

Volunteers, Part II: What Makes them Leave?

Christine Litch | May 4, 2007

Last month, we examined factors that motivate volunteers, the things that keep them coming back to their volunteer stints. This month, we look at the factors that cause them to leave.

A dingy or poorly arranged office/workplace, inadequate supervision or leadership quality, and nonexistent or ineffective communication can all make a volunteer head for the door, never to return. Fortunately, these environmental factors are all under a nonprofits direct control.

Appearance of Office/Workspace

Although its tempting for a nonprofit to downplay appearances, a cramped, cluttered, or outdated space is not appealing to most volunteers. No-cost or low-cost solutions such as a simple coat of paint or rearranging desks and equipment may make all the difference. Also examine the lighting to make sure that the space is well lit and inviting.

Equipment Quality

Give volunteers the proper tools to do their tasks. If you don't, their frustration levels can run high. Anything from having a hole punch, paper cutter, or stapler that doesn't work, clear up to the computer that freezes when data entry on a spreadsheet is almost complete, can drive a volunteer to distraction and departure.

Orientation and Training

Just as in the business sector, orientation and training are of paramount importance. A new volunteer should be introduced to the organization and its mission. The volunteer can then see how the organizations services fit into the community.

Part of orientation should also involve communicating how the volunteers tasks mesh with the organizations goals. After the initial overview, a volunteer should have a training period, in which he or she receives instructions on and becomes familiar with assigned tasks. As in the private sector, make sure to design policies and job descriptions for volunteers, so they will know what is expected of them. Ongoing or fresher training is also helpful.

Although these suggestions seem rudimentary, research has shown that many volunteers do not receive much in the way of formal training. Instead, many organizations fall back on on-the-job training or use other volunteers as makeshift trainers. Nonprofits should be sure to have train the trainer workshops for those in charge of training and orientation of newly recruited volunteers.

Communication

Volunteers should receive clear, day-to-day instructions about their assigned tasks. Make sure every volunteer knows to whom he or she may go for additional instructions or clarification.

In a larger sense, communication also plays a key role in keeping volunteers on the same playing field as any paid staff members. Make sure key correspondence is sent to volunteers as well as staff members. If a volunteer works in a particular department, make sure to add his or her e-mail address to the distribution group for that team. Volunteers should also be kept abreast of outside issues affecting the organization and factors affecting their jobs within the organization. Invite volunteers to staff meetings if at all possible.

Remember that communication is a two-way street. Make sure to ask periodically for volunteers feedback. Soliciting feedback can be as informal as asking, Hows everything going? to conducting a formal survey.

Don't forget evaluation. Not only should supervisors solicit feedback from volunteers but supervisors should also provide feedback to volunteers. Whether done in a formal or informal fashion, providing information about a volunteers work will enhance his or her future performance.

Organization

Many volunteers complain about the level of disorganization within an organization, sometimes leading to a perception of wasted time, money, or energy. One of the most effective ways to improve volunteers perception of your group is to put more effort into volunteer coordination. Of course, a volunteer coordinators time is often stretched thin and allocated to a variety of other tasks as well.

To ease some of the load for volunteer coordinators, a number of nonprofits are turning to on-line scheduling programs. Streamlining volunteer organization, these scheduling tools allow volunteer coordinators to devote more time to volunteers and less time to paperwork, phone calls, and e-mails. On-line scheduling allows new projects to be posted and volunteers to be alerted. Volunteers can log on to the site at their convenience, 24/7. They can browse the site to find projects they are interested in and sign up.

Additionally, on-line scheduling provides extra organizational tools for administrators. When planning and promoting an event, a maximum number of participants can be set, so that there are neither too many nor too few volunteers for a given project. Real-time numbers allow project coordinators to allocate an appropriate amount of resources or to a task, eliminating redundancy, waste, and unnecessary expense.

Interpersonal Relationships

Team building is an important aspect of any group. Make sure that volunteers feel comfortable with the other volunteers in the organization as well as supervisors, paid employees, and individuals the organization serves (if applicable). Turnover tends to reduce when volunteers develop good

interpersonal relationships with others and feel they are part of a team and have a support network within the organization.

Working Conditions

Educating paid staff about the value volunteers bring to an organization is crucial. Paid staff should give volunteers the same respect as any other coworker. Volunteer coordinators should also take care that volunteers are treated equally and fairly. Any volunteer who feels that he or she is being given unequal work or less opportunity is more likely to become dissatisfied and leave the organization.

Summary

If the prospect of improving in all these areas seems daunting, then start with some basics. A recent study has concluded that two key factors in volunteer retention are orientation/training and assigning challenging tasks to volunteers. Looking beyond the study, however, think first about improving communication and organization, and you will see an increase in efficiency. This will allow you to dedicate more time to the key factors and ultimately toward all of the volunteer retention aspects.

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