

# How To Ensure Your Best Volunteers Leave!

## **SLIDE 1 (Introduction)**

People volunteer for an endless variety of reasons. Many people want to gain experience, acquire new skills, meet new people, or expand their network of contacts as a way to get a new job or start a career. Others just want to give back to their community, to help a friend or promote a worthwhile activity.

Volunteers are often considered and treated as a resource only. Free labour. A means of saving money for cash strapped organizations. But this is of course not why the person behind the volunteer is there, and by treating them without care, treating them as an endlessly renewable resource, and to not have a solid volunteer engagement and retention plan, is a sure fire means of emptying your organization of one of its most valuable assets. Volunteers are an organizations life blood, they are your spokespeople, your marketing team, your front line and your backbone.

Forget this and you are well on your way to ensuring all the best volunteers that cross your doorway, will end up as someone else's best assets.

In the following presentation, we will look at volunteer engagement and retention and all the ways you and your organization can ensure your best volunteers head elsewhere.

## **SLIDE 2 (Make your Orientation program an exercise in TEDIUM)**

Volunteers are most impressionable during the first few interactions with your organization

Every bit of information gathered during this time will either reinforce your new volunteer's connection to your organization, or send them packing to find a better connection elsewhere.

I like to call this volunteer "remorse" or the infamous "What did I get myself into"

The biggest cause of this Remorse" is the dreaded volunteer orientation/training program.

Most are poorly organized, inefficient, and boring. How can you expect excellence from your new volunteers if your orientation program is a sloppy amalgamation of tedious paperwork, boring policies and procedures, and hours of orientation training and pointless meetings?

Or the opposite, not orientation or introductions to the team. The, just show up and work mentality.

To reinforce the volunteer's buy in decision, and it is a buy in, as there are literally hundreds of volunteer opportunities out there, get key management involved on the first day and make sure your orientation delivers and reinforces these three messages repeatedly:

You were carefully chosen and we're glad you're here! You're now part of a great organization! This is why your job is so important! This is why you are so important

## **SLIDE 3 (Don't CONNECT to their PASSION)**

Smart organizations align volunteer passion with the organizations vision and values.

Human nature makes it very hard for people to walk away from pursuits they are passionate about.

If you fail to understand what brought a volunteer to your team, they are going to seek their passions elsewhere.

Personal screening and human connections are the best way to do this.

Find out what brought each volunteer to your organization.

Remember: They made a choice out of hundreds of other opportunities to select your organization.

Make sure each Volunteer knows what your organization stands for and what your values are.

Try to have even a brief phone conversation with each volunteer about who they are and what they are looking for

#### **SLIDE 4 (Don't CHALLENGE their INTELLECT)**

Smart people don't like to live in a dimly lit world of boredom. If you don't challenge people's minds, they'll leave you for someplace that will.

Find out what their skills are. What they can offer.

If you just select volunteers because they filled out an application on your website and don't practice skills based selection and assignment you run the risk of your volunteers feeling disconnected and bored.

Volunteers are any organizations greatest resource. Find out what they have to offer other than their presence.

Every volunteer brings with them all of their own life experiences and work history. Ask them about it!

Include background questions as part of your screening or application process.

Keep notes on what each volunteer can bring to your organization and try your best to use those skills.

If you have special projects or needs reach out to your existing volunteers. You'll be surprised how much they can help you.

#### **SLIDE 5 (Don't ENGAGE their CREATIVITY)**

Volunteers come pre-wired to improve, enhance, and add value.

Their experience and passion can help an organization change and innovate.

Most people volunteer because they want to contribute by putting their fingerprints on something worthwhile.

Smart organizations don't place people in boxes – they free them from boxes.

This connects to their intellect and passion, use it to your mutual benefit.

Volunteers love to feel they are a part of the magic that makes your organization thrive.

Unleash them from the norm!

Regular jobs can be stifling to the creative soul. People volunteer to escape their everyday routine, so give them the freedom to explore. Let your volunteers express who they are and you'll be amazed at what they are willing to contribute.

### **SLIDE 6 (Tolerate MEDIOCRITY)**

Simply put, A-players don't have to or want to play with a bunch of C-players.

Make sure you have an evaluation plan in place, and you and your management are personally connected to the volunteers and their work.

If some volunteers are just sliding by while others give their all you are going to lose the ones giving their all.

This doesn't mean replace all your C-players with A-Players, it means finding out why they aren't reaching the same level and find out how you can help get them there.

Find the right place for everyone and you'll keep your team year after year. Talk to volunteers that seem bored, unhappy and disconnected. They just may not be in the right role.

It ties us right back to connecting with their passion, intellect and creativity.

### **SLIDE 7 (Treat everyone EQUAL)**

Treating everyone equal may sound good, but your volunteers are not equal.

