



WHAT VOLUNTEERS WANT

KEEPING YOUR CREW CONTENT ISN'T AS HARD AS YOU THINK.

BY TED HARRO

Lost and Found

The red leather NIV Bible on my bookshelf evokes twinges of regret. It belongs to Steve, a seminary student who volunteered on our youth ministry team nearly 15 years ago.

As a full-time intern, I was responsible for growing a ministry to a large suburban high school. I had recruited Steve to my team and admired his heart for God. Together, we had decided that he would focus his energies on building relationships with the 12th grade boys. Steve was older than most of our volunteers and loved basketball, so we thought he would have natural credibility.

Over the course of the year, Steve gave it his best shot. He showed up for athletic events, attended our programs, and joined in training sessions. By the middle of the year, however, I could tell that his enthusiasm was waning. He showed that hang-dog look of someone who feels defeated. He made less time for students. He skipped our end-of-year picnic.

Just before the picnic, Steve left the red leather Bible in my car by mistake. Long after the picnic was over, I realized that I still hadn't connected with Steve to return his Bible and to thank him for his service. By that time, summer vacations were underway. Steve had finished seminary, and I had no way to find him. His Bible still sits on my bookshelf.

While he probably shared some responsibility, I have come to believe that I bear ownership for Steve's decline in morale. I simply didn't understand volunteers.

Today I still wrestle with the question of keeping volunteers happy and productive, even though I'm now a volunteer myself. I have the privilege of leading a ministry in our church that is almost entirely led, funded, trained, and staffed by volunteers. I have a deep appreciation for the unpaid workers in the Kingdom. I want to keep them motivated and connected. I am on a

THE SHORT COURSE

- Most non-profits have a rich, untapped resource in their volunteer ranks.
- To engage and motivate your volunteers, focus on making their service meaningful.
- Avoid three common demotivators: time-wasting, under-resourcing, and ball-hogging.
- Try the simple assessment at the end of the article to identify how your non-profit could more effectively attract volunteers.

personal quest to discover what volunteers really want.

Most churches can't afford to add all the staff they need, and many of the skills for "doing church" today are not taught in our seminaries. These forces will continue to drive churches to hunt for willing, able volunteers.

The demographics hold good news. As Baby Boomers reach retirement age, they have more discretionary time. And Gen X-ers display a natural inclination toward activism. This creates a deep talent pool, if you know how to maximize it.

Make it mean something

As I reflect on my own experience, one insight consistently surfaces. I serve for many reasons, but the greatest is meaning.

Like many volunteers, I spend most of my week in the marketplace, pleasing several masters: bosses, customers, employees. Those stakeholders have values different from mine. If my workday thoughts appeared over my head in a cartoon bubble, you would see me muttering to myself, "I can't wait to do something that really matters with people I love and with whom I share a common cause."

If you are looking for volunteers, you should be salivating as you read those thoughts. People with those thoughts are ripe for volunteer work, on a few conditions:

Give me a clear, compelling purpose. Happy volunteers are crystal clear on their ministry's purpose. They can tell you not only why their group exists, but also why that cause is important. For an important cause, they will give selflessly and *thank you for it*.

As Andy Stanley recently said in a talk on vision, volunteers want answers to three big questions:

- What is the problem?
- What is the solution?
- Why are we the ones to solve it now?

Answer those questions clearly, and people will volunteer for all manner of tasks.

I applied those questions to our newly married couples' ministry. The responses were motivating to me.

The problem? Newly married couples in our society are at serious risk. Statistics don't lie: divorce hovers around 50%, with half of those break-ups occurring in the first seven years of marriage. The figures are not noticeably better inside the church. And the vast majority of Gen X couples come from broken or damaged homes themselves, leaving them without solid role models.

If you could read my workday thoughts, you would hear me say, "I can't wait to do something that really matters..."

The solution? A strategy of connecting newly married couples to God, to their spouse, and to their life purpose— all through transforming community. We emphasize relationships and mentoring in our approach.

Why are we the ones to solve it now? My wife and I are passionate about mission-oriented marriages. She is a practicing marriage therapist and as a couple born between the Boomers and Gen X'ers, we have an ability to build bridges between potential mentors and young couples. We have a group of like-minded leaders who join us in this mission.

The answers to the vision questions provided our entire leadership team with a guiding light as we go about our work.

Involve me as much as possible. This principle is counter-intuitive, but miss it and you'll drive volunteers nuts. On the one hand, volunteers are busy and juggling multiple priorities. On the other hand, we desperately want to have input into the direction and execution of the ministry. Simply donating funds or following through on the plans of staff members fail to excite long-term motivation.

A large para-church ministry recently asked me to provide training for their staff fundraisers. I have supported the organization financially, but after interacting with these committed servants, I was ready to give more, serve more, and tell more friends about this ministry.

By allowing me to use my talents in their organization, they had converted me from ordinary donor to impassioned supporter. They showed me that I have something to offer besides financial support or carrying out the plans of the "professionals" who happen to receive a paycheck from the ministry. They can now unapologetically ask for the best of my time and talents to strengthen the ministry.

Celebrate moments by creating traditions. I stumbled into this one by mistake. A couple of years ago, we got to the end of our ministry season and I wanted to hold our monthly volunteer meeting near a lake. I decided to do a take-off on the foot-washing story in the gospels. We gave each leader a servant's towel and, as a group, affirmed some way that they had imitated Jesus' selfless service. Dry eyes were at a premium that sunny June morning as we soaked in the affirmation of God and our peers.

The next year, I couldn't think of anything better to do, so we essentially did the same thing with the same result. So, we decided to make it a tradition. It allows us to underline core values and say the positive words that often go unspoken. And it speaks to a real desire of volunteers – consistent relational investment punctuated by meaningful moments.

Make it positive

As important as it is to maximize meaning, I have found it equally important

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to neutralize negatives. And believe me, I cringe at the number of negatives I have allowed into the lives of my volunteers. Here are only three.

Don't waste my time. Remember, our volunteers want to contribute. They see their unpaid work as a wonderful way to build meaning and purpose into life. And they evaluate every meeting, email, phone call to see if it supports the purpose. If not, they will withdraw and allocate their time elsewhere.

My wife recalls a short-term mission trip that failed this test. Her team showed up at their overseas destination only to find that their roles were unclear and their supplies inadequate. For half the day they sat idly playing cards, waiting for instructions. Needless to say, they felt frustrated by being available to serve, only to be stymied by a lack of direction.

Don't waste my time, Part 2. Our volunteers develop a sensitive nose for the hopelessly under-resourced project. Nothing leads to the starving of projects more predictably than a failure to regularly prune the ministry project list.

At one church meeting I recently attended, this dynamic was on parade. One after another, volunteer teams made impassioned appeals for volunteers and resources. It was obvious that the church simply had too many sub-ministries going. Its leaders had not engaged in proper church hygiene, regularly examining all projects to decide which could be resourced fully and which should be curtailed or discontinued. Nearly all of the sub-ministries ran dangerously close to the bone, and volunteers became less motivated by the day.

I find that I need a "stop doing" list at least as much as a "to do" list. Otherwise, I simply confuse and frustrate my volunteers.

Stop the ball-hogging. Any athlete knows how little fun it is to play with a ball hog. What that player is silently communicating is that he doesn't trust you to do something good with the ball. And eventually, you just want to sit down.

How often do we really entrust our volunteers with doing the most important part of ministry?

I remember a pivotal meeting we had when I was on church staff. We had always made a big deal of small groups in our discussions of life-change strategy. But as we sat in a conference room, we realized we had been kidding ourselves. We had two large programs a week on everyone's schedule, complete with music, drama, and creative messages. But small groups had to find a way to fit in to everyone's schedules in the corners and cracks.

It struck me then that we didn't *really* believe in small groups. We believed in big programs. And as the staff person responsible for recruiting and training small group leaders, that disturbed me! We started a lively debate that day. In the end, we decided to give our small group leaders, almost entirely volunteers, the ball. It was far from easy, but it was an important statement.

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Your Turn

Here is an exercise you might try with your key leaders. Ask them to give you feedback on the following survey items. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = No way, 10 = We rock) rate these items:

1. Our purpose is clear and compelling.
2. I feel radically cared for by my leaders and fellow servants.
3. I have fantastic opportunities to give my best talents to the accomplishment of our purpose.
4. I am coached and supported effectively.
5. Our ministry has adequate support and resources.
6. We regularly celebrate our progress and growth.

Of course, it is more important to know the reasons behind the numbers than to just compile the data. So debate, dig, and drive to action.