



An HJS Studio Tutorial: Volunteer Management



I know, you've got to be wondering what Volunteer Management is, and what it's doing on a website about fiber, right? Surprisingly, Fiber and Volunteers belong together. What spinning or weaving or knitting guild isn't based on volunteers? What fiber festival doesn't depend on volunteers to get the work done while keeping costs down? Yet volunteer management seems to be pretty much unknown in the fiber world.

Does your group have a hard time attracting and keeping volunteers? Do your volunteers burn out and quit, sometimes with little notice and leaving you in the lurch? This article might help you out.

What are my qualifications on this subject? I started out volunteering over 30 years ago, as a receptionist for my Army recruiter (really!), and have since volunteered as a lactation consultant, playgroup leader, Family Support Group (Army thing) leader, every possible position in fiber-related guilds, many jobs for fiber festivals, organizer of a major fiber fundraiser, and at the peak of my husband's Army career, I managed about 50 volunteers, as well as provided training for others. I've been a volunteer, managed volunteers, and trained those who manage volunteers, so I've lived every bit of what goes into this article.

Some Basic, Vitally Important, Points

If you read nothing else, at least read this part. If you ignore these issues, they will come back to bite you.

Point 1: Don't let your group become a clique! It's amazing to me how frequently this issue is overlooked. If your group is a clique, you won't attract or keep new volunteers. It's really that simple. If, when your group gets together, you tend to greet each other and ignore newcomers; if your group doesn't have someone to welcome and incorporate newcomers into your group; if you don't go out of your way to make newcomers feel part of your group at their first meeting, and all other meetings, then you have a clique. More than likely, visitors to your group won't keep coming back because they don't feel like they are welcomed and wanted.

Point 2: "Volunteer" is a pay category, not a job description. What this means is a volunteer is someone who does a job without financial recompense. It doesn't mean she's a jill of all trades who can be jerked around from job to job, it doesn't mean she doesn't need training, it doesn't mean she will do a great job with no management, and it doesn't mean she's a second-class citizen. Treat her with the same respect you would give a paid employee, and things will go more smoothly.



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Point 3: All volunteers appreciate and need some sort of feedback. They need to know that what they're doing supports the organization as a whole, and they need to hear it from the leaders of that organization. Otherwise they are likely to start feeling their contribution isn't valued or needed, and the next step is to quit.

Recruiting Volunteers

Many group leaders think all they have to do is ask, and there will be dozens of qualified volunteers waving their hands madly to fill the position. Or they assign more and more tasks to the volunteer they already have, thinking that no one new will step forward to do the work. Neither of these methods are terribly effective. Some alternative approaches:

Have a volunteer manager:

Unless your group is very small, make sure someone with experience is appointed volunteer manager. This person will be responsible for recruiting volunteers, helping to supervise them, providing assistance with writing job descriptions, and arranging for recognition and appreciation of the volunteers. Don't underestimate the importance of this job! It's vital to gaining and retaining active, effective workers.

Define the job:

Don't assume "I need a volunteer" will work in real life. Instead, define what job needs doing. Be specific and complete, consulting with others who have actually done the job. Write a job description, including an accurate assessment of the time and skills needed. Define where in the organization this job fits, and communicate that—don't assume it's obvious to new volunteers.

Get to know your pool of potential volunteers:

Devise a questionnaire to give potential volunteers. It should assess their skills, interest, and desired level of commitment. Then use it, don't just file it! Follow up quickly with those who indicate an interest in volunteering. They're already motivated—take advantage of that and strike while the spindle is spinning :)

Recognize that every volunteer has a different reason for volunteering:

Not every volunteer does so just to support the group. Most have more than one motivation. Some will volunteer to be a valued part of something they admire; some will volunteer to be recognized for their skills; some will raise their hands to meet more people with similar interests; some will volunteer because they want to be influential; some want to gain job skills and experience; and there are many more reasons to volunteer. None of these motivations are good or bad in and of themselves. If you understand where a volunteer is coming from you can better tailor the jobs you offer her, and create a good match of skill and interest with need.

Interview each potential volunteer:

If at all possible, have a personal interview with each possible volunteer. Better than any questionnaire, an interview will give you a 'feel' for what the volunteer might offer your group



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that she didn't realize would be a help. Have a checklist of questions to ask, and take copious notes. Then add that information to your volunteer file for future reference, and make sure to pass it on to the proper person if she's a great match for a job needing a worker.

