

# GOOD PRACTICES

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## A Culture that Values Volunteers

EXECUTIVE SERVICE CORPS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

While the vast majority of US nonprofit organizations use volunteers, less than one-third have paid staff coordinating volunteers. What is more, few of these staff members have received any training in volunteer management.<sup>1</sup> For many nonprofit organizations, volunteer management remains an elusive goal. With many years of experience managing volunteers, Executive Service Corps of Southern California shares its good practices with local nonprofit groups. Secrets to successful volunteer management include: volunteer screening, regular and open communication between staff and volunteers, on-going training for volunteers, matching individuals with appropriate assignments, and fostering an organizational culture that both values and recognizes the financial and time commitments of volunteers.



## ORGANIZATION PROFILE

Founded in 1981, Executive Service Corps of Southern California, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, provides a menu of management consulting services to hundreds of nonprofit organizations in Los Angeles, Ventura, and Orange Counties each year. Executive Service Corps (ESC) consultants are retired senior executives and managers who previously worked in major corporations, large nonprofit organizations, or governmental agencies. Part of a national network, ESC's services include management consulting, leadership development, board coaching, project consulting, and strategic planning. While there is a nominal fee paid by nonprofit organizations for ESC consultants and coaches, the more than 100 consultants provide their services pro bono, donating thousands of volunteer hours a year.



## THE CHALLENGE

Nationwide, nearly 80 percent of nonprofit agencies and 30 percent of faith-based organizations use volunteers. However, only 30 percent of these nonprofits and 20 percent of the faith-based programs have a paid staff member who coordinates volunteers. Of these paid employees, one in three has not received any training in volunteer management, and 50 percent spend less than one-third of their time on volunteer coordination.<sup>2</sup> Volunteer management is a challenge for most nonprofit managers. So how does Executive Service Corps of Southern California, which relies entirely on highly-skilled volunteers to provide its services, continue to recruit, motivate, and retain more than 100 volunteers on an on-going basis, without a dedicated volunteer manager, and with a 20 to 1 ratio of volunteers to full-time staff members?

### **1** AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF APPRECIATION

"It is our organizational culture," according to Aileen Strike Preonas, a consultant who serves as ESC Project Director. "From our Executive Director on through to our support staff, we foster a volunteer-centered culture. Good communication, recognition, and motivation are the keys to success." Preonas points out that for an organization, like Executive Service Corps, which is entirely reliant on volunteers to deliver its services, creating such an organizational culture is more than a good practice. It is essential.

"For most nonprofits, a typical problem in starting a volunteer program is that the staff either doesn't have the time, or doesn't put in the time that it takes. We spend a lot of staff time building relationships with our consultants." And, according to Preonas, who has

a background in volunteer management, “Those organizations that do volunteer management really well actually meet the needs of their volunteers. It requires a fundamental shift in how people traditionally think about volunteers. A volunteer is an investment— a financial and a time commitment for an organization—that can yield valuable returns.”

## 2 **VOLUNTEER MOTIVATIONS**

In order to meet the needs of volunteers, it is essential first and foremost to understand what motivates volunteers. Motivation in both paid and unpaid work can be divided into three basic categories, all three of which have been found to be important determinants in both performance and success: achievement, affiliation, and power.<sup>3</sup> Achievement motives are characterized by the desire to achieve excellence and to take pride in one’s accomplishments, the affiliation motive is the drive to fit-in and have harmonious relationships, while power motives are influenced by a desire for influence and control.<sup>4</sup> In looking specifically at volunteers, there are three additional—and at times overlapping—motivational factors to consider: altruistic motives (compassion, good of the community), instrumental motives (gain experience and new skills, meet people, personal satisfaction), and obligation motives (debt to society, moral or religious duty).<sup>5</sup> These motivations are not found in isolation, but in different combinations that vary from person to person.

Fred Merrill, who has been volunteering for Executive Service Corps for more than 20 years, is the embodiment of this motivational mix. What is Merrill’s primary motivation for volunteering for ESC? “It’s difficult to isolate just one thing. When you retire you need to keep active mentally. Part of making retirement worthwhile

is giving something back and doing something good for others.” Merrill adds, “Also seeing these organizations blossom, as well as the respect you get for what you can contribute are great rewards. The nonprofits that we work with are eager for help and very grateful for our services.”

