

7 Ways to Enhance Your Experience as a Volunteer

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In working with thousands of volunteers over the past 24 years, I've heard one comment repeated over and over again in various versions. It goes something like this: "Thank you; I got so much more out of it than I gave." Hearing this from so many volunteers—but not all—got me wondering why some people have a better experience than others and, more important, how much of that is due to their own initiative. So while most of my work is dedicated to what organizations can do to support and nurture their volunteer programs, this column is devoted to things volunteers can do to get the most out of their experiences.

1. Find the Right Fit.

Organizations spend a lot of time and resources screening volunteers to make sure they match the right person to the right job. Yet with all of these screening tools, the only person who truly knows whether it's the right fit is *you*. If something isn't working for you, be honest with your supervisor and explore whether the job can be modified or there might be another opportunity in the organization. In extreme situations, another organization may be a better fit. There are thousands of great opportunities for volunteers out there; the volunteers who are happiest are the ones who take the time to find that right position.

2. Be Proactive.

Let your supervisor know what it is you want to achieve from your volunteer experience and periodically assess whether you are meeting your goals. Along the way, don't be afraid to speak up (in a nice way, of course!) and share your ideas for making things better. Even if your suggestions can't be implemented, making yourself heard

is a powerful way to build a deeper relationship with your co-workers and the organization you care so deeply about.

3. Understand the Big Picture.

Make a commitment to learn about all aspects of the organization you work for so that you understand how your service as a volunteer fits into the big picture. You may discover other volunteer opportunities within the organization, and at the very least, you will have an increased appreciation for all the moving parts that go into delivering services.

4. Be an Advocate for the Organization.

As a volunteer, you have a lot of knowledge and understanding about important issues affecting the community. Whether you help recruit new volunteers, collect donations or just open up a few minds, embrace your inner advocate and share your passion and knowledge with others. At the end of the day, there is nothing more motivating than sharing your experience with another person and seeing your own passion reflected back to you.

5. Acknowledge Your Co-Workers.

Take time to get to know your co-workers (paid staff, other volunteers and your supervisor) and pay attention to what makes them unique and effective. When they least expect it, let them know how much you appreciate them. As Mark Twain said, "The happy phrasing of a compliment is one of the rarest of human gifts and the happy delivery of it another."

6. Find Balance.

As much as you love your volunteer work and the difference you are making, part of what makes you successful is your ability to find balance in your life, keep things in



perspective and keep all the parts in harmony. Acknowledge your limitations—we can't be everything to everybody!—and know how much time you can realistically give as a volunteer. The happiest volunteers measure their success in the quality of the time they donate, not the quantity.

7. Know When to Leave.

Volunteering for an organization is a journey of discovery, and as with all journeys, there is an ending. Whether your volunteer tenure with an organization spans a couple of years or a couple of decades, there will come a time when that inner voice tells you you've given all you can give and it's time to start a new journey. When this happens, work closely with your organization to prepare an exit plan that ensures your important work will continue and other volunteers are in place, ready to fight the good fight. And, of course, just because you no longer volunteer for an organization doesn't mean you have to stop being an advocate (see #4 above!).

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