

MANAGING VOLUNTEERS IN TEMPLE AND SYNAGOGUE LIBRARIES

IMPORTANCE of volunteers

Nonprofit organizations, including libraries, have been using more volunteers because of the difficult economic situation, including budget cuts and unfilled staff positions. At the same time there has been more recognition of the value and importance of volunteers. They have become more valued and appreciated. It is clear that volunteers enable organizations to do what they couldn't do alone with limited staff and increasing demands for services. They provide value added services. Volunteers increase productivity and information flow; increase social capital. In this way better decisions can be made, and the organization can become more successful.

There has been more sophisticated and creative use of volunteers, as well as a more positive attitude toward volunteers. This is reflected on the national level with the presidential volunteer award and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service each year. Volunteerism can be considered an essential part of the American character. It is also an essential part of the Jewish experience, focusing on the value of providing service, of doing Tikkun Olam.

Volunteers bring key ingredients for success to an organization, including caring, connection enthusiasm, creativity, leadership, expertise, energy. They can give the temple or synagogue library exposure, support it through donations, as well as providing service. They are a source of advocacy for the library.

PROMOTING and RECRUITING Volunteers

More volunteers are available as a result of early retirement. Retiring baby boomers want to keep active, using their skills and experience. One characteristic of the current economic situation is that more people are underemployed or unemployed. They want to gain experience through volunteering. Community service is part of many school and academic programs, so that teens and college students are available as volunteers. The 4 R's or key aspects of working with volunteers are recruitment, retention, recognition and retraining.

Promoting and recruiting volunteers relates to the image of the library in the minds of its community. Since most people want to be part of a growing, vibrant organization, if the temple or synagogue library is seen as neglected, abandoned, isolated or not relevant, people may not want to volunteer. They may ask themselves, "why do they need me"? The level of volunteer effort relates to the health of the library itself.

In the temple or synagogue bulletin, newsletter or other publication, volunteer opportunities in the library can be described, tasks needing to be done identified. For example, at Washington Hebrew Congregation in Washington, D.C., a booklet passed out at High Holy Days lists volunteer opportunities and specific tasks, including those in the library.

Personal contact or connection is always important, meeting congregants and asking them if they are interested, especially those who are former teachers or librarians; as well as those who use the library regularly. Having a friends group, the Friends of the Library, can facilitate this personal connection, serving as an effective means to promote and recruit volunteers.

Using library programs to ask for volunteers is another strategy, since programs raise awareness of the library. People hear that the library is doing things, and want to be a part of it. For example, at Washington Hebrew Congregation, a Jewish book month Shabbat heightens awareness of books, reading and volunteering in the library.

It is important to think about what volunteering serves for the volunteers, including providing friendships, intellectual stimulation, strengthening Jewish identity, making a contribution and providing service. The aim is to obtain volunteers who take their work seriously, have a sense of responsibility, can handle constructive criticism, are reliable, offer suggestions, follow directions, listen, are pleasant and relate well to people. These are some characteristics of good volunteers.

MOTIVATING and TRAINING Volunteers

It is very helpful to talk with potential volunteers about what is motivating them to volunteer; why they want to volunteer, what they want to get out of it. In this way, a link can be made between their internal motivation and the tasks needing to be done in the library. There is a fine line between letting volunteers “do their own thing”, not controlling them, leaving them autonomy to show that they are valued, and identifying what needs to be done that they could do. The goal is to match their interests with the needs of the library, giving them work which interests them, which will be missed if they don't come, so they feel that their work matters.

Recognition is an essential part of motivation. This includes thanking volunteers for their work, letting them know that they are important. This could take the form of planning a formal volunteer recognition or appreciation activity, such as a luncheon with certificates for each volunteer.

In the process of training volunteers, it is important to give a clear explanation of what to do, showing and demonstrating the tasks needing to be done, not too much at a time. In addition, it is very important to write down formal procedures, step by step, in a specific, detailed manner. These written guidelines can be referred to and followed, even when the librarian is not available to answer questions.

Useful feedback from volunteers comes from seeing if they are doing what they are supposed to be doing, as well as if they are showing up and staying. In addition, asking them questions is important, about how they are doing, as well as reporting on what they've done. Including their accomplishments in an annual report, so that they can see the success of their work, is a valuable motivation strategy.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is key in building an effective team of volunteers. Use of email has become an important communication tool, in addition to more traditional written notes or calling on the telephone, talking directly to volunteers. Social interaction events, like volunteer appreciation luncheons, facilitate communication among volunteers, getting to know each other, thus becoming a more effective team. Building respect for each other, providing space for each to do his/her work is part of this process.

Commitment to the library, as a way to facilitate Jewish learning, dedication to its aims and goals, are characteristics of an effective team, along with the ability to work together in a congenial manner, to know what others are doing and avoid duplication. The librarian in charge needs to have good managerial skills in order to gain this commitment. He/she needs to make sure that volunteers and their work are recognized, complimented; that they are kept active and involved. Both recognizing strengths and weaknesses of volunteers, building on strengths, taking advantage of each persons' skills, as well as improving the weaknesses, is part of these managerial skills. Flexibility, patience and perseverance are essential.

CONCLUSIONS

The perception of volunteering is changing. People are doing it as a commitment, following successful careers, considering it as another stage of life, an important part of their routines, not just a sideline to life. There is a large and diverse body of retired people to volunteer, as well as those unemployed or underemployed, those needing internships or service hours (college and high school students). Volunteers form commitments and bonds as in any job, not less than in a paid job. Defining the library's needs and possibilities, then fitting volunteers into these slots, matching their skills and interests, is the challenge. Keeping volunteers motivated by effective communication is essential. Everyone wants to feel useful, doing what they want to do, getting things done, then getting recognition for what they are doing. This recognition, acknowledging volunteers' work, valuing it, appreciating it, gets volunteers involved and keeps them involved.

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