Some are worth more, because they produce more results.

Some are just not able to contribute at the same level of others. They may come from a different culture, have different language skills, have visible or hidden disabilities, and have different backgrounds or experience.

Don't judge one person's contributions by those of another.

The key is not to treat everyone equally; it is to treat them all fairly.

Being aware of this also helps you ensure an inclusive environment.

Understand people needs, and limitations. Everyone is different, but everyone is capable of contributing.

## **SLIDE 8 (Don't recognize outstanding PERFORMANCE)**

Remember Psychology 101: Behavior you want repeated should be rewarded immediately.

Notice when a volunteer does a good job. Let them know you noticed. Keep notes associated with volunteers so you will remember to thank them later.

You can never say THANK-YOU enough.

Don't just say it. Mean it! Show it!

Send out Thank-you cards. Start and end every email with a thank-you, and try to make them personal.

Reward a good job. Even if it's something small, people remember it.

Reward excellence and excellence will grow to greatness.

The number one complaint I hear from volunteers is that they always hear when they do something wrong, but never when they do something right.

Remember the rule of positive and negative reinforcement. If you have negative feedback to give, make it constructive. And make sure you start off by acknowledging the hard work they do.

## **SLIDE 9 (Don't recognize their CONTRIBUTIONS)**

Psychology 102: Make the recognition count.

Know what you are thanking them for. Be specific and aware.

A general Thank-you is great, but a personal thank-you is better.

Again, volunteers are your best resource, they do the work, and if you've connected to them as we discussed they will be your best go-to tool for how well things are working, and they often have the best ideas on how to improve policy and procedure.

Always be aware of what your volunteers are doing, and keep track of those times they go above and beyond, or take initiative in dealing with a challenge.

If you do a keep job of keeping track of who is doing what, you'll be ready to recognize those strong volunteers when a leadership opportunity arises.

Ask for and listen to feedback, and publicly recognize good ideas and actions.

Remember, the best leaders make sure that everyone they lead is capable of doing their job and yours.

### **SLIDE 10 (Don't increase their RESPONSIBILITIES)**

You cannot confine talent – try to do so and it will either devolve into mediocrity, or force your talent seek more fertile ground.

People will gladly accept a heavy workload as long as an increase in responsibility comes along with the performance.

Make sure you have opportunities to grow.

Have leadership roles for volunteers and make sure your volunteers are your first go-to source if you're looking for leaders.

When you're hiring in your organization, post the opportunities to your volunteer pool.

Give volunteers special projects that connect with their passions.

Share opportunities that may come up with other organizations.

Encourage mentorship. Have longer term volunteers do the training of new volunteers for you.

Include volunteers in any decision making that affects them.

Create special projects you can assign to your best volunteers.

### **SLIDE 11 (Don't Give your volunteers a VOICE)**

Talented people have good thoughts, ideas, insights, and observations. If you don't listen to them, I can guarantee you someone else will.

If you're thinking of making changes to your operations, ask your most important resource.

Include volunteers in decision making and strategic planning.

Do regular one on one review's with your volunteers.

Do surveys of your volunteers.

And recognize their input.

Ask your volunteers if they think you're doing a good job, and continually ask how you can do things better.

### **SLIDE 12 (MICROMANAGE)**

Tell them what you want done and how you want it done and let them do it

Explain to your volunteers why a job needs to be done and why their job is important, and they will run with it.

Don't and they will care about what they are doing about as much as they thing you do.

Ask for their input on how it could be done better.

Trust that they know what they are doing.

Make sure you have an open door policy for volunteers.

They need to feel comfortable coming to you to ask how or why things need doing.

If a volunteer comes to you with a suggestion on how to improve their job, listen, and offer them a chance to show you how their idea will help.

You might be the boss, but they are the ones doing the work.

Chances are they have some pretty good suggestions that could save your organization time and money.

### **SLIDE 13 (Have DUMB rules)**

I did not say have no rules, rules are important. I specified dumb rules.

Great volunteers want to have guidelines and direction, but they don't want to have rules that get in the way of doing their jobs or that conflict with the values that your organization says are important.

There is nothing more disheartening than a series of seemingly pointless rules and policies that don't actually mean anything.

In fact often rules can present a sense of mistrust from your organization.

Make sure you understand why rules are in place and the purpose they serve, and be prepared to explain those reasons to your volunteers.

Try to limit rules around dress codes and appearance. Give your volunteers the freedom to express themselves.

Be flexible.

Make sure your organization has rules that apply to everyone fairly. Don't treat staff and volunteers differently.

Ask your volunteers what rules they'd like to see. Include them in your process when making or changing policy.

Trust.