Carefully match volunteers to jobs:

A poor match between worker and job can lead to problems. The work probably won't be done well and in a timely manner, and the volunteer may feel negatively about the work and the organization, and leave. Use your questionnaire, job description, and interview as tools to find the best possible combination of volunteer and job.

Maintaining Volunteers

Another frequent problem with organizations that depend upon volunteers is the assumption they will work forever with little, if any, supervision or appreciation. I guess we tend to believe that volunteering is in itself sufficient motivation to continue. Well, I can tell you, that ain't so! Both supervision and appreciation are critical to retaining your volunteers, and keeping them working effectively for your organization.

Supervise your volunteers:

Supervision includes a variety of tasks. Follow up with your volunteers. Make sure they're feeling, and being, productive. Don't micromanage their every move, but chat occasionally to see how things are going. Ask what they need to be more effective. Ask what problems they're having. Be a resource and a support. Don't assume that if someone is having trouble, she'll immediately let you know. She may be embarrassed, feel stupid, not understand something, or simply not know there's a problem.

Revisit the job description periodically:

Is the job description an accurate depiction of what the volunteer really needs to do? Has the job evolved to involve more work than originally thought? Talk with the volunteer to find out how well the job description fits her work, and ask her to revise it as needed--or take notes and revise it for her, as many volunteers aren't comfortable writing their own job descriptions. A job description is not written in stone, it's an on-going work of art.

Provide an orientation to the organization:

We tend to assume everyone knows all the stuff we know about our group. Kind of silly when you think about it, but it's a common problem. If your group has written a vision and/or mission statement, you can use those as a starting point to orient incoming volunteers. Have an organizational chart which shows the committees, officers, board members, etc. Provide copies of the by laws and other legal documents pertaining to your group. If possible, a tour of whatever facilities are used by the group is a good thing. If you have a lot of volunteers, you might like to host a meeting each year or more frequently that gets everyone together to learn more about each other. Your goal is to make sure each new volunteer has a good idea of the big picture as well as her own piece of the puzzle.



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Provide job training:

Ideally every volunteer will walk in already perfectly prepared for the job at hand. If so, your job as manager is simplified. But many, even most, volunteers have more motivation than experience. Have some form of formal or informal training ready for each position you fill. It can be as simple as sitting down with the outgoing volunteer, or as complex as writing down all the steps involved in doing the job. There may even be formal, off-site training where you can send a volunteer. For example, your state may provide training in doing the taxes of a not-for-profit organization. It takes time to set up training, but it will pay off in increased job effectiveness, and easier transitions when volunteers change.

Provide opportunities for growth:

Volunteers can get tired of the same old grind. If you keep in touch with your volunteers, you will learn to sense when someone needs to move on to a new job of more challenge and complexity. Or maybe what's needed is additional depth in the existing position. A program chair for guild meetings might be ready to take on setting up workshop leaders for a mini conference, for example. Of course you want to keep effective volunteers in your organization, but one motivation to volunteer is learning marketable skills, and possibly your best volunteer may want to put her skills to good use in a paid position. Pick her brain before she leaves, but do let her go gracefully and in good fellowship.

Watch for burnout:

I participated in a focus group on volunteer burnout, and it was well timed, as I was feeling very burnt out. I gave the subject some thought, trying to define what the problem was for me. It wasn't that I had too much to do, it was that I kept running into brick walls. The leadership of the organization I was part of at the time was having a major shake-up. There was no sense of direction, no feeling that anyone knew what was going on or where the group was headed. I share this to show that burnout can have a variety of causes—it's not just about having too much work to do, though that is all too common. Again, keep in touch with your volunteers. Ask if they're feeling burned out, but realize they may not admit it, as it will often feel like failure to them. Listen between the words they say. Then provide support—recruit helpers if there's just too much going on; training if the volunteer doesn't understand her job; appreciation if she feels her efforts are unnoticed, etc.

Feedback and reviews:

Most paid jobs include some sort of periodic review of employees. Organizations relying on volunteers really should do the same thing. I think most volunteers want to know how their performance is viewed by the leadership, and want to know how they can improve what they do. Likewise, the organization needs to be ready to correct potential problems before they become real issues. Volunteers can be fired! Amazing concept, and not something anyone wants to do, but sometimes it's necessary. And don't forget to ask the volunteer for her feedback on how she feels regarding how she is managed, her role in the group, and how she views the organization as a whole. You might find out some surprising things.



