

Building the Successful Volunteer Teams in the Midst of Transition: *How to Manage a Transition without Losing Your Volunteers*

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Taking an organization through a change is not easy task. Recruiting and managing volunteers is difficult enough during stable time; however, during times of transition it can become almost impossible. Let's face it, any organization, church, association or educational institution that is making a difference will experience change. And yet change often shakes up our volunteer work force.

The volunteer manager that doesn't prepare team members for the future will wake up like Sergei Krikalev did in Russia. In April of 1991, the Leningrad native Krikalev was launched into space to orbit the earth for four months. While he was in orbit, the technical system that was to bring the cosmonaut back to earth failed. His four month trip lasted ten months and when he returned to earth, almost a year later, the world had changed. His country no longer existed. Michael Gorbachev had been replaced by a previously marginal politician named Boris Yeltsin. The Communist party was out of power and in disrepute. Krikalev's hometown of Leningrad had been renamed St. Petersburg. His 500-ruble salary was significantly reduced by inflation and now was not enough to buy even a hamburger at the Moscow Mc Donalds. Sergie Krikalev's true story is a parable for the 21 century leader. We are experiencing the greatest era of change in human history.

Some people seem to thrive on change. How do they do it? How do they manage change in a way that they not only survive, but also excel? They seem to make change work for them. Martin Luther King, Jr., Margaret Thatcher, Winston Churchill, Anwar Sadat, Nelson Mandella, and Mother Teresa -- with resolute courage and determination -- stood squarely in the center of change and controversy. These leaders created their own opportunities to fight for what they believed in.

Each of these leaders were masters of change. One of the most significant essentials for success during transition is teambuilding. Leaders that can challenge, motivate, and empower their teams through change are successful. Most change disrupts teamwork. The leaders who can keep their work teams focused during changes will have organizations and businesses which thrive.

When taking a volunteer team through transitional times, we need to emphasize the following five essentials. Not only are each of these essential, but they are listed in the proper order. Each one builds on the preceding one. Get one out of place, and you disrupt the team.

- Essential One: Emphasize the Stability of A Rallying Cause
- Essential Two: Create an Energizing Vision
- Essential Three: Build a Winning Team Spirit—Intentionally
- Essential Four: Develop a Transition Action Plan
- Essential Five: Enhance the Volunteer Training and Development

Essential One: Emphasize the Stability of A Rallying Cause

The organization in transition needs to recall and emphasize their purpose for existence—their cause. A cause can bring almost any team together. In the United States the crises of 9/11 brought together people, organizations, government agencies and the nation in a unified cause. But we don't need a crisis to bring together an organization. Sometimes the cause is the mission of the organization. When an organization loses sight of its mission, it has lost its cause. If the organization gets off track, the changes can be so much more difficult.

A few years ago I trained the staff of Ducks Unlimited how to recruit and motivate their volunteers. Many of the staff had their Ph.Ds in biology, and they were very passionate about restoring the wetlands. Many of their members were not as passionate about the environment, but they got excited about restoring the wetlands so that there would be more ducks to blow away. How did these groups come together? They had a common cause—"bucks for the ducks."

Growth is a change that often threatens an organization, but the organization that demonstrates how the change, (i.e. growth) can help further the cause, will have a foundation for the change. Although Ducks Unlimited has grown to over 1 million members and often raises over \$ 100 million a year for the restoration of the wetlands, their cause is always the same—raise bucks for the ducks.

When you are facing a major transition, go back to your common cause. Don't change the cause. You can handle a change if your cause is still important to your members. Use your cause as your basis for the transition.

Essential Two: Create An Energizing Vision

A focused vision engages people—it reaches out and grabs people in the gut. It is tangible, energizing, highly focused and people get it right away. That is why Jim Collins calls them Big Hairy Audacious Goals. He points out how President Kennedy challenged our country to a huge, daunting challenge when on May 25, 1961 he said, "that this Nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth." He did not say, "Let's beef up our space program."

