



**RAYBOURN GROUP INTERNATIONAL**

Passion. Expertise. Partnership.

# Success with Leading Volunteers

Written by: Brian Lewis, CAE, CVA & Mark Lewis CAE, CVA

3502 Woodview Trace, Suite 300 Indianapolis, IN 46268

800.362.2546 | 317.328.4636 ext. 120 | Fax: 317.280.8527 | [www.raybourn.com](http://www.raybourn.com)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### SUCCESS WITH LEADING VOLUNTEERS

<b>Introduction</b>	.....	Page 2
<b>Understanding Success</b>	.....	Page 3
<b>Understanding the Importance of Volunteers</b>	.....	Page 4
<b>Communicating the Goal</b>	.....	Page 5
<b>Tips for Volunteer Management</b>	.....	Page 6
<b>Conclusion</b>	.....	Page 8

## SUCCESS WITH LEADING VOLUNTEERS

### INTRODUCTION

Volunteer management is much more of an art than a science so the goal of this e-book is to both provide you with some practical tips and to help you to think differently about your role as a manager and leader of volunteers.

# UNDERSTANDING SUCCESS

## WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

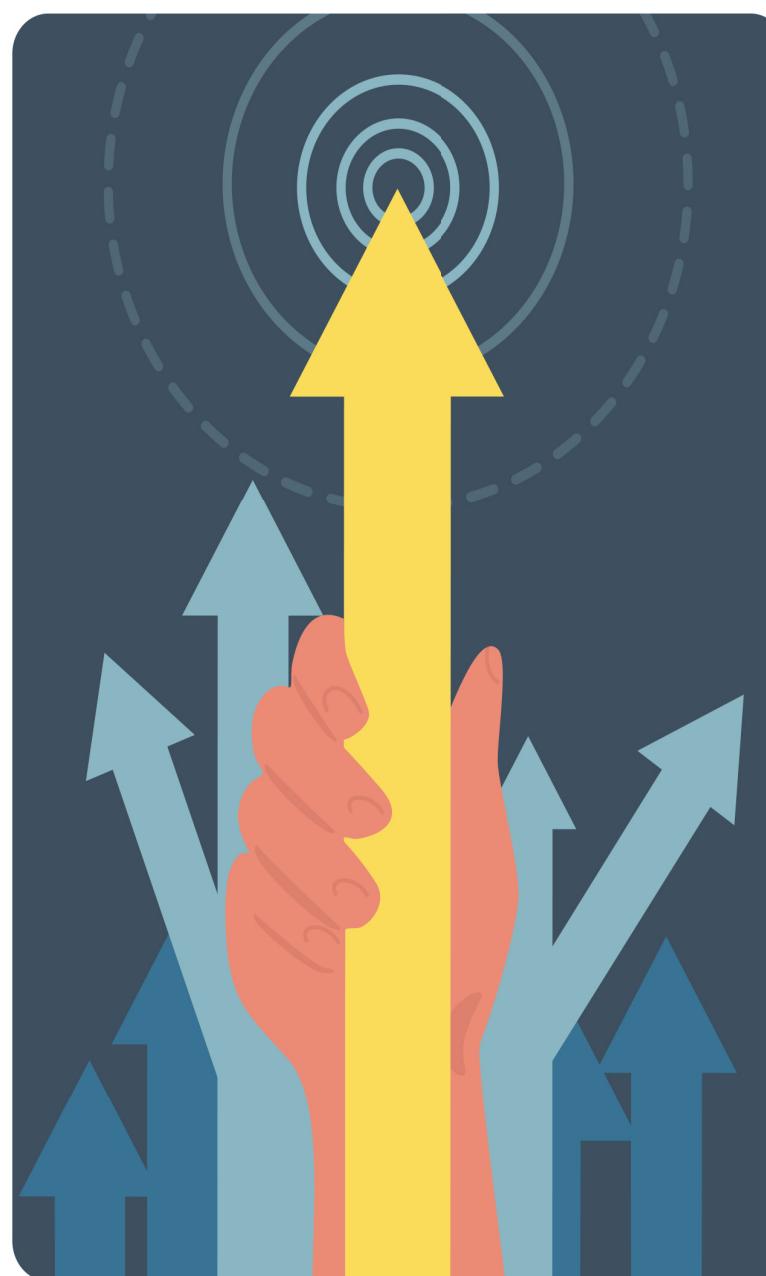
- Accomplishing the Goal
- Creating a Positive Volunteer Experience
- Helping to Perpetuate Sustainability

The obvious answer is accomplishing the goal that has been assigned to that group of volunteers. Every volunteer project should have a goal assigned to it that advances the mission of the association. Each of these projects is a piece of the puzzle, and an association can't be successful if pieces are missing. So step one is making sure there is a clear goal and that everyone understands.

