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THE GIFT OF VOLUNTEERING

How to find and be a good volunteer for any organization

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The Gift of **Volunteering**

BY ELAINE DUMLER, CSP, & CRAIG HARRISON

An illustration featuring two brown hands holding a large red heart. The heart contains the text 'Tips on Finding and Being a Good Volunteer'. The hands are wearing dark blue sleeves. The background includes stylized red and pink shapes at the bottom.

Tips on Finding and Being a Good Volunteer

I had the opportunity to lead a training team in Dubai. I've led teams in lots of cities, but now I was taking a team of five 7,800 miles away. What if something went wrong? What if I forgot something I really needed? Those thoughts started filling my mind the minute I left my driveway for the airport. There were four other people on my team, and I was the one in charge. What I was really scared of was failing them—and myself. Then the thoughts in my head changed. I was given this contract because someone in the company had faith in me, in my team, and in the fact that we could deliver what they wanted.

What does this have to do with volunteering?

Simple. It's about understanding that you have skills that your organization, NSA chapter, or team needs and values—sometimes as a member, being asked for your contributions, and sometimes

as a leader, bringing others together for a common goal.

There are some challenging mindsets, both about how to ask someone to volunteer and about accepting a volunteer position yourself.

ASKING FOR VOLUNTEERS

Craig Harrison, 2004–05 NSA–NC president, shares a top 10 list called “How to Make the Ask.” How you ask for volunteers often determines the results you receive. Understanding how to make the ask is an important skill that can help you build boards and committees, form project teams, and even help find a marriage partner. Recognize these keys when asking for help.

1. Start with the benefits. Phrase your request in terms of the benefits to the listener. Speak to “what’s in it for them.” How will *they* benefit from saying yes?

2. Be positive. Sometimes it can feel like you’re “begging” someone to fill a slot. Get off the negative and share the positive. Frame it as an opportunity to build new skills or give all involved a sense of accomplishment.

3. Show respect and appreciation. When you recognize their skills, past track record, personality, or other attributes, volunteers feel special to be asked.

4. Give accurate and clear expectations of what the position requires. It’s tempting to tell people what they want to hear, or only emphasize what is easy or fun. Give a fair explanation of your request and what it entails. This heads off buyer’s remorse later on.

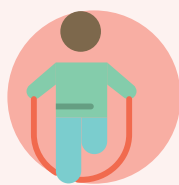
5. Listen to their issues or concerns. What are they worried about? What will they base their decision on? Strive to understand their needs, concerns, fears, and constraints.

6. Provide an appropriate amount of time to make an informed decision. Don’t pressure, manipulate, or overwhelm them in hopes of getting a yes. That usually backfires.

Volunteer Tips



Assemble a team with diverse skill sets and backgrounds.



Make it fun! Celebrate your team and its work.



Delegate for better or worse. That’s how we all grow.



They’re out there just waiting to be asked!

7. Strive for win-wins. Use flexibility and creativity for mutually acceptable outcomes.

8. Accept their answer appreciatively, whether they agree to your request or not.

9. Be ready with a backup. Should your initial request be rejected, consider a counter-offer or secondary offer. Having a fallback offer allows them to work with you in whatever capacity they are able to. Maybe it’s working on a “one-time” project rather than a year serving on a board.

10. Thank them either way for their time and willingness to consider your offer. By treating them with respect and care, they are more likely to say yes in the future. Consider asking them if they know of anyone else who might be good for this opportunity.

BEING A GOOD VOLUNTEER

You were asked for a reason. Maybe it’s that you know more about the subject. Maybe people see qualities in you that stand out.

Be willing to listen. If you are the board president or a team leader, remember that the group is filled with ideas they want to share. Present an issue and then listen to what others say. At this stage, write down every idea. Don’t throw anything out. If you are a team member, share your ideas. Together, look at each one and analyze how it will work to solve the issue.

Don’t be jealous of what other team members do better than you. Keep in mind that each person was asked and selected to be on the team because of the special skills they brought. Don’t feel inadequate; instead, look at how your unique skills will combine with those of others to add value.

Be the kind of team member or leader people want to follow. Get good at making sure everyone on the board has a voice that is important in producing the best outcome. The true goal is to engage people so you are all heading in the same direction.

Scott “Q” Marcus, former NSA–NC chapter president, instilled a great theme/challenge to chapter members in 2006–07. “The theme was “*I gave my 30.*” I asked everyone to donate 30 minutes a month; basically, [it was] derived from one minute per day,” he says. “The concept, based on the theme, was to break it down into such small bites that anyone could come up with the time to volunteer. Most people went on to do more.”

Volunteer! It’s a quality that will serve you well, and you’ll probably enjoy it! ■



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CRAIG HARRISON’S *Expressions of Excellence* helps clients tell their stories and their clients’ stories, and help clients create new stories through the

design and delivery of amazing customer experiences.