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Volunteers to Self-Motivate

Fueling Volunteer Passion: Empowering Volunteers to Self-Motivate

By [Sheri Wilensky Burke](#)

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Recently, I conducted a training session for an organization's long-time volunteers, most had been involved as a volunteer for more than 15 years. I was asked to create a workshop that would help these volunteers maintain or regain their passion for their volunteer work and to help minimize burnout. While preparing my notes, it occurred to me that staff often think of motivation from the perspective of what *they* can do to encourage volunteers to continue their work. But, when considering this session from the perspective of the *volunteer*, I realized motivation really needs to come from within. Volunteer engagement leaders can strive to meet motivational needs, but ideally leaders should be helping volunteers to better understand their own (sometimes changing) motivations for being involved. The role of volunteer engagement leaders is to empower volunteers to motivate themselves.

Considering Original Motivations

We often ask why a volunteer chooses to join our organization as part of the interview process. There are as many reasons for volunteering as there are volunteers, and volunteer partnerships are most successful when volunteer assignments feed those motivations. For example, if a volunteer reveals that he works from home and is looking for opportunities for social interaction, placing him in a position working alone sets him up for disappointment. We can guess that he probably won't remain with that organization for very long.

We know how important it is to listen to volunteers' needs. However, volunteer engagement leaders don't always take the time to revisit volunteers' motivations moving forward. When is the last time you talked with volunteers about why they continue to volunteer with your organization? Include this discussion as part of an annual evaluation process. Sometimes a volunteer's reason for continuing to volunteer no longer aligns with that initial motivation. Discuss with the volunteer if the assignment is still meeting motivational needs and, if not, what has changed. Let's revisit the example from above –

the volunteer looking for social interaction. Maybe that volunteer is now working in a chaotic office environment. An assignment working alone might now be preferred.

Setting Personal Goals

In a [previous Hot Topic](#), I wrote about creating a volunteer career ladder and the importance of allowing volunteers to explore how they want to grow with an organization. Volunteer engagement leaders should offer volunteers the opportunity to set volunteer goals and the chance to discover what they are hoping to achieve as a volunteer.

Often, volunteers don't take the time to consider their volunteer career path; therefore, it is our responsibility to help them imagine where they see themselves in a year, five, or even ten years. Ask what, if anything, a volunteer would change about his current responsibilities. Offer time to explore what volunteers envision for their future and to contemplate new roles within the organization. This can be done during the annual evaluation process or in a group session where volunteers are given the opportunity to talk with one another.

Once they have developed a volunteer career path and set their goals, staff should help volunteers identify what must happen for that career path to occur. For example, if a volunteer would like to become a board member in the future, what training would need to be provided? What roles could the volunteer assume to help him demonstrate the leadership abilities needed in a board member? Is there a current or past board member that would be willing to discuss the opportunity or serve as a mentor?

Minimizing Burnout

Often, volunteers find it difficult to set boundaries, particularly in organizations where the mission is tied to a disease or an immediate cause. Passion for the mission may lead volunteers to feel the need to do it all themselves. We all know those volunteers who we can count on to do anything we need, but as leaders, we also need to recognize the signs of individuals unable to set boundaries. If not, this can lead to burnout.

We must ensure that those eager volunteers learn how to delegate to other volunteers, recognize when to say no to a request, and set realistic limits to what can be accomplished in the timeframe. Volunteer engagement leaders need to guide volunteers in practicing self-care and give them the ability to take a step back when needed. How can staff help volunteers to recognize when their motivation wanes?

For example, there are times when a volunteer does not fulfill an assignment but staff (or other volunteers) are reluctant to hold her accountable. However, perhaps accountability is just what the volunteer needs to help her remain engaged for the long-term. In other words, when a volunteer tries to "do it all," she may be unable to accomplish what needs to be achieved, resulting in feelings of

failure. When a task is not completed, ask the volunteer to help examine what happened. Together, gain a better understanding of the situation and discuss how the situation could be changed.