While the specific goals are important, ultimately, as a leader of volunteers, our first priority should always be to ensure our organization is better off because of the work that's been done. We want to achieve our goals without losing sight of the big picture: the overall success of the association. This is important and ties into creating a positive volunteer experience. Hitting the goal is great, but if everyone is burned out after reaching that goal, it probably wasn't very fun or fulfilling. We need volunteers to be pumped up about what was accomplished so they'll want to do it again, or volunteer to do something else. If volunteers are getting burned out, that's not going to help the association with its long term goals. So the path taken to accomplish the goal is often just as important as the goal itself. It sets the tone and the expectations for those volunteers for future participation.

Don't sacrifice tomorrow for a short term gain because part of being a successful volunteer manager is helping the organization establish sustainable success. Most organizations have those amazing volunteers who get a ton of stuff done for the association, but when they're done, is someone ready to replace them? Have they shared their knowledge and experience or have they hoarded it? Delegation is very difficult, but the goal is for the association to be successful far beyond any individual's participation, so focusing efforts towards training the next wave, the next generation of volunteers, is vitally important.

Great volunteers get things done, while great leaders get more people involved. It's wonderful to be a great volunteer; everyone needs more great volunteers, but great leaders make everyone around them more successful. A great leader will enable members to be the best volunteers they can be and help the association to maximize its potential. So whether you are managing volunteers as a staff person or are in a volunteer leadership position, evaluate your success as a leader: someone who is improving the current and future success of the organization.





# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERS

## WHY ARE VOLUNTEERS IMPORTANT?

- Creates competitive advantage
- Establishes the bounds of what the organization can accomplish
- It is a membership benefit... If it has value to the member

### **It's THEIR Association, allow THEM to make a difference**

It's important to remember what a wonderful resource your volunteers are. Associations can accomplish amazing things because volunteers are willing to donate their time and talents to a common cause. Nonprofits are able to do things that no for-profit company could ever do and a big difference between the two are the people who are willing to volunteer.

Just using one example, think about the education that associations are able to offer, all the time and expertise that's put into developing programming and presentations. While there are a lot of examples of education being provided by for-profits, nonprofit associations are frequently able to offer better programs at a lower cost. Our competitive advantage is the "free" labor we get because volunteers are motivated by factors other than making money and are willing to donate their time to support our mission.

However, because volunteers are so vital to an association, they also establish the bounds of what the association can accomplish. There are certain things that a trained, paid staff member can do to support an organization.

However, there comes a point where no matter how much money the association has to invest in its projects, the number, the willingness, and the dedication of the volunteers will determine the ceiling of what the association can accomplish. Even if all our events are profitable, we're limited by what volunteers are capable of organizing and members are willing to attend. So our ability to recruit, retain, and engage volunteers really determines the extent of what an organization can achieve.

While volunteers are a huge benefit to the association, volunteering can also be a benefit to the member, but ONLY if it has value to them. By volunteering, people are given opportunities to develop new skills while helping to shape their organization. It gives people with similar interests an opportunity to discuss those topics, expand their knowledge, and see things from different perspectives. This is another huge reason why it's important that the volunteer experience is a positive one. We don't want to kill their joy for something they love to do; we want to give them an opportunity to dive deeper into it.

# COMMUNICATING THE GOAL

**CLEAR-** Everyone must be on the same page

**CONCISE-** Don't micromanage

**IMPACTFUL-** Positive effect on the organization

**REALISTIC-** The volunteers must feel like they can accomplish it

There are all kinds of resources out there for developing quality goals and philosophies for goal setting, so let's just focus on a couple of attributes that are particularly important when working with volunteers.

In most cases, the goals have already been developed by the Board of Directors for the Committee/Council/Task Force to implement, but the task of the volunteer manager is communicating those goals to the volunteers.

The first challenge is making sure that you understand the goal, because if you don't understand it then you won't be able to communicate it clearly to the volunteers. It's not as simple as just throwing verbiage up on a

slide or on an agenda; the goal needs to be communicated and explained in a way that avoids different interpretations so everyone has the same finish line in mind.

