

Can I Get a Volunteer from the Audience?

Development Desk: Volunteers by Alexandra Gray

For a fledgling arts organization, volunteers make up the backbone of your operations. They will be the people who sit on your board and lead your organization's development as well as the human capital you'll rely on in accomplishing your mission.

A dedicated volunteer core can be equally effective at promoting, producing, and fundraising as a paid staff. It's simply a matter of being a good manager.

Raising money is important, but "raising volunteers" can be just as vital to your group's success. Certain key principles can guide you in recruiting new volunteers, or energizing old ones.

Throw the recruitment net wide. Most volunteers will probably be individuals you have known for a long time, but it's wise to diversify for several reasons. The first is that networking is a draw: people will volunteer if they know they will meet others from outside their normal circles. Cultural and social diversity will enrich your work, and economic diversity provides a second, quantitative benefit: volunteers are the most likely candidates to become regular donors. Some may be able to make small donations and invest lots of time; others may be strapped for time but not for funds. A volunteer base with all points of the spectrum represented will better address your organization's needs over time.

Outline your expectations. Employees work more effectively when they know what is expected of them, and volunteers are no exception. Consider writing out a job description for your volunteers, especially if critical elements will hinge on what they do. Communicating clearly will also avoid disagreements if certain goals aren't met.

Express your gratitude. Let your volunteers know how much you value them. Volunteers who feel respected are far more effective than those who feel over-extended or, worse, taken advantage of. A reward system, like credit in your publications, or events held in their honor, will enhance your reputation as a company, and keep volunteers happy as well.

Include volunteers in your budget! It may seem elementary, but ensuring that you include volunteers in your annual budget—the hours they put in and the value attached to their time—can boost your group's image, especially in the minds of funders. Even if you cannot pay anyone in your staff on your current budget, seeing that you are keeping track of their activities shows that you are on the path to becoming a professional institution.

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