

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT NON-PROFIT VOLUNTEERS

You can get more out of your uncompensated help



Volunteers are the lifeblood of many non-profits. Organizations rely on uncompensated help for leadership, administration, marketing, program delivery, and other functions. Some non-profits are entirely volunteer-driven, while others use them for specific activities. Sometimes, it can seem like there just aren't enough, while in other situations there may be too many. Developing and administering volunteer programs can be challenging. It takes a good deal of effort to make sure you have the right skills, put people in the right jobs, coordinate schedules, get them to show up, properly equip them, and manage them to effective outcomes. For non-profits that depend on them, volunteers can present a conundrum—while essential, it can seem really hard to get them integrated.

Fear not! Volunteers can be very effective, if you understand them and choose the right approach. There are some big misconceptions, however, and they need to be corrected if you're going to get the most out of your uncompensated help. Below are **five big myths about volunteers** commonly accepted by non-profits, and they stand in the way of success.

Myth #1—"Getting the right people is sheer luck."

In many ways, recruiting volunteers is just like finding paid staff. You have to determine exactly what you need them to do, define the required skills, figure out where they are, and sell yourself. That sounds easy, right? Okay, maybe it's not so simple—it does take a bit of up-front effort, but it's worth it. You have to clearly define the jobs, and identify the knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes necessary to do the work and fit the culture. Then, think about where you can find people who meet these requirements—who they are, and how you can best reach them. Where you post opportunities (e.g., physical locations, web sites, and/or social media channels) is very important, as are the messages you communicate. Target the right populations in the right places, and capture their interest in both your non-profit and the job. Done effectively, recruiting may cost less, and you may be shocked by the quality—if not the quantity—of your volunteer applicants.

Myth #2—"Beggars shouldn't be choosers."

Since volunteers are critical to many non-profits, it is tempting to take every opportunity to get them in the door. Whether the pool is limited or the interest is overwhelming, the wrong people—those whose skills don't meet your needs, interests aren't mission-driven, or attitudes aren't positive, or who generally don't fit your culture—can do more harm than good. Most likely, you won't be able to count on them to be consistently available and they won't do the job well, negatively affecting performance, reputation, and workplace morale. Even though it's difficult and may put added stress on your workforce, it's usually better to go without for a period of time than to accept an individual who may not represent you well, and can't do the job to the standards you need. Be patient, and be selective. It's critical to make sure your volunteers meet the requirements you've established. If you've defined them well, you'll find people who do.



Myth #3—"Realize half of your volunteers won't show up."

Poor volunteers. Deserved or not, they tend to get a bad rap. True, many people volunteer their time and then don't deliver when needed, but it doesn't have to be this way. You can build a reliable uncompensated workforce, one that's committed and appears regularly when called upon. Three key things will turn your desire for reliability into reality: (a) Be selective (see



#2, above) for the attributes you think lend themselves to dependability, (b) Offer an experience that keeps your volunteers engaged and makes them want to come back, and (c) Monitor who's there for you and who isn't, identify why, and adjust your program to emphasize the characteristics of the "good" volunteers. Accept the individuals most likely to participate and meet your expectations—and deliver the experience you're promising—and you'll build a volunteer base you can count on. You'll also build momentum by word of mouth, as more people learn they can make an impact in a positive environment.

Myth #4—"Volunteers will motivate themselves."

Presumably, individuals volunteer for a reason, and who you choose will start off highly motivated. However, people can become disillusioned or just burn out, so you have to feed the fire. Three things keep volunteers energized: (a) Being part of the organization, (b) Seeing they're making a difference, and (c) Feeling appreciated. Volunteers want to be integrated—they want to be needed, informed, listened to, and involved outside of just their work. They also need to see outcomes—organizational successes and, at a personal level, the direct results of their work. Finally, they don't want to toil in anonymity. Though not the primary driver, recognition builds self-worth and keeps people attached. If you effectively engage volunteers, they'll stay interested and motivated, and you'll get consistent, meaningful participation, better performance, and new ideas. While not a "must have," a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator will make this a whole lot easier.



Myth #5—"You can't hold volunteers accountable."

Perhaps the biggest issue with volunteers is that they're volunteers—they're sacrificing their time and, in many ways, it's a privilege to have them. If they aren't doing what you need, it may feel like your only recourse is to silently complain. When the uncompensated help is critical to leadership, administration, and/or operations, reluctance to ask people to do more—or suggest they do something else—is understandable. In reality, however, underperforming volunteers are a burden, and can have negative impacts on the organization and everyone in it. You should expect volunteers to produce, and there are many ways to push them. Informally, for example, transparency can be a powerful tool—everyone can see what everyone else is (or is not) doing. Periodic, formal reviews also help reinforce positive behaviors, redirect people to activities to which they're better aligned, and encourage them to learn new skills. At the end of the day, though, you can't be afraid to cut ties.



Whether your Board is made up of volunteers or you use volunteers for administrative and operational work, you can get a lot out of those who are willing to help your organization on their dimes. To do so, non-profits need to shed the "volunteer mystique," which dictates "all are welcome" no matter what they bring to the table or how they perform. Despite popular perceptions, volunteer management is a lot like managing paid talent—not everyone fits the need, and "bad volunteers" can be worse than no help at all. If you can cast off the myths described above, you can build and maintain a volunteer workforce that's capable, committed, energetic, and highly productive, fully integrate it into your non-profit's "experience," and keep the best people coming back for more.

Snowflake LLC is a small, Certified B Corporation® consultancy headquartered in Loudoun County, Virginia. Our mission is "to help organizations that improve individuals' and communities' quality of life," enabling them to be at their sustainable best—and then do more—through forward-thinking strategy, aligned programs, qualified people, cost-effective structures, and targeted marketing. Founded in 2014, Snowflake has worked with more than 25 non-profits, government agencies, and socially responsible companies, helping them to do greater things for the greater good. Reach out to us with questions and comments on this article, get more information, and set up a complementary one-hour initial consultation, please visit us at www.snowflakellc.com/contact or e-mail us at info@snowflakellc.com.

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