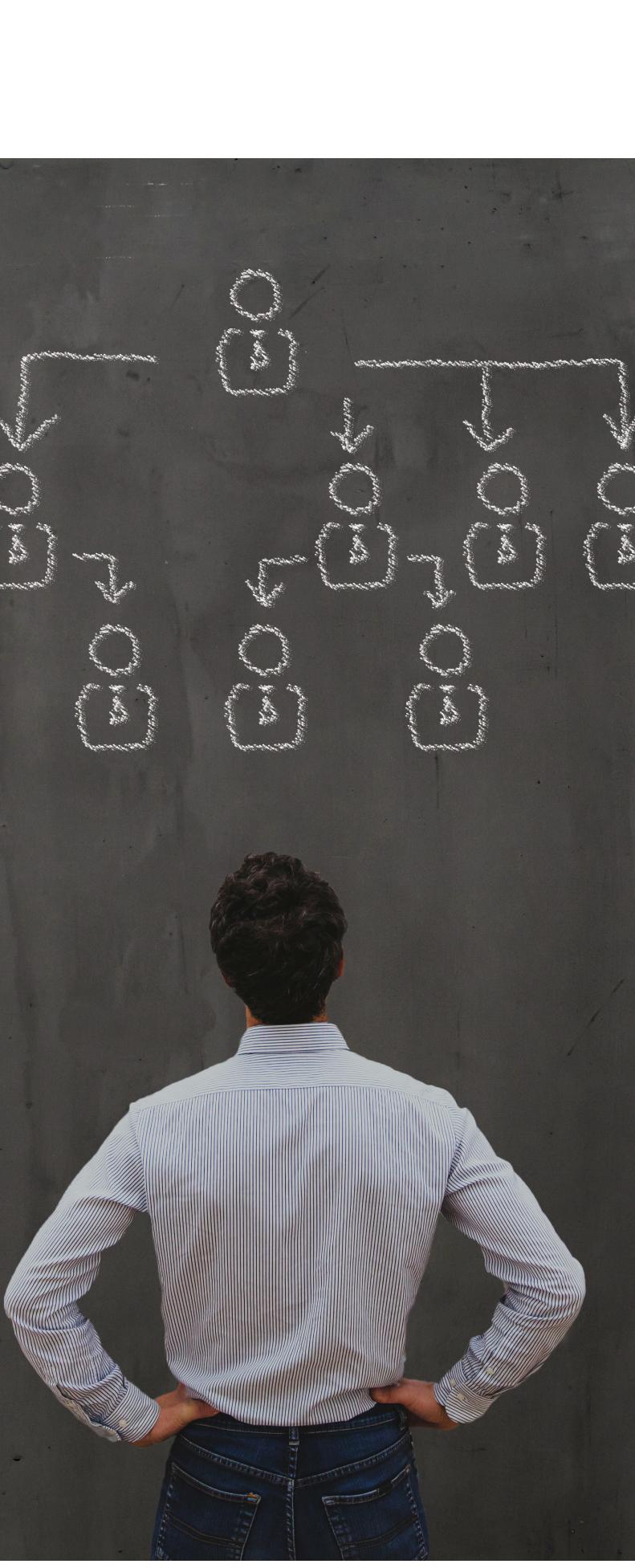
While we want to be clear about what goal entails, we don't want to be overly detailed either. We want to have a very clear end result in mind but allow volunteers the opportunity to brainstorm how to accomplish said goal.

Don't provide them with a 42 step plan and expect them to be robots following it; there is no leadership or skill development there. Additionally, there is no opportunity to utilize the different ideas, perspectives, and skills that your other committee members can contribute to the team.

Whatever the goal is, it needs to have a positive impact on the association. And you need to make sure volunteers know what that impact is going to be. Even for mundane work, they need to know why it is important. And if you as the staff or volunteer leader can't answer that question, that work should be reevaluated because when the going gets tough, the volunteers are going to wonder if what they've been assigned is even worth doing. It's also important for the volunteers to understand how what they're doing is part of the bigger picture. If they really understand why they're doing something, they'll be more effective in figuring out how to reach that goal in a way that also helps the association accomplish what it's trying to do.

Last, make sure the goal is realistic because nothing is more deflating than feeling like there's no way to be successful, that the goal is impossible, or that you've been set up for failure. Once a volunteer feels like they can't do it, they'll either deviate from the plan or not do anything at all. As a leader, sometimes you have to be ready to sell the volunteers on the idea that the goal isn't too lofty and is something that can be accomplished. A little positivity can go a long way so you may have to be ready with that motivational speech if it looks like everyone is starting to get discouraged. Sometimes it's as simple as just breaking a larger goal into many smaller goals so everyone can see that progress is being made.





# TIPS FOR VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

## DIRECT, DON'T MICROMANAGE

- Know your goals, brainstorm solutions, come to a consensus
- Divide & delegate tasks utilizing everyone's skills
- Don't feel like you have to be specific on the "how"

## NEVER FORGET! YOUR VOLUNTEERS ARE VOLUNTEERS

- On their best day, the association will likely be their third priority behind family and work
- So politely hold people accountable for their tasks
- And give people a graceful way "out"

## VOLUNTEER TIME IS VALUABLE

- Make effective use of everyone's time
- Don't have meetings just to have a meeting
- Don't bog your committee down with "busy" work

With a clear goal in mind, it makes it much easier to stay focused on brainstorming ways to accomplish that goal. It's important to get everyone's ideas and make sure everyone is heard. You never know who is going to have a thought that might not be a great idea on its own, but someone else might be able to build off of that idea, and building off one another can result in the best plan to accomplish the goal . Many times the best solutions start with an idea that won't even work but that gets us thinking in a different direction and leads to an innovative solution.

While we want everyone's thoughts, we also need everyone to buy into the plan and come to a consensus. Before executing our plan, we need to make sure everyone is moving in the same direction. Sometimes, volunteers with strong personalities can make it difficult to get everyone on the same page (as the loudest voice can sometimes drown out all of the others), but it's better to spend some effort building a consensus up front than having people doing tasks that aren't productive to accomplishing the goal.

Once a consensus has been met, give everyone something to do but don't feel like you have to be specific on how you want them to accomplish it. When people understand what the goal is, they often come up with innovative solutions to the problem.

No one likes to be micromanaged so give them the opportunity to surprise you with how they accomplish the task, just be available to help them if they get stuck.

Remember, your volunteers are VOLUNTEERS. On their best day your volunteer work will likely be their third priority behind family and their career, and then you will be competing with their other volunteer responsibilities, hobbies, interests, etc. While that doesn't mean volunteers can't be held accountable, it does mean we have to be understanding that they probably have a lot going on in other parts of their life so we have to motivate them to make us a priority. They're not employees so there are no payroll savings by firing them; we just now have one less volunteer.

As the person responsible for managing the volunteers, you are the one that has to be in charge of overseeing the success of the entire project. You want to avoid "nagging" the volunteers but you do need to politely hold people accountable for their tasks. This can be difficult because different people need different degrees of "reminding." Some people want to be left alone and they'll get their work done while others won't get anything done without a little pushing. It's up to you to stay flexible, figure out the personalities you're working with, and determine alternative solutions when the work isn't getting done.

Occasionally, if someone's not getting the job done, they need to be replaced with someone who can accomplish it. Sometimes we have to remove a volunteer because of a personality conflict that's ruining the volunteer experience for the rest of the committee. When these situations occur, the priority must be to the big picture; it has to be what's best for the association. One important strategy is to give people a graceful way "out."

If they can't accomplish their task: be understanding, provide them with an exit strategy that saves face, and hopefully keep them as a potential future volunteer. If their work or personal life suddenly gets busy, ask them if they need to back away for a while or if someone else can assist with their project because we can see their conflict and we don't want to interfere with that. Make it easy and painless for them to quit because there is no reason to have a volunteer who isn't committed, and the association needs someone on board who will get that job done.

Associations work because of the time put in by volunteers. It's our competitive advantage; it's why we can compete with for-profit companies so don't take that time for granted. Make sure it is being used as efficiently as possible as the time that volunteers give up to help the association is very valuable.



Imagine the costs our committee meetings would incur if we had to pay everyone their normal wages. While meetings aren't necessarily or inherently bad, we need to make sure the outcomes from that meeting justify the time people are donating to it, and sometimes calculating it in monetary terms helps us realize what a big donation that time is. Make sure the time invested for the meeting is comparable for what is going to be achieved.

We don't want to waste volunteer time on any task that isn't advancing us towards our goals. It's one thing if someone enjoys the task as we know there are some people who love to spend a couple hours on tasks such as preparing mailers. While it may not be a great use of their time, they like this kind of quiet, manual task which gives them an excuse to slow down and be alone with their thoughts. So to them it's not a waste of time; they're getting something beneficial out of it. Not everyone is going to feel that way but if we can find a volunteer that enjoys the task, and it's productive, there's no harm in a volunteer doing it. However, if no one wants to do it, then we have to ask ourselves if it's worth twisting someone's arm to volunteer. Is that task really the best use of someone's time?

## CONCLUSION

Sometimes the hardest thing to accept is that there is not always a right answer. There are great questions that help guide us towards more productive collaboration with volunteers but there is no solution that's always going to work. And things don't stay the same either. We're dealing with people and while much has been made about the transition from Baby-Boomers to Millennials and Gen Z in the workforce, the reality is a new group of professionals enter the workforce every year with different perceptions and life experiences. So flexibility is key; we need flexibility to allow new volunteers with new ideas to help us discover new ways to reach the finish line. There should be no doom and gloom about where the association is heading, just an understanding that change is inevitable. And change isn't bad; it's an opportunity to continue improving and finding new ways to better accomplish our mission.





**RAYBOURN GROUP INTERNATIONAL**  
Passion. Expertise. Partnership.

3502 Woodview Trace, Suite 300  
Indianapolis, IN 46268  
800.362.2546 | 317.328.4636 ext. 120  
Fax: 317.280.8527

[WWW.RAYBOURN.COM](http://WWW.RAYBOURN.COM)

