



The Essential Pieces of a Fantastic Event – Volunteer Management Best Practices

The following is a summary of the tips that were shared during a recent Volunteer Management breakout session with Local Coordinators.

For more training or resources, contact Kathy Langfield, SONC Volunteer Engagement Director, at klangfield@sonc.net.

- It's okay to say no!
 - As a non-profit and very grassroots organization, we rely on volunteers to make our programs and events run smoothly. This may sound crazy and feel completely unnatural, but there are some situations where it makes sense to turn volunteers away. Here are some examples:
 - The volunteer is not capable of performing their job.
 - You have a volunteer (he/she could be a day-of-event volunteer, a committee member, a coach, etc.) who wants to volunteer but is not performing at an appropriate level. Before you turn that person away, ask yourself these questions:
 - Did you train them adequately?
 - Can you retrain them?
 - Can you reassign them to a more suitable role?
 - One of the examples I used at Leadership Conference was the texting teenager. She was assigned to be a court assistant (essentially a ball shagger) at a basketball qualifier. The 5-on-5 teams playing were highly competitive and the ball rarely strayed off the court. Instead of watching competition, she leaned against the wall and texted. I reassigned her to help with lunches and then sent her home early. I removed her from the situation, kept her engaged in a task I needed help with and then released her.
 - The volunteer would like to come, but can only commit to a short amount of time.
 - You have a volunteer who calls to let you know he/she is available for an upcoming event but can only come for 45 minutes.
 - If you really do need them, sign them up. If not, tell them about your upcoming events and let them know you would love for them to come to a future event for a longer period of time.
 - Keep in mind that by the time you train this volunteer, it will be time for him/her to leave. You also have a finite number of lunches and shirts available to volunteers. Those who are able to commit to the time you need them should be rewarded with these items.
 - Possible exceptions: current/potential sponsors; groups you would like to get involved in the future (New Hanover County

provided the example of a UNC Wilmington group that they want to get more involved in future events. By having them come to help with lunches or present awards, the group was able to get an idea of what SONC events are like and got excited about the movement.

- The volunteer has asked you last-minute if he/she can help.
 - You have a volunteer who calls you the day before an event to see what positions are still available the following day.
 - Again, if you really do need them, sign them up. If not, tell them about your upcoming events and let them know you would love for them to come to a future event.
 - Think of a creative way to use their help. The example I used at Leadership Conference was a group that wanted to help the Sunday of Summer Games. We were staffed at all events, so we had the group come to the warehouse at the Morrisville office to help put equipment away. This was a huge help to us because we were able to get these items inventoried and put away earlier than we would have otherwise. The group had a great time, but they told me that next year they would sign up earlier so they could actually see the athletes in action.
 - Exceptions: current/potential sponsors; groups you would like to get involved in the future
- Choose quality over quantity
 - Having a lot of volunteers can be worse than not having enough
 - A smaller group may
 - Be more focused
 - Work as a cohesive unit
 - Take more ownership in their roles
 - Seek out other ways to help (i.e. be proactive instead of waiting to be told what to do)
- Create a volunteer-friendly event
 - Make an effort to think like your volunteers
 - Set aside some time at your site visit to consider the following:
 - Where volunteers will park
 - The route they will take from parking to check-in
 - Where to set up a visible check-in table
 - Where volunteers will go after they check in (e.g. training area, a “holding” area)
- Never assume that anyone knows anything
 - Just because someone tells you they know how to do something doesn’t mean they do. It never hurts to go over rules, expectations, etc.
 - Exception: “regulars” – You likely have a person or group who has been doing the same job for years. While you always want to do a bit of a refresher before a job is started, it makes sense to let these volunteers do what they do best.
 - Train volunteers ahead of time whenever possible.