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Give the volunteer room to breathe:

In one volunteer position I held, making a booklet for an event, I was first told to go for it on my own; I brought rough drafts back to the group and was told they were fine; then the micromanagement started, major changes were demanded, and nothing I did was good enough. Needless to say, I didn't stay with that group. Make your expectations clear from the beginning, then allow the volunteer to do what you, after all, selected her to do. Supervise, sure, but don't strangle. Yes, it's a fine line to walk, but a necessary one.

Informal appreciation:

Both informal and formal appreciation is critical to maintaining your volunteers. Informal appreciation can be as slight as a hug or pat on the back at a stressful moment, or as involved as a specially-chosen small gift to thank the volunteer at the completion of a major project. Show that you know what her responsibilities are, and pick out something special she did to mention in your thanks. Generic thank yous are nice, but not real appreciation.

Formal appreciation:

Formal appreciation should involve public recognition, at least in front of the organization, and maybe in a broader public arena. From a name in the fair booklet to a presentation of a plaque at a ceremony, it shows all the volunteers, not just the person receiving the award, that they are valued and important, and gives them something to strive for. It needn't break the budget of your group. A press release to a local newspaper or fiber publication is free; it doesn't cost anything but time to make sure all committee chairs are listed in the fair booklet; certificates of appreciation are very inexpensive. Make sure it's public in some way, make sure it specifically mentions what the volunteer contributed, and make sure it's sincere. Volunteers know when appreciation is 'by the book' and not from the heart.

Letting Go

It's hard to say goodbye to an effective volunteer, and even harder to 'let go' one who isn't performing in spite of providing lots of support, training, and feedback. Here's some thoughts on letting a volunteer go.

Moving on:

She's been part of your organization for years, or even just months, and has made a significant contribution. Now she tells you she must get a paid job, or is moving to another state, or perhaps her term is limited by your by laws. Some situations can be worked around. A good volunteer who is burned out or bored may be revived by a different job in the organization. If she must leave, though, what next? First, get her to revise the job description and provide some sort of set of procedures for doing her job. You may need to help her with this—many people have a hard time putting procedures they do almost without thinking on paper. Next, get her thoughts on what's great and not-so-great about her job and the organization as a whole. Finally, provide some sort of tangible recognition and review of her work. Bring her back for an award ceremony, have a small party to celebrate her contribution, or something similar. The point here isn't to try to change her mind, but to let her go with good feelings all around. Who knows? She might come back later on! And be sure to provide



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her with a letter describing her skills and contributions. These can be valuable additions to a resume, or simply something nice to reread in later years.

Firing a volunteer:

Perhaps this point should have been made first: Every volunteer should be expected to meet defined standards of performance and behavior. If a volunteer falls short of those expectations, make sure she understands them. A written review might help, so there's documentation that she was counseled. Find out if there's anything preventing her reaching those standards—maybe she's just got too much work, maybe she lacks training and skills, maybe she's been sick, etc. Give her a chance to improve within reason. But if repeated efforts to support the volunteer don't result in meaningful improvement, she needs to be moved to a position she can handle, or fired. Give her a fair chance, but don't let your organization suffer because she's a volunteer; volunteers can be fired just like paid employees.

Don't bury your head in the sand:

If you find your organization is losing volunteers faster than you can replace them, acknowledge you have a problem and work to solve it; don't try to sweep it under the rug. Are volunteers burning out because they aren't well managed? Is the leadership ineffective at communicating the vision of the group? Or maybe they're just not good at communication! Is the group a clique, and those not 'in' the group are the ones leaving? Do volunteers feel they are invisible? Take an honest look at the organization, and try to answer these questions. Otherwise you may end up having to close your doors because no one is willing to work for the group any longer.

Conclusion

Volunteer management is a challenging field, but a very rewarding one as well. Done effectively, it makes the organization more effective and successful—not to mention more fun! Welcome new blood—it brings a new vibrancy and creativity into the group as well as reduces the burdens of the old hands. Appreciate your volunteers—if you don't they will eventually leave. Reinvent your group periodically to avoid stagnation. OK, so I'm getting away from volunteer management here, but it's important to do anyway :) Most of all, keep in touch with your workers' feelings, needs, and wants. You may not be able to solve all the challenges they face, but knowing you're trying will make a big difference to them.



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