

Leading Volunteers



EMS agencies have traditionally had volunteers who contribute time and other resources to make the delivery of emergency services possible. Even services with full-time staffing often have auxiliaries and other volunteers who perform a variety of functions. Whatever the title of the person at the top, Chief or Director, leading volunteers is different from managing full-time staff.

A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history. – Mohandas Gandhi

Volunteers commit their time, energy, money, and other resources because they want to make a difference, belong to a group with a common goal, and have pride in being a contributing member. Volunteers have to commit on their own terms. It is the leader who provides the glue, attracting others to join and directing activities. The following are key characteristics of volunteers and their leaders as identified in a two-year research project by Deloitte:

1. Autonomy. Volunteers see themselves as highly independent and prefer to make their own decisions. The leader connects personally and passionately with volunteers sharing facts and stirring emotions – letting them know that they can choose to make a difference.
2. Opinions. Volunteers have their own opinions and want to be given the opportunity to make them known to the organization. The leader gives volunteers a voice – a place where their opinions and ideas can be heard. They find the channels that are successful for their organization: meetings, social media like Facebook, personal phone calls, or text messages.
3. Options. Volunteers want to have the option to engage or not engage on a case-by-case basis based on their personal values and time and resources available. The leader offers volunteers many different options for involvement based on the wide variety of resources needed from equipment maintenance to servicing computers to fundraising to running emergency calls to building public relations.
4. Motivation. Volunteers connect with stories about why their contribution is important. The leader taps into the volunteer's interest over time by being trustworthy, actively listening, promoting a strong organizational identity, and understanding individual motivation. The leader tells compelling stories about the contributions of the organization in the community and gives the listeners opportunity to become invested in the mission, making it their own. Remember, volunteers don't join organizations, they join causes.
5. Have a say. Volunteers joined to make a difference and want to have a say in direction and decision making. The leader keeps channels of communication open, uses democratic decision-making processes whenever possible, and is aware of power dynamics within the group. Transparency in the decision-making process and paying attention to power issues will go a long way to keeping the volunteers allied together.

6. Numbers. The more people involved, the more will become involved. The leader is persistent in seeking out new volunteers, knowing that as more and more people become involved in different ways, more will join. Success is never based on the contribution and effort of one person.

You have to convert people one person at a time; time after time. Progress only comes when people plow ahead and do it. It takes a lot of patience. – Cesar Chavez

Leading volunteers requires igniting interest and creating opportunities for people to make a commitment. It requires identifying all of the different ways the volunteers can contribute to the organization. Here are some questions for leaders who want to assess their ability to organize and direct volunteers:

- How easy is it for new people to join your organization?
- Do you regularly set targets for inviting people to join?
- Have you assessed what methods work and don't work in your community for adding to your volunteer base?
- How are you increasing the commitment of those volunteers who are already a part of your organization?
- How effectively have you created an organizational identity in your community? Do volunteers publicly state they are part of your organization and invite others to engage too?
- How do you change the conversation from what people aren't willing to do to what they can contribute?
- Do you tell the story of the many different ways people make a difference through volunteering in your organization?
- Can you distinguish "passengers" from those who are actually making a contribution? Do you publicly acknowledge those who contribute the most time, energy, money, and other resources?
- Do you continually work to develop trust and credibility between the volunteers and yourself, between the community and your organization?

There are many encouraging statistics for those seeking to attract volunteers – from the overwhelming numbers of college students applying to Teach for America to the spontaneously organizing groups on the Internet such as the Linux users group, who jointly develop an operating system, and Wikipedia contributors. People envision helping their communities, learning new skills, and making a difference. EMS leaders should actively invite people to join the cause.

A community organizer is someone who uncovers [volunteers'] self-interest. They give [volunteers] an opportunity to work in their own self-interest and address problems in the community that they could not address by themselves. – Jane Addams