

# How To Motivate Volunteers

Every Group depends on volunteers, those good souls who give up time to serve a cause without financial reward.

Volunteers can be surprisingly tricky to manage. They may be total greenhorns and need extensive supervision. Or they may consider their passion for the cause is licence to perform a smidge (or two) or two below the level you'd like.

Trouble is, a lot of the tricks that work fine when you're motivating or upskilling employees usually just won't cut it with volunteers!

Luckily, there are still plenty of ways to keep your volunteers on track. Apply the suggestions below with good humour, and everyone in your Town Team is a winner.

## Positive Feedback - the Number One Motivator

"I loved how you helped that old lady cross the street at the festival. A few more like you and we'll have the best main street in the metro area!"

"If I had a gold medal, I'd give it to you for always doing such a beautiful job of the financial reports. Seriously, you do it better than the accountants where I work!"

"I really like the way you talk to people at our street fairs. You have a special way of making people open up to you."

Wouldn't you feel good if people spoke to you like that? You'd probably go the extra mile every time you volunteered for them! Be like that with your volunteers, often. Be specific about what you're praising them for, so it's more than a generic thank you. Give positive feedback in public if you can, so that others can hear how well the volunteer did.

You're not limited to words. Put pictures of your volunteers up on social media, or your Town Team's website. Show them in action, making a difference!

## Reward and Recognise

This approach takes the first suggestion further.

Recognition is the simple version. This is where you recognise a person for the job they came to do. For example, Robbo volunteered to be the secretary last year, and did a perfectly decent job. Recognise Robbo's form with a special "Secretary of the Year" moment in one of your meetings. Pat him on the back and tell him he's a legend. Good on you, Robbo!

Reward's a level above recognition. Use reward when a person's gone far above what was asked. For example, Tammy volunteered to arrange the street festival this year and put together an outstanding program. Attendance and revenue were double last year's figures! Tammy went the extra mile and booked outstanding stage acts, musicians, buskers and comedians, many of whom donated their time. She did it all under budget too. Top work Tammy!

You reward Tammy for the brilliant job she did. You publish Tammy-specific thank yous in the Town Team newsletter, which goes out to hundreds of local people. You arrange a \$200 voucher for one of the local day spa businesses to be given to Tammy at the first meeting after the street festival. And the Town Team writes Tammy a formal letter, saying thank you on behalf of the whole organisation.

Robbo and Tammy are now much likelier to be excited about volunteering next year! Other volunteers might just well be inspired enough to follow suit, too.

Other reward and recognition tricks that we've seen work with volunteers include:

- T-shirts, hats, water bottles, tote bags etc (a way of recognising volunteers at an event)
- Coffee, food, bookshop, craft store vouchers etc (ditto. Can also be distributed according to performance)
- Food at meetings (recognises attendees)
- Life memberships
- Community awards (usually through local government)
- Concert tickets
- Handwritten notes

Be as creative as you like! And win the hearts of your hard-working people while you're at it.

### Provide On-the-job Training

Here's where your commitment to succession planning can really pay off! (See our [How to Structure Your Organisation](#) guide for a succession planning primer.) Mentoring and training pay handsome dividends for everyone, especially volunteers.

Imagine one of your young volunteers being a novice at the art of bookkeeping. Then imagine the volunteer being mentored for 12 months by a bona fide accountant (who happens to be the Town Team treasurer) on exactly this aforesaid art. Then further imagine this newly confident youngster being promoted to official Town Team treasurer! Bookkeeping greenhorn to bookkeeping champion in less than a year. That youngster will have something impressive on their CV, plus a good deal of faith in themselves, thanks to your policy of careful training and mentoring. They'll also be highly motivated as they go!

Mentoring works extra well for volunteers who are specific about why they've joined your cause. Were they looking for a particular skill? Hook them up! And if you're not sure about what motivates them, ask! That simple question might make all the difference to someone.

## Free Food

This one truly works, trust us!

Offering free snacks to your volunteers goes a long way. We'd suggest you offer the best you can afford. A tin of stale biscuits doesn't scream "you're awesome"; it whispers "we're lame." Sandwiches and other light nibblies will probably do the job nicely.

Food can really brighten an evening meeting. Save the tucker for the end of the meeting if you can – people are astonishingly more efficient in these circumstances! They'll also be more likely to hang around and chat afterwards.

## Have Fun!

Volunteer work can be stressful. And fun is one of the best stress busters. Serious, passionate leaders often forget to laugh! Be sure you're setting a good (preferably ridiculous) example around the team.

We find that the best Town Team meetings are run with a good deal of humour. These folks stick to their agendas and they're very efficient, but by gum, they're laughing plenty on the way! If you've got a fun person in your team, you may consider making them chair. A couple of fun meetings in a row and people start looking forward to them. A couple of very serious meetings in a row, and, eww ... you get the idea!

## Be clear

Volunteers thrive when they know what they're supposed to do. When they don't, they may end up just standing around, which is a waste of everyone's time. Be sure your people know why they're there!

## Lead by example

Lead your people by example. Don't demand anything from your volunteers that you wouldn't be willing to do.

## Communicate

This is an easy and effective way of keeping your volunteers' spirits high. Good comms are a two way street, as you know. Ask questions and listen!

Welcome suggestions and feedback. Show volunteers that their opinions matter to you. Soon you'll have a team of people willing to do their best to serve the cause.

**Acknowledgement:**

We put this advice together based on our own experiences and with help from these sources:

<https://nonprohthub.org/volunteer-management/tips-to-motivate-your-volunteers-and-keep-them-coming-back/>

<http://www.volunteerpower.com/articles/motivate.asp>

<https://blogs.volunteermatch.org/engagingvolunteers/2015/02/10/5-ways-to-motivate-your-nonprofits-volunteers/>

<https://blogs.volunteermatch.org/engagingvolunteers/2012/07/09/10-tips-for-keeping-your-volunteers-motivated-and-happy/>