However, it is not just about what motivates an individual to volunteer; it is also about keeping a volunteer motivated. For Merrill, this is about challenging assignments and the feeling that he is using his skills. “ESC does a great job of matching consultants with assignments. They make an attempt to really utilize your skills: if you have a marketing background then they will assign you to marketing projects. We’re given meaningful assignments and the necessary training to utilize our talents.”

Matching a volunteer with a project or a task that fits well with his/her skill set is an important factor in keeping volunteers engaged and motivated. “We do a lot of work to ensure that there is a good fit—really a chemistry— between the consultant and the client,” says Jesus Romero, Assistant Director. As well, Romero, who serves as the ESC point person for recruiting volunteers, adds that with new recruits there is an even higher level of expectation: “New volunteers come in all pumped up and ready to go. You have to get them involved right away on a meaningful project, otherwise you risk losing them.”

## 3 **RECRUITING AND SCREENING VOLUNTEERS**

Maintaining a relatively stable roster of between 100–125 volunteer consultants, ESC’s primary means of recruitment remains word of mouth. Indeed, eighty-five percent of their consultants come either through other consultants or the nonprofit agencies that ESC works with, while

the additional fifteen percent of consultants are found through services such as Volunteer Match. Still, recruiting is an area where ESC would like to improve, particularly its recruitment of minority consultants, and the organization has plans to hire an employee whose primary job would be to recruit new consultants.

When Aileen Preonas first started with ESC, she worked with the senior ESC staff to develop a more formal screening process. First a prospective volunteer makes an initial inquiry; next an ESC staff member calls the individual to set the tone about ESC's expectations; if the person is still interested, then they are sent an application; however if ESC doesn't receive the completed application, then the individual is not pursued. After an application is received, then the prospective consultant meets with a member of the ESC Consultants' Advisory Council (which is made up of eight active consultants). If all goes well, the person is then referred to the ESC Program Manager who follows-up and extends an invitation to become an ESC consultant. "By the time someone makes it to the interview, we usually already know that the individual would make a good consultant, but on occasion it turns out that it just isn't a good fit," says Preonas. "If it isn't going to work, then we discuss it with the person, and the prospect usually reaches the same conclusion."

While in some ways it may seem counterintuitive, according to Preonas, the more rigorous the volunteer screening process and the more you require from a volunteer, the more likely that a volunteer will stay involved with an organization. "I came out of the Kellogg Training Center where our screening process included a panel interview, checking references, and an intensive three days of training. What I learned from that experience is that volunteers are far

more engaged and committed when you have a strict screening process, a challenging volunteer commitment, a mandatory orientation, and intensive trainings. I helped to bring these practices to ESC."

#### **4 ORIENTATION, TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR VOLUNTEERS**

New ESC recruits take part in a one-day, mandatory orientation, which describes the organization's expectations, policies, and procedures. All ESC consultants also participate in on-going trainings throughout the year covering a range of topics around nonprofit management, such as a board development, fundraising, marketing and a two-day training on strategic planning. Trainings also address issues such as how to be a better consultant and how to deal with a difficult director. ESC uses in-house trainers, external consultants, guest speakers, and guest trainers to teach these modules. As well, consultants often work in teams for the trainings and participants receive tool kits that they can use in the field.

For ESC consultants, these on-going trainings are essential. While all consultants were formerly executives or senior managers, the majority come out of private industry, and nonprofit management is new to most of the volunteers. As such, the trainings really serve two purposes: they provide the consultants with the tools they need out in the field, but they also serve as professional development opportunities. Says Preonas, "Training organizes what you know intellectually and intuitively and then provides a framework. The consultants want to be the best that they can be, so they are continually working to improve their knowledge and sharpen their skills. But it also serves as professional

development for our volunteers, which can be difficult to find in retirement. For many of our consultants, it is like a second career.”

## **5 WRITTEN VOLUNTEER POLICIES AND JOB DESCRIPTIONS**

Having written policies, procedures and job descriptions ensures that volunteers are clear on the rules of conduct and the expectations of the organization, making it easier to discipline an individual and even to fire a volunteer. “You know, you can fire volunteers,” says Preonas. While it is rare, if an ESC volunteer hasn’t been active for an extended period of time, then the organization sends them a letter and follows-up with a phone call. “We discuss what is going on with the consultant and ESC’s expectations. Those who are taken off the ESC rolls have already reached the same conclusion about continued ESC service.” Written volunteer policies and job descriptions are provided in ESC’s orientation materials. Preonas adds, “You have to know exactly what you want the volunteer to do and you have to spell it out.” Having an organization’s policies on the books also serves to establish criteria to recognize outstanding volunteers.

