10 Tips For Keeping Your Volunteers Motivated And Happy

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Keep your volunteers’ hands raised to help you out.

No company can be successful without the right employees working behind the scenes. The same can be said for organizations that rely upon volunteers. And it is the role of any manager to keep volunteers motivated to ensure they are willing to continue helping. The happier volunteers are, the more productive they can be.

Keeping volunteers motivated and productive is easier said than done in many instances. Groups of volunteers might all perform similar tasks, but each person is an individual and what motivates one won’t necessarily motivate another. Additionally, it is important to recognize the difference between positive and negative motivation.

Motivating your volunteers and team members in a positive manner is important. Positive motivation includes rewarding volunteers for positive results and performances. As Christine Gibbs, keynote speaker and philanthropist says, “Treat your employees like brilliant, hard working adults, and you’ll have a team of brilliant, hard working adults. Treat your employees like toddlers, and your days are going to be spent changing diapers.”

Negative motivation includes strategies like threatening punishment for not being productive enough. So how does a manager go about motivating volunteers in a positive manner?

The following are 10 tips for keeping your volunteers motivated day after day, week after week:

1. Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds

A good volunteer is only going to be as productive as their body and mind allow them to be. Emphasize the importance of a healthy lifestyle to volunteers in a positive way. This does not mean harping on those who appear out of shape or overweight to hit the gym. Rather, managers should encourage volunteers to take breaks, drink water and get a good night’s sleep before showing up. This is particularly important if volunteers are helping to complete a physically demanding project.

2. Respect

Your volunteers may just be numbers to some, but to you they are human beings worthy of receiving respect. Be understanding when volunteers miss a day and be sure to recognize their return to the project afterward. Remember, volunteers are participating out of the goodness of their hearts and no amount of respect and admiration is too much.

3. Hold Regular Meetings
Meetings might be universally mocked among employees in a typical 9-5 office role, but for volunteers meetings are vital. Meetings provide volunteers a sense of direction in the beginning of their service. Later on, meetings keep them in the loop on the overall progress of a project and allow them an opportunity to provide input.

4. Be Accessible

When a manager establishes themselves as a near authoritarian leader, they lose the faith and trust of their volunteers. It is important to walk the line between being the boss and being an accessible individual. Work hard to ensure that volunteers feel comfortable coming to you with questions, concerns and input; and try to check-in with them from time to time, as well.

5. Establish Reliable Go-Betweens

Try as you might, no manager is capable of successfully running a project alone. If you spend the entire day dealing with the little things, you become distracted from your big picture. Establishing a reliable go-between that will honestly and truthfully relay information back and forth is important. This provides volunteers a trusted person who will honestly pass along information, and frees up time for you as the manager to accomplish your tasks each day, as well.

6. Be Accurate And Detailed

Unlike regular employees, volunteers should not be saddled with too great a burden. This is not meant to belittle the volunteers, but rather to present them with realistic goals. Provide volunteers with clear, accurate, and concise goals from the beginning so they have direction and can produce quality results from the start.

7. Praise And Recognize Accomplishments

Don’t forget to recognize and praise volunteers. Recognize their accomplishments, praise their work ethic and thank them for contributing their time to your project or cause. Volunteers rarely give their time for the joy of recognition, but that doesn’t mean it won’t drive them to perform at higher levels or keep coming back to volunteer in the future.

8. Build Community

The more comfortable volunteers feel, the more relaxed they will be and the more likely it is they will turn in productive time. Make efforts to build a sense of community among your group of volunteers by offering them “extras” when they are not volunteering. Host a barbeque before starting the project to allow volunteers to mingle and become comfortable with each other; or consider starting a group athletics league during the course of a project to build a sense of unity.

9. Be Flexible

Remember to offer flexibility to your volunteers as well. Your personal and private life is a roller coaster, and so is that of each of your volunteers. These people are offering up their
free time to assist in your project, so understand when they need to be away for a week or two or weekends here and there.

10. Lead By Example!

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, lead your volunteers by example. Don’t demand anything from your volunteers that you yourself wouldn’t be willing to do. Additionally, don’t merely sit around barking out orders and then park yourself in a chair while they work hard. By all means, feel free to be directive, but it is imperative to jump in and get your hands dirty with your volunteers to show them you are willing to work hard, too.