A volunteer attending my session shared his story of ending his volunteer work after 15 years because he no longer felt that he could be effective. He returned to the organization after a two-year break feeling more engaged and motivated than he had in years. Sometimes a long-time volunteer needs a sabbatical. Staff should help a volunteer identify the signs, allow him the chance to recognize that it's acceptable to step away and ensure him that there is the opportunity to return re-motivated when ready.

Volunteer engagement staff can play a vital role in helping volunteers to recognize what motivates their passions for volunteering and give them the chance throughout their volunteer career to revisit that motivation, helping to meet their motivational needs but also acknowledging when a change is needed.

What have you done to help volunteers motivate themselves?

What additional role can you play in helping volunteers to motivate themselves?

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on October 3rd, 2019

Rashmi Deo, HR Manager, Suzlon, Pune, Maharashtra, India

It is very essential for leaders to help volunteers to better understand their own motivations for being involved, this will be a continuous and ongoing process. It is a huge responsibility and takes immense efforts to empower volunteers and motivate them. Much appreciate author Sheri Wilensky Burke's article; helping Volunteers/Mgrs in this space to closely monitor and take action that is with a purpose in mind. Thank you for influencing my thoughts with your article.

Submitted on October 4th, 2019

Sheri Burke, President, Sheri Wilensky Burke Consulting LLC, PA, United States

So glad my words spoke to you. Yes it is an ongoing process that takes time, but empowering volunteers is a worthwhile investment in community development and mission achievement.

Submitted on October 28th, 2019

Gerald (Jerry) ..., Presenter and Blogger, self employed, New York, NY, United States

Thank you for this Hot Topic article. I especially liked the various examples you provided. This is great 'food for thought'.

Submitted on November 9th, 2019

Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.

One manager probably wanted to hire me but refused to use me as a volunteer even though some other people used me. I think one difference between us was that he wanted to be the supplier of my motivation. Leaders often object to self-motivation, but don't discuss why with us.

As an ad hoc volunteer coordinator, I didn't ask why anyone wanted to volunteer, why they were there, etc. I doubted I'd get answers that were both honest and useful, because many people studied how to ace hiring interviews. Instead, I put them to work within 60 seconds, did some of it myself, while they were doing that briefly inquired into whether there were things they'd like to do, and tried to match them up.

I'm relatively introverted and am resistant to a manager exploring my psychology. I want to know what needs to be done and feedback on how what I'm doing is or isn't useful. I don't want to be given work because someone thinks it's what I want to do. That gets busywork. I want to know what the organization, movement, or leader wants. Tell me about a few kinds of work and I can choose perfectly well without guidance, for hosts of reasons that I may not care to articulate, and if I do it well and you need it then you shouldn't care why I chose it. I tend to be more productive and more comfortable that way and I last longer. In my observation, most of us don't care if it's drudge or exciting; the leader states priorities and we take it from there.

I didn't know that volunteers usually don't get to talk with each other, unless they don't work with each other or don't know the others exist. I guess I'm still surprised that people who had the initiative to volunteer, the initiative to select an organization with which they would volunteer, and the initiative to show up and ask don't know how to think of what they'd like to do. That sounds like an issue with management assuming that people who volunteer wouldn't know how to think of it. One repeatedly-elected politician who depended on volunteers has privately described all volunteers categorically as "stupid" and acted that way for years. I'm also self-serving enough and don't want anyone acting as if I need my ego boosted. Focus on mission.

Setting boundaries, such as if I don't have the relevant skill set, appears to be taken as unwillingness to do what's needed. So is offering to do more: given task A and seeing that I'd

often be idle in the middle of it, I asked for some additional task, and the response was that I must not want to do task A. At least she said so and I could correct her error. Elsewhere, my refusing to be paid (that's a boundary) was a deal-breaker to the top person.

Volunteers are often seen as threats to paid positions and board seats and are accepted only if they essentially agree that other volunteers are no good and can then be an ally of their new mentors who feel the same way. That undermines the organization.

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