## **6 VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION**

Each year, Executive Service Corps has a luncheon to recognize its outstanding consultants. All of the consultants are invited and the organization generally honors between five to ten volunteers for a variety of accomplishments. Over the years, most volunteers are recognized. At the luncheon, the volunteers are awarded small tokens of appreciation and their photos appear in the ESC newsletter. ESC also takes its volunteers for a “Day in LA” trip, where they

visit three nonprofit agencies that have been, or are current, ESC clients.

While this formal recognition is important, according to Preonas, what is far more important is the day-in and day-out informal recognition. The most basic type of informal recognition is simply recognizing who your volunteers are and respecting their skills, talents, constraints, and preferred schedules. With retirees, this means scheduling meetings in the morning to miss the traffic and trying to avoid evenings and weekends, and assigning projects that take distance into account. With teenagers, it might mean assigning projects after school or during the summer, or with working adults it may mean creating volunteer opportunities on weekends and holding meetings in the evenings. As well, communicating and building relationships with volunteers is an important form of informal recognition. At ESC, all of the staff members take part in this informal recognition of volunteers, and in this way, all play an important role in volunteer management.

## **7 RETAINING VOLUNTEERS**

So how does an organization retain its volunteers, as in the case with ESC, for more than 20 years? Preonas says with a smile, “We appeal to those factors that motivate our volunteers to serve, keep them intellectually challenged, and keep up the social interactions. The result is that our volunteers stay.” Fred Merrill concurs, “ESC does tremendous work. They also really use a person’s talents. And from a personal standpoint, ESC is an opportunity to fill a lot of needs in retirement.”

After two decades as a volunteer, Fred was forced to go on leave for the past eighteen months due to personal issues. “I recently had

lunch with the ESC Executive Director, Megan Cooper, and we're trying to figure out a way that I can get back to help ESC and work from home." He pauses, and reflects, "There is a real esprit de corps there. The other consultants became my second family." Perhaps there is no greater testament to Executive Service Corps good practices than volunteers like Fred Merrill.

**ENDNOTES.** 1. Urban Institute. 2004. Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report. Washington, D.C. 2. Urban Institute. 2004. Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report. Washington, D.C. 3. Atkinson, J. & Feather, N. (1966). Theory of Achievement Motivation. New York: Wiley. Maehr, M., & Braskamp, L. (1986). The Motivation Factor. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books. McClelland, D. (1962). Business Drive and National Achievement. Harvard Business Review, 40 (4), 99-112. 4. Atkinson, J. & Birch, D. (1978). An Introduction to Motivation. New York: Litton Educational Publishing, Inc. 5. Barker, D. G. (1993). "Values and Volunteering," in J.D. Smith (ed.) Volunteering in Europe, London: Voluntary Action Research, Second Series, No. 2: 10-31. 8. Anheier, H. K. (2005). Nonprofit Organizations: Theory, Management, Policy. New York: Routledge.



## GOOD PRACTICES For Volunteers

- ① Training for paid staff in volunteer management and working with volunteers.
- ② Screening procedures to identify suitable volunteers.
- ③ Written policies and job descriptions for volunteer involvement.
- ④ Training and professional development opportunities for volunteers.
- ⑤ Routine supervision and communication with volunteers.
- ⑥ Recognition activities for volunteers, such as award ceremonies.
- ⑦ Routine collection of information on volunteer numbers and hours.

The Center for Civil Society is the focal point for the UCLA School of Public Affairs' programs and activities in nonprofit leadership and management. "A Culture that Values Volunteers" is one in a series of "good practices" of Southern California nonprofits developed by the Center for nonprofit practitioners and community leaders. These vignettes, covering a range of topics from governance to innovation to volunteer management, are available for download, free of charge, on the Center for Civil Society's Web. Visit us online to read other Good Practices or to sign up for the next session of the Nonprofit Leadership Program. <http://www.spa.ucla.edu/ccs>