

SIX TOOLS FOR MANAGING VOLUNTEERS

At its most basic level, managing volunteers means supporting their work in order to sustain their activity over time. The apostle Paul urges leaders “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12), which indicates that as we prepare others (equipping), we make them and other believers (the body of Christ) stronger and stronger (building up). The equipping metaphor as applied to volunteer management is both positive and growth oriented, but it does not explain how to accomplish it. Volunteer management requires at least six tools.

Orientation

The volunteer should be provided with a job description laying out what he or she will be doing.¹ An orientation program goes further by offering an introduction to what it will be like for the volunteer once the work begins. An effective orientation can reinforce the volunteer’s initial decision to get involved, provide a connection with the wider purpose of the program, and reduce volunteer turnover. Of course, the orientation also should provide information a new volunteer will need. If unclear about what to include, ask several of the more experienced volunteers for their opinion.²

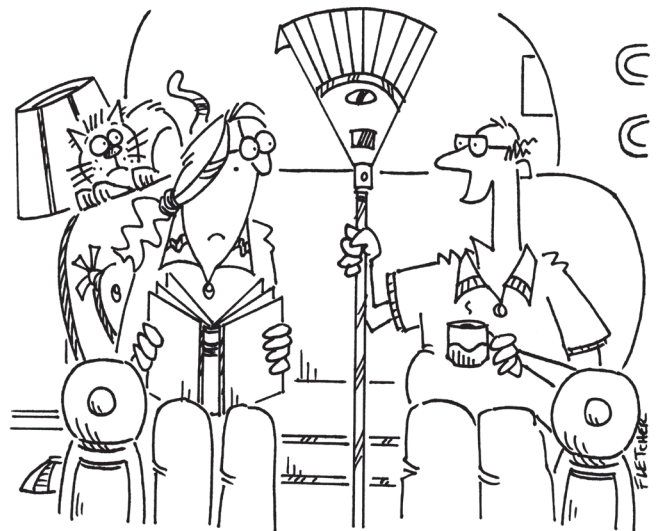
Volunteer Handbook

At the orientation, plan to distribute a volunteer handbook. This book provides information about procedures and policies that may have been reviewed verbally in the orientation but may not be readily remembered due to information overload. *Policies* provide general guidance for what is expected of the volunteer on the job. For example, youth mission volunteers need to agree to a policy of never having an adult with a minor in a car alone. *Procedures* have to do with practical guidance on how to get the job done. For example, volunteers may need to be told the best procedure for lining up a substitute volunteer in case of sickness. Additionally, the handbook can include areas such as the ministry’s purpose and values,

organizational structure, dress codes, safety and security information, and how the work will be evaluated.

Training Session

Nearly all volunteer positions require some sort of training, which might be anything from an informal conversation about how to operate the copy machine or a detailed set of instructions for volunteers canvassing the neighborhood. Before planning to hold a training session, first determine the need. Some experts refer to this practice as “gap analysis” because it involves identifying the space between what people know and what they need to know. Begin by writing a few learning objectives for the students. What can realistically be accomplished by the end of the session? Next, write a class outline. Some trainers might regard an outline as a creativity killer, but it need not be so. Having a sequence of steps prepared ahead of time can lend confidence and cure unexpected jitters that may arise once the training session begins. Spontaneity can still occur within structure. Be sure to practice ahead of time by walking through the session,



“SUNDAY’S SERMON ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHURCH VOLUNTEERS WAS TRULY INSPIRING... I SIGNED YOU UP FOR THE LAWN CARE TEAM.”

paying attention to the timing of the activities and thinking about how to set up the location where the training will take place. Finally, ask for feedback from students through a simple evaluation near the end of the session.³

Setting Expectations

Expectations, defined as “our assumptions about the future—how we anticipate things will go,” can often determine whether the volunteer has a worthwhile experience.⁴ Be clear with volunteers about expectations. Assume they want to do their best and that it may be the trainer’s own failure to communicate that is at fault whenever expectations are not met. Tell the volunteer not just what is to be done but how it is to be done. Every three to six months, ask what they need that they’re not getting and what they’d like to know about their volunteer job that they don’t know.⁵

Evaluation

There are two types of evaluation that must be done: evaluating the ministry itself and evaluating the volunteers as individuals. Evaluation and planning are closely connected. Only by developing a mission statement and strategic plan will it be possible to evaluate it later. Did the plan get accomplished within the expected timeline and within budget?⁶

Evaluating volunteers as individuals constitutes the second task, and it can be affirming and celebratory. Performance reviews offer an opportunity for the leader who assigned the job and the volunteer who performs it to talk about how things are going. It is important to schedule such meetings on a regular basis. Marlene Wilson sums up the attitude that leaders should take toward evaluation: “Performance reviews should be nonthreatening, constructive, supportive, flexible, and empowering. The aim: to encourage volunteers to stretch for high standards and determine how the church can help the volunteer achieve his or her goals.”⁷

Recognition

Leaders should formally recognize the volunteer’s contribution. It’s not possible to offer too much appreciation! While we tend to think of recognition as occurring at the end of a project, recognition should take place throughout the volunteer experience. Betty Stallings, a recognition expert, describes the “Four Ps” of recognition: make it *personal*, *plentiful*, *powerful*, and *practical*.

Making it personal means crafting a thank you that validates the person in a way unique to them. For instance,

one organization sent its staff members a card of recognition on the anniversary on the date when they started working there. *Making it plentiful* means doing it early and often in order to help spread the attitude of recognition throughout the entire work team. *Making it powerful* means recognizing the importance of small symbolic acts, such as the conference organizer who drew out of her pocket a partial roll of Lifesavers at the end of the meeting, handed one to her most trusted assistant, and said, “You’ve been a real Lifesaver today!”⁸ *Making it practical* means addressing the excuses people make for not providing recognition, such as lack of money in the budget or arguing that volunteers say they do not need recognition. To counter these objections, point out the ways in which recognition sustains the work by encouraging everyone involved.⁹

A Process, Not a Program

Managing volunteers is a process, not a program. It is too complex to be encapsulated neatly in a short space.¹⁰ As the apostle Paul’s metaphor implies, maintaining a healthy body of volunteers requires an ongoing effort of nourishment and support. The more continual the encouragement and support, the stronger the body grows in its ministry to the community.

1. See Marlene Wilson, *Volunteer Job Descriptions and Action Plans*, vol. 3, *Group’s Volunteer Leadership Series* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004) for detailed instruction on how to design job descriptions.

2. Marlene Wilson, *Volunteer Orientation and Training*, vol. 5, *Group’s Volunteer Leadership Series* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004), 9–19.

3. *Ibid.*, 55–69. For a sample evaluation form, see p. 101.

4. Marlene Wilson, *Volunteer Encouragement, Evaluation, and Accountability*, vol. 6, *Group’s Volunteer Leadership Series* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004), 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 17.

6. For more detail on planning and evaluating programs, see Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Projects That Matter: Successful Planning and Evaluation for Religious Organizations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

7. Wilson, *Volunteer Encouragement*, 67.

8. *Ibid.*, 91.

9. *Ibid.*, 83–92.

10. To go deeper into this subject, see Wilson, *Group’s Volunteer Leadership Series*, or Sue Mallory and Brad Smith, *The Equipping Church Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). For general resources on working with volunteers, see the website of Energize, Inc., a training, consulting, and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism, at www.energizeinc.com.

* This article has been adapted from Dana Horrell’s book, *Engage! Tools for Ministry in the Community* (Fortress Press, 2019).