

# Motivating Volunteers

## *Make the Most of Commitment to the Cause*

By Stephanie Probst Kipperman

In the best of all possible worlds, getting and keeping volunteers would take little effort. One would simply recruit the most altruistic, skilled, available and responsible individuals, match them to rewarding tasks and highly appreciative clients, and provide support and recognition from time to time.

Unfortunately, the situations in which most of us function are not nearly so perfect. Not all clients are easy to work with. Not all tasks are their own reward. Not all volunteers have the skills to do the job as well as it could be done. And most volunteer managers have

multiple responsibilities which occupy their time and make it difficult—if not impossible—to be available to the volunteers as much as we—or they—would like.

Yet, millions of volunteers take time out of their own lives to do a job and to do it well—without an employment contract or a salary. Why do they do it? And what can we do to make it happen more often, longer and more successfully?

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There are three factors which are most often cited as affecting volunteer motivation and retention: personal factors related to the volunteer, job design, and organizational support. I would add a fourth: commitment to the

cause, and argue that although the others are important, and all are inter-related, commitment is central.

### The Call to Serve

Commitment, as any volunteer manager knows, is neither simple nor constant. It must be nourished on an ongoing basis in a variety of ways, based on who the volunteer is and "why" he or she is on the

job. The call "to serve the cause" must not only be incorporated into recruitment, but constantly nourished.

The goal is for the initial offer of help to become a firm and long lasting commitment to stay on the job.

This entails recognizing and responding to individual needs and the highly personal reasons volunteers have for giving their time. In addition, it means creating an atmosphere in which volunteers' efforts and program goals are strongly linked to shared values, and volunteers feel that they make a meaningful difference in people's lives. In such a situation, the volunteer gets as well as gives and so is motivated to continue and to perform well.

"I CAME TO VOLUNTEER BUT I SEE  
THAT YOU'RE OUT OF DONUTS...  
SO CAN I LEAVE NOW?"



Screening, for example, is the time to access volunteer interests, skills and availability; it is also an opportunity to find out "why" a person is volunteering—and what is his or her potential for long-term commitment.

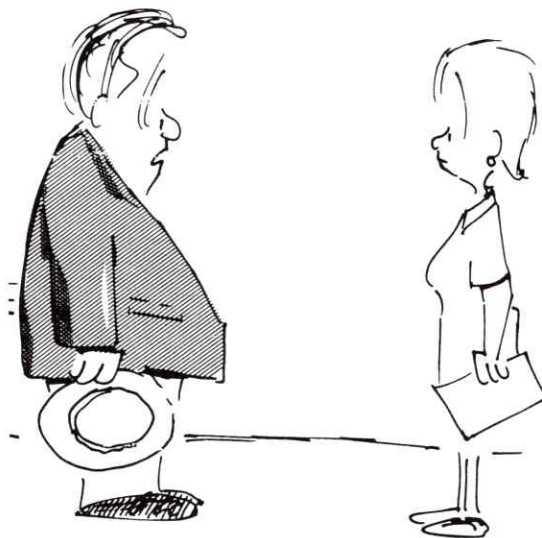
Good training prepares the volunteer for a specific assignment so that it can result in ongoing positive feedback. It also underlines the importance of the work—for the client and the cause. Recognition—both formal and informal—demonstrates our appreciation to the volunteer for the time and effort being expended and also re-emphasizes the meaningfulness of the service being provided.

Insuring that a volunteer feels that the results are worth the effort expended does not just happen. The behavior of an organization through its volunteer manager and his or her coworkers can make the difference between volunteers doing the job passably, excellently—or not at all.

## The Twelve Rs

Let me suggest some basic strategies, which I call the "Twelve Rs to Establishing and Maintaining Commitment":

1. RECRUIT volunteers who are emotionally drawn to organizational goals and values.
2. RECOGNIZE individual needs, interests and skills by placing volunteers in appropriate positions.
3. REINFORCE appropriate behavior on the job whenever possible.
4. REWARD work well done both formally and informally.
5. RESPOND as quickly and sensitively as possible to volunteers' questions, concerns and feedback.
6. RELIEVE isolation and stress through peer support and volunteer/staff collaboration which encourages collegiality and a sense of community.
7. REACH OUT proactively to volunteers at risk,



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recognizing where problems exist or are likely, so that corrective action can be taken.

8. REMIND staff to demonstrate appreciation for volunteer assistance as often as possible.

9. RE-EMPOWER volunteers to be as effective as possible through orientation, training, and ongoing support.

10. REDESIGN jobs if necessary so that they are as intrinsically satisfying as possible.

11. RELATE positive feedback and information of interest to volunteers, so that they feel good about what they're doing and part of something bigger.

12. RE-INSPIRE on a regular basis by reiterating organizational values and program achievements and the meaningfulness of the volunteer's contribution.

Re-inspiring is mentioned last, but it is essential. Peoples' agendas change and, in the midst

of performing a job in all its minutiae, it's easy to forget the value of what one is doing in the greater scheme of things.

Re-inspiration—and re-energization—should be incorporated in all that we do (from recruitment through screening, training, supporting and rewarding) so that there is a ready awareness by everyone involved—at every stage of their involvement—of the shared vision which drives our efforts and the meaningful results which are attained. Fortunately, this can be done relatively easily once we are convinced of its importance.

What each of the twelve strategies tells the volunteer is that he or she is valued as an individual doing something important, and making a difference in the broader sense. And the result is commitment to continue and do the best job possible. Stated or unstated, that is the overriding goal. And the responsibility of volunteer program managers is to use every means possible to make it a reality, so that our words reflect and reinforce the commitment each volunteer is making. ■