

What Makes a Volunteer

Of Their Own Free Will

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Volunteers: a people who fervently commit hours of their time and energy for no financial gain. A people who face the same challenges, disappointments and deadlines as paid staff: yet freely give their output. The words 'volunteer' or 'amateur' are too-often spoken by 'professionals' with (whether intentional or not) a sense of condescension. And, I'll admit, I've been known to hail a show as "excellent; for an amateur production". Don't get me wrong: most professionals realize they could not get by without the commitment and skills of their volunteers, and strongly appreciate their efforts. Some may be taciturn, however most managers are very vocal when attributing the success of their concert/festival/event/operations to the commitment of their volunteers. Managers wishing to pay volunteers with a salary consummate with their output: both boundless often recognize this impossibility. So these are the people that fit in the little box at the very bottom of the organigram.

Why do they do it? Surely they must be getting something in return, because nobody does anything for nothing, right?

Without becoming too deeply philosophical, perhaps it's true that there is no such thing as true benevolence and altruism; that there's always some gain in donating one's time and efforts- be it to fulfil one's own love of working within the arts, or to fulfil part of Maslow's Hierarchy in feeling needed and loved, or to give something back to others. True cynics may even look deeper, incorporating the two terms 'tax deduction' and 'volunteering' in the same sentence. I think, what it comes down to is that no matter their motivation: these people are not the wheel that steers the ship, nor the crew that guide its journey: they're the timber, the portholes, and the sails.

As these people form such an integral body of staff, it is therefore crucial that they receive the training, motivation and ongoing support necessary to ensure their success. It would be disingenuous to hail every person who has ever displayed a volunteer badge as an asset in their embodiment of an organization, however many volunteers demonstrate a commitment to achieving as much (and sometimes, additional) excellence than paid staff.

What does this mean though, for a Managing Director or Chief of Staff? Here we have

- A. *an essential ingredient in the recipe to an organization's success*
- B. *a group of people who will strive to achieve excellence*
- C. *a group of people who could, with 'antisocial' behaviours undermine the "face" of an organization and (let's assume)*
- D. *no possibility of remunerating these staff for their efforts*

If we look to market surveys, we see questions such as "How

highly do you value on-the-job training?” and “How often do you receive feedback from your Manager?” and “How do you rate your organization’s flexible working options?”. These types of questions provide us with some clues to tapping into this elusive group of worker-bees through alternatives to the traditional financial incentives.

Google the meaning and etymology of ‘volunteer’, and you’ll see the words ‘willing’ and ‘free will’ often appear. Let’s not forget the volunteers have chosen to donate their unique skills to this particular organization. So, one could assume there is something that aligns them; be it the company goals, vision, the position itself or the industry. Volunteers are (presumably) representing an organization to the public, and the public will not make concessions for unsatisfactory performance on the basis that ‘they’re a volunteer’. Therefore, these volunteers need and deserve a commitment from their organization to the same transparency of information as paid staff; a clear induction and regular feedback; on the job (or other appropriate) training and ongoing support. These are all fundamental to the underpinning right of these volunteers, and that’s around ‘respect’.

The entire company’s staff may be aware of who is paid and who isn’t, but this need not be reflected in the treatment of a volunteer. A manager need not walk on eggshells where constructive criticism is necessary. Nor should a manager delegate menial tasks on the basis that a paid staff member would be ‘above that’ (in fact, this may be counter-productive where a volunteer has a useful set of skills). If the public see a paid staff member and a volunteer as one and the same: so too should a manager. And this will filter down through the staff, encouraging a harmonious and respectful workplace.

So next time you think of someone as ‘just a volunteer’, think of all of the international artistic (and other non-profit organizations) on a global, national and local level. Consider the Chairman of the Board of the international festival who

labours for months over its inception and during the event gains minimal sleep; firmly committed to ensuring its success. Consider the staff member who greets every patron with a smile as they answer the same few questions repeatedly; paraphrasing often the only variety in their day. Don't think of why it is they do it, but how more people can be convinced they should.

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Volunteers!

