

Leadership Volunteers

Grooming the next batch takes time

It's generally easier to recruit a volunteer to do frontline, hands-on work than to accept a leadership position on a board of directors, advisory council, or key committee. Getting them to increase their involvement over time and grow comfortable taking on more responsibilities and even authority takes work.

First, consider what it takes to be a leadership volunteer. Some, if not all, of the following will be required:

- ✓ Attendance at meetings – maybe lots of long meetings, and not always productive ones;
- ✓ Willingness to stick their necks out and take risks on behalf of the project at hand;
- ✓ Making difficult choices and then facing scrutiny (and maybe criticism) from their colleagues and friends about these decisions;
- ✓ Acceptance of legal liability;
- ✓ Deferred gratification, in that it may take months or years to see the beneficial results of

their work.

If you're honest about it, you'll see that volunteers are right if they assume this is a major commitment. In fact, it may be more of a mystery why some volunteers agree to serve in such roles at all.

The key is to articulate what the benefits of service at the leadership level are, and then to identify the type of people who would find satisfaction in those. For example:

- ✓ The intellectual challenge of developing and implementing strategies to help the community.

✓ Opportunity to interact with other community leaders.

✓ Being at the forefront of positive change and action.

✓ Doing something with long-term and lasting implications.

Many – perhaps most – prospective volunteers will not see such benefits as outweighing the negatives already listed. More people are, by nature, followers than are leaders. So how do you find those predisposed to fulfill the roles you need?

Recruiting people who are already leaders

One misconception is that people in business, especially in big corporations, are usually "leaders." Of course some corporate executives have strong leadership skills, but many have simply risen to a level of authority and are enforcing the decisions of a small circle of others at the very top.

Also, community leadership requires consensus building, diplomacy, and other characteristics that may not be as highly prized in the business world. So it's fine to look to successful business people as possible leadership volunteers; just be sure to double-check your assumptions with each individual.

For community boards and committees, your best candidates may be people who have demonstrated their ability to coordinate others in perhaps less obvious ways. For example, people who have:

- ✓ Been elected in the past to officer positions in other community organizations;
- ✓ Organized groups of neighbors for a political or social cause;
- ✓ Taken key roles in their faith community;
- ✓ Started successful small businesses;
- ✓ Proven themselves in professions that require motivating others, such as teachers.

The point is not to go back again and again to the same core of people already well-known in the community, but to consider who might be pleased to have his or her talents recognized in a different way.

Grooming new leaders

Even more important than finding volunteers with established leadership skills is the challenge of "grooming" people who usually take follower roles

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so that they blossom into new leaders. This is a process that takes time and starts by noticing who has the potential to develop. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a powerful force. Once you believe a volunteer can grow into leadership, you will take the steps necessary to cultivate his or her abilities.

Think of the process in the following stages:

✓ The volunteer does an assignment well and you notice this. He or she shows initiative, does something above and beyond what you expected, or seems able to help others do better or to work together as a team.

✓ Genuinely praise the good work the volunteer is doing

✓ Invite the volunteer to do something that both requires additional commitment and gives the opportunity to learn additional skills. This might be acting as a team leader for a project, or being a trainer of new volunteers, or writing a report about the project. Offer whatever support the person might need to succeed and then praise that, too.

✓ Ask the volunteer to participate in a planning or evaluation session - something that requires the person to speak out, share opinions, and interact with others. This might lead to service on a committee or task force - a group that meets for a short time with a specific purpose.

If you ultimately want the volunteer to become a member of a formal board of directors, the next step would be an invitation to serve on a committee of the board as a non-board member. This allows the volunteer to test the water about the work of the board and the type of people involved. Conversely, it serves as a useful "audition" to see if the volunteer fits in, too.

All through the process, talk honestly with the volunteer about your hopes for her or his development and longer-term commitment to your cause. This shouldn't be a secret process in which you manipulate someone into the trap of long-term service. If the person really is not comfortable, it's important to know that. It might also take some convincing to make the prospective leader feel sure that you really think she or he has the "right stuff" to do the job well.

Finally, when you are ready to recruit the volunteer you've been grooming to join the board or committee, be open and specific about what the position entails, and discuss both of your expectations.

Position description is the key

Most organizations know that good volunteer position descriptions spell out precisely what is needed and wanted, and give the applicant/nominee the opportunity to accept or decline the full scope of the work. Here are some things to include when describing the role of a leadership volunteer:

- How many meetings are held each year, when, of what duration, and any policies about the number a member must attend (and what to do if the person cannot);
- What is expected of members in be-

tween meetings. Often meetings are discussions to plan what everyone will do the rest of the time. Be honest about the amount of work anticipated each month or week, both in group meetings and as individual assignments.

- What preparation will need to be done to be productive at meetings, such as promising to read reports, minutes, and other important documents in advance of discussion.

- Any reporting the member will be expected to do on his or her activities since the last meeting - and if this report is due each time even if the volunteer is not physically in attendance at the meeting.

- Whether or not a financial contribution is the

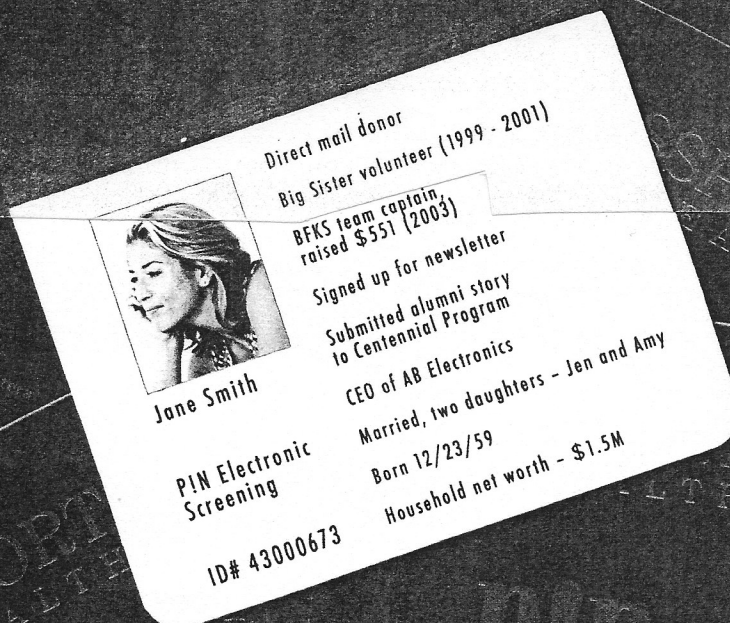
rule and/or what other resources does the organization need from the volunteer, such as in-kind services from his or her place of work.

By allowing each volunteer to take small steps towards involvement as a leader, and be reinforced with skill-building and success at each level, you will cultivate a pool of committed - and competent - individuals. *NPT*

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