



Saskatchewan Municipal

Management Resource

Developing and Retaining a Vibrant Volunteer Workforce

This document discusses how municipal managers can engage local volunteers and keep them satisfied and engaged. A strong volunteer base is a sign of a vibrant and sustainable community, which is usually essential to the continued viability of the municipal corporation.

Introduction

Although many municipalities are actively engaged in promoting the local community, municipal resources (money and staff) are rarely enough to fully provide all of the resources a community needs. As a result, a strong volunteer base is an essential component of a vibrant and sustainable community.

As populations age, and sometimes decline, municipalities begin to face the possibility of 'volunteer burnout'. Burnout is often a result of a declining volunteer base that is being asked to do more and more, often without appropriate support. While volunteers are usually willing to become even more engaged within the community, everyone has their limits. At some point, people either begin reducing their involvement, quit altogether, or in the worst case...move.

This brief resource is designed to give municipal managers some things to think about as they are looking for ways to engage volunteers in new or existing initiatives, programs, etc. The resource tries to answer the question of how you create community ownership and how you sustain volunteers, especially when you are relying heavily on them.

Engaging Community Volunteers – The '5 Rs' of Volunteers

An important first step is to understand why people choose to become involved in volunteering at the local level. One thing that you can do is to take the time to find out why your existing volunteers are involved, and likewise to find out why other people aren't. This can be done through a community survey, through personal conversations, or even a public meeting. You might be surprised by what you find out!

Here are some reasons why people decide to become engaged in volunteering, and stay involved. Each reason, and there are five of them listed here, begins with an 'R', so these are the '5 Rs' of volunteers.

► **Recognition**

Everyone enjoys being recognized for their contributions. Although people may not be motivated to become volunteers by promises of recognition, existing volunteers are sustained and encouraged by recognition from their peers, from community and municipal leaders, and from the public.

Municipalities can find many ways to recognize the participation of volunteers. This is one area where municipalities should definitely avoid being frugal. Offering your volunteers active and public praise and recognition will inspire them to continue, and often increase, their efforts. It's important to note that recognition should generally be offered in a public fashion. This has the additional benefit of perhaps encouraging others to become engaged in the community.

Tips: Here are a few ideas you can use to recognize your volunteers:

- You can publicly thank volunteers through a locally published newsletter;
- You can send a letter to the editor of the local newspaper;
- Offering opportunities to win prizes for volunteering. You can often encourage local businesses to contribute gifts to be awarded;
- What about holding volunteer appreciation events (lunches, suppers, picnics, etc)?; and
- Making sure to highlight volunteer contributions whenever talking at public functions, including public meetings and council meetings.

Example: Every year, the RM of Volunteer Retention holds two volunteer recognition events. The first one is a summer picnic, and the second is a winter supper and dance. The municipality covers the costs involved, and makes sure that very few of the volunteers actually have to be involved in organizing this event. At each event, the Reeve delivers a brief speech thanking all of the volunteers for their work throughout the year, and highlighting the successes that have been achieved because of their help. The RM hands out service awards to everyone who has completed their first year of volunteering, their fifth year, their tenth year, and so on. The RM solicits gifts from local businesses and distributes them as door prizes to the volunteers. Finally, the RM sends a press release and letter to the editor of the local newspaper. Ever since the RM began holding these events, and taking the time to publicly recognize their volunteers, the RM has had a steady flow of committed volunteers.

► **Respect**

It is important for a municipality that wants to keep an active volunteer base to make sure that volunteers receive the respect they deserve. In a world where most of us feel like life is getting busier and busier, taking time out of our lives to volunteer to support our local community can be quite a sacrifice. It is definitely something deserving of respect.

One reason people choose to become engaged in local volunteering is because they are seeking respect. In the volunteer context, respect is similar to recognition. However, while recognition is best displayed publicly, respect is more commonly shown privately through on-going personal relationships.

Municipal managers looking for volunteers need to make sure that everyone involved in the project or program knows the importance of respecting the needs, priorities, and concerns of others. This means recognizing that for most volunteers, their volunteer commitment isn't the most important life commitment they have. Many of them will have jobs, families, friends, and homes that require their attention. Respect means never pushing your volunteers

to hard, or ignoring their other priorities. It means going out of your way as a manager to provide them with private thank-you's and support.

Tips: If you want volunteers to be involved in your program or project, you need to keep their schedules in mind. Don't schedule all of your meetings during regular business hours. Ask your volunteers ahead of time what meeting times will work for them, and be prepared to work on their schedule...not just your own.

Figure out what the needs of your volunteers are ahead of time. If they have kids, maybe you can find a local person who will offer free (or municipally subsidized) babysitting services while the parents are volunteering.

Based on when your meetings are scheduled, consider providing meals for your volunteers. They will appreciate the time they save with not having to prepare meals.

Example: The Town of Turnaround is renowned for their large and active volunteer base. Anytime you talk to a volunteer from Turnaround, the first thing they talk about...after bragging about their town...is how well respected they feel as volunteers. A few years ago, the town manager developed a volunteer policy for all of the municipality's staff to follow. It has made a world of difference.

Today, town staff make sure to regularly meet with their volunteers to see how they are doing. It's routine for the manager to be seen out for coffee with one volunteer or another. Additionally, the manager and his staff started providing volunteers with thank you notes for their extraordinary contributions.

Every year, the municipality conducts a volunteer survey to find out how volunteers are doing and what things they might like to see done differently. The town goes out of its way to implement volunteer suggestions, and be accountable to their volunteers for these ideas. The town pays local teenagers to baby-sit children for volunteers for the monthly program meetings, and brings in supper for that evening as well. Everyone in Turnaround is thrilled to volunteer.

► **Role**

Not only do volunteers need to be recognized and respected for their contributions, but it is also important that they know their contributions are important. Everyone likes to feel needed, and one reason people get involved in their community is because they want to feel that they can contribute. It is therefore important that a municipal manager ensure that specific roles can be found for everyone who wants to be involved in a project or program.

Another important part of Role is making sure volunteers know what is expected of them, and how their specific roles will contribute to the larger picture. This will help people to feel needed, it will clarify responsibilities and reduce conflict, and it helps to make projects or programs more likely to succeed.

Tip: Don't let anyone feel like they are involved as a 'token' rather than a full participant. Make sure you have a clear and defined plan, which has room for everyone to become active participants.

Example: The RM of Volunteer Retention is active in helping community associations engage and keep their volunteers. One way that the RM does this is to work with an association to develop a volunteer plan. Each plan outlines the projects or programs that volunteers will be contributing to, specifies all of the responsibilities that need to be handled, presents the required timelines and budget, and appoints someone to coordinate the volunteers.

These plans are very popular, as everyone in the RM now knows how they can become involved in that particular project or program, and it has really helped reduce the confusion that volunteers used to feel when the community associations didn't do a good job of planning or of leading these volunteers.

► **Relationship**

Every volunteer opportunity is a chance for your volunteers to make new friends, and get to know their 'neighbours' better. In fact, it is often because of a friend being involved that new volunteers become engaged in community groups or activities.

A wise municipal manager will make sure that people have a way of connecting with one another and building relationships. After all, volunteering isn't all just about work. It also needs to be about having fun and making new friends, or spending time with old friends.

Tip: Organizations should work to make sure that their volunteers have lots of opportunities to connect with other volunteers and community leaders.

Example: The Town of Turnaround maintains a calendar of local events, and has an extensive e-mail distribution list for all of their volunteers. Knowing that building relationships between volunteers is one way of strengthening their volunteer base, the town makes sure to send out a monthly newsletter telling people about the pending events. Also, every quarter the town holds an evening come-and-go social for volunteers and community leaders. These socials are primarily opportunities for volunteers to mingle.

► **Results**

Nothing works like results! A good manager makes sure that volunteers are asked to be involved in things that have a reasonable chance of success. Every time an organization fails, it discourages the people involved with it. Repeated failures will drive volunteers away. Success on the other hand, will have people interested in being involved.

One way that you can increase the likelihood of keeping people happy with the results your initiative is producing is to make sure that your volunteers know the goals they are working towards and that these goals are reasonable and achievable.

Many people are motivated to volunteer because they have a vision for ways that the community can be improved. A good volunteer dependent organization will help people to channel their energy in order to help turn these visions into reality.

Tip: If your group is trying to change the world, know what it is you're trying to change it to. Maybe your group is together because of recent youth crimes in your neighbourhood, and you're trying to deal with this problem. Make sure that your volunteers know what they're working towards, and make sure that they get to celebrate their successes.

Example: Citizens of the Town of Turnaround were concerned that downtown Turnaround seemed to be falling apart. They knew the town needed to do something to beautify the downtown, but municipal money was tight. These concerned citizens got together and created the Turnaround Beautification Society. The town provided them with a space for their meetings, access to town tools, etc. The society developed a plan to improve the look of

downtown by planting flowers. The results were amazing; the town looked like a completely different place. Everyone was excited. The volunteers were so thrilled with their success that they were already busy planning next year's work. The town decided this success needed to be celebrated. As a result, the town submitted the society's work to the Communities in Bloom program for recognition. The town Mayor also made a proclamation, recognizing a particular day as the Turnaround Beautification Society Day. All of the volunteers were so pleased that everyone was proud of the work they had done.

Conclusion

Remember that volunteers are giving you their 'free time'. This is an amazing gift, and unfortunately all too often not enough of an effort is made to make sure that enthusiastic volunteers stay that way.

Your municipality will have great success if every time you consider approaching volunteers, you take the time to actively consider how you will use the '5 Rs' to build your volunteer base and keep it active and engaged. Good luck!

SOURCE

This document is adapted from "The Six R's of Participation" by Gillian Kaye, with the permission of AHEC/Community Partners, University of Massachusetts.