

CEV is collaborating with Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) to publish a series of articles on volunteering-related topics in English. The articles will cover a broad range of topics and versions of the articles have been previously published in Dutch.

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Approach the 'lapsed-volunteer' like a slot machine in membership-based associations

In a previous contribution, we analyzed the 'non-volunteer', based on the metaphor of the Fainting Goat. We found that the fainting goat gene, the deep reason why some people never volunteer in their whole life, might be rendered harmless by properly preparing and warning the potential volunteers before asking them to engage. A surprise attack does not work, for like the goats, they will faint.

In this contribution, we take a closer look at the 'past-volunteers', or probably better called 'lapsed-volunteers'. They differ principally from the 'non-volunteer' as they do have the volunteering gene, they just are not volunteering right now. However, not all lapsed-volunteers in membership-based associations are the same; there are three types of lapsed-volunteers. The most visible group of lapsed volunteers are people who have volunteered a lot in recent years for the association. This seems to be an easy group: they are known to the associations and they clearly are volunteer-minded. At the same time, this is precisely the group where the volunteer recruiter should (try to) know, understand, and sometimes accept the reasons for 'having lapsed'. Sometimes it is advisable to "allow" these former volunteers a sabbatical from volunteering, certainly when it comes to major life changes (job, education, home situation) that have interfered with the volunteering. Just wait for their availability to become better again, as it is clear that the willingness to volunteer is not the problem. In these cases it is important to communicate this situation well to the lapsed volunteer so that they are fully aware that the "door is open" for their return and that the volunteer coordinator is aware that the return might imply different tasks and roles to that which they were involved in previously. Furthermore, that the volunteer coordinator is completely satisfied with this situation.

The second group does not volunteer at your association, because they already volunteer elsewhere. These individuals might be even more interesting for the association as they are willing to volunteer, but have no or only a low availability for your request. However, a flexibilisation strategy aimed at making small volunteer tasks, certainly when volunteering might be done at a time and place that is set by the volunteer themselves, can encourage them in for your organization as well.

The third group are the people that are lapsed volunteers for most of their time, but who are willing to volunteer from time to time. If asked correctly. With them the flexibilisation strategy works as well, but they are simply slightly better at saying no than the two other groups.

The flexibilisation strategy is likely to need, as a core component, a shift from organization-centered function to a volunteer-focused task approach. In practice, this can mean, for example, rather than seeking a volunteer to become the Treasurer of the club, that a person or persons are asked to help out with organising the receipts/ invoices on a time and place at their own convenience. The tasks are completed in a step by step way but it avoids the necessity for someone having to make the full volunteering commitment to be the Treasurer.

Preventing people from falling over

Two factors can explain the collapsing of most 'lapsed volunteers' in associations. First, these members are afraid of being asked, and sometimes they even try their best not to be asked. They feel as if they, as being known volunteers, are likely to be stalked and are indeed avoiding to be taken by surprise. The second factor is that coordinators ask them to perform volunteer activities about which they doubt whether they want (willingness) or are able to do them (competence and availability). It can be paradoxical, the volunteering they did before, they might not want to do anymore, while for other volunteering activities they might not see themselves as being capable. You could say that they are "startled by the horn".

Preventing lapsed volunteers from falling over can be done by announcing the request clearly and timely, not by stalking nor by asking questions in a threatening manner. This can simply be done by creating a clear and visible agenda with peak times when volunteers are needed (bar shifts during championship matches, club tournaments, team parties, etc.) at the beginning of the year or season. There are simple systems available that make it possible for the members to self (re)roster their volunteering once you get them to use the system.

Credit system

A more abstract method to prevent fainting is to make explicit when the voluntary contribution is enough. Many lapsed volunteers are frightened by the total and incomprehensible commitment that seems to be demanded by the association. They fear that once you "give an inch", they will "take a yard". That is also because many volunteer coordinators seem to be like very hungry caterpillars who just keep asking for more.

