

Etiquette Excerpt - Etiquette Tips for Volunteers and Those Who Manage Them

Tips for Volunteers

Do it willingly - Although it's hard to say "no" sometimes, there's really no point in agreeing to volunteer for something if you will regret it. Before you commit, make sure that you have the time to follow through and be clear about the tasks you are taking on. It's better to be honest now than to be resentful later.

Honour your commitment - A volunteer role is not a suggestion. It's a commitment that you have agreed to honour. While genuine emergencies might force you to renege on your promise, it's not acceptable to flake out of volunteer work just because other parts of your life got busier. People are counting on you and dropping out causes a lot of extra work for organizers and other volunteers.

Take it seriously - You're not getting paid but that doesn't mean it's not important - to you, to the organization and to the people who benefit from your efforts. While you will not (and should not) be held accountable for the success of the whole venture, you should give it your best and do everything you can to make a first-class contribution. Show up on time, meet deadlines and be prepared to report on your progress at status meetings.

Remember why you're there - We all expect and like to be thanked for our efforts. But you should volunteer because you believe in the cause and want to make a difference. In many cases, the people who are supervising you are volunteers themselves and don't have time to constantly check in on you and show their gratitude.

Be a friend - For many people, volunteering is a way to join a community and meet new friends who share similar interests. Although it's tempting to chat and gossip with the people you already know at meetings or events, make an effort to reach out to new volunteers and introduce them to others. If they feel welcome, they'll come back.

Tips for Volunteer Managers

Be professional - Have proper role descriptions, including expected time commitment for each volunteer role you want to fill. The more clarity volunteers have at the beginning, the better the experience for everyone. Make sure all volunteers understand the expectations and deadlines involved in their project, give them the tools and resources they need for success and keep them up to date on any changes in the plan.

Listen - When volunteers are up-front about what they can and cannot do, listen to them. Don't agree with them in the hopes that they will change their mind. If a volunteer comes up with a great idea, don't automatically assign it to them to execute. That just makes people reluctant to ever suggest ideas. And if past, current, or potential volunteers say "no" to a request for help, don't pester them. They'll be more likely to come back when they have more time if the relationship is pleasant.

Say thank you - If coordinating volunteers is part of your paid job, it's your role to acknowledge and thank volunteers personally and publicly as much as possible. On the other hand, if you are also a volunteer in the project, remember to say "thank you" whenever possible and listen to concerns, but you shouldn't be judged if you're not "grateful enough".

Play to their strengths - Everyone has different skills and the project will be more successful if volunteers aren't forced into roles outside of their comfort zones. Some people are born salespersons and others are great at organizing lists. One might relish the idea of serving as the official spokesperson while another breaks into a sweat at the thought of public speaking. Let them do what they're good at and they'll shine.

Learn how to chair a meeting - Grievances abound in volunteer work and status meetings can quickly turn into a bitch-fest if you don't stay focused. Give everyone a set amount of floor time to share updates and table concerns and then move on to the next person. Schedule off-line discussions to deal with major issues or disagreements.