, target e-mails/snail mails, community collaborations and postings on the Metro United Way website.

Greg Hudelson, Coordinator of Agency Relations at the Metro United Way in Louisville, Kentucky states that, “we often rely on present volunteers from our existing committees to help us identify individuals with the certain skill set we are looking for to serve on our committees.” Lastly, if the organization has a great need for volunteers, design a brochure that describes the opportunities in an appealing way and be sure to include an application or registration section that can be returned.

Training Volunteers

Happy and fulfilled volunteers have a tendency to stay with your organization and stay productive. After the proper volunteers are chosen, effective volunteer management must take place. One of the most important aspects of managing volunteers is making sure that they are properly trained and prepared. When training and preparing a volunteer, it is important to offer this training before the actual event takes place. This can be done by offering an on-site visit, or even internet training when available. This will allow individuals to be prepared for their task before they have to do it as opposed to having them learn on the fly. “It is also important to avoid assigning volunteer workers to duties that require "hard skills" without a prior

opportunity to determine their competency” (Schirick, 2007). Volunteer’s competency can be determined by their application, as well as their performance doing the task that they are assigned after they arrive.

Once you have all the volunteers you need to work your event, you will need to hold training sessions for them before the event. When scheduling your training, offer volunteers a couple of choices, including an evening and weekend session. Each volunteer effort is different and therefore has a different job description. “Volunteers receive both specific training (to the task) and general training (things every employee at the agency should know) depending on the assignment”, said Saul Levenshus of the Barshop JCC.

Requiring volunteers to attend training sessions also helps reduce the rate of no-shows. It seems that volunteers make a deeper commitment to your event or program and are more invested in honoring that commitment. In the training sessions you should explain to all the volunteers their general requirements as well as their specialized requirements as needed. You should explain their dress if needed or supply them with uniforms, as well as food if it is applicable during the event. Make sure that your volunteers know who their supervisor is and who they need to communicate to, if a problem were to arise. Joe LaRocca, CEO & President of the Southern Indiana YMCA in New Albany, Indiana states that “all youth sports volunteers go through an extensive coaches training program”.

Thanking Volunteers

Creating a culture of thanks is a key value of an organization that believes in actively rewarding people for their accomplishments. Creating a culture of thanks isn’t a single action, but the culmination of several gestures. It’s that feeling you get when you come into an organization where people seem pleased and you can sense the positive energy all around you.

Expressing thanks to your volunteers and doing it through a range of creative words and actions, is one of the most effective ways to retain a team of dedicated volunteers. Too many volunteers go unrecognized and

feel under-valued. If they do not feel appreciated, they will not want to volunteer again. According to Kenny Hoerter, Executive Director of the Northeast YMCA in Louisville, Kentucky says, “Ongoing praise is how we recognize our volunteers”.

You can recognize them in many ways, such as public announcement, having a party for them, or giving them a reward. Do not take your volunteers for granted, because they are the main reason your event is possible. At the Barshop JCC in San Antonio, Texas, they provide their volunteers with a pin designating them as a J Volunteer, in addition to hosting a “cheers for volunteers” event, sometimes a reception, sometimes a breakfast, just to say thanks for their efforts.

You may also think about hosting a party for the volunteers only. Most importantly, acknowledge them on a regular basis and make them feel like they are just as much a part of your organization as your staff members. Tell them thank you, let them know you appreciate them regularly. Volunteers are volunteering their time because they are passionate about your mission and they want to be a part of your service, so make them feel like they are. Greg Hudelson, Coordinator of Agency Relations at the Metro United Way in Louisville, Kentucky states that, “we consistently thank volunteers throughout the year in a variety of ways. (Letters, hand written cards, electronic emails and often verbally face to face following meetings or special events”.

Here are some other ways to show your appreciation to your volunteers:

- It’s the things you do on a daily basis to make volunteers feel welcome, part of your team and connected to the group,
- Invite them to staff meetings,
- Hold volunteer social events,

- Use your monthly newsletter to acknowledge their efforts,
- Invite them to special trainings,
- Provide volunteers with some perks like t-shirts or guest passes,
- Give out an annual volunteer of the year award, or
- Sponsor a volunteer appreciation luncheon.

In conclusion, volunteers can be a very important part of a nonprofit organization as well as making any special event a great success. Volunteer management is the process of recruiting and keeping track of volunteers. It's important for volunteers to receive the proper training so they can reach their maximum potential when performing a job. Management must treat the volunteers with the highest level of respect for several reasons. Too many volunteers go unrecognized and are under-valued so it is encouraged that you motivate them and keep them happy. Maintaining a vibrant volunteer program is an essential ingredient for the long-term success of your organization.

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