#### **SLIDE 14 (Don't keep your volunteers INFORMED)**

You've got to communicate not only the good, but also the bad and the ugly. If you don't tell them, the rumor mill will.

Volunteers like feel included, to know they are part of a team.

Make them know they are an a vital piece of your organization's success and they will fight for your organization and your future.

Be honest and upfront about successes and challenges.

Answer questions honestly and openly.

Don't hold your cards to close you or you'll push your volunteers elsewhere.

Again they are your biggest resource, they may have solutions you haven't thought of.

Include them in Strategic planning.

Send out regular Newsletters with updates to how your organization is progressing.

Make your success, their success. And vice versa.

#### **SLIDE 15 (Don't encourage any FUN)**

Where's the written rule that says work has to be serious?

If you find it, rip it to shreds and stomp on it, because the notion that work cannot be fun is actually counterproductive.

Volunteering should be fun.

Find ways to make the work and/or the work environment more relaxed and fun, and you will have happy volunteers who look forward to coming to back year after year.

Have fun yourself, and let everyone else in on the secret.

Have parties, get-togethers, picnics, whatever your budget can afford. And include the volunteers in the planning and organization.

Laugh, be silly, it may sound counterproductive, but it's the best way to deal with tedium and stress.

Do this, and your volunteers will stay engaged.

Trust that they will know when to be serious and when not.

### **SLIDE 16 (Don't allow Volunteers To Express Their Individuality)**

Get to know your volunteers. Find out who is outgoing, who stays in the shadows, and pair these opposite types together.

Let people express who they are. This ties back to having fun. Everyone brings their personality with them, it's a person's best asset, try and engage it and use it.

This isn't their day job. Let people have freedom with their dress and accessories. Don't judge.

Know your volunteers lives as much as you can. Ask questions. Be sensitive to live experiences, and try to offer support and kindness when needed.

Ask if they are enjoying their role. Find out how you can make it better for them.

Let people be joyous. If you can connect your volunteer's joy to your organization it will be contagious.

Ask for their input when planning events or making changes.

Remember they are your greatest asset, and bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience that is different for each individual.

### **SLIDE 17(Don't CARE)**

If you fail to care about people at a human level, at an emotional level, they'll eventually leave you regardless of how much you organization can offer them.

Talk to your volunteers. Get to know them.

Have an open door policy.

Notice when they are overworked, or uninvolved. Find out how you can help.

Get to know who they are outside of your organization. Do they have family? Pets? What are their dreams and goals?

Everything you do to engage volunteers comes down to this.

Make sure they know that they are more than a body to fill a spot. People need to know they are important.

Every volunteer is also a unique human being with unique needs, skills, gifts and dreams.

Know some of these and they will be more than your volunteer. They will be your friend.

### **SLIDE 18 (Don't develop a volunteer RETENTION plan)**

Volunteer retention deserves your attention every day.

Make a list of the people you don't want to lose and, next to each name, write down what you are doing or will do to ensure that person stays engaged and on board.

Keep track of those who seem disconnected and talk to them, find out what you can do to make their experience better.

Everything we've discussed before now leads to this place.

Ensure your budget allows for volunteer events and engagement.

Even the smallest organization can have a retention plan.

Remember, the fewer volunteers you have to replace and retrain the stronger your volunteer family will be, and the less of your organizations resources will have to go into recruitment and training.

Connect with other organizations, and trade tickets or products to reward your volunteers.

Keep records accurate of your volunteers. Know and recognize when they hit milestones.

Know their birthdays and other special dates and send out greetings.

Use social media to connect with your volunteers and give them a space to connect with each other.

## SLIDE 19

If you are going to take anything away from this, take note of the following Key points:

- 1. Show appreciation and respect for your volunteers:** Make sure you have a reward and recognition program. Know who your volunteers are and what they need from you.
- 2. Provide meaningful and varied volunteer experiences:** Ensure you are paying attention to your volunteer's skills and success and help them to move forward in your organization.
- 3. Communicate and be responsive to volunteers:** Ensure you have the resources and time to respond to volunteer calls and emails. Be honest and clear with your answers. Share your organizations successes and challenges with them.
- 4. Provide staff and social support, and social experiences:** Ensure you have a staff or board member dedicated to Volunteers and your volunteer program. Provide social opportunities for your volunteers, both to connect them with staff and directors as well as with each other.

## **SLIDE 21 (ENGAGEMENT)**

In summary remember these key words when creating and managing your volunteer program:

- Connect
- Passion
- Challenge
- Intellect
- Creativity
- Understanding
- Performance
- Contributions
- Responsibilities
- Voice
- Informed
- Fun
- Care

If you can keep these key concepts alive in your organization, you will have a happy team of volunteers that move with you on your journey and ensure your success.