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Article Title

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Retaining Volunteers for
Nonprofit Work

Topic Areas

Volunteerism, Outreach,
Communication,
Leadership

Monthly Article

December 2021



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By Dr. Angie Holzer, CEO/Founder of WikiCharities

Every year, the majority of nonprofits are run and sustained by volunteers around the United States (McKeever, 2016). There is a great need to better understand how to obtain and then retain these volunteers in helping move your cause forward as a nonprofit. This article will address 10 ways to approach volunteerism as you find volunteers, and then work to actively retain them in your efforts.

(About the Author: Dr. Angie Holzer received her doctorate in learning and leadership, where she specialized in organizational leadership with an emphasis in nonprofit management. She received the Dissertation of the Year Award in 2021 for her research in human trafficking and nonprofit collaboration. She has spent the last twenty years working in the nonprofit sector. She founded WikiCharities, a new online platform to help improve collaboration in the nonprofit sector and improve trust through a nonprofit validation. All US based nonprofits can now claim their FREE webpage.)

10 Keys to Obtaining and Retaining Volunteers for Nonprofit Work

By Angela Holzer, EdD



Introduction

As nonprofits continue to struggle with raising funds, especially during this pandemic, it is important to better understand how to attract and maintain volunteers to help with a variety of services in a nonprofit organization. The following 10 ideas have helped me over the past twenty years of working in the nonprofit sector to maintain a steady stream of volunteers in my nonprofit work.

1- Present Opportunity and Invite

Tell people about what you are working on and invite them to help if they are interested. Offering them an opportunity to get involved opens the door to someone thinking about giving their time, skills, and expertise to your cause. You want volunteers who have a desire to help without a lot of asking or persuading. I have found that rarely do people ask to help without me (or someone on my team) extending the invitation.

2- Find Out Interests

Often times finding out a person's interest and what causes they feel passionate about is key to getting them to volunteer. What are their skills? What specifically interests them about your cause? Once you know them a little better, give them different options in how they can help. I have found that people stay longer when volunteer opportunities align with their passions or interests.

3- Be a Good Storyteller

Nonprofit leaders need to be engaging and enthusiastic about their mission. Effective leadership styles for nonprofit leaders often fall under one of the four areas: transformational

leadership, servant leadership, charismatic leadership, and transactional leadership. In all of these styles, a nonprofit leader needs to be able to motivate people to get involved and help someone understand the importance of how their service will make a difference. Make sure you tell them about ways they can help and/or ways other people have helped that have made a big impact.

4- Don't Require a Large Time Commitment

Many people who volunteer are already actively involved with other things. It's important to present opportunities that are not overwhelming with large time commitments. People are hesitant to commit if they think they will let you down, so give them a chance to volunteer once and then they can see how they feel about future service. You can also present a small task where they can get their feet wet and feel like they are making a difference, even in a small way.

5- Show Appreciation

Having the ability to show your appreciation for the time people are giving to volunteer is an important part of retaining volunteers. Be a friend. Be reachable. Be approachable. Nobody likes to support causes that are led by unfriendly and/or unappreciative leaders. You can show appreciation through words, small gifts and even listing their name on your website as someone who supported the efforts can go along way.

6- Ask for Opinions and Input

You always need to remember that the best ideas don't always come from you. People like to feel needed as they contribute not only their time, but their ideas and thoughts on improving what you are doing. When you make a decision, get a second or third opinion from those who are helping you. Then have a discussion. This opens the door to someone feeling comfortable about approaching you in the future with ideas they may have, and thus helps volunteers feel more engaged in your organization.

7- Give Them a Task

When someone commits to helping, do not wait too long before giving them a task or chance to help. Helping a volunteer feel they are needed means letting them know you have things they can help with sooner rather than later. Make it easy for someone to jump into a task by giving them clear expectations and ideas on how to complete a task.

8- Give Autonomy in Completing Tasks

When you assign a task, give the volunteer flexibility in how and when they want to accomplish that task if possible. However, some volunteers need to be present at a certain time (helping serve food to the homeless). In this case, there needs to be a clear and set time for volunteers to be present. However, many times tasks could include helping out with financial spreadsheets, maintaining social media platforms, etc. You need to help the volunteer feel motivated with consistently checking in with them on the progress, but

allowing them to complete tasks on their own time as long as they meet the needed timeline you established.

9- Be Flexible with Deadlines

When you assign a task, give them a timeline of when that task needs to be completed. However, when a volunteer isn't able to complete the task on time, you need to be flexible in extending deadlines if possible. Help people feel that they are not a huge burden when deadlines aren't met right on time. Even if it's inconvenient, you need to decide whether you lose a volunteer because of your deadline and making them feel bad or adjusting your timeline so you can maintain an extra set of helping hands.

10- Help Volunteers Feel Important – Because They Are!

You can help volunteers feel important through a number of ways. It's important to get to know your volunteers and find out what motivates them. This could be a genuine 'Thank You' or even acknowledging their efforts in front of others, which shows you are mindful of their service and willing to praise their efforts.

Conclusion

Volunteers are an important part of most nonprofit organizations. They often help with fundraising, marketing, business development, strategy, and projects. Finding and keeping volunteers can be a great way to keep your costs down and reduce funds spent on salaries. What tips have you found helpful in working with volunteers in your nonprofit organization? We would love to hear from you at info@wikicharities.org.

Please let us know if you are interested in contributing articles to our journal in the future. We are looking for scholastic articles and thought papers. Thought papers need to be from nonprofit leaders who have firsthand experience on their topic. All submissions should be sent to info@wikicharities.org with the subject line: Journal Submission.

References

McKeever, B. (2016). *Nonprofit Almanac 9th edition*. Rowman & Littlefield.