Motivating and Retaining Volunteers

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When working with volunteers, it is important to remember the reasons people want to volunteer in the first place. A good starting point is a review of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954), a concept familiar to most people today. While this theory was developed many years ago, its basic premise remains true today. Maslow contended that the need for self-actualization is a healthy person’s primary motivation. Self-actualization is the ability to achieve one’s maximum potential. Maslow’s five levels of needs, starting from the bottom and working toward the top are:

- Survival Needs—needs such as food, shelter, clothing;
- Safety Needs—security needs, the need for established rules, the need to be protected;
- Love, Affection, Belonging Needs—the need to be accepted and have relationships with others;
- Esteem Needs—status within an organization; and

While survival and safety needs are not likely to be met from volunteering in an organization, the other three levels of needs can be met in this way. Most people want to feel accepted and appreciated, want the chance to have status and growth opportunities, and want to have interaction and relationships with other people.
A Plan of Action

While keeping Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in mind, it is important to have a plan of action once you have successfully recruited volunteers for your organization. The next challenge is to find ways to keep members around and motivated.

It is important to remember that volunteers lose interest in an organization when:

1. What they are expecting is not what the organization actually turns out to be;
2. They don't feel they make a difference;
3. There is no recognition or reward for being a member of the group;
4. There is no variety in the work done;
5. There is no support from the leader or other group members;
6. There is no chance for personal growth;
7. There is no chance to have personal needs met;
8. There is no chance to show their skills and abilities; and
9. There is tension in the group.

In addition, volunteers stay committed to an organization when:

1. They feel appreciated;
2. They can see they are making a difference;
3. There is opportunity for personal growth;
4. They receive recognition privately and publicly;
5. They believe they can handle the tasks they are assigned;
6. There is a sense of group belonging and being a member of the "team";
7. They are involved in the process: problem-solving, decision-making and goal-setting;
8. They realize that something significant is happening because the group exists; and
9. Their personal needs are met.
GRAPE Retention

When you are developing a program to retain members, you may want to try the "GRAPE" Theory (Buckman, 1976) to keep members involved. GRAPE stands for:

G—Growth
R—Recognition
A—Achievement
P—Participation
E—Enjoyment

Growth—For members to have the chance to grow, they must be given opportunities to grow as a person. This can involve working with others, learning new skills and being given challenging assignments. Ways to accomplish this include:
- Providing leadership development programs and activities.
- Offering an orientation to the organization.
- Surveying members for ideas for growth opportunities.
- Having developmental folders for members with goals, plans and evaluations of their personal development.

Recognition—Everyone likes to be recognized for their work. They have done a job well, in the case of planning an event or program, we forget to let people know they are appreciated and make them feel good about their work. Examples of providing recognition include:
- Naming a "Member of the Month".
- Writing thank you notes.
- Giving public recognition at an event or meeting.
- Highlighting a member in the organization newsletter or on the Web site.
- Giving small tokens of appreciation to members.
- Giving a member a new title or promotion.
- Sharing candy.
- Making a scrapbook for someone who coordinated an event, etc.
- Remembering to just say "thank you!"

Achievement—There is nothing better than working on a project from start to finish and feeling the resulting sense of accomplishment. Even if someone hasn't done all the work, they need to feel they played a part in the overall achievement. Examples of how to make sure people feel they are part of the group's achievement include:
- Sharing a letter from the vice-president of Student Affairs or other high-ranking university administrator recognizing the group's accomplishment.
- Securing an article in the student newspaper.
- Placing an article on your organization's Web site.
- Presenting a certificate or award.
Letting Go

It is often difficult for leaders to let go and really allow people to take responsibility for tasks that need to be completed. With that said, in order to help your group be successful and to keep people involved, you will need to provide or show:

1. A system for making sure things are getting done and your delegation of tasks is working;
2. Trust and confidence in your group members;
3. The chance for group members to work independently and make decisions;
4. Confidence in your abilities as a leader;
5. A shared vision that you and your members know and understand;
6. The ability to delegate the glory and rewards, not just the not-so-fun tasks;
7. A communication system that works for your group so everyone is in the know; and
8. A formal/informal system to reward and recognize members for the great jobs they are doing.

Meeting the Needs of New and Returning Members

As a leader, it is also important to remember you have returning members and new members just starting out with your organization. You need to make sure you take into account the differences between new and returning members. You may need to develop some programs and activities just for the new members so they can have time to learn about your organization and become acclimated to your group and its customs. You can use some of your returning members to serve as mentors or experts and have them assist you in training new members and helping them to feel part of the group.

Personal Motivation

For a leader to be successful in retaining and motivating volunteers, you must also be personally motivated. It is helpful for a leader to spend time thinking about their own personal motivation and how that can affect a group. Before you begin working with volunteers, you must take stock and think about:

1. What direction do you envision for the group?
2. How will you build your team and how will you know whom to count on?
3. How will you keep things in perspective and know what is important and needs to be done?
4. How will you keep balance in your life and not get burned out from leading the group?
5. How will you determine what motivates others and discover their potential?
6. How will you deal with incompetence?
7. How will you deal with the possibility of not getting recognition for your work?
8. When it becomes necessary, can you make decisions for the group and justify them?

Volunteer Rights

Finally, it is important to remember that even though someone is a volunteer, they have rights as a person and member of your organization. Here is a volunteer “bill of rights,” based on one offered by Scouts Canada, that is helpful when working with any group of volunteers.

Volunteer Bill of Rights:
1. The right to be treated as an equal.
2. The right to a suitable assignment.
3. The right to know as much about the organization as possible.
4. The right to training for the job.
5. The right to continuing education.
6. The right to sound guidance and direction.
7. The right to a promotion.
8. The right to varied experiences.
9. The right to be heard.
10. The right to recognition.
11. The right to a place to work.

It is important to remember that volunteers join groups for myriad reasons. As a leader, you must spend time getting to know each member of your group and what motivates them. Some group members will be outstanding members and an asset to your organization. Others will be a disappointment and may end up leading to more trouble than their involvement is worth. This is the tricky part of working with volunteers. A leader must never forget how important it is to spend time getting to know the people they are leading. It is crucial for the experience of the volunteers and leader, as well as the betterment of the organization.

References


About the Author

Gayle Spencer, PhD, is assistant dean of Student Life at Kansas State University. She holds a bachelor’s degree in business administration from the University of Nebraska-Omaha, a master’s degree in college student personnel from Western Illinois University and a doctorate in student counseling and student personnel services from Kansas State University. A long-time NACA volunteer, she has served in capacities ranging from serving on the National Convention Program Committee and regional coordinator (former NACA Illiana Region) to chair of the Multicultural Education Task Force and Chair of the NACA Board of Directors. She is a past recipient of the former NACA Illiana Region’s Janet Carl Smith Award and the former NACA South Central Region’s Markley Award. Active in the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), she has also participated in Chi Omega Sorority and the Association of College Unions-International (ACUI). In 2004, she received ACPA’s Commission for Student Involvement Research Award.

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