



Adjust your thinking: Shifting the focus to volunteer retention

By Donna Lockhart

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Recruit, recruit, recruit... Why is everyone so focused on recruitment of volunteers?

It seems that every organization I meet these days is focused on recruitment.

- *If only we had more volunteers!*
- *If only we had more volunteers...it would solve all our problems!*
- *Our services have increased and our volunteers are decreasing!*
- *Greater competition for volunteer resources means we have to be the best in recruitment!*
- *Recruitment is our real issue; that's why we are targeting youth and baby boomers!*
- *Our retention issues will be solved when we can get enough volunteers recruited!*

Sound familiar? Recent studies indicate the number one issue for most nonprofits is, in fact, recruitment of volunteers. I don't want to suggest that organizations abandon this focus completely, but rather shift some attention to another aspect in volunteer management - that of "Retention".

In 1988, MacKenzie and Moore developed the Volunteer Retention Cycle, a guide to understanding how volunteers are engaged in organizations. It has been modified and updated several times, but the message remains the same. There are steps in volunteer management that lead to engagement, involvement and retention of volunteers. The model was developed to assist those managing volunteers to do a better job.

I'd like to share a couple of examples to illustrate the importance of shifting some focus onto retention of volunteers.

The Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) consciously increased recruitment during the years 2000-2005. They increased the number of volunteers significantly, from 4,500 to 6,500 volunteers. This team of dedicated volunteers provides leadership, grooming, and trail membership sales for more than 43,000km of snowmobile trails in Ontario. However, as Eric Saunter, the manager of volunteer development says, "Recruiting new volunteers was very important, but we also informally tracked our retention rate. What we found was significant - 50% of our volunteers leave within the first five years of volunteering. We need to carefully examine what is happening."

Many organizations like OFSC recognize that getting volunteers is one thing. Keeping them engaged is another. Now they can turn their attention to what keeps volunteers engaged in OFSC. Fischer and Shafer (1993), in *Older Volunteers: A Guide to Research and Practice*, make the statement:

“Volunteers who quit after a short time are costly. Typically, ex-volunteers or almost-volunteers take away their acquired learning and leave little behind. Turnover, especially high turnover, can create havoc in the administration and management of volunteer programs.”

Perhaps if organizations focused as much, if not more time on keeping volunteers as they do on recruiting new ones, turnover might, in fact, decrease. This would take the pressure off constant recruitment. This is not to say that recruitment should be abandoned at the expense of retention. But recruitment efforts may cost more in the long run.

Human resources management has taught us that we invest a lot of time and effort into marketing and recruiting for new staff. The primary costs are up front. Once staff is trained and begins work, costs decrease. I am sure this is the same for volunteers! It costs staff time to recruit, market, screen, place, and train volunteers. The costs are up front. If volunteers leave within the first few months, the organization is starting over. If they stay longer, costs decrease.

There is an exciting ‘dynamic tension’ that exists during a volunteer's time with an organization. This tension starts when a volunteer says ‘yes’ and continues throughout the time they volunteer. What happens during this journey affects retention.

The motivation to join an organization can be very different from the motivation to stay. What brings a volunteer initially to your organization is one thing; what will keep them there is another. Often, managers of volunteers are just so happy that someone volunteered; they forget to keep ‘volunteer-centred’. This means building a relationship so that when motivations change you can be proactive rather than reactive.

Many organizations don’t recognize, let alone talk about how volunteers and their perspectives change over time. If we did, it might signal some critical times to communicate with volunteers and redirect them into some new areas. Volunteers often leave when the job becomes redundant, boring, or their ‘term’ of commitment is over. Building a relationship with volunteers helps detect when the volunteer could be redirected or reassigned. This is a win-win situation.

There have been many reasons identified as strategies to retain volunteers. McCurley and Lynch developed a resource, *Keeping Volunteers: A Guide to Retention*, to assist us in thinking this through. The UPS Foundation conducted research to determine what keeps volunteers engaged. Reva Cooper conducted a workshop at a PAVR-O conference on “Retention Strategies for Today’s Volunteers.” The top ten strategies she identified are:

1. Understand and meet people’s needs
2. Be a matchmaker
3. Set people up for success
4. See volunteers as customers
5. Designate a volunteer resource professional
6. Maintain a positive organizational climate

7. Welcome diversity
8. Be flexible
9. Don't burn people out
10. Recognize contributions

Imagine yourself in a volunteer position - "Wow this was exciting when I came but I am just not enjoying my work any more." The manager of volunteers approaches you and talks about your role. She knows that you love to do developmental work and a new project is in the conception stages...and would you like to join the team to help build and define this project?" Excited, you are shifted from one volunteer role into another. Your role has been altered a new opportunity waits. So instead of the potential of losing a volunteer due to boredom, a volunteer has been revitalized into a new direction. Is that volunteer likely to be happier and will they stay longer? I would like to hope that the answer is yes!

During my time as director of leadership development with United Way, I did exactly what was outlined above. I took three volunteers who had been training boards of directors for several years and asked them to use their experience designing materials for a new topic. They were thrilled to do something new and challenging and stayed with us longer than they might have had they continued as volunteer trainers. I'd like to think I understood changing motivations back then, but I really did not. What I was doing was giving existing volunteers new options without knowing that they were ready. I was also getting some new work done.

In my own volunteer opportunities I work hard to connect to the organization I am helping. I have recently stepped out of a board position as I wanted a smaller, focused task to do. I 'volunteered' to chair a task group. I am thrilled and happy to do this. I keep connected to a cause I believe in and they get continued work done. Sometimes volunteers offer to do smaller bits of work but organizations are not willing or ready to let them. How adaptable or flexible is your organization? How much are you listening? With the growing group of baby boomers as potential volunteers, organizations better listen and be prepared to respond to the ideas and suggestions for new work from this group.

It takes a very perceptive and knowledgeable manager of volunteers to be able to recognize when a volunteer might want something new and then be creative enough to do something about it. Volunteers redirected or reassigned may be happier and ultimately stay longer. They may be forging stronger relationships with the organization. Those who are very passionate about the cause of the organization have a harder time leaving. When this happens, increased and improved retention of volunteers occurs. When retention improves, we increase the skill level of the organization and also reduce (not eliminate) the need for recruitment.

This dynamic between recruitment and retention hinges in part on the relationship developed between the volunteer and the organization. This working relationship needs to be many things (meaningful, rewarding, productive, respectful) as well as supportive from a good volunteer management perspective.

Over the past ten years, I think our focus has been more on the work that volunteers do, rather than fulfilling the needs of the volunteers. The times call for a better balance. If we meet the needs of volunteers (and we know with new groups like youth and baby boomers that needs are changing), I believe retention will increase. And when volunteers are satisfied, production levels and accomplishments should increase...the work of the organization gets accomplished. And, we increase the possibility that volunteers will become true believers in the cause. By focusing on what keeps volunteers, organizations should increase their retention rates and 'potential' volunteers should be attracted to them, therefore making recruitment easier. What goes around comes around!

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