

16 Tips for Leadership of Volunteers in Small Nonprofits and Community-Based Groups

New member involvement

- **Be open to new members/volunteers and have a plan for how to find them.** New people are required to replace people as they leave and with this comes fresh, new perspectives, ideas, and energy. So, develop a good marketing plan which ushers in the new and guides your recruitment process to suit the roles and your organisation. Create brainstorm lists to consider where you might find appropriate new members. Think of where you might best find these people with a common zest for your organization's purpose. Who are the champions who will refer suitable individuals your way? If you are having trouble recruiting and retaining volunteers look where your approach may be discouraging new people and fill or amend these gaps.
- **Get new members/ volunteers involved immediately.** Actively engage new volunteers immediately through welcoming them and introducing them, help them to feel involved and appreciated from the beginning. Ask questions about what brought them to express their interest in the position, show genuine interest in their background, be positive and encouraging. Ensure an appropriate induction is initiated where new volunteers are oriented appropriately regarding organisational policies and procedures, offer supervision, and allow space for them to ask any questions they may have. Ask your volunteers for feedback on what may help them as they settle into their role.

Leadership

- **Develop organizational structures to bring up new leadership.** Creating a position in your organisation (such as a committee chair) where people can try out a new leadership role. Aim to have new recruits and long-term staff in leadership positions to create balance. Create a team environment where long term volunteers share and pass down their past knowledge to new volunteers and offer opportunities for new volunteers to share in responsibilities.
- **Watch out for signs of beginning of burn out in leaders.** Promote awareness of self-care in volunteer leaders. Many volunteers work tirelessly giving much of themselves and their time. Be mindful of how much workload individuals take on and ensure that work is distributed evenly amongst volunteers. Observe for burnout, especially in leaders and look at ways to reduce burden such as scheduling a month off from meetings or reporting duties.

Operations

- **Define clear expectations for positions.** Create clear position descriptions for all volunteer positions. Distinctly outline role expectations for all volunteers. Ensure that the easy-to-understand structure allows for the individual to understand what is expected of them and how success of their work will be measured.
- **Develop a culture of recognition within the organisation.** Regularly say thank you for the efforts of volunteers and even put it in writing. Make a point to praise accomplishments and even the smallest efforts. Ensure the management culture is shaped to reward through praise of efforts of volunteers.
- **Address liability risks for your organisation.** Consider the ways in which your volunteers may be at risk. What areas present the greatest potential risk? Ensure appropriately designed policies and procedures are in place and in practice to keep people safe. Has your organisation developed risk management standards for harm minimization such as implementation of criminal background checks.
- **Develop a culture of expectation where people do what they say they will do.** Leaders should always walk their talk and model their behaviour towards others with an air of accountability.
- **Cultivate a clear direction for the organisation.** Ensure a clear, formal, and strategic plan which should be approved through the board where all amendments must be board approved prior to acceptance and implementation.
- **Institute means for effective and easily accessible information sharing and communication.** Ensure that meeting agendas are appropriately designed, and clear meeting minutes are recorded in order for volunteers and other staff to clearly understand the developments of the organisation.
- **Reconsider the tasks that no one is willing to do.** Ask for feedback of volunteers regarding tasks assigned. Ask whether they think it is relevant, too tedious, large, or too hard. Consider how it can be redesigned to be broken up into smaller tasks or made more relevant. Ask your volunteers what their ideas are to make it theirs, give ownership to the redevelopment of the task.

Additional Tips for all-volunteer organisations

- **Identify and support other volunteers as a board responsibility.** The primary purpose of board members in all-volunteer organisations is to design the foundations and work tasks to make the work of the volunteers more streamlined. Board members in all-volunteer organisations must operate as supervisors do in paid organisations, ensuring that volunteers understand their responsibilities, scope of practice and that they have all the resources that they require to complete their role effectively.
- **Create systems to ensure commitments are attended to and completed.** Appoint project leaders who will guarantee results. Expect progress notes and send out notes after meetings as confirmation of responsibilities assigned. Ensure that tasks are clear and resources are available. Set timelines and monitor progress.

- **Ensure a 'good paper trail'**. Ensure documents are kept in a designated area, including bylaws, articles of incorporation, minutes, and financial reports. If you are in receipt of grants, be aware of reporting requirements and expectation of retention of records. Keep good records of events and projects so that new people can take over easily. If you do not have an office, ensure you find a suitable storage arrangement which protects key documents.

Additional Tips for staffed small nonprofits

- **Position the volunteer program within the organisation to reflect the importance of volunteers to the organisation.** Other organizational pressures can diminish the attention afforded to volunteer programs. Include staff responsible for volunteer programs as a part of management decisions. Include volunteer program resources in the budget.
- **Ensure that volunteer duties do not transition into paid staff duties.** When organisations transition roles into paid positions, some volunteer responsibilities can seep into paid employee roles without this being noticed. Ensure this is a conscious decision if it is required for your organisation.

Extracted from:

Amy Thomas, "Champions and Feeders Worksheet," North Central AmeriCorps*VISTA Training, July 2006

Jan Masaka, "All Hands on Board: The Board of Directors in an All-Volunteer Organization," p. 10, BoardSource E-Book Series, 1999