

**The following 10 tips to leading volunteers can go a long way in directing the desire and intentions of our volunteers towards maximum engagement, reliability and contribution. (Note: credit SKYBOUND Coaching and Teaching for these tips)**

**Build a Relationship:** Individual relationships are the basis of our connections to organizations and institutions. Everyone says that “business is all about relationships,” and the same is true in the context of volunteer associations. Sometimes the reason people prioritize certain activities has more to do with who’s involved than what’s involved. To lay the groundwork for a motivated and engaged volunteer, take the time up-front to develop a relationship by making a personal connection through an initial conversation or casual meeting.

**Listen for What Matters to Them:** To help a volunteer make a deep connection with your organization or cause, listen carefully for what matters to them. By aligning with volunteers’ underlying values and motivations, you keep them consistently anchored among the sea of competing priorities in their lives. What kind of impact do they want to have? What matters most to them? Why are they volunteering?

**Connect Them to the Mission:** Once you understand what a volunteer values, your next goal is to find alignment between their motivations and your organization’s mission. Through discussion, help the volunteer connect the dots between the impact they would like to make, and your institution’s needs and purpose. By zeroing-in on connections, you help direct the volunteer’s time and talents to areas where they find the most resonance. That will help ensure they become a reliable, even lifelong, advocate.

**Clearly Define Roles & Expectations:** Volunteers are most effective in carrying out their responsibilities when roles and expectations are made crystal clear. Without clarity, both the volunteer and the organization operate on assumptions, which inevitably lead to misunderstandings or mismatches between expectations and actual results. An organization's expectations are often watered down. The manager may not want to risk scaring a volunteer away. As a result, there is less engagement, satisfaction and success. True leaders of volunteers carefully find out how much time volunteers can offer, determine in what capacity, and then clearly define roles and expectations.

**Enroll and Get True Commitment:** We cannot assume that, once we’ve connected with a volunteer and agreed upon roles and expectations, we have a solid commitment. This is often the case with organizations that are in dire need of volunteers, as they are anxious to get people plugged-in and going. Leaders of volunteers need to ask for, and then receive, a clear and intentional “yes” to the proposed role, responsibilities and expectations. If you get a “well, I think that sounds good,” then that’s not a clear “yes.” At that point, become curious and try to clarify where the hesitation lies. Something likely still needs to be discussed or negotiated about the role in order to get a definite “yes, I will do that.”

**Create a Shared Vision:** Once you have volunteers on board for a particular endeavor, enroll them even further by collaboratively designing a shared vision for the future. What is the team of volunteers trying to achieve? How does that connect with the larger mission of the organization

you serve? What will success look like? What's at stake? Creating a vision for the future (whether that's 6 months or a year from now, or longer) gives everyone a target. And coming up with it together is the best way to get the deepest buy-in and commitment. Vision statements handed down from above don't truly motivate those involved with making it a reality.

**Delegate and Empower:** It can be scary to let go of control, especially when you're handing it to a volunteer as opposed to a paid employee. That said, delegating and empowering others is the way to keep them truly engaged. If you've done a good job recruiting and getting the right volunteers into the right roles, then handing over the reins becomes a lot easier. Resist the urge to jump in and save the day. That doesn't mean you should be totally hands-off, especially if you sense that something isn't getting done. Problematic situations can be terrific opportunities to support and mentor your volunteers, and to continue the important ongoing discussion about expectations and commitment level.

**Maintain Contact & Provide Support:** Much to the previous point, ongoing communication can be key. Leaders need to stay in proactive communication with their volunteers at regular intervals in order to establish where they may be struggling or need support. No volunteer wants to feel like an island, left without the proper resources, coaching, connections or overall support. That said, recognize that there is a delicate balance to achieve in both providing support while still empowering your volunteers to make things happen themselves.

**Adjust & Redesign:** As I mentioned, priorities and demands are always shifting for volunteers. Through regular conversation, adjust the duties and re-assess the level of commitment of your volunteers if needed. Let them know up-front that ongoing communication is welcomed and necessary. They'll be less likely to disappear and be out of touch.

**Appreciate & Reward:** Because they're not getting paid for their work, volunteers are motivated primarily by intrinsic elements, such as inner satisfaction, meaning and a sense of accomplishment. That's why it's so important to align them from the start with the deeper mission of the cause they are supporting. At the same time, extrinsic elements can be important motivators for volunteers. They don't come in the form of financial rewards, however, but as appreciation and recognition. Often, simple perks and verbal expressions of appreciation can be the most powerful.

