

## Save Your At-Risk Volunteers

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**By:** Jacqui Cook

The signs are unmistakable: one missed conference call, then another, each accompanied by a flimsy excuse, if any at all. Emails go unanswered, and deliverables never arrive. Eventually it becomes painfully clear that a once-promising volunteer is no longer engaged in the work of the association.

The reasons it happens are as varied as the volunteers themselves. It may be added job responsibilities, a changing family situation, or a conflict with another volunteer. But for almost every association, the effect is the same: Work is left undone, decisions are delayed, and frustration levels escalate. If not handled carefully, the disengaged volunteer could quickly become a disgruntled ex-member.

"Volunteer engagement is the number-one thing you can measure to help you determine whether your association is healthy or not," says Shelly Alcorn, CAE, principal, Alcorn Associates Management Consulting and author of the [Association Subculture blog](#). "Volunteer engagement is even more important than the number of members you have. We should consider redefining success and shift our thinking from 'How many members do we have?' to 'How many of our current members are actively engaged?'"

Fortunately, there are strategies to ensure that volunteers who can be reengaged are brought back and that those who can't are redirected or let go in a way that preserves the relationship and the reputation of the association.

## Listen, Listen, Listen

At the American Dietetic Association (ADA), it became clear from member surveys and observation that the volunteers most prone to becoming disengaged are the same groups likely to be at-risk members: those one to five years into their careers and those close to retirement. The former are often busy juggling young families and new careers, while the latter are ready to wind down their involvement.

"With the younger members, you have to ask if there is another way," says Barbara Visocan, ADA vice president, member services. "Sometimes they just don't have the time for a long-term, ongoing commitment. It's really about matching their opportunities to their life changes."

At ADA, these volunteers can be offered a seat on a short-term task force that has a defined beginning and ending date, such as planning an event. That keeps them engaged and active without overwhelming them, and it keeps the door open to making a deeper volunteer commitment when their circumstances allow.

For late-career professionals, ADA developed a member-interest group for those 50 and older to involve them in mentoring and other projects that use their seasoned talents. In addition, ADA's leadership orientation, which trains new leaders in the organization, includes techniques on ensuring all points of view are heard during meetings involving volunteers.

"What you need to do is go around the room and make sure you hear from everyone," Visocan says. "Take notes and pay attention to who hasn't spoken up. You don't want them leaving the meeting and talking to friends about how frustrated they are. Although you may not get 100 percent of people agreeing, everyone's views need to be respected."

## Open Communication

Laura G. Davis, CAE, director, marketing and membership, at the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, says having a longer-term volunteer serve as a mentor can make the difference for a first-time volunteer trying to navigate her responsibilities and the various personalities among committee or board members. AAHPM has a buddy program that matches current board members with new board members during their first year.

"With a mentor, new board members have someone to turn to if they have questions," she says. "Not only do they have someone to sit with at a board meeting, but this individual also provides useful history and context on complex issues and is available to debrief following meetings."

AAHPM also makes the responsibilities and commitments clear for each volunteer upfront, even putting them in writing for some roles. For example, a volunteer author is given an agreement with the number of conference calls and articles required.

"People are able to accept or decline a request when they are provided with detailed information upfront," Davis says. "Even when they agree to serve, you have to leave them an out. If you're not getting what you need, you or the volunteer chair can call and say 'How can I help? Do you need an extension?' I think people are very appreciative of that. Everyone wants to do a good job, but sometimes personal life or work obligations get in the way."

Renee Schleicher, CAE, president and CEO of the American Academy of Medical Administrators (AAMA), has been in this position several times during her two decades in association management. She agrees that the vast majority of members fully intend to keep their commitment at the time they answer the call for volunteers, but then something about their situation changes.

"People volunteer when they are convinced they have the time to do it, and they truly want to do it," she says.

"They believe in the organization and they believe they'll get benefits to their career—not from adding it to their

resume but from being able to learn team building and leadership in a noncompetitive environment. Then at some point, they are assigned to an activity and their life has changed. All of a sudden, we're asking them to do something, and they're in the middle of a healthcare crisis, a divorce, or the boss handed them an assignment."

As CEO of the 2,000-member organization, Schleicher tries to keep in touch with all members, whether they volunteer or not, so she knows when something has come up that may affect their involvement in AAMA. Members also know they can call the headquarters office and get Schleicher on the phone. This personal relationship can play a major role in figuring out how to handle a volunteer who seems to be disengaged, she says.

"I try to work through the committee chairs, but sometimes it has to go back to staff," says Schleicher. "If I don't know them personally, they know my name and they're happy that I'm calling. We try to call and say that we know you've been unable to attend, and is that going to turn around soon?"

## **The Long Goodbye**

If the answer to that question is no, the association is faced with the dilemma of asking the disengaged volunteer to step down or letting the situation stay the way it is until the volunteer's term is over. No matter what the organization's decision is, proceed slowly and carefully, says Holly Duckworth, CMP, CAE, CEO and chief connections officer for Leadership Solutions International. She recommends taking at least three to six months before taking any action. Even then, redirecting is almost always a better option than resigning.

"I'm a believer that you can't fire a volunteer, but you can repurpose them outside the organization," she says. "If someone comes to me and wants to be on a committee but hasn't done anything after three months, I'm going to ask the chair to call that person and make sure he or she is OK. And if it's not working out, let's call it what it is. Let's let the volunteer decide what to do and whether to be repurposed within or without our organization. Know what other groups are doing and suggest another group, if that's what the volunteer chooses."

If a volunteer chooses to stay, figure out how to make the volunteer commitment work within the member's other commitments. Find out when the member's busy season at work is or if she has a major life event coming up, such as a new baby or a family wedding. Then make sure she has time away from volunteer service during that time.

