

# Why Do We Love Volunteer Satisfaction Surveys?

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In any discussion of evaluating volunteer services, someone inevitably will point to the results of a “volunteer satisfaction survey” as ostensible evidence that things are going well. How did we arrive at this particular method of assessing success with volunteers? Do such surveys reveal anything meaningful about the value of volunteer contributions?

Determining if volunteers are satisfied is not wrong, but doing so in a vacuum without gathering other information and feedback leads to doubtful conclusions. I believe that the most important subject to evaluate is whether the effort contributed by volunteers has *a meaningful effect* on the primary work of the organization...and whether volunteers are able to see that meaning.

## The Limits of Determining Satisfaction

Volunteer satisfaction surveys are based on customer or client satisfaction surveys, through which a business or organization attempts to learn how recipients of a service feel about their interaction with the service provider. It may be nice to make sure that volunteers feel positive about their work with us, but *volunteers are not our customers*— they are team members (alongside the paid staff) providing service *to others*. They are one of the organization’s *stakeholders*, insiders not outsiders.

Take a look at any volunteer satisfaction survey and critique it honestly. I’ll bet you will find questions about such things as:

- Whether the volunteer feels busy enough or likes the assignments offered
- How the paid staff treats volunteers
- Physical comfort of the work environment
- The usefulness of training provided

The tone is most likely based on a hospitality perspective: Have we been nice to you? Met your needs? Are you happy with us?

There are two potentially serious problems with these kinds of surveys.

First, assessing how well volunteers like what they are doing may be missing the point. Their satisfaction equates to...what? Success? Impact? A volunteer might *enjoy* an assigned role for all sorts of personal reasons, whether or not the work itself is of real use to anyone! This is often why some organizations find it hard to institute change if volunteers have grown accustomed to

spending their time pleasantly on tasks that are no longer needed. Asking about satisfaction, therefore, may be the wrong question.

Second, traditional volunteer satisfaction surveys can seem like report cards given by volunteers to the paid staff. After all, who is implied to be at fault if the survey results show that volunteers are not treated well? Given the delicate dynamics of employee/volunteer relationships, we should not frame questions that concentrate on what happens *to* volunteers, as if the action is all one-way. This issue might be diffused if you also ask employees about their satisfaction with volunteer performance (and treatment of *them*) but, again, what does degree of satisfaction really tell us?

## **Assess What Volunteering Means, Not What It Feels Like**

A more revealing set of questions might get volunteers to reflect on the content and purpose of their work on behalf of your mission. This will elicit information about how they are being treated by the organization, but shares responsibility with volunteers for increasing their own effectiveness. Here are some possible questions that lead to such mutual assessment:

- Are we asking you to do significant work? If you don't think so, please explain what might add meaning to your assignment.
- What do you think are the most important things you do for the recipients of our services? How do you know these are valued by our clients?
- What do you think are the most important things you do to support the paid staff?
- Did you encounter any problems this year in doing your work? Please describe briefly and explain how (if) the situations were resolved.
- Is there any need or gap in service you have noticed that might have potential for additional volunteer work (not necessarily by you)?
- Have you been given feedback or overheard comments by our clients – positive or negative – that you wish to pass on to us?
- Have we asked you for advice on anything? Have you provided any suggestions or input to us? (If not, why not?) How was this information received and/or used?
- What can we do to be more supportive to you in accomplishing your work?
- What training or access to information would help you to be more effective as a volunteer?
- In just a few sentences or phrases, please tell us how you describe our agency and its work to your friends and family.
- Do you have a talent or skill that we have never asked you to put to use in your work for us (but would be happy to do so)?

These sorts of probing questions are not conducive to easy multiple-choice check boxes and require some thought to answer. But the responses will be much more meaningful, both to help volunteers

be thoughtful about the value of their time and effort, and in giving you information to improve volunteer involvement.

## Focus on the Results

We can take this all a notch higher by focusing on the *results* of volunteer service. In other words, make an attempt to prove the impact or effectiveness of volunteer efforts. Such questions would have to be setting specific, of course, but here are a few generic ideas:

- What have you observed or heard from clients this year that indicates your services made a difference to them or changed their behavior or circumstances?
- Can you tell whether or not your efforts have had results? What are the indicators?
- Did you meet the goals we mutually set for your work this year? How do you know? Do you think they were the right goals?
- Did anything unexpected occur as a result of your volunteer activities (something that was important to our clients) this year?

The answers we receive to these sorts of questions have far-reaching implications. They will help to position volunteers in everyone's mind as true contributors to the essential work of the organization. This, in turn, improves volunteer/employee relations. The information can also be used in recruiting new volunteers, as it is appealing to get involved with a successful effort.

And here's the kicker: When we can demonstrate that their volunteering makes a difference, guess what? We vastly increase volunteers' *satisfaction* with their service!

- *If you disagree and like your volunteer satisfaction survey, debate me! But please explain why you feel it is a useful tool – and what else you do to assess the meaning and impact of volunteer involvement.*
- *If you agree on the limits of volunteer satisfaction surveys, can you add any arguments against them to my list?*

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