

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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The untapped reservoir of volunteer energy in membership-based organizations

A fantastic scene in the Pixar / Disney movie "Cars" is when Mater and Lightning McQueen set off at night for a game of ["tractor tipping."](#) Mater and Lightning McQueen are sneaking up on a sleeping tractor during this game and suddenly honk very loudly, causing the tractor to tip back. When the game gets out of hand and all the tractors are in shock on their backs, the fierce threshing machine Frank appears from behind the trees to take revenge on the two naughty boys.

The film scene is inspired by the fainting goats, a goat that faints due to a DNA issue as soon as it experiences stress. In volunteer-based sports associations clubs in The Netherlands, many members seem to be fainting goats: they want to do sports, but if you ask them to volunteer, they don't respond.

Tantalizing excuses

If citizens and associational members are the falling tractors (fainting goats), Mater and Lightning McQueen represent active volunteer coordinators or board members looking relentlessly for new volunteers. How do we prevent that their "honking" leads to potential volunteers fainting and that volunteer coordinators act like Mater and Lightning McQueen? Experience shows in that, as soon as you ask in a less friendly way whether someone would like to volunteer, many members and citizens look at you in a haggard way, come up with poor excuses and break out in a nervous sweat, like real fainting goats.

A call on Facebook aimed at volunteer managers in Dutch sports associations on their recruiting experiences yielded a list of great excuses, such as: "I would like to, but I don't even have time to get into the sports." And: "I really can't go tending the club bar, I'm so clumsy." Or: "I'd want to help, but my knee is bothering me." Or: "well, volunteering is voluntary isn't it ... otherwise it would be forced labor." And finally: "I will just pay more, just tell me what it should cost."

If someone uses the excuse that they don't want to miss their favorite TV program, as a volunteer recruiter you'd of course prefer to give it a go by asking mischievously: "Have you ever heard of view on-demand?" If someone apologizes and says they don't even have time to exercise, you hit back with: "Yes, we are all busy ... and yet I manage to also do things that are good for **your** children ... ". Although it could feel nice and relieving, such reactions are obviously counterproductive. What could a volunteer coordinator do about the phenomenon of "fainting goats"?

The "fainting people" can be explained by low volunteerability of the people that are asked. Volunteerability consists of three building blocks that the volunteer coordinator must work with: willingness, availability, and capability. This leads to three questions in the metaphor of the fainting goats:

- how do we defuse the fainting gene ("me volunteering")?
- how do we prevent the stress ("what-do-you-ask-of-me?") so that they don't fall over?
- how do we help the fallen tractor to stand up again (ehhh, maybe next week...)?

According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics, almost half of the people in The Netherlands do volunteer at least once a year. Nevertheless, maybe surprisingly, many organizations still feel they have a shortage of volunteers. Here we address the question as to what we can and should do about it to get the other 50 percent to also volunteer; the 50 percent who do not actively benefit from the benefits of volunteering, doing volunteer work, but who passively benefit from others' voluntary efforts.

Making the fainting gene harmless

The fainting gene mainly has to do with the (un)willingness of people to volunteer. Haski-Leventhal et al. (2017) compared a group of hardcore "non-volunteers" (no volunteering done in the last five years) with a group of "past-volunteers" (not in the last 12 months but did volunteer before). The non-volunteer has the fainting gene, the others don't. The unwillingness of the non-volunteer appears to be based primarily on other norms and values. Their unavailability and incapability are about their own perceived (im)possibilities. Past-volunteers, on the other hand, do not see a possibility right now, but are easier to persuade to "step up to the plate" because they do have the volunteering gene!

An individual volunteer coordinator cannot do much about the other norms and values of the non-volunteer, although good and appealing examples of role models are likely to help. The non-volunteer simply needs to become acquainted with volunteering by guiding him or her to it. Hustinx, Meijs, and Ten Hoorn (2009) indicate that guided volunteering is based on two factors: normative coercion (you must) and functional organization (in this way). The first is about making the need to volunteer explicit by putting a price on "free-riding" and making non-volunteers pay more for membership. The second is about creating a mandatory schedule to volunteer in the association. As a result, 'fainting goats' will have 'volunteered' at least once and if the non-volunteer still doesn't understand the concept after that, nothing is lost. Incidentally, it is also possible to tell the non-volunteers only afterwards that they have volunteered. For example, when you invite them for a 'meet-and-greet' participatory activity with a celebrity that involves cleaning up a park together, you don't need to use the word volunteering. Other volunteering activities can also be rebranded under alternative banners such as campaigning, direct action, community engagement, etc and this approach could succeed in engaging the non-volunteers.

Keeping volunteers on their feet

Membership-based associations have a big advantage concerning volunteering compared to other organizations. They can select the volunteers “at the gate” when they apply for membership, or in other words: if a potential member has the fainting gene, the gatekeeper has to wonder if they actually should be allowed to join. Volunteer recruiters in service delivery organizations and the broader community need to be more open-minded. But demonstrable "bad behavior" in the past is no guarantee for not becoming a volunteer in the future.

Guided volunteering could help in this regard. Guiding to volunteer through soft coercion (functional organizing) and compulsory organization (normative coercion) is very well possible in associations because in these contexts the non-volunteers are well known by name and address. The volunteer coordinator must be attentive to the fact that the never-volunteer in their association might be a very important volunteer in another organization. This person certainly has the volunteering gene and does not always faint. They should not be treated as the ‘bad’ non-volunteer but more gently as the temporary lapsed past-volunteer. This past-volunteer will not faint when being honked at because they understand why volunteering is important and fun. But, if they are approached in the wrong way, they might get stressed and probably faint too!

References:

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