

Volunteer Development

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“Every citizen group longs for a larger membership and more committed volunteers. We love to describe graphically just how overworked we are, how we can’t possibly respond to the many issues demanding our attention, how we always see the same familiar faces at our meetings and events. And what do we actually do about it? Preoccupied with fire-fighting, we begin to neglect long-term planning, we let our meeting structure deteriorate; we slip into jargon, which saves time, but alienates newcomers; and we assign responsibilities to the tried and true-workhorses, because we haven’t the time to train newer people”

From: *Care and Feeding of Volunteers* by Ellen Schwartzel in Ontario Environmental Network Newsletter (1993)

Sound familiar? Environmental organizations and the people who volunteer for these groups are particularly vulnerable to self-neglect and organizational neglect because at every turn another issue does pop up. And since many of these issues are positioned in a them-versus-us context, many people find themselves alienated from their friends, colleagues, or their community, and swimming upstream — fighting the status quo. The other problem is that people who get involved in environmental issues give more than their time, money, or knowledge. They give their passion, which on one hand is very motivating, but on the other hand is very draining. The result is that many individuals and their organizations find themselves sliding towards burn-out.

This section of the training kit focuses on building, fuelling, and maintaining the engine of the environmental movement — people. It will look at where and how to recruit potential volunteers, how to keep them and make the best use of their skills, and how to acknowledge their work.

In 2007, a comprehensive national survey found that over 12 million Canadians contribute over two billion hours of their time to volunteer activities each year. Only 3

percent of those two billion hours are spent volunteering for environmental causes. The challenge for environmental groups is to link issues to specific tasks and offer citizens a wide variety of opportunities to contribute to a cause through concrete actions. How can this be done?

Step 1. Develop Recruitment Programs

The task of recruiting volunteers is often thought of in the context of meeting an organizational need. However, to borrow a line from community organizer John McKnight, no organization is built with a focus on deficiencies and needs. Every organization is built on the capacities and gifts of people. Recruiting volunteers is about creating an opportunity for people to contribute their skills, abilities, passion, intelligence, experience, knowledge, time, and energy to an organization that offers a personal challenge, learning, and growth, and, at the same time, the chance to make a valuable contribution to a community.

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According to Trudy Seita, author of “Leadership Skills for the New Age of Non Profits,”

“People in the workforce today are better educated, have more demands on their time, and are more highly skilled than ever in the history of our society. As a result, we will see more independent, almost renegade, volunteers than in the past. They are going to commit their time, talents, and dollars to causes rather than organizations. They might not walk across the street to volunteer in a mediocre organization, but they will drive across town for a cause they strongly believe in, or an organization to which they can effectively contribute.”

Matching skills to actions

The key to getting and keeping volunteers is to create a match between the work that needs to be done and the skills and expectations of the volunteer. A poor match between job and volunteer can result in frustration on the part of the volunteer which could lead to a volunteer quitting the organization. Your group may want to ask volunteers to fill-out a self-assessment form to identify their skills and expectations. Since many environmental groups in New Brunswick operate totally by volunteers, a self-assessment by the volunteers may help to identify the strengths of the group, as well as the gaps in skill requirements. A sample volunteer self-assessment form can be found in Appendix A. Making the most of people’s skills begins with recognizing and acknowledging their gifts.

Another way to think about volunteer recruitment is to look at the demographics of our communities. A study on volunteering in Canada in 2007 showed that higher levels of volunteerism are associated with increased age, higher levels of education and household income, being employed and having children in the household. Knowing the volunteering trends and the constraints people face during different stages of their life can help your group to identify the right method for recruiting, orienting, and recognizing individuals.

Where and how to recruit volunteers

Your group’s strategy to recruit volunteers should be coupled with its plan of action and knowledge of your group’s community, membership, or constituency. When your group creates an ac-

tion plan, it provides friends, colleagues, and the general public with an opportunity to link their skills to your actions. Therefore, communicating your group’s activities will be an important part of developing volunteers.

A key point to remember about recruiting volunteers is that many people are **task-oriented** and are more likely to respond to a specific request or task than a vague, open-ended request. To accommodate people who are more task-oriented, break your projects, actions, or committees into smaller activities, events, and sub-committees. This will also help you to identify and target the specific skills, expertise, and information you need.