"Knowing volunteers personally starts at the beginning of the recruitment cycle," Duckworth says. "It's more than knowing who they are and where they work. Know the number of kids they have, their birthdays, where they like to go on vacation. Ask your volunteers to start with the truth. When is their busy time? When is their easy time? Don't come to me and offer to plan the holiday gala when your annual convention is November 15. It's not fair to you, me, or the association."

This is also the time when the personal touch matters. These kinds of conversations cannot be had over email, and they must be handled with extreme caution. "There is no way to unburn that bridge when you try to induce guilt or take an accusatory tone and attack a volunteer for not being engaged," Alcorn says.

She suggests having the staff liaison talk to the volunteer first, assuming their relationship is not the reason for the estrangement. In many cases, it's easier for a volunteer to tell an association staff member what's really going on than to share personal information with a peer. If the volunteer tells you she thought she would like the assignment, but it's just not what she wants, that is an ideal opportunity to suggest another volunteer slot, rather than just letting her go.

However, Alcorn says the person initiating the conversation, whether staff or committee chair, must be smart enough to know when to relent and give the volunteer the freedom to leave.

"If the volunteer is too stressed, unwilling, or incapable of continuing, the message is, 'I understand and we'd love to welcome you back anytime you want to return. Can I contact you in six months to see how you're doing?'"

## **When Parting Isn't Sweet**

Sometimes, the reason for losing a volunteer is not because of something going on in his life but rather something happening within the association. This situation is tricky, because the last thing an association wants is an ex-volunteer detailing his bad experience to current or future volunteers.

Julie O'Rourke, CAE, director of membership at the Coin Laundry Association (CLA), says this kind of situation often arises when a volunteer believes the association isn't invested in her projects or events.

"It gets discouraging when you volunteer and put in a lot of time and effort to schedule a meeting or event, and there's not the interest you hoped for," she says. "You put your time into it and you don't see the ROI."

In those cases, it may be time to look inside the association to determine if changes need to be made internally, rather than asking the volunteer to change, O'Rourke says. CLA has affiliates in 19 states, each with its own board, financials, and twice-yearly meetings. That means a lot of volunteer time and the potential for conflicts to arise.

"The CLA has some affiliates that run really well, where the meetings happen and the members are engaged," she says. "And there are some that have had the same volunteers for a long time, and in some of those cases it might be time to revisit that structure and get new blood in. It can't be the same thing, all the time. The new people coming in aren't interested in the same ideas that have been repeated for years."

Making these kinds of changes can take longer and be more complicated than simply having a one-on-one discussion with a disengaged volunteer, but the process can lead to substantive improvements that will go a long way toward keeping future volunteers satisfied.

"If it all comes down to an organizational or governance problem, it is your job to fix it," Alcorn says. "When you stop making progress toward your strategic objectives—when you put issues, recommendations, or programs in board packets and nobody does anything about them—when you reach the point of simply recycling programs and regurgitating the same old material, that is sure to lead to volunteer discontent. Once volunteers see they aren't making progress or a difference, they get on the hamster wheel of 'Don't change, don't change, don't change.' When they get tired and bored, they will simply fall off."

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## Sidebar: 7 Ways to Engage Volunteers With Less Time

By Holly Duckworth, CAE

Every organization hears it: "I don't have time to volunteer." What your members are really telling you is that they don't know how to engage in a way that will match volunteering with their current priorities and values. Here are seven ways to get your members to give seven minutes, seven hours, or seven days.

- 1. Demonstrate how volunteering directly helps your organization.** Tie the volunteer's values into your mission and help him understand the organization's long-term vision.
- 2. Personally ask.** It's easy to ignore an email or not return a phone call. We crave direct human contact. Ask volunteers to share a skill or strength you know they have. Or personally offer to teach them a new skill you know they are looking to learn.
- 3. Customize.** We can get customized shoes, customized news sent to our computers, customized music on our phones. So customize the volunteer experience. Find out what your members need personally or professionally and tailor a volunteer opportunity to give them a customized return on their investment.
- 4. Share testimonials of the people you have volunteering.** Ask them to explain why they love volunteering and what return they get from giving back. It takes less than 10 minutes to shoot a Flip camera testimonial and post it on YouTube. Share this via traditional printed and nontraditional media.
- 5. Use technology and speak their language.** If your members tweet, tweet out volunteer opportunities. If they text, do that. Use technology to limit the number of face-to-face meetings. Use Skype for committee meetings, Dropbox.com to share important documents, YouTube to share video messages. If your members don't know technology, use your association as a safe place to teach them.

**6. Think microvolunteering.** Break tasks down so there are lots of ways to give from one hour to multiple days or years. Give options with a firm start date and end date, and you'll increase your chances of hearing "yes."

**7. Time is money.** Current U.S. statistics value a volunteer hour at \$20.68. How much money does your organization put back to the bottom line by having volunteers versus staff doing the work? Demonstrate gratitude for the volunteering member. A handwritten thank-you note is invaluable and can save you both time and money.

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## **Online Extra: 5 Questions to Help Recognize an Unengaged Volunteer**

By Holly Duckworth, CAE

Has anyone seen Victor Volunteer? Victor never missed a member event and was always first to volunteer. Now suddenly you haven't seen or heard from him in months. What should you ask yourself to determine if Victor is slowly slipping away from your organization?

1. Has Victor had a career change or life event? If so, does it change his values as they relate to your group or reduce the time he has available to volunteer?
2. Has anyone seen Victor at a meeting or event? Does he post to the Twitter stream or Facebook?
3. Has Victor returned any direct and personal calls or emails?
4. Does Victor attend committee events for the activities he was once so involved in?
5. Have other members heard from Victor?

If you answer yes to a change-in-life event and no to many of the other questions above, now is the time to reengage your volunteer.

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