

MULTIPLY YOUR MISSION

Increase Impact by Cultivating Volunteer Leadership



Getting Started

Welcome!

From helping manage major events to sharing news on social media, volunteers are the backbone of mission-driven organizations. By strategically empowering volunteers to lead others, that impact multiplies. Cultivating volunteer leadership is more than filling a role; it is creating a culture where people can grow alongside the mission they serve by recognizing potential and building trust. Developing leaders from within your volunteer base helps you get more done while building something that lasts.

Using This Guide

We invite you to use this guide to support your volunteer planning efforts. It's meant to be a practical tool you can adapt to fit the needs of your site, team, and community.

You're welcome to share the guide with others. If you copy or adapt any part of the content, please credit the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF).

For questions, feedback, or additional support, contact us at NPLD@NEEFusa.org.



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Introduction

This resource is intended to provide key considerations about cultivating volunteers into leaders, including framework, development, support, and recognition. It is specifically geared towards volunteer events, like those that take place on National Public Lands Day but can be applied to any situation where leadership beyond staff would be helpful to maximize impact.

Background

Public lands, like parks, forests, trails, and waterways, are experiencing continued demand for recreation, with national, state, and local public lands hosting hundreds of [millions of visitors each year](#). These open spaces have seen visitor numbers increase over the last decade, with the COVID-19 pandemic acting as a catalyst to accelerate this trend in some areas as Americans sought the outdoors for safe recreation and mental respite.

As people embrace outdoor recreation, there is demand for guided experiences and organized events in these popular natural settings. Land management agencies often grapple with the balance of providing public access and preserving natural and cultural resources. One essential tool for sustainability is volunteerism, where the public is invited to care for visitor infrastructure and valuable natural resources.

Holding volunteer events is a proven way to complete larger tasks faster than relying on individual volunteers chipping away at a project over time. But engaging volunteers at scale comes with real challenges, particularly the staff time required to continuously train and monitor people performing set tasks. A tiered leadership structure, where experienced volunteers manage other volunteers, expands your impact while reducing the staff capacity needed to support a larger group.



Retaining volunteers is [consistently cited](#) as a top operational challenge for nonprofits, ranking ahead of recruitment for the first time in recent years.



Americans volunteered more than 4.1 billion hours in 2021, contributing an estimated [\\$122.9 billion](#) in economic value.



Key factors influencing [volunteer satisfaction](#) include recognition, a respectful and trustworthy culture, and a feeling of belonging to a group.



Benefits

Transforming volunteers into leaders comes with many benefits.

- **Sustainability** – Volunteer leaders help maintain established events that might otherwise be disrupted by changes in staffing.
- **Specialized expertise** – Volunteer leaders bring professional skills that complement staff, such as teaching, event management, scientific knowledge, or marketing.
- **Scalability** – Volunteer leaders provide the structure needed to grow events and host larger numbers of people.
- **Community ownership** – Volunteer leaders develop a deep investment in an organization's success and can become powerful advocates and credible ambassadors for support and engagement.
- **Staff capacity** – With volunteer leaders managing boots-on-the-ground work, program staff can shift their focus to strategic planning, complex problem solving, and interagency coordination that requires their expertise.

Volunteers do not replace the value of paid staff, but they do enable staff to build capacity. That frees up time and resources to address equitable access, ecological stewardship, economic opportunity, and community benefit at a moment when demand on public lands continues to grow.

Framework

Leveraging volunteer talent to help with events begins with a framework. What needs does your organization have that personnel other than a staff person could handle? How do you identify good volunteer candidates? What sort of training would the volunteer need to complete, and what are the boundaries of their authority?

Assessing Needs

When you are creating the framework for volunteer leadership, start with an assessment of needs. Volunteers do not replace the value and expertise of staff when it comes to managing events, but allow the capacity to meet growing needs.

Below are some common event needs that may only require access to resources, time, and initial training, not staff expertise.

- **Administration** – database management
- **Outreach** – mailing, handing out flyers to local businesses, sharing with personal networks
- **Reception** – greeting event attendees, answering phones, and providing information before the event
- **Event support** – registration, set up/tear down, survey collection, handing out tools/necessary materials

Most of these roles can be completed under direct staff supervision, but they also present opportunities for leadership. Could a volunteer manage several others entering registration and survey data into your database? Could one knowledgeable volunteer direct others on how to greet attendees? A step further might be a volunteer who runs a segment of participants during a larger event, like leading kids' activities while adults work, or managing a small group doing trail work away from the main event area.

To fully assess your needs, think beyond what simply needs to get done. Consider how your event could have greater impact if the site manager did not have to individually coordinate with every volunteer who shows up.

Defining Leadership

Volunteer leadership will look different for every organization and may shift from event to event. Having a clearly outlined scope of leadership helps avoid confusion about roles from the beginning. One key question is the boundaries of authority. What decisions can volunteer leaders make independently, and what requires escalating to a staff member? For example, if an attendee brings an unregistered friend, does the volunteer



leader need staff approval to accommodate them? If a volunteer leader hears thunder, can they call for evacuation on their own, or do they need to check with staff first?

Another consideration is how many volunteers a leader can reasonably oversee. That number may change based on the event's needs or the volunteer leader's experience. Having a direct conversation with volunteer leaders about their comfort level is essential.

One practical way to signal leadership and clarify boundaries is to give volunteer leaders a clear title, like Team Lead or Section Captain.

Identifying Candidates

Trust plays a critical role in working with volunteer leaders because often they are working without as much supervision as a typical volunteer.

When identifying candidates for volunteer leadership, consider the following:

- Has this volunteer demonstrated consistent reliability in other tasks?
- Do other volunteers look to them informally?
- Have they received positive feedback from other staff they may have worked with?
- Do they have a positive attitude when faced with challenges?
- Are they dedicated to your organization's mission beyond completing the task?

Most often, volunteer leaders will come from your existing volunteer corps. For your volunteer leadership framework, establish other readiness criteria like minimum hours served.

Development, Support, and Recognition

Building Key Skills

Once a volunteer has expressed interest in a leadership role and understands what it involves, it is time to build their skills. That means going beyond technical training to include mentorship and developing a leadership mindset.

Leadership

Some volunteer leaders may have little prior leadership experience, whether professionally or within another organization. Even those who have led before benefit from a conversation about what it takes to ensure everyone on their team has a positive experience. Key leadership skills to cover include:

Communication

- Conflict resolution, including knowing when to escalate problems
- Delegation versus micromanaging
- Giving constructive feedback
- Providing mission-aligned motivation

There is also a meaningful mindset shift that comes with moving from volunteer to leader. They are no longer just representing themselves. They are accountable for a team, responsible for motivating others, and carrying out work they once did solo.

Finally, giving new volunteer leaders the opportunity to shadow staff or experienced volunteer leaders is a practical way to ease them into their responsibilities before a full transition.



Onboarding and Support

Once a volunteer leader has the technical and interpersonal skills for their new role, it is up to the staff to ensure that volunteer leaders are put to good use.

Onboarding

A good rule of thumb is for a volunteer leader to have a written description they can refer to when first accepting a new role. An introduction to the staff and volunteer leadership team, with an endorsement from a staff member, is key to a good start. Additionally, provide a primary and secondary staff point of contact for their questions.

If this volunteer leadership role is beyond a single event, consider creating a plan with milestones and low stakes “wins” for a volunteer to accomplish. An example is below:

- Event 1 – Shadow a staff member to perform new responsibilities
- Event 2 – Take charge of issuing tools for volunteer work along a trail
- Event 3 – Lead a small group of 5-8 volunteers close to the main group, with the staff member close by for support
- Event 4 – Lead a small or medium-sized group further from the main group

Ongoing Support

Regular check-ins with a staff supervisor will allow space for a volunteer to express challenges, desires for more, less, or different responsibilities, and thoughts about future events. They can provide valuable insights.

Also, providing space for volunteer leaders to connect with each other creates a peer community. This can strengthen ties with the organization and mission, as well as create a clear opportunity to share concerns and grow from each other's experiences.

Continued Growth

Volunteer leadership is a first step in accessing a deeply meaningful relationship with your organization and mission. Providing opportunities for training, like leadership workshops, further training on technical skills, or expanding peer networks, will only strengthen their desire to give back and the impact they will make. Volunteer leadership can easily be a pipeline if your organization is looking for new team members or board members.

Recognition

Leading peers is harder than showing up for an event. Recognition validates the extra time in training and at the event itself, as well as the emotional component of being responsible for something greater than themselves. Being seen as a leader by others builds confidence that they are doing meaningful work, buffers against volunteer fatigue, and strengthens their sense of belonging.

Ways to achieve this level of recognition are to differentiate their acknowledgement beyond regular volunteer appreciation. This could be an extra, specific thank you at an appreciation event or something more tangible like a physical token. Another sign of recognition is to provide them with a meaningful perk, like a permanent name tag, early access to special events or sites, or having access to exclusive information like strategic plans or milestone infrastructure improvement dates.

Benefits for the Organization

Recognized leaders stay longer. Retaining experienced volunteer leaders will help in the long run with maintaining levels of service and event success, even when the organization is presented with new challenges.

Recognizing volunteer leaders in a clear and public way signals to other volunteers that there is a pathway for them to have growth opportunities. This builds a culture that is attractive to new volunteers because they know your organization treats people well. It signals a grassroots credibility. Other sure ways to show appreciation are by asking for their feedback. Not only for their thoughts on how events can be improved, but also about how to strengthen ties in their community from their perspective. Finally, when volunteer leaders feel supported and gain experience, they are more likely to resolve issues before they are escalated to staff, ultimately expanding the capacity of staff.

Consider volunteer leader recognition an investment in the future, in addition to a reward for the past. When volunteer leaders feel genuinely valued, they lead better and inspire the same in others.

Conclusion

Volunteer leaders bring firsthand passion for the organization, peer credibility, and strategic capacity to increase impact and scale up volunteer events in a way that would be challenging for paid staff alone. By investing in training and empowering these volunteers, land managers can expand the impact on natural and cultural resources as well as deepen a sense of community ownership of public lands.

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