Some people are action-oriented than others and prefer to engage in radical or activist programs such as marches, demonstrations, and blockades. Recognize that not everyone is action-oriented. If your group plans a militant protest as part of its action plan, try to include something for those who, for whatever reason, prefer a moderate approach. This will help to broaden your membership base, and also improve your chances for later success.

A checklist of where and how your organization can identify and recruit potential volunteers is presented below. This list also serves to identify public relations opportunities. Remember, **over 90% of volunteers recruited have some direct link to current volunteers.** There is a bottom line to volunteer development — if you don’t ask someone to volunteer, it is unlikely they will step forward on their own. The same bottom line applies to fundraising — if you don’t ask, people don’t give.

According to Trudy Seita, author of Leadership Skills for the New Age of Non Profits:
“Rather than spending a lot of time in one organization, you may find that people want to move into an organization, contribute on a limited but meaningful basis, and then move on to other causes or organizations; therefore, those with the structure to accommodate this pattern are those that will be able to benefit from the new resources available in today’s volunteers.”

It may not seem obvious to some environmental groups how they can get volunteer support from health organizations or farm associations. It is possible, particularly if you can link your group’s activities or interests with those of another organization with compatible goals. For example, suppose your group is fighting an industrial air pollution issue. Ask your local lung association and medical or cancer societies if they would help you with some of your activities which could include staffing an information booth at a mall, contributing research, or hosting an information session.

Sharing volunteers

There is one final issue regarding volunteer recruitment/development that your organization should be aware of. Instead of viewing the mobility of volunteers and the diversity of their interests as a problem, Seita urges organizations to view this as an opportunity. Rather than mounting an aggressive (and possibly expensive) campaign to

win over volunteers to your organization, an alternative strategy to consider is forming a **collaboration** with other organizations with similar interests. Scarce time and energy requires pooling of resources and sharing of information. Your organization will have to look around its community and decide which other groups have a mission that is similar or compatible to yours and explore how you can work together. A good example of collaboration is the work of the Friends of the Petitcodiac in the early 1990s. They brought together interest groups ranging from church-basement organizations to sportsmen’s associations, with the support of larger provincial-level groups in a coalition of groups. Joining forces calls for flexibility, creativity, and hard work; but the results can generate a synergy that brings about a positive change for all involved. And, it can result in a **broader power base**.

A CHECKLIST OF WHERE AND HOW TO LOOK FOR VOLUNTEERS

WHERE...	HOW...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • volunteer bureaus • school associations • youth groups/schools • student councils • co-workers • community service clubs • relatives • friends • fishers’ organizations • religious organizations • farm organizations • fish and game groups • community colleges • universities • health organizations • recreational associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • word-of-mouth • public service announcement • newspaper ads that identify special tasks • mall displays • special exhibits • posters, pamphlets • press releases • letters to editor • cable television • in-store displays • publicity and recognition of existing volunteers • your group’s website • Facebook, Twitter, and other social media

Step 2. Effective Orientation and Involvement

Orientation for new volunteers

According to Ellen Schwartzel, researcher for Pollution Probe (Toronto), groups with healthy memberships invariably have a “volunteer coordinator” responsible for the “care and feeding” of volunteers. It should be considered an important and valued activity, even if — especially if — your group has no staff.

One of the most important tasks of a volunteer coordinator is developing orientation to bring the new volunteer to a productive level in completing agreed-upon tasks and responsibilities. This involves the volunteer gaining increased knowledge about the organization, having clear expectations about duties and responsibilities, meeting the other members of the organization, and getting answers to questions and concerns.

Orientation can be accomplished through an information package that includes (if applicable): a history of the organization; list of Board Members and major sponsors/donors; description of existing publications, programs, and services; links to the group’s website and/or Facebook pages; copies of program brochures, flyers, promotional materials, press items, and press releases; and a copy of the organization’s constitution and bylaws. A buddy or mentoring system for new members is also helpful. Use upcoming events sponsored by your group to bring new volunteers into the organization.

