



Volunteer Engagement: The Five Rs

There are many ways to approach Volunteer Engagement, and certainly one size does not fit all situations. There are, however, some basic approaches to volunteer management that serve all needs – whether a one-time volunteer opportunity to a multi-year board position – these five Rs will set you up for success.

What are the Five Rs? Recruit, Retain, Review, Recognize & Reward

Recruit

“It is a rare and high privilege to be in a position to help people understand the differences that they can make not only in their own lives but in the lives of others by simply giving of themselves.” – Helen Boosalis

In order for any organization to be effective when managing volunteers, it is important to first commit to the successful recruitment of willing and dedicated individuals. Such volunteers are those who selflessly give their time and effort to volunteer for specified projects. Unlike the workplace where promotions and monetary encouragement provide management with the necessary resources to nurture an appropriately engaged work force, the management of your volunteers often cannot be as easily accomplished. However, the interpersonal skills and volunteer management best practices needed are easy to comprehend and relatively straightforward to put into practice.

Although there is typically one big push each year to recruit new volunteers, volunteer recruitment is not something that should occur only once a year. In order to enhance volunteer utilization and engagement, recruitment should be considered a year-round activity. It can be tragic when someone’s offer to volunteer is declined because it is not the right time of the year. Be creative with your volunteer positions and the timetable for which they can be utilized. Through the implementation of the following efforts, you should have a steady number of volunteers who are more likely to be motivated, harder working, and satisfied within their positions.

Preliminary Work – You are probably anxious to begin the recruitment of your volunteer base, but there are some important things to consider before you start looking to fill the available volunteer positions. You need to be very comfortable defining the responsibilities and roles you are looking to have completed by the member and defining the type of member that would best be qualified. Think through some questions such as “What skills and knowledge would the volunteer need in order to fill the position?” and “How might I explain the value of volunteering for such a position to those interested?” By considering the various possibilities, you will reach a conclusion that will accurately describe the work to be performed by the volunteer and how to best attract volunteers who will show a significant interest and commitment to the position.



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Personal Invitation – More often than not, when a potential volunteer is given a personal invitation to volunteer, the invitation is accepted. The most common means for being recruited to cosponsor volunteering, according to The American Society for Association Management's (ASAE) "*The Decision to Volunteer*," were being asked by another volunteer, recruited at a meeting, or invited through a local chapter. It is important to note that few respondents contacted the organization themselves and offered to volunteer (although should you receive such requests, be ready and willing!). After an invitation has been accepted, it is important to respond immediately with a thank you note, a welcome letter, a position description, or even a simple agreement to confirm the involvement. Remember to always be flexible with the invitation. If the potential volunteer is not able to commit to the position offered, find other involvement opportunities that may be more realistic and appealing.

Positive Experience – A potential volunteer's initial interaction with you and/or your staff can set the tone for the entire volunteer experience. It is likely you have heard you can never make another first impression. First impressions matter, so it is imperative that you provide volunteers with a positive experience from the first interaction. Think through some questions a volunteer might have for you, including "Given my knowledge and skills, what might the best position for me be?" or "Do you have any information you can give me about the organization and the available position?" You should also express sincere appreciation, solidify your commitment to the volunteers' experience, and explain the next steps in the volunteer process. You should always attempt to provide a positive and rewarding experience, as this may be the only time you are afforded to do so.

Position Description – When recruiting volunteers for your organization, you will want to be prepared by having position descriptions that outline each of the positions available. A position description is necessary and very helpful for recruitment efforts in that it defines the essential components which can be fulfilled by volunteers. Not only does it identify the assignment, skills, abilities, and interests for the important position, but it can also demonstrate how meaningful and significant the position can be to all involved. Just remember, the descriptions created should define the necessary information needed to help your volunteers perform the tasks successfully and with confidence.



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Retain

“There is only one way...to get anybody to do anything. And that is by making the other person want to do it.” – Dale Carnegie

Retention is your organization’s ability to cultivate engaged and productive volunteers. Your needs as well as the needs and expectations of your volunteers must be met in order to achieve positive results. It is unrealistic to think volunteers are “free” resources because of the various organizational resources that are needed to create and maintain an effective volunteer program. Volunteer retention can be a bit involved in that a volunteer’s motivation can evolve throughout the duration of the term. Your volunteer might start volunteering for one reason, but continue volunteering for a completely different reason. A motivated volunteer is one who wants to do the job that needs to be done in the spirit and within the guidelines of the organization. People behave in motivated ways when the work satisfies a need of theirs.

It is important for organizations to have a practical understanding of the management approaches that support volunteer involvement. To avoid continually refilling volunteer positions, an investment in your volunteer program should be made. Volunteer turnover tends to be higher than staff turnover, yet few organizations calculate the costs of turnover for their volunteers even when they do the same for staff. ASAE research shows that annually, about one in three volunteers terminate his or her position, which is 10 times the turnover rate of paid nonprofit staff. Given the nature of volunteer work and the fact that volunteers are not paid, turnover is to be expected. Nevertheless, the way you manage your volunteers and the experience you create for them can contribute to the turnover.

