

Attracting and Retaining Your Volunteers

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The “care and feeding” of volunteers can be tricky. This article is meant to assist police departments in attracting and retaining volunteers for the programs they make available to CPA graduates (i.e., Citizens on Patrol, CERT, Volunteers in Police Service, etc.), as well as to assist alumni associations in attracting and retaining members who, for the most part, are volunteers

of the organization when it comes to fundraising, serving on committees, etc.

Volunteers give their time because they’re committed to a cause, and they come back because it’s fun. You have to be able to deliver on both counts. Volunteers want to be appreciated. You can show your appreciation with rewards, recognition and respect.

Rewards

- Give them a winding-down party after they’ve helped out at a large event.
- Try to build team spirit. People give their best when they see themselves as among discriminating friends.
- Help them to get to know their fellow volunteers. Have social meetings a few times a year (i.e., a barbecue, a video night with popcorn, a holiday party).

Recognition

- List their names in your report (if there are a thousand of them, write small). Thank them in your meetings with the Chief or Board.
- Make a phone call or write a letter to say thank you.

When it comes down to what really counts, most people want nothing more than to live and work in a safe, friendly place where they can raise a family, have a stake in their future, and enjoy their lives. Most times, when something needs doing, its regular folks that band together to get it done. Teachers make things better in our schools, managers make improvements in the workplace, and VOLUNTEERS make a difference in their community.

Respect

- Give them the training they need. Help them learn new things.
- Talk to them.
- Supervise them properly and offer them resources and support.
- Demand that they do a good job.
- Consult them. Ask them to suggest other volunteers, for example. Ask their opinion on the experience.
- Tell them about your complaints/grievance resolution procedures, in case they have a beef.

Additionally, here are some basic “DO” and “DON’T” elements of how to manage your volunteers in an efficient manner. Approach this task with purpose and commitment, and you will benefit greatly.

DO make every volunteer feel like they are a valued member of the team. It’s important to show volunteers that you place a real value on their work. There are occasions, too, when you really do need to assess the value of your volunteers, and to write it down and justify it if anybody asks. These times come when you’re applying for a grant or proposing a joint project, or entering any other arrangement where

there’s a question of who is contributing what. A grant-maker will want to know what your level of commitment is, a partner will want to know how much you’re putting in. For these purposes, it helps considerably if you’re able to put a dollar figure on your workers; and for this purpose, the applicable figure is the cost of hir-

ing someone to do the job. Note: The fact that you are getting it pro bono is not something that affects them, so put it in a footnote, if that.

And if you’re trying to motivate and challenge them, then there’s another thing to consider; if that’s one of your strategic goals, then you should be measuring it. A recent report on “volunteerism” pointed to some major contradictions in what agencies and associations preach and what they practice when it comes to volunteers. For example, 93% of the study’s respondents said their primary concern was whether volunteers were satisfied, but almost half of the respondents said they did nothing to measure volunteer satisfaction. Do you survey your volunteers? Do you ask them whether they’re satisfied with the way you use them?

DO involve volunteers in every step of organizing.

DO actively seek the input of your volunteers. Cooperation will help you accomplish your task(s) as well as develop the group’s sense of identity.

DO try to be realistic about what your volunteers can accomplish:

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1) How much time is needed to complete the project? 2) How many people are needed for the project? 3) What other projects are underway? Is it feasible for the volunteers to take on a new responsibility?

DO bring all activities to discussion or vote before committing the volunteers to a new project.

DON'T become discouraged with new volunteers that are not as excited or eager as you are about the project. It is impossible for each and every member to be at the same level of enthusiasm.

DON'T try to do everything yourself.

DON'T abandon projects without a good and defensible reason. Make sure the volunteers know why a particular project is being dropped.

DON'T scare off new volunteers by asking them to volunteer for "life." Instead, start out small and then build on accomplishments.

Your volunteers are your greatest resource. These are the members that will make things happen for the benefit of your police department, alumni association, and the community. Volunteers are very special people who give their time and energy without receiving any other form of compensation. To keep someone coming to meetings week after week or month after month, there must be other enticements.

