

BUILDING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

Volunteering, because it isn't contractual or paid, is dependent on relationships. Having open, mutually beneficial and respectful relationships with volunteers is an enormous help to making things run smoothly and getting things done.

Within the church, Christians are used to hearing the commandment to "love one another". There is usually a strong commitment to the principle of building good relationships and many of the following suggestions are already likely to be happening. However sometimes, particularly in churches where people already know each other, it can be assumed that there is no need to give extra attention to nurturing and developing relationships and so opportunities to do so can be overlooked. Having good patterns and checklists in place (even if they are mental ones) can make it easier to ensure that some useful ways of building positive relationships are not forgotten.

Starting points

1

The volunteer is the focus – the 'person', not just the 'task.'

This is important because care of one another is crucial and the additional benefit is that people who feel cared for and valued usually operate more effectively.

2

Relationships develop when people feel valued members of a team rather than invisible cogs in a mechanism.

For example it is good to take opportunities to publicly acknowledge the contribution that is made by volunteers, or groups of volunteers, as well as doing that individually.

3

People vary, and one way of relating to some volunteers may not be appropriate to all.

People will feel valued if you recognise their individual starting point so that:

- You do not patronise them (e.g. by telling an experienced person how to do something basic).
- You do not embarrass them (e.g. by putting them in a position where it is difficult for them to ask for help).
- You do not exploit them (e.g. by taking them for granted, expecting unreasonable timescales, not providing suitable equipment or resources to do the task required).

Practicalities

Good interpersonal skills and an interest in enabling people to use their gifts help to foster good relationships in innumerable ways. But here are a few key points to bear in mind:

1

Notice volunteers and engage with them.

It sounds obvious but is surprisingly easy to overlook! Say hello, remember people's names, thank people for specific things they have done, listen to their ideas, take an interest in them, answer messages promptly, and include thanks when sending things like rotas.

2

Communicate.

Keep the lines of communication open – both ways! Communicate regularly – let people know what is happening and anything that might be changing. This could include face to face communication, phone calls, updates by e-mail etc. The methods you choose to use will depend on your volunteers. Be careful about methods that might exclude some.

Make it easy for volunteers to communicate with you, both by being receptive when they do and by letting them know the best times and ways of getting hold of you. Try to respond quickly but if you can't, then let them know so that they don't feel ignored.

3

Arrange opportunities to meet.

These may be informal or more formal opportunities. Less formal opportunities can include social events which enable those volunteering to get together with other volunteers, or board members or trustees of a project if you have them. Sometimes volunteers doing the same task or role don't all do it at the same time and so enabling them to meet together can be helpful and affirming. More formal opportunities to meet might include a regular chat to catch up or a formal supervision or discussion about how a role is going.

4

Affirm the value of what the volunteer is doing.

Explain the value of the task itself and also its contribution to such things as a church mission action plan or a project vision statement. (See *Clarifying Tasks* guidance). As well as doing this when someone takes on a role, it is helpful to reinforce the message both privately and publicly.

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Practicalities (continued)

5

Ensure that volunteering is mutually beneficial.

Be aware of what volunteers can gain from the experience and try to facilitate it. Remember that people change – in motivation and circumstances. Try to make it easy for people to update you about these, and make it easy for people to change roles. (*Research in churches indicates that in healthy growing churches there is a lot of rotation among people in volunteer roles, rather than the same people always fulfilling the same roles.*¹)

6

Tackle potential difficulties.

Difficulties can arise when expectations, on either side, don't match what happens in practice.

Many difficulties can be avoided by being clear about expectations at the beginning and by encouraging volunteers to contribute ideas. This can enable them to mention things that need changing within a positive framework, rather than as a complaint. Where problems do emerge they are best addressed before they grow and damage good relationships.

See more on *Tackling Difficulties*.

7

Remember people vary.

In all sorts of ways, such as the amount of support they want and need, and the extent to which they want to develop through their role. For some volunteers the chance to chat is crucial for motivation; others will appreciate a positive hello but won't want you to linger so you will need to find other ways to develop relationships.

Good relationships are often a balance between the corporate and the individual. To use St Paul's analogy, the eye is not the same as the hand but both are part of the body. Volunteers, and relationships, are most likely to flourish if individual characteristics and preferences are valued alongside a recognition of the importance of functioning as a whole.

8

Help people leave well.

Endings matter and so when a volunteer finishes a role, look for a way to mark their contribution positively and ensure that they know they have been valued.

*Developing a good relationship with volunteers is also about ensuring that they are valued and empowered and have opportunities to develop. (See **Encouraging Development**).*

¹ From Anecdote to Evidence – 2014 www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk