

The Invisible Volunteer: Teaching Volunteer Managers How To Welcome New Volunteers

Feature Articles

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Imagine walking into a small room where there are eight people – seven of these eight already know each other – and after you have stayed for an hour, not a single person has spoken to you or acknowledged your presence.

That was my experience on the latest nonprofit board I joined as a volunteer.

As a Volunteer Engagement professional, this experience made me reflect on how *I* go about my work to prepare others to work with volunteers. It occurred to me immediately that so much of our focus is most likely spent on training staff that we may forget to provide our volunteers with the critical training *they* need to work with other volunteers.

Especially in small nonprofits, we rely on our volunteers to serve as ambassadors, leaders, fundraisers, advocates and in many other roles that help our organizations fulfill our missions. But because many of these volunteers are engaged in other organizations, successful in their own careers and believe in our work, it's easy to make the wrong assumption and think that that they are also ready to hit the ground running as a new volunteer.

My experience would indicate the opposite: It isn't always the case that volunteers automatically have the skills needed to be effective volunteers for our cause.

10 Practices To Onboard New Volunteer Leaders

So, how do Volunteer Engagement professionals prepare volunteers to work with and lead other volunteers, without making them feel like we don't trust them to do what we need them to do?

To begin with, don't call it "training." Volunteers, especially those who are experienced on other boards or in other roles, will likely view the word "training" as basic or even insulting. For the purposes of this article, we will refer to the process of bringing new volunteers into volunteer experiences as "onboarding."

Below are the top 10 practices I follow when onboarding new volunteer leaders to organizations I am involved with.

1. Volunteer job descriptions and expectations are important to the volunteer experience.

Just as we evaluate staff needs in our organizations and develop job descriptions and recruitment tactics to fill them, we must do the same with our volunteer leaders. Organizational charts are common when it comes to illustrating the staff resources for an organization, but when was the last time you developed a volunteer organizational chart that outlines the role your volunteers play? Organizations put a great deal of time and effort into making sure staff job descriptions sound appealing and are clear, in order to attract the most qualified candidates. The same process should be the case when it comes to volunteer recruitment.

Developing a list of needs for volunteer support is the first step while being realistic with the amount of volunteer involvement your organization can manage must follow. From there, develop volunteer job descriptions just as you would for staff, including the role a volunteer will play, metrics for success, the type of background you're looking for, and how much time they might expect to spend in the role. While interviewing may seem like a formal process, most times the potential volunteer will appreciate the attention to the experience you are showing and will likely give them the feeling that they play an important role in the organization. Interviews also give the volunteer an opportunity to assess whether your organization and expectations are in line with their own.

2. An onboarding process is important regardless of the volunteer role.

The volunteer has said "yes," now what?

Because many nonprofits move so quickly, it is common to expect the same with our volunteers. But we must remember that, like staff, the backgrounds of our volunteers are as varied as their previous volunteer experiences. Creating an onboarding process may be one of the most important and impactful parts of the volunteer journey. Volunteer onboarding should include important organizational training

elements, such as understanding: the history/mission/values of the organization, the staff and volunteer structure; how resources are deployed; major priorities/projects/initiatives; the strategic plan; and an appreciation and understanding of their specific role and how it “fits” into the overall organization.

This is also a key time to better understand what the volunteer is looking for in their experience.

3. Mentorship is just as important for volunteers as it is for staff.

Even if the volunteer is familiar with the organization, an important part of the onboarding process is to connect them to another volunteer who they can learn from and connect with.

Finding the right volunteer mentor is critical.

You will want to identify someone who excels in their volunteer role, who ideally has something in common with the new volunteer, and who can help the volunteer navigate the first few months in the new role. Coming into a new organization at any level can be intimidating, so connecting the new volunteer to someone else from the beginning will help them feel welcomed, valued and part of a community.

4. Having a volunteer retention plan will help to build a strong leadership pipeline.

Volunteer retention is just as important as staff retention for many of the same reasons.

A first-time volunteer can become a future President or Chair of your board, a leading donor in your next campaign, or someone who recruits countless new volunteers. So investing in their future leadership is important. The return on investing in resources and time to retain high performing volunteers will always be a better use of your time and resources than a revolving door of volunteers coming and going, so an intentional and planned volunteer retention plan is critical!

5. Volunteer leaders want to know how they are doing.

In the same way that we shouldn't wait until the annual review cycle to let a staff member know how they are performing, the same principle should also apply to volunteers.

