

VOLUNTEER BEST PRACTICES

Turning Strangers into Teammates



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Welcome!

It is entirely likely that the volunteers who join your events are strangers. Perhaps they aren't strangers to you, your organization, or your natural area, but at the surface, a clear picture of what everyone has in common may be missing. While it may not seem critical to completing a service project, camaraderie is an important tool to create a lasting impact, not only on your public land site, but also among volunteers.

To many, doing an "icebreaker" can be an awkward experience. But, leading an introductory activity that reveals common motivations among your volunteers may strengthen cooperation and increase volunteer satisfaction in a way that reaps benefits past the service project itself.

Understanding Motivations

There are myriad reasons why someone volunteers. Identifying and understanding a volunteer's philanthropic motivations can provide insight into what may make them feel more aligned with your space and want to return.

Below are a few motivations volunteers may have:

- **Career building:** Young adults may seek volunteer opportunities that will allow them to build or exercise their professional skillset. Mature adults may become involved to continue to practice and flex their skill sets.
- **Personal passion:** People may volunteer because your mission is aligned with their personal values and interests.
- **Community interaction:** For many, volunteering is a means of finding a community and connecting outside of work and school. Or, it is a means of growing closer to those within an existing community, like workplace or faith group.
- **Mandatory presence:** For some, volunteering may be required as part of a larger milestone, like needing a certain number of hours to graduate. It's important to make sure those who are, at first, unsure if they want to be there aren't left out!

Benefits of Introductions

It's standard to begin an event with a welcome address. But going the extra step to introduce volunteers to one another and share their motivations can create friendships and connections that will last beyond the event. To them, meeting each other may even spark new motivations that were not initially present, like meeting new people, that can lead to strong volunteer retention.

Additionally, revealing commonalities between strangers is a good way to help them work better together, from sharing tools to working in teams.



Photo credit: Save our Smokies

Leading Questions

Instead of an icebreaker game, consider using leading questions that get right to the point of motivation. The questions are not phrased to ask people about their personal lives, like "What do you do when you're not volunteering?" or "Share something you're passionate about outside of work," because not all participants feel comfortable sharing in front of groups. The questions below provide the opportunity to bring up thoughts and feelings that could relate to their lives, while reducing social pressure for those who prefer to keep answers short.

- What brought you here today and say “yes” to volunteering?
- Why did you volunteer for this event specifically?
- What makes this natural area/organization special to you?
- What are you hoping to get out of volunteering today?

Some pointers for event leaders:

- Share your response to that question first to model vulnerability
- Allow people a moment to think; embrace the pause
- Do this in small groups to reduce tension with group speaking



Photo credit: Jason Dixon

Conclusion

Bringing people together in a volunteer setting is a feat itself. Going the extra mile to make their volunteer experience individually impactful means taking time to make connections and identify motivations. Just by taking the time to ask leading questions, you can transform strangers with a shared task into people with a shared story.