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Can I Have a Volunteer?

“Our Club has a few doers, and a lot of dues-payers.” Have you heard that one before? Is your club in the situation of having a large membership, but it seems only a few people do all the work?

It’s a fragile, precarious situation when an endeavor depends on volunteer labor to accomplish its goals. Yet when it comes to dog activities, it’s expected that the vast majority of work is done on a volunteer basis. But here’s the conundrum: Many clubs have only a handful of the total membership involved in doing the work.

How do clubs manage? Maybe the answer involves the basic nature of volunteerism. Early in life you’re taught how to be a good loser and a good winner. However, no one teaches you how to be a good volunteer or how to manage the work of other volunteers.

Getting a job done with volunteers is vastly different from directing performance of paid workers. Anyone who’s involved in such work is bound to have encountered some of the following nightmare volunteers. There’s the person who volunteers and then does nothing. Then there are the poor performers, where work is done but the quality is less than what is needed. How about the volunteer who requires so much “care and feeding” that what you get is not worth the effort? Then there’s the person who has no skill in working with others and creates more problems than they are worth. We’ve all had these experiences with volunteers. I’m certain some personal memories have just flashed before your eyes.

Listing what can go wrong with volunteers is easy but what can your club do to make the situation better?

First, take a good look at the jobs to be accomplished, and then see if the work is a good match for the designated volunteer. People do well at jobs they like to do. See if you’re making a good match of skills with tasks.

Give good guidance on what you want accomplished. If you set a volunteer loose with sketchy instructions, you may be greatly disappointed with what is accomplished. Lack of guidance is also frustrating to the volunteer, especially when the organization is disappointed with their resultant work.

Next, reach out to new members and give them a job, no matter how small it is. When people have a responsibility they feel connected with an organization. Try pairing an experienced worker with a new member, establish a mentoring situation.

Make sure you recognize the work done by your volunteers. Don’t take for granted that “so and so” will always be there to do “their” job. A few well placed thank-yous, to both new and the stalwart workers go a long way to guarantee continued good work and club involvement.

Let me speak a little heresy in this electronic-dominated world. There’s nothing that can take the place of direct, one-on-one contact to get work done. Use e-mail and text messages sparingly

when you're getting a new project off the ground. Rely on face-to-face contact or use the phone to personalize and humanize your message. Remember, there's no tone in e-mail messages. No matter how much you try to drum up enthusiasm and rally your volunteers, it's hard to do so in electronic format.

The dog world rides on the backs of volunteers. If dog club volunteers suddenly disappeared and we paid for all services, I wouldn't be surprised if entry fees would have an extra zero tacked at the end of the current cost. Doesn't that put things into perspective?

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