Volunteers agree to serve because they want to play an active role in the success of your organization, but that does not happen by accident. In addition to the investment of onboarding and retention, you will also want to ensure a culture of feedback for all your volunteers, so that they know how they are contributing to the overall goals of the organization. This may come in the form of informal feedback or scheduled formal feedback. Either way, offering constructive feedback should become a core part of the volunteer experience and a part that volunteers come to expect.

6. Not everyone can or should be a volunteer for your organization.

Your approach to recruiting volunteers does not need to be a 'come one, come all' approach. You will want to identify those volunteers who have the skill set required to positively contribute to your organization and meet the goals you have set for your volunteer roles, and that may simply not be everyone who comes your way!

This is where volunteer job descriptions that clearly state what they will be doing and the experiences they need to bring are important. When you encounter someone who is enthusiastic to volunteer but may lack the type of experiences needed for the specific roles you are looking for, you should think about whether this is someone you want to invest in and, if so, identify ways to get them trained – just like you would a staff member – in the areas they are excited about.

7. Forming a volunteer community can help further many of your goals.

Many nonprofits, regardless of size, have robust volunteer networks with all serving in a variety of capacities – and, in many cases, these volunteers do not even know each other!

Connecting volunteers to other volunteers helps to create more excitement and enthusiasm, serves as a hub for innovation and ideas, creates mentorship relationships, and fosters a great sense of pride in the organization they serve. But this also does not happen by accident and requires an organized plan for how you intend on forming this community. This also is a great way to engage former board chairs or long-serving volunteer leaders to help your organization design what this community can achieve.

8. Communicating regularly with your volunteers will give them a strong sense of affinity to your work.

I have served on boards where I hear from the Board President/Chair or Chief Staff Officer on a weekly basis, and I have served on other boards where I forget I am on the board until I receive a meeting agenda.

Neither example is probably the right cadence of communicating, but this illustrates the great range in the ways we communicate with our volunteer leaders.

So, does your organization have a communication plan or schedule? If not, now would be a good time to develop one and ensure that communication with both volunteers and paid staff is included. This also requires some dialogue with your volunteers to get an overall sense of how they want to be communicated with and what they are hoping to learn from this communication.

It usually will not be a one-size fits all approach. However, you can learn a lot by asking the right questions.

9. Volunteers can be your best spokespeople in recruiting new volunteers.

There is a phrase I often use that I learned from a mentor:

People join people, and a good organization, too.

Sure, for volunteers to remain passionate and interested they must believe in the organization's mission. But I would argue that if they do not feel a connection to the people in that organization, that nothing else will really matter.

Just like we train and educate our staff on general recruitment tactics (whether that be recruiting new volunteers, donors or staff) and provide them with the knowledge and resources to be successful in this area, we must do the same with our volunteer leaders.

There is nothing more powerful than a volunteer leader explaining to a potential volunteer why they put aside time in their week and dollars in their wallet to support the work of your organization.

10. Be inquisitive.

I believe very much in principles one to nine above, otherwise I wouldn't have taken the time to write this article. But I also believe and recognize that every organization is different, has different volunteers and has different needs.

So my last piece of advice would be to remember what we already know...ask questions!

Your volunteers are there for a reason and that reason may differ tremendously from one volunteer to the next. Some may volunteer because the organization literally saved their life, while others may volunteer because they are required to do so for a class they may be taking. As Volunteer Engagement professionals, we have the obligation to ensure a positive experience for all.

Conclusion

As you continue to think about how to prepare others to work with volunteers and how to develop your volunteer development program, let's review these 10 take-a-ways:

- Develop and utilize volunteer job descriptions;
- Create and implement an onboarding process that inspires, prepares, and motivates your new volunteers;
- Utilize a mentorship program for your new volunteers to feel an immediate connection;
- Think about volunteer retention and develop a plan that be utilized across the organization.
- Volunteers need to be evaluated, too. Develop a culture of feedback;
- Find the right fit for the right person at the right time, and do not try to force it;
- Forming a volunteer community can serve as an important tool toward retention and connectivity;
- Your volunteer communication should be part of your overall communication plan;
- Volunteers are your best spokespeople so help them be successful in that role; and

- Ask questions often.

And don't forget that you're not alone. Thousands of organizations across the world are looking to volunteers to help further the goals of their organization. Whether formally at professional development events or informally through social media, reach out to others who can serve as sounding board for your ideas.

Just as volunteers give us the gifts of their time/talent/treasure, we give them the gift of playing a meaningful role in an organization and mission that is important to them.

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