### **Summary:**

- Volunteers – those who freely give their time to an initiative or cause – are critical to nonprofits
- It's crucial that organizations harness the energy, talent and time of volunteers in the most effective way, which can often present a significant challenge
- Volunteers can be unreliable, inconsistent and often become easily disengaged
- The 10 tips to leading volunteers, outlined above, provide a roadmap to directing the desire and intentions of volunteers towards maximum engagement, reliability and contribution

## Try This Out:

- Ask a devoted, tenured volunteer to lunch and find out what's important to them. What motivates them to volunteer? What matters most to them?
- Do the above with a completely new volunteer. Look for similarities and differences.
- Design a profile sheet or questionnaire to use with incoming volunteers. This helpful tool can assist with identifying and capturing volunteer strengths, talents and interests. It can also be used to start the conversation about level of commitment and time availability.
- Create job descriptions for volunteer roles, clearly identifying responsibilities and expectations.
- Gather your volunteers and discuss a shared team vision for the next year.
- Hold check-in meetings or discussions with your volunteers on an annual, if not bi-annual, basis. Take their temperature about the experience overall, while considering any necessary shifts in volunteer duties or commitment level. This is a good time to re-enroll your volunteers and get another clear “yes” regarding their work in the months to come.
- Reach out to one volunteer a day and express your appreciation for their work.
- Hold a volunteer appreciation happy hour, lunch or similar event.

*This article was originally featured on [TobiJohnson.com](http://TobiJohnson.com)*

Now, more than ever, volunteer administrators are called upon to strengthen their model for leading volunteers and others. The ability to inspire and influence — whether it be volunteers, community partners, executive management, or co-workers — is at the very core of the job and critical to success.

Most information and training available for volunteer coordinators, however, focuses on developing management skills rather than strengthening leadership competencies. Fortunately, plenty of evidence exists about what makes a good leader. In fact, [research shows](#) leadership across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors doesn't differ that much.

## Great Leadership Makes a Difference

In their influential book, [The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations](#), [James Kouzes & Barry Posner](#) offer a well-researched model for five practices and ten commitments of exemplary leadership. They found that leaders who exhibited these traits were able to bring about notable changes in their organizations.

They discovered leadership wasn't just a nice, feel-good concept. Excellence in leadership actually made a difference. Below are some of the concrete ways better leadership made an impact across a wide variety of contexts. They are striking in that they are often-cited challenges for volunteer managers.

Better leadership:

- Created higher-performing teams
- Fostered loyalty and greater commitment

- Increased fundraising results and gift levels
- Increased retention and reduced and turnover
- Positively influenced recruitment

## **An Evidence-based Model for Leading Volunteers in Practice**

Below are Kouzes and Posner’s five practices and ten commitments that are associated with better leadership results.

- **Model the Way**
  - Clarify and affirm shared values by finding your voice
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Develop a Philosophy of Volunteer Engagement that describes how and why volunteers are involved and share it with management and staff.
  - Set the example by aligning actions with shared values
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Work alongside volunteers from time to time to better understand their experiences and needs.
- **Inspire a Shared Vision**
  - Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Imagine and describe to others, ways volunteers can lead instead of follow at your organization.
  - Appeal to shared aspirations by enlisting others in a common vision
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Brainstorm with volunteers new and exciting ways they might be interested in contributing to the organization’s mission.
- **Challenge the Process**
  - Seize initiative and look outward for opportunities and innovative ways to improve
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Seek out cross-disciplinary and cross-sector collaborations (with business, academia, etc.) to unearth new discoveries and approaches.
  - Generate small wins for your team through experimentation
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Work with volunteers to develop small, self-reflective “growth pilot projects” where new ideas can be tested and improved.
- **Enable Others to Act**
  - Facilitate relationship and build trust through collaboration
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Actively assist volunteers in developing deep-rooted relationships by infusing trust- and teambuilding activities in meetings and trainings.
  - Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence
    - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Develop a leadership training pathway volunteers can use to develop their leadership skills and assume greater responsibility.
- **Encourage the Heart**
  - Recognize contributions and show appreciation for individual excellence

- **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** On a regular basis, recognize individual volunteers for personal improvements and successes, both in partnership with the organization and outside it.
- Celebrate values and victories by creating a spirit of community
  - **Action Item for Volunteer Coordinators:** Document and archive the “living history” of volunteer achievements at your organization through photos and stories.