Volunteers remain active with organizations when they feel they are contributing positively to the efforts or organization. In addition, volunteers also remain active when they are recognized for the effort they make within that organization. Positive reinforcement is crucial to keeping these members active in your group.

When volunteers no longer feel appreciated, they become very susceptible to "burnout." Burnout is a condition realized when the volunteer feels like all of their efforts are in vain. They may also perceive that they are the only members doing any work.

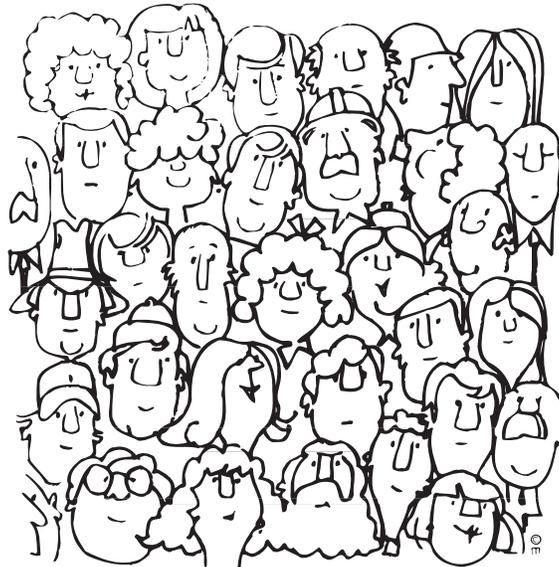
To prevent volunteer burnout, the positive feeling one has must remain high in spite of the many hours devoted to the work involved. This is especially true of police departments and/or alumni associations that often

demand great commitment from their volunteers.

Following are just a few of the reasons why volunteers burn out. A CPA Coordinator, Police Liaison, or Committee Chair should strive to be sensitive to these concerns...

1) The group is lacking clear goals and direction. Strong leadership is important to volunteers.

2) The sheer number of tasks seems overwhelming. There is too much work to be done. Volunteers are afraid to say "no" thinking that tasks



will not get done if they do not volunteer to do them.

3) People take the entire responsibility for the group personally. There is a popular notion that if you work for a public interest organization (i.e., your alumni association), you have to give selflessly for the cause. People see it as a measure of their self-worth.

4) Volunteers feel unappreciated. There are often too few rewards or positive recognition opportunities.

5) There are too few fun events organized by the group. All work and no play makes everyone tired and burned out.

6) A general lack of volunteers. The perception will be that there are too few people involved.

Prevention is the best objective when dealing with volunteer burnout. Keep the following objectives in mind when you work with your volunteers...

➤ Attempt to set realistic objectives that meet the group's purpose and goals. It helps to have job descrip-

tions or task outlines so people know what they are getting themselves into and what is expected of them in the job.

➤ Different people are able to handle different amounts and types of work. Recognize different abilities and tolerance levels in handing out work assignments. Don't let one person take on everything and then burn out. Increase the group's efforts to recruit new members.

➤ Remind people that the quality of their work is what's important, not the quantity. The more active volunteers the group has, the better the work will be distributed.

➤ Regardless of how small the achievement, recognize people for a job well done on every occasion. You can verbally give thanks to people at meetings, or develop an award system. This could be a certificate of appreciation, a gift given to a volunteer who has worked hard for the group, or an annual award potluck dinner where volunteers are publicly recognized. Nominate volunteers for recognition by the community on a regular basis.

➤ After a particularly hard project has been completed, organize a fun event for your volunteers. Creating a social network of volunteers and alumni members can provide support and also give people an opportunity to have a good time together. Recreational events should be a regular project for the group.

Remember, the way volunteers generally register their dissatisfaction isn't usually by filling out a form or writing a letter, it's by drifting over to another cause that they think will be more fulfilling. You hold on to volunteers by a very weak thread... the smallest resistance and it tears away. If you want to keep volunteers committed, you have to show them that you value their time just as highly as if they were paid staff. You have to find them jobs that produce results that are worth as much as what they put in. You have to take them seriously. If you give them make-work jobs (things that don't need doing) you'll lose twice... you'll get little out of them, and they'll sense you don't need them and will go elsewhere, taking their services over the years (and their potential donations and contact lists) elsewhere. ❖