

Welcoming Volunteers to Your Community

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT SKILLS SERIES



Welcoming Volunteers

When you rely on volunteers, you are asked to trust them to do what is best for your work and your community. This can be especially challenging when work is anchored in a community that starkly contrasts with the experiences of those you invite to volunteer, or around which there are particularly strong narratives or expectations. “Field trip” or “tourist” mentalities

can make managing volunteers challenging. But by keeping in mind project objectives and limits and by allowing space for learning and dialogue, you can maintain community integrity and trust, foster strong partnerships, and learn without sacrificing our values and energy. Here are some things to consider.

Be Intentional in Partnerships

Many organizations—from large corporations and school groups to community churches and small student clubs—seek opportunities to volunteer with interesting organizations. However, these groups come with different needs and expectations, sometimes assuming volunteer partnerships will manifest in specific ways. Even if the quantity of volunteers may seem appealing, you need to be sure pursuing partnerships will produce meaningful results and reflect the values of your organization and community. This doesn’t necessarily mean swearing off partnerships with organizations that don’t 100% align with your values, but it does mean that work must be done to prepare to receive and manage volunteers. Having clear organizational goals to work towards can help drive the decision on whether a partnership is right for our organizations.

Preparing to Host

Long before volunteer groups arrive on location, there are steps that can be taken to help facilitate the volunteer program in action. These include:

KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

Although your work is likely based on community input and interest, you can’t assume you know everything about your community. You are not expected to be an expert, but knowing something about the history of the neighborhood, speaking with elders and long-term residents, and understanding some of the strengths and traumas can help you feel more prepared to answer volunteer questions.

CONVERSE IN ADVANCE

Reaching out to the parent organizations of volunteer groups or volunteers individually before arrival can go a long way in clarifying expectations. Speaking in advance can allow group leaders to know what volunteers should expect to see, encounter, and do. This also helps clarify the level of seriousness and amount of work you can expect volunteers to offer.

HAVE CLEAR VOLUNTEER ROLE DESCRIPTIONS

Make sure volunteer objectives are outlined in advance so that the scope of work is clear and distinct. This is important in any volunteer partnership.

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

In addition to the volunteers, it is important to inform staff and community members what is happening regarding volunteer programs in their community. When work has public facing elements or takes place outside, it can be uncomfortable for neighbors to come across large groups of strangers. Notifying them in advance can help build trust with your community.



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COALITION

Hosting

Once volunteers arrive on site, sharing (and reinforcing if previously shared) knowledge of our communities to be served and what's expected is the first priority. Working to orient volunteers, guide their work, and manage community-volunteer interactions closely follow. Here are some tips for handling this:

Orient Volunteers

Volunteer orientations are a time to demonstrate the work you are looking for volunteers to do, including sharing volunteer descriptions and providing training for each role a volunteer will play. Volunteer orientations can also be an opportunity to help acclimate volunteers and educate them about the experiences they are about to have. No matter the format of the orientation, remind volunteers that they are in a neighborhood or at an organization that works with the public, and that there may be others around who are going about their regular activities. Grounding volunteers and giving them a moment to reflect on their intentions and commitment to service in a new community is best done in advance. Giving simple guidelines about behavior, such as what should and should not be photographed, can help set standards for respectful interactions for volunteering in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Volunteer agreements and liability waivers can also serve to reinforce important principles and standards.

Give Space for Learning

It is important to make space for learning for those that have lived or worked in our communities and those who have not. Volunteer partnerships can be developed into longer term relationships, especially if guests feel like they are allowed to ask questions. Most volunteers genuinely want to contribute but may need time to understand things with which others have had plenty of experience.

Have Frank Conversations

Some groups are more responsive to direct conversations than others. Being prepared to have honest conversations about the context of the work can help to strengthen integrity and trust within your communities.

Foster Dialogue

Encouraging community members and volunteers to work side by side can help to initiate meaningful conversations and offer opportunities for learning and relationship building.

Setting Boundaries

Despite all your preparation, there still may be times when judgment calls must be made and boundaries need to be enforced. Dealing with conflict is not easy. When volunteers overstep their roles or double down on disrespectful behavior, it can be necessary to step in and end a partnership. When this happens, be respectful, clear about your reasons, and explain what has occurred. For your organization's records, be sure to document any negative situation as soon as possible. Ending unhelpful or challenged partnerships can maintain integrity, productivity, and the health and wellbeing of your organization.

Final Notes

Managing outside volunteers can involve extra preparation but can yield lasting, meaningful partnerships. You can work together with outside volunteers if you are mindful about the process and the needs of your organization and community.



Bailey Park Neighborhood Development Corporation creates space for volunteers to learn about the community being served by allowing them to have open dialogue and ask questions.

Hear more at:
<https://youtu.be/wAKroC9c9-Y>

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