Vision statements are different than mission or cause statements. Cause statements identify who you are and why you exist. Vision statements are outrageous goals. When you set a goal to climb mount Everest, it doesn't need a three-page mission statement to explain what Mount Everest is.

Think about your organization. Do you have big goals? What is your vision? Change is much more manageable when you have commitment to a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. I highly recommend reading Jim Collins' *Build to Last* and especially the chapter on how to get commitment to these goals.

Essential Three: Build a Winning Team Spirit-- Intentionally

A team spirit doesn't just happen. Community is something the team has to work on. One of the most important roles of the volunteer leader is to build team community. In my early years of leading volunteers, I was very naïve, and I thought that community would just happen if we just spent time working together. I was so wrong. Fortunately, years ago I discovered that one way to build community is to use community-enhancing exercises. Retreats and all-day planning sessions are opportunities to use community building activities. But don't forget to start a team meeting with a community building activity such as those found at <http://www.volunteerpowers.com/resources/icebreaker.asp>

One such team building activity for helping people deal with the change is the "framing a problem into an opportunity" activity. I use three questions in focus groups of our volunteers.

Question One: How has the change affected your volunteer work with our organization?

Question Two: How are you feeling about the changes?

Question Three: What can we do to facilitate the transition from the old way to the new?

When we give people an opportunity to share their concerns and we listen to their feelings, we have won the right to ask question three. Too many times we jump straight to the third question. And people often have great ideas of how we can manage the transitions. When our members don't feel listened to, they react to change and will fight it. And we lose our valuable volunteers.

Essential Four: Develop a Transition Action Plan

Peter Drucker says that "sooner or later all plans degenerate into work if anything is to be accomplished." The reason many teams fail to manage a change is that leaders do not develop a transition plan. A transition plan consists of the following elements:

- Identifying who is going to be affected by the change
- Developing steps to implement the change

- Developing on-going communication through focus groups, newsletters, and informational meetings

California Travel Parks Association went through a significant transition as they are experiencing growth and a change in leadership at the same time. They have grown from a small state association to become a Western States association adding members and leaders from Washington, Nevada and Oregon. In addition, their executive directors, Tug and Judy Miller, who are the visionaries who have grown the association for the last twenty years, retired. Members begin to lose confidence and security in an organization when leadership changes. The staff also wondered just what the future would look like.

But California Travel Parks Association focused on a strong strategic mission. They developed a transition plan and kept focusing on sound business practices and building a team of caring workers. They started working on this transition plan three years in advance and in the past few years, the group has added more members and is recognized as a fun place to work because of its team spirit.

Essential Five: Enhance Volunteer Training and Development

Jerry Rice, who was still playing professional football at the age of 40, practiced his basic skills by catching 100 balls each day. You would think that after almost 20 years of being an all-pro, he would know how to catch balls; however, Jerry Rice kept developing his skills. No wonder he is one of the greatest to play the game. Like Jerry Rice, even experienced volunteer managers need to sharpen their skills.

Why all five Essentials are essentials – an inventory

Great volunteer teams are made up of people who have a focused vision, believe in their mission, and empower each other with their initiative and skill development. But they always emphasize all five essentials because leaders know that . . .

- Initiative and training without a cause and vision is misguided energy.
- Without initiative and training, the vision and cause are just a dream.

When you face a major change that is going to affect your volunteer base, ask these questions:

Purpose: What is our cause? Why do we exist? What services are we providing that are absolutely essential for our community, our members, our nation, the world?

Vision: What is your vision for accomplishing our cause? Is it challenging and does the vision easy to get exciting about?

Team: What are we doing to build community among our volunteers? Do they love working with us? Are we listening to them about how the change is affecting them?

Process: What is our transition plan? What are we doing to communicate our changes and prevent the rumors from destroying our great cause and community?

Training: What kind of training do you we for our volunteer leaders to adjust to our new way of accomplishing our mission?

When you have answered these questions, go for it. And during the transition, keep asking these questions over and over again. And about the time you get them answered, you will be facing another change. That's the way it is.

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