Difficulty in retaining volunteers can usually be traced to problems in motivating them. In order to motivate volunteers, a positive experience needs to be created to allow an individual to meet his/her motivational needs in ways that are productive and satisfying to both the organization and the individual. By designing satisfying work experiences for the volunteer and defining mutual expectations between the volunteer and the organization, it is possible to give volunteers a motivational paycheck for their priceless contributions.

Each volunteer is very unique and has an individual combination of motivations and needs. Therefore, each will do best in conditions complimentary to his/her combination of motivations. Some volunteers may be motivated by developing psychologically, whereas others might be motivated by strengthening social relationships. The art of motivating your volunteers with multiple motives is not only knowing how to utilize a given motivator, but in being able to also figure out what combination of needs a particular volunteer has.

A volunteer’s motivations can help you understand how to design your volunteer program and various positions around the needs of your specific volunteers. According



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to ASAE, individuals volunteer for some “combination of the following reasons, expressed as the personal and social functions or needs that volunteering serves:”

- Values – to express or act on important values like humanitarianism
- Understanding – to learn more about the world or exercise skills that are unused
- Enhancement – to grow and develop psychologically
- Career – to gain career-related experience
- Social – to strengthen social relationships
- Protective – to reduce negative feelings or to address personal problems

You can also survey your volunteers in a more informal way by simply asking them from time to time about the relative importance of factors that may motivate them to volunteer. The variety of responses from your volunteers will help you comprehend why they volunteer and what you can offer them in return for their selfless service and interest to continue as a volunteer. Their responses will also help you to recognize that one size does not fit all when it comes to an individual’s motives behind volunteering. Retention can happen naturally if you are able to connect with their motivational needs and maintain their interest and presence.

Volunteer satisfaction can increase when they are oriented, trained, and in a position that is compatible with their combination of motivations. It is important to remember that one size does not fit all in volunteer management. Your volunteers need information and multiple opportunities to fulfill their needs – and yours, of course. Treat them as equals to staff, ask for feedback and opinions when problem-solving, and maintain an open line of communication. By taking all of this into account, your retention should increase.

Review the “Motivators for Volunteer Activity” list for initial thoughts on the many motives behind volunteering. Consider this list when assigning your volunteers various roles and responsibilities. Remember, one size does not fit all, so it is likely each will have his/her own combination of motivators.



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Review

“Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.” – Martin Luther King Jr.

Once you have confirmed your volunteers, it is important to communicate with them and help them to feel comfortable by providing them with an appreciation of the context within which they will work. The more your volunteers understand your organization and how it operates, the more they will be able to align their actions with the available volunteer position(s) as well as demonstrate initiative in coming up with additional initiatives that are helpful to the organization.

In order to provide a formal opportunity to welcome your volunteers and to make them feel as though they are truly part of the team, it is a good idea to offer a review session. During the session, you will want to orient your volunteers and provide them with some basic information about the organization, their position and how it fits into the organization, a realistic expectation of the amount of time needed for each position, and any training specific to the role. This information can be compiled into a manual that can be given to your volunteers during the formal review session and used as a convenient reference tool in the future. While reviewing the items detailed in the manual with your volunteers during the review session, you might want to highlight the following areas.

Organization Review - In order to maintain and sustain effective and engaged volunteers, it is essential that your volunteers receive a review of the organization. They need to know basic information concerning the organization, such as the history, structure, mission, vision, and strategic goals. The content covered during the review of your organization should be customized to fit the specific needs of your volunteers and association. They need to believe the organization’s goals and objectives are within reach and that what they will be doing as volunteers has purpose and contributes to the mission of the organization.

Position Review - It is important to not only share information concerning the organization with volunteers, but to also share detailed information with them about the responsibilities and positions in which they will be involved. Often, you might know what you would like your volunteers to be doing, but they may not. By sharing a written position description with your volunteers, you can describe in detail the assignment, responsibilities, and qualifications needed to perform in such a role. Express that all positions are meaningful and significant and play an important role in the overall goals of the organization.

Duration Review – Your volunteers will also need to know what is expected of them and how much time they should expect to dedicate to the assignment. The amount of time each volunteer is willing to spend on any given responsibility will differ, as some



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may have more time than others, depending on their responsibilities outside of volunteering. Some responsibilities may be project-oriented and others might be able to be performed remotely or even virtually. Regardless of the duration or location of the position, it is important to communicate the expectations and realistic time frame each position might involve.

Training Review – If you are having volunteers fill specific positions in which they are not familiar, it is important to offer training in the specific job-related skills and behaviors needed to perform successfully within their particular volunteer role. During training, you can demonstrate acceptable ways of performing in such a role, practice skills that will be performed during the period, and identify what can be done in various situations or should an unforeseen situation arise.

