
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: A VOLUNTEER'S PERSPECTIVE

Lori Gotlieb

RECENTLY, A COLLEAGUE SHARED WITH ME A VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE SHE HAD, and that prompted me to write this article.

As a fellow not-for-profit employee who is very familiar with volunteerism, she decided that she would share some of her experience and expertise with an organization that was well established and worked with volunteers in many of its activities.

She contacted the organization and gave some details about her experience in the not-for-profit world, what she had to offer, and what she would like to share. The organization directed her to contact another department, which asked her to come in.

She filled out the necessary screening forms, and began the application process.

In the interview, no one asked her about her skills, what she was interested in, or what she could bring to the organization. She was not even sure when she left the interview what her duties would be. She was given no role description, no information about the organization, and no contact name.

She was, however, given a schedule, and the first day she came in, she was directed to a corner table and asked to stuff envelopes.

There was no orientation to the office staff or the mission of the organization, no walk about, no key information, such as where the restrooms were or if she needed a key to open the door. She was not even told where to get a cup of coffee. But, with a smile on her face, she came back week after week.

Finally, when she decided to end her volunteering to go on maternity leave, she thanked the organization for the opportunity, and that was that. She has not heard from them since.

How many times have you heard this story or even been this volunteer?

LORI GOTLIEB is the Director of Volunteer Resources at The Arthritis Society and Founder of Lori Gotlieb Consulting located in Toronto Ontario.
Email: lori.gotlieb@rogers.com.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?

1. Here was an opportunity for the organization to work with a seasoned not-for-profit professional who was highly skilled and motivated, who wanted to make a difference for both the short-term and the long-term, who would return if she felt needed, but whose skills and enthusiasm were never explored by the organization.
2. All volunteers should be interviewed before being placed; it is amazing what an organization can learn from such an interview. The interview will only be effective if questions are asked with a purpose to discover what the candidate's skills and interests are and how those skills and interests could be used for the benefit of the organization. The interview should also include a discussion about job responsibilities and expectations.
3. No one asked this candidate about what she thought she could bring to the table.
4. Making volunteers feel as if they are part of something includes orienting them to physical layouts of the work environment, introducing them to staff, and giving them a clear understanding of where to get what.
5. Even if you are not the professional administrator of volunteers, we all have a part to play in volunteer engagement. The volunteer experience is bigger than the number of envelopes stuffed. It is about the impact of what volunteers are doing and who are we reaching and why. By providing a detailed role description with information on what the expectations of the position are, what the skills are to fulfill the role, what the volunteer will learn from the role and what the impact of the role is to the mission, you are not only providing the framework for the supervision but an opportunity to have a discussion about volunteer skills and experiences and how they can help. By doing this, you are starting to involve the volunteer in the role, and creating a sense of ownership and inclusion.
6. Recognition, recognition, recognition is key. Just think what a small card of congratulations or a thank you card might mean to a volunteer on his or her last day.
7. Volunteers have a strong voice in the community. If you have a negative experience, how many people do you tell? What about if you have a positive one? One voice has many octaves.
8. We know it takes time to engage a volunteer, but as the old saying goes, "A little time at the front end pays big time in the back end."
9. Finally, it is key to know why volunteers come to our organizations, what motivates them, and how we can make the experience a win/win one for everyone involved.

So the next time you get a call or an email, take the time to learn about who is on the other end. Relationships take some time to build, but they can last forever.