

Nonprofit Toolbox

Building Volunteer Relationships That Last

Strong volunteer programs aren't built on luck or endless capacity; they're built by design. Small, thoughtful changes can turn volunteer challenges into sustainable partnerships.

RECRUITING

1. Make the Ask Smaller and Clearer

- Design short-term, well-defined roles.
- Avoid open-ended or vague commitments.
- Clearly state the time commitment, responsibilities, and why the role matters.

2. Use Your Existing Community

- Invite board members, donors, and current volunteers to act as ambassadors.
- Partner with recruiters who can help translate existing needs into compelling role descriptions.
- Ask trusted vendors to recommend or recruit one volunteer.

MANAGING

3. Mitigate the “Sign Up and Disappear” Syndrome

- Simply onboarding.
- Create one clear point of contact.
- Deliver an early, quick win by giving volunteers something useful and achievable right away. Early success increases long-term engagement.

4. Managing Volunteers When You Have Limited Time

- Design systems, reuse, and refine them. Tools include templates for welcome emails, role descriptions, and orientation.
- Automate when you can: Use simple tools for scheduling and reminders.
- Empower lead volunteers: Identify reliable volunteers who can coordinate peers or projects, and who can take on light leadership roles to build ownership.

RETAINING

5. Strengthen Engagement and Retention

- Treat volunteers as mission partners, inviting them into conversations and planning where appropriate.
- Connect work to impact often by sharing stories, updates, or results. Remind volunteers how their time makes a difference.
- Normalize flexible commitment, recognizing that not every volunteer will stay forever.
- Recognize efforts by saying 'thank you' often.
- Offer a next step, such as mentoring, leadership roles, ambassador, or advisory opportunities.
- Give volunteers a reason to stay connected as capacity changes.

6. Protect Your Best Volunteers from Burnout

- Watch for over-reliance on the same dependable volunteers.
 - Encourage breaks, rotation, and clear boundaries around time and scope.
 - Check in regularly to understand what feels energizing and what feels draining.
- Retention improves when volunteers feel supported rather than stretched thin.

When volunteer experiences are designed with clarity, care, and intention, people don't just show up; they stay. Small, thoughtful changes today can build the kind of volunteer relationships that sustain your mission for years to come.



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