Additional Review – Each volunteer position is going to be a bit unique, as will each orientation session offered. Although the previously mentioned components are common to most volunteer manuals, you might need to add a few additional details specific to your volunteer program. Some additions you can add might be your volunteer policies and procedures, funding sources, a list of council/board members, definitions of acronyms, reimbursement process, or even a confidentiality agreement.

Remember, in this situation, one size does not fit all. You may need to tailor the information shared for each group of volunteers, depending on their overall motivations and the various roles within the organization. The review you provide to your volunteers can be as simple or as detailed as you would like to make it, but ideally, you should make certain they have the tools, background information, and necessary materials in order to make them feel comfortable and ultimately, set them up for success.

Reference the “Volunteer Orientation Manual.” Although a suggested framework for the document is offered, consider your volunteer program and your volunteers' needs when developing your manual. Feel free to add additional pages to the manual to use during your volunteer review. Keep in mind the purpose of the Manual is to provide your volunteers with the tools, background information, and necessary materials in order to help them feel comfortable and to set them up for success.



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Recognition

“No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.” - Aesop

Recognition of your volunteers and their efforts is a crucial part of retaining your volunteer base. It should begin the minute a volunteer is introduced to the program and continue throughout the duration of the program. By recognizing your volunteers as worthy individuals giving their time to perform significant work in an effective way, you will begin to lay the foundation for a lucrative and happy volunteer. Through continuous encouragement and support, the recognition given to your volunteers can play a pivotal role for both your volunteers as well as your organization.

A simple “thank you” to your volunteers can do so much, especially when you say thank you often and in different ways. The gift of a tangible item can have multiple functions beyond simple courtesy. To your volunteers, recognition can indicate that someone respects and appreciates their unselfish volunteer efforts. To your organization, however, recognition of volunteers can signify role models and communicate a positive message regarding such individuals.

Recognition of your volunteers is the means for you to truly let them know how much you appreciate their many contributions. Finding the time to volunteer alone can be a bit overwhelming, so it is imperative that you notice and recognize all your volunteers do. Although sometimes an afterthought, you want to make certain that they believe you are offering recognition out of sincerity rather than out of obligation. When recognizing your volunteers, there are a few principles you will want to follow in order for your message to be meaningful to the recipient.

Be Genuine – In order to remain genuine in your message, it is important that you deliver recognition in a very personable and authentic way. You need to avoid providing recognition that is overproduced and reminiscent of every other message you deliver to your volunteers. Be straightforward and let them know how much you value their efforts and apparent dedication.

Be Specific – Remember, one size does not fit all when it comes to recognizing your volunteer members. Tailor your message to the individual needs of the volunteer involved. By offering many recognition options you have the flexibility to recognize your volunteers’ accomplishments in ways that are specific and appropriate to the given situation at hand.

Be Timely – Your timing when it comes to recognition of your volunteers is absolutely crucial. You need to acknowledge the continuous contribution of your volunteers



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throughout each project and close to the time when the volunteering occurs. In order for your message to be strong and have the desired impact, it needs to be delivered in a timely fashion.

Be Concise – The message sent to your volunteers needs to be very clear and concise in order to be meaningful. Your volunteers need to have a clear understanding as to why they received the recognition and the criteria used when determining the recognition. Create a clear association between the accomplishment and the received recognition.

Consider when offering genuine recognition to your volunteers both formal and informal ways to show appreciation for their numerous efforts. Review the “Volunteer Recognition Ideas Template” for additional ideas that can be used when recognizing volunteers.



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Rewards

“Volunteers are seldom paid; not because they are worthless, but because they are PRICELESS!” - Author Unknown

ASAE research has shown that annually, it is estimated that volunteers in America contribute \$240 billion in unpaid labor. It is apparent then, that whatever the reason for volunteering, each moment spent helping others or working for a specific cause is time that holds value for both the individual as well as the organization.

The most cited reason for volunteering was an individual's ambition to help others and to create a better society. The same holds true for professional volunteering. While members of associations still foresee career benefits from their professional volunteering, they are also interested in volunteering for reasons other than themselves, above all to build a substantial profession. Through volunteering then, one can gain both personal and professional rewards.

Some personal rewards your volunteers might be seeking are to:

- Learn about many different issues
- Receive satisfaction and recognition
- Feel appreciated and valued
- Gain a new perspective
- Explore personal strengths
- Network with others interested in the same issues
- Deal with some personal problems.

Some professional rewards your volunteers might be seeking are to:

- List such experience on a resume
- Learn new leadership skills
- Receive academic/certification credit
- Make professional contacts
- Improve professional skills
- Meet others in the industry
- Receive letters of recommendation



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In addition to the personal and professional rewards you are able to provide to your volunteers, you might consider taking it one step further. Feel free to be creative when rewarding volunteers.