As an association, make it clear to members how many volunteer contributions are enough. Start a hundred-point credit system, negotiate with a great deal of humor with the members how many points any activity is and accept that once people have met their target, they can say no to volunteering for the rest of the year. Make a clear policy for people who do not make it ; who faint. See these 'fainters' as customers and let them pay more! But make certain that what they pay per point is more than cost-covering so that replacement can be hired and some surplus can be made. Use that surplus or let

them make an additional financial contribution to a big party for the real volunteers. Or, as a real association, understand that these fainters have a real reason this time and keep them involved as volunteers because they pay 'warm' with a symbolic 'punishment': every five points mean a 'meter of beer' for themselves and the volunteers.

Helping fallen tractors to get up

Despite all the cautious approaches and the desired clarity, it is still possible that the lapsed volunteer would faint when approached. Helping them to get up is the result of a negotiation between the volunteer coordinator and the fainted volunteer. Negotiating is not that strange, because the demand of the organization will never fully match the possibilities of the volunteer. Availability and capability of the volunteer must be negotiated, and indirectly also the willingness to say yes again.

It is important to ask yourself what people mean when they say no. The excuse that someone doesn't want to miss their favorite TV show probably tells you that the task is far beyond their comfort zone. They are probably just afraid that they do not have the right skills for it, but will be assessed on how they perform anyway, or that the time commitment will be excessive. This is what Haski-Leventhal and colleagues (2017) mean by perceived impossibilities. It also ties in with Handy & Cnaan (2007). They argue that removing the fear of being judged negatively by strangers in combination with a personal approach is important for finding and retaining volunteers who are not so sure of themselves.

Guilty feeling

As a volunteer coordinator, you can offer to have the reluctant volunteer engage with people they know well and with whom they feel comfortable learning new skills. And with those who indicate that they are too busy, it might just be that they actually want to help, but that they do not see how to keep all proverbial balls of their personal obligations in the air at the same time. The children, clients, the boss, the house, the dog, family and friends: they all demand attention. How are you going to deal with the feeling of guilt that someone actually wants to contribute, but doesn't know how to be in two places at the same time?

In concrete terms, it is all about reaching out by entering into a dialogue about what is possible according to the volunteer. Start with the organizational question and move to the volunteer offer from there and back again. Understand that the average market for volunteers works exactly the other way than that for professionals: the organization must adapt to the volunteer, not the other way around.

Slot machine

Meijs and Brudney (2007) have developed the volunteer-slot-machine for this. It has the same three wheels as the concept of volunteerability: Willingness, Availability, and Capability. The slot machine pays out when a winning volunteer scenario arises. This happens when willingness, availability and capability of both the volunteer and the organization are perfectly aligned. And that works 'wheel by wheel': fixate a winning wheel (hold) and then work on aligning the others, thereby bringing the potential volunteer closer to complete volunteerability piece by piece.

A fallen tractor is asked "what are you able to do?" (capability) and "when can you do it?" (availability). One of those two forms the beginning. The prospective volunteers, for example, claim that they simply have no availability when the club is open. The negotiation about availability then shifts to the (virtual) possibilities that can be done from home and in one's own time. Then you search for a fitting competence. It is a bit like a traditional car salesman turning around all counter-arguments by offering an alternative.

Conclusion

First and foremost, as an organization, you have to pay close attention to when, how, what, and how much you ask of people and why they can or should do this. As an association you have to prepare this well: do you want to send a timetable at the beginning of the year? Or every so often a menu with chores that members can subscribe to?

If your tractors have already fallen over, because you (accidentally) started working as the frightening volunteer coordinator, you can always help your people up again. A personal approach works well. Have potential volunteers work in a place or with people that fall within their comfort zone (even if the job itself might not). In short, get started the way a slot machine works: little by little, ensure that the potential volunteer gets closer to complete volunteerability. Jackpot, and everyone wins.

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