

Volunteer Management

Leadership Strategies for Success

by Dawn Marie Barhyte

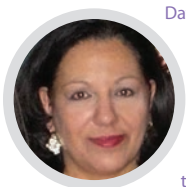
Volunteers are priceless assets to our organizations. They are caring and committed to serving the children in our care. Directors are in a pivotal position to influence the management of these non-paid employees who offer so much. Doing so is demanding but can also be delightful. Volunteers each bring their own goals, skills, schedules, and expectations to our programs. You can involve these committed staff in the life of your center by using their strengths to ensure a positive experience for everyone and giving your program an overall boost. The potential benefits of using volunteers include greater staff diversity, increased skill sets, and positive energy.

Effective volunteer management is the key to a lighter workload because volunteers are offering their time at no cost; it is up to supervisors to ensure they are valued and maximally utilized. If care and attention is not devoted to

your volunteer staff, they can become disenchanting. Your reward will be a staff committed to you, the children you care for, and the families you serve. It is vital to keep volunteers motivated and recognized; this can be done as simply as saying “thank you,” equipping them for meaningful work, and inviting them to be part of your community.

Organizations that are successful at recruiting and retaining well-matched volunteers thoroughly screen applicants and conduct in-depth interviews. Successful screening can prevent supervision issues and will make it easier to place volunteers in roles they find appealing and engaging, which will in turn boost their commitment. Do not be afraid to ask what type of work they have done, what they liked best about that work and what kind of training or experience they bring that will help contribute to your organization. When volunteer roles are clearly defined, it lightens the workload at all levels.

Even though there is no direct compensation for working, there are strategies that will make it easier to retain your volunteers. Due to the high turnover rate in child care, we need to identify how to retain dynamic volunteers and to lead them to serve most effectively. Once you have them on board, your job does not end. Your volunteers need good leadership and support to ensure they stay committed for the long haul.



Dawn Marie Barhyte is a widely published freelance author. She writes frequently on early childhood topics and parenting issues. For more than 20 years she met the needs of children and their families, co-directing, teaching and coordinating children's programs. She continues her commitment to children and touches their lives through her writing.



Too often, volunteers fall through the cracks because we mistakenly assume good intentions and pure motives will make everything turn out all right. Volunteers need to feel productive, engage in work that challenges them and offers opportunities for growth, and they need to know they are valued for what they do.

But how do you entice quality volunteers and create partnerships that work best for your program as well? Here are some smart leadership strategies to enhance volunteer commitment, keep them motivated, and keep them coming back.

Roll out the red carpet.

Say welcome enthusiastically and mean it! Begin by conveying in a warm, friendly manner that you are delighted to have them aboard. A nice, personal touch is to send a handwritten “welcome to the team” note.

Acclimate the volunteer.

A good way to get started on the right foot is to provide a well-organized orientation. Use this opportunity to explain standards and expectations that clarify the volunteer’s role and outline what is involved in the position. Offer a description of the work she will be doing, safety rules and regulations, and also illuminate your center’s philosophy or mission and some basic child development information and emergency procedures. Be sure to allow for questions regarding your organization and its mission. Explain tasks in detail and demonstrate if necessary. Convey that you are available if any issues arise.

Furnish training necessary to carry out the volunteer’s role.

It is good practice to provide your volunteers with access to any staff development that will enable them to do a better job. If you build on the skills of your volunteers they will be more qualified, better-prepared, and better able to carry out their work. Besides collecting basic

information about your volunteers and conducting the necessary background checks, it is good practice to get to know them personally, so you can harness their talents and maximize their contributions to your program.

Figure out what makes them tick.

Tap into volunteer motives by asking them from the outset what they hope to gain from their experience and look for ways to satisfy that. Besides collecting basic information about your volunteers, it is good practice to get to know more about them personally. Knowing these things can help you get the most out of your volunteers, as well as provide the volunteer with a more enriching experience.

Ace accessibility.

Maintaining an open door policy ensures your volunteers do their best work and feel comfortable asking questions. Give volunteers a reasonable amount of attention during their first few weeks of work. Check on their progress. See how well they are adjusting. Determine if there is anything you can do to ease the transition. Respond quickly to volunteer concerns; do not let volunteers languish because it is likely they will think about finding somewhere else to contribute their time.

Promote professionalism.

Training volunteers takes time and considerable effort but it is an invaluable investment that validates their worth as a team member. In doing so, you will broaden the volunteer’s expertise while furthering the work of your organization.

Give guidance.

It is vital to schedule regular opportunities to discuss any concerns, and offer feedback, advice and support. Place a high priority on objective, timely feedback. Train paid staff to give positive feedback to your volunteers to prevent

overload that might lead to burnout. This will be conducive to assessing job satisfaction and identifying areas where growth is needed. Watch for signs that your volunteers are over committed. Keep looking for ways to improve the volunteer experience at your center.

Keep current.

Follow trends in child development and share them with your volunteers so they can polish their skills. Ask your board to provide funds for you and your volunteers to attend conferences and access other learning opportunities.

Invite input.

Actively seek out and reward input as your volunteers can be a great source of insight and ideas. When people give their time and hearts to your organization, they will develop ideas about your program. Be wary of the attitude that your volunteer staff is not as perceptive as paid staff. Stay genuinely open to ideas as you shape your program. When appropriate, remember to include volunteers in staff meetings with paid employees. Nurture and applaud your volunteers when they share ideas and solve problems together. This makes the volunteer feel like an integral part of your child care team and reinforces the message that they are competent and their input is valuable. A thriving organizational team flourishes in an atmosphere of open communication where opinions and questions are respected.

Maintain a positive climate. This is fundamental to overall volunteer satisfaction and ongoing commitment to service. Do this by facilitating team spirit, which has many advantages. For example, it fosters cooperation, communication, and improves staff morale.

Express yourself.

Foster communication by developing and supplying child development magazines, newsletters, workshops, bulletin boards, and staff meetings where all

are included—paid and volunteer staff alike. Share information via email, Facebook, and phone.

Affirm efforts,
recognize achievements,
and reward service.

Show honest and genuine appreciation. Be sure to convey how important your volunteers are. All of us need recognition at one point or another. For some, recognition of the impact they are having on children's lives is the driving force behind their continued service, for others it is the recognition of others that makes the critical difference. Remember anniversaries of service, birthdays, and special days. Any way you can express appreciation means a lot—a pin, an annual luncheon during volunteer week, a certificate, or even a simple thank you note for going the extra mile.

Formally recognizing the hard work of your volunteers is an essential part of making them feel appreciated and accomplished.

Hug your volunteers,
shake their hands,
pat their backs,
and offer praise.

On a regular basis, let volunteers know they are doing a great job, ask their opinions, and help them feel comfortable with being an integral part of your organization. Doing so will instill pride that they are part of an organization doing great work. Another way to show appreciation is to publish photos of volunteers at work on your website, in local newspapers, and your organization's newsletter. Volunteers love seeing the impact of their work.



Volunteers are not free—they require an investment of your time, thought, and energy; the return on your efforts is an investment well worth the effort!



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