

THE SIX PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

1. Successful voluntary organizations have a clear mission and specific goals that are communicated to their membership and to the public.

Successful voluntary organizations have a mission: an end they strive to achieve, a reason for existing. This mission represents what the organization wants to be known for and why it exists. They work very hard at communicating this mission to their members and the public.

They adopt and pursue specific goals which serve this mission and which define progress towards it. By setting goals, either annually, or for 3 - 5 years, these organizations establish their program and they allocate their resources, both time and money, to accomplish these objectives.

Be clear about the difference between a mission and a goal: Missions are not generally attainable, while goals always are. Missions don't have deadlines, goals always do. Individuals always take responsibility for objectives and the group has responsibility for goals. Missions are the end of the journey and goals are the steps along the road.

The adoption of specific objectives, that lead toward achieving the goal, allows everyone to know what they are working toward and who is responsible. Typical objectives include internal growth, as well as external work like conservation action.

By setting goals and objectives to reach, you decide exactly what you want and how you're going to get it. You decide, "This is our destination, and this is the route." If you don't make these decisions, you end up just reacting to others. You are not in control of your organization's current path or its final destination.

Your mission and the accomplishment of your goals fundamentally define your organization. If they are clear and attractive to a broad consensus of people, and are successfully achieved, potential leaders will join you because they want to participate in success. If your mission and goals are not clear, are narrow or self serving and are not successfully achieved, your appeal to the public, much less potential leaders, will fall short of the mark.

Assessment Questions:

- Is your organization's mission or purpose clear enough to attract volunteers?
- Does your organization's vision include volunteers as an important part of achieving its goals?
- How well does the organization communicate the mission to your members and the public?
- Do you adopt annual goals...long-range (three- to five-year) goals?
- How well do you communicate these goals to members and the public?
- Do you have a goal and objectives for your individual work in the organization?
- Do you have a goal and objectives for your individual work in the organization?



2. Successful voluntary organizations offer many opportunities for every member to act on behalf of the organization's goals and objectives.

Most leaders start out just as people wanting to help or trying to right a wrong. They get involved and then find that more and more challenging (and rewarding) tasks are either offered to, or thrust upon them.

Your current members serve as the pool from which active volunteers can be drawn. As a target to shoot for, one must bear in mind that roughly ten percent of your members have the capability or motivation to become leaders. Organizations working toward hitting that 10 percent target use every event, public educational forum or speaking opportunity to identify and recruit potential volunteers and leaders.

Once you've made contact with an interested member or new recruit, the only way to know about his or her leadership abilities is by giving that person an opportunity to help. Give him or her a job and assess performance. The person you want will get it done. Once they complete one task, it's up to you as the leader to work with them to find other interesting projects for them.

As leaders are developed, they must first be used to replace the ones you lose through attrition and turnover before you can begin to add to your leadership ranks. Consequently, if you are to have more leaders, there must be a continuous process of providing opportunities for volunteers to become involved in taking ever larger amounts of responsibility on behalf of the organization.

When a potential leader wants to help, you must have something available for him or her to do. When a volunteer appears, a job must be at hand which will allow them to demonstrate their capability and motivation. You must be prepared to offer a volunteer a job to do which is appropriate to the skills and experience they bring your organization.

Assessment Questions:

- What genuine opportunities are available for potential leaders to serve the organization?
 - At the top level? (the officers and board)
 - At the middle level? (committees)
 - At the entry level?
- Do you inform potential volunteers and leaders of these opportunities?
- Does your organization develop leaders?
 - Are there opportunities for progressive growth?
 - Are there opportunities for rapid advancement?

3. Successful voluntary organizations train their volunteers and officers to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for the organization to be effective.

Few voluntary leaders learned the skills or procedures for doing their jobs in high school or college. Most voluntary leaders have learned them either through their occupation or, more likely, through painful on-the-job experience. This can also be painful for the organization.

Recruiting experienced leaders from related organizations can help, and finding occupationally qualified people for key positions is always useful, but the bottom line is that training one's leaders in essential skills is vital.



The duties, responsibilities and procedures incumbent upon elected or appointed offices must be learned by those who hold them, hopefully before or very shortly after assuming the position. Many new officers who are not given direction so they "hang-back" and become inactive because what is expected of them is not clear. On the other hand, some eager new officers plunge in and quickly get in over their heads.

What's more, the existing leaders in the organization can grow and develop through the training you organize. Many skills related to your group's objectives, like public speaking, lobbying, and budgeting can be easily learned by motivated adults.

Also, your members are the most likely people to act on environmental, conservation or recreation issues. It's normally assumed that they are well informed and know what to do when an issue arises. This is rarely a valid assumption.

Find out what your members care about. Then provide the information, examples, and opportunities to act. Give plenty of support and a few suggestions for improvement. Training can involve the traditional conference or workshop, but often some of the best "training" happens one-on-one or within the working committees of your group.

Through the process of educating and activating your membership, you can draw in more people involved with the issues. Your organization's training has the double benefit of

- 1) Strengthening your base and ultimately your power, and;
- 2) Identifying and developing the people who will be your future leaders.

Assessment Questions:

- What kind of training could you have used when you started being a leader? What kind could you use now?
- What training exists for officers and board members?
- What training exists for activists and leaders?
- What provision for exchange and training exists between old and new officers when they change over?

4. Successful voluntary organizations establish clear expectations and procedures for individual volunteer performance.

The volunteers and leaders in a voluntary organization are its most valuable asset. To maintain and increase their effectiveness, they must be managed even more carefully than a corporation manages its personnel.

Since there is no stick to encourage high performance, the most valuable management tool, the carrot, is a set of clear expectations that all understand and can live up to. These expectations must be understood by the volunteer as well as those who assign the job and who oversee the work. In a best case scenario, the leader negotiates with the volunteer so that both parties feel ownership in what's expected.

By defining what a volunteer or a committee will do, several benefits are derived by the organization:



- First: The volunteer or the committee knows precisely what is to be done and the limits of the authority delegated. Being uncertain about what is expected is the most common excuse for volunteer failure. Being certain about the task allows the volunteer to feel secure and to creatively dive into the challenge.
- Second: The leader who delegated the task can know exactly what to expect and when to expect it. This allows her or him to delegate and follow up with confidence. With the ground rules set from the beginning, surprise phone calls saying, "Why didn't you do it this way?" and "Can I expect your report tomorrow?", are avoided.
- Third: Failure to perform can be quickly realized, feedback can be given and, if needed, replacement can be undertaken promptly, rather than waiting until failure is unmistakable.

It's important to understand that in establishing expectations one identifies goals for the job, not specifically how it is to be done. If this is done clearly and well, the individual will then establish specific objectives for how he, she, or the committee will get it done.

Assessment Questions:

- Are there written expectations established for all officers? How about the committees, their committee chairs, and members?
- Are there written expectations for volunteers?
- Are these expectations written down and agreed to?
- How well do you define what is expected from board members and committees?
- Do individuals or committees establish their own objectives based upon these expectations and present these to the Board for approval?

5. Successful voluntary organizations extensively and publicly recognize and reward the work of their volunteers/members at all levels.

Nobody does anything for nothing. Some direct or indirect reward is expected from every activity that anyone undertakes. A reward can be simply defined as anything that makes an individual feel good.

We can assume then that volunteers expect something for the time and effort they expend on behalf of your organization. What it might be depends on the individual as well as the task performed. Your role as a leader is to learn a person's needs or expectations, and to offer an appropriate reward or recognition.

A voluntary organization has very few big rewards (like money) to offer volunteers. However, every volunteer who works on its behalf must receive some direct and personal reward for their effort, even if it is no more than a thank you from the person who asked for their help.

Beyond that simple, mandatory courtesy, larger rewards for volunteers can include the following:

- a. Public recognition, like the volunteer's name being mentioned in the newspaper or your organization's newsletter;



- b. Resolutions passed by the governing body and then suitably printed and framed for hanging;
- c. Recognition at the beginning of each meeting for the special tasks completed by a member or volunteer leader;
- d. A hand written thank you note to a leader or volunteer after an exceptional performance (this one is especially effective).

These ideas are just a few to start you thinking. Your thoughtfulness and creativity are the only limits to the rewards you can give. The only rule to follow is: The more tangible the reward, the more effective the reward will be.

Rewards not only encourage a person to volunteer again, but if the rewards are publicized, the uninvolved member also can be attracted because he or she can see the rewards that others are receiving. One of the basic psychological motivations of leaders is their personal need for approval by others. If you give this approval, potential leaders will respond.

Assessment Questions:

- How well are volunteers/members rewarded? Are these rewards publicized?
- How inclusive are these rewards? Are they just for the top level or do they include all levels?
- How tangible are the rewards you give?

6. Successful voluntary organizations are networks of socially as well as functionally related people. Both relationships are continually maintained.

A voluntary organization is not business, it's pleasure. Fundamentally, volunteers must enjoy what they are doing or they won't do it for very long. A major and ongoing reward that a voluntary organization offers its participating volunteers/members is the social contact made and renewed in the course of doing business. Hence in planning meetings, conferences or other activities, adequate time must always be given for establishing and renewing friendships.

Three provisos apply:

Shared recreation experiences--canoeing, fishing trips, outings, field trips, and hunts--seem to establish fellowship much more rapidly than "social hours" or group dinners. Doing things together is a bonding experience.

All must be welcomed into the group. Cliques which are closed to newcomers must be avoided at all costs. The members of a clique rarely perceive themselves this way, but newcomers, or people different from them, may easily be discouraged unless they are welcomed into the group.

Newcomers have a special need to feel included. Find creative ways to introduce newcomers to the group and introduce your group to them. Special efforts to call or



write members after their first meeting make a big difference. Check to see if the operating procedures were clear, if they have any questions, and if they know where and when the next meeting will be held.

A major added benefit also accrues to the organization if there is a high level of fellowship among its leaders. A fundamental part of a friendship is trust. Trust is also a necessity if authority is to be delegated. The capacity of the organization to act, to be effective is ultimately based upon the level of trust that exists between its leaders.

Assessment Questions:

What kind of social or recreational opportunities are arranged? How often do they occur?

Does your organization do anything to welcome new members? If a person attends a meeting or hearing, do they receive any special attention?

Is anything special done to introduce new members of the Board to the rest of the Board? To the membership?

Are your fellow Board members friends of yours? Do you feel like you know them well?