Improving volunteer participation

Unfortunately, it is often only after a volunteer has left the organization that you may hear some of the reasons for quitting. These reasons may reflect the dynamics within the organization:

- “The apathy in the group was discouraging”
- “Our committee was over-worked”
- “Members want the support of the organization, but no one wants to help”
- “We hold meetings, but hardly anyone comes”
- “We haven’t had elections because no one wants to run for office”
- “People only come out if it’s a big issue”

Other reasons for quitting may involve the dynamics between the individual and the organization:

- “I never knew what I was supposed to be doing”
- “I made suggestions but all I heard was — that’s the way we’ve always done it”
- “I filled out a self-assessment form and nothing happened”
- “I found myself working on my own a lot”
- “When they did ask me for help it was always a crisis or last minute and with a lot of pressure — we’re desperate, you owe me one, or it’s your turn”
- “I wanted to learn another skill but I was always asked to do the same thing”

Any of these complaints sound familiar? Here are some organizational suggestions that may avoid the loss or alienation of volunteers/members and improve their participation in your organization:

Distribute responsibility — you can't force or allow one person to do all the work. Your efforts should rise above the goals of a single individual. On the other hand, a committee that 'has to do everything' often does so because it wants to do everything. Make sure responsibility is distributed throughout all the members.

Involve more people — most people are willing to share in the work within their own capability. The more people your group has working, the less each individual has to do, the less pressure individuals and committees feel, and the stronger the group becomes.

Work towards full participation — make sure your organization's meetings are interesting and give everyone a chance to participate. Everyone likes to believe their opinions and views are important and, in a citizen group, they *are* important.

Individual capabilities vary — no two people have the same interests, skills, expectations, and experiences. Create an atmosphere of mutual trust and support that will allow positive and constructive volunteer-to-volunteer or volunteer-to-group feedback. Feedback can provide support for change, show appreciation for time and energy spent, reduce anxiety, and link job responsibilities to the plans, goals, and objectives of the organization.

Avoiding stress and burnout

People and organizations who work on environmental and social issues are often prime candidates for burnout. The people associated with these issues are caring, nurturing, and thoughtful people. They and their organizations are willing, and do "go the extra mile." They are committed and passionate about their work and they find it hard to say "no." When a volunteer is suffering from stress or burn-out, not only does the person suffer, so does the group.

All of us have some stress in our lives. Stress helps keep you and the group going. It pumps the adrenalin through your veins. But there are good stressors and bad stressors. It is the amount of bad stress that you are under and the length of time you have to carry it that creates the overload and burnout. Burnout arises when your mouth has said yes too many times while your gut is saying no.

At an individual level, knowing what causes stress and recognizing when you are suffering from an overload are the best antidotes for the symptoms. It's like the common cold, however; there are no cures for stress and burn-out. You may get over a bout of it and feel great; and then, before you know it, you've loaded yourself up with too many commitments again; and suddenly, you're lying awake at night, your stomach is tied in knots, you're grouchy, and

Organization-level burnout can have many of the symptoms expressed in individual burnout. An organization can become obsessed by its cause (or goal), lose perspective, and appear dogmatic, cynical, and intolerant. As a result, it can alienate its supporters, diminish its credibility, and lose ground. If this happens, some organizations can re-build or re-structure; others simply fold.

As with individual-level burnout, the best antidote for organization-level burnout is reading the early signs of

organizational stress and recognizing when the group is overloaded. This means listening to your volunteers, members, and constituency, re-visiting your group's goals and objectives, keeping your analysis fresh, and being realistic about the scale of your accomplishments. And have fun.

As environmentalists, we all want to save the world, but it's going to happen over the long haul. In the meantime, we need friends and encouragement to keep us going. She offers these basic tips for making our work less demanding:

- hold brief social breaks at regular meetings;
- alternate tough, controversial projects with fun projects;
- praise each other for jobs well done;
- remember that we are human and fallible;
- hold occasional social events; and
- celebrate victories, large and small.

Step 3. Recognition

You can't thank people enough...

Recognition, whether subtle or substantial, is an art. When practised sensitively and honestly, it can ensure that volunteers feel acknowledged, accepted, praised, and identified as being special. Most people appreciate recognition and for volunteers who are giving freely of their time and energy, recognition can be a highly potent motivator.

Different individuals will benefit from different types of recognition. Part of the "art" of recognition involves determining the best type to use for each volunteer. There are two kinds of recognition — personal and public. Personal recognition shows itself in smiles, supportive remarks, candid praise, an appreciative nod, a letter of support. A letter of reference, training in job skills, and validation of effective work habits would be a great recognition for someone who is out of work or looking to improve his or her position in the paid employment work world. It is often the smaller, less obvious gesture that has the most meaning and the greatest impact. Personal recognition is the responsibility of everyone in a group. It involves all of the finer aspects of communication — of saying a genuine "thanks" for work accomplished, favours received, ideas generated, and all of the big and small accomplishments that make an organization tick. Your group exists because of everyone's hard work and contribution.

Public recognition usually involves more tangible forms. They can include:

Words — letters, citations, public thanks, constructive feedback

Awards — plaques, trophies, medals, certificates, books, photo albums, inductions to prestigious groups, special presentations, scholarships

Rewards — free tickets/passes, out-of-town travel, training workshops, conferences, t-shirts, mugs, personal notepaper, identification pins

Events — banquets, "roasts," tributes, special occasions/events

Special Attention — TV programs on local cable stations, newspaper articles, radio programs, newsletter articles.

Remember to match the appropriate form of recognition to the right person.

Volunteer “benefit packages” can be another form of recognition. These can include: offers of special training that will benefit the individual not only in their volunteer job but in their personal life as well; invitations to attend conferences or special events on behalf of the organization; and access to equipment such as photocopier or scanner.

The Long Haul

The phrase, “the long haul,” is often invoked by citizens’ groups to remind themselves that there is a continuum to citizen and environmental action and that there is a need to prepare themselves and their organizations for long-term work. “The Long Haul” is also the title of book about Myles Horton (1905-1991) an educator and social activist who did his “learning” on the labour issues of the 1930s, the civil rights issues of the 1950s and ‘60s, and the political and environmental issues of the 1970s and ‘80s. Myles Horton:

“People use ‘That’s for the birds’ in a derogatory sense, but I have learned valuable things from birds... I realize that they not only use tail winds but they don’t fight the winds. They change their course year after year on the basis of the particular situation. They never come back exactly the same way twice because the conditions are never the same, but they always get to their destination. They have a purpose, a goal. They know where they are going, but they zigzag and they change tactics ac-

ording to the situation. I thought, for God’s sake they’re pretty smart, why can’t we learn not to do things when it’s almost impossible? Why can’t we learn to hole up and renew our strength? Why can’t we learn to change the entire route if it’s necessary, so long as we get to the right point? I started learning from the birds about how to conserve energy and how not to wear myself out. I also learned how to take advantage of crisis situations and of the opposition and use that knowledge for my own purposes. Once I did that, it became a little easier to program ideas and survive, and to begin to share that kind of thinking with other people in a way they could understand.”

Page 198-199, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography of Myles Horton* (1990) by Judith Kohl and Herbert Kohl

Appendix A: Volunteer Self-Assessment Form

In order for us to match your skills and expectations to the volunteer opportunities in our group, please complete the following self-assessment form.

1. What do you want most out of working with this organization?

2. What would you like to accomplish as a volunteer with this organization?

3. What skills do you want to use as a volunteer with this organization?

	Skills I am competent in, and enjoy using	Skills I am competent in, but do not enjoy using	Skills I want to learn or to improve my level of competency
Reading/researching			
Public speaking			
Writing			
Computer software			
Desktop publishing			
Graphic arts			
Accounting			
Legal Issues			
Lobbying			
Marketing/promotion			
Problem-solving			
Translation			
Organizing (e.g., events)			
Leading (e.g., a campaign)			
Taking responsibility			
Evaluation and follow-up			
Facilitating meetings			
Social media			
Others:			

4. What activities do you wish to become involved with?

	Activities I am competent in, and like doing	Activities I am competent in, but do not like doing	Activities I want to learn or to improve my competency
Attending meetings			
Preparing written work (e.g., reports, minutes)			
Updating computer databases			
Speaking to groups			
Chairing meetings			
Implementing programs			
Researching and analyzing information			
Speaking to the press			
Bookkeeping			
Translating			
Public relations			
Working with a team			
Writing funding proposals			
Organizing social events			
Keeping track of information (e.g., managing a small library)			
Social media			
Others:			

5. Do you want to work alone? _____ with others? _____

6. How much time can you spend volunteering:

Per week? _____ per month? _____

7. When is it convenient for you to volunteer?

days _____ evenings _____ weekends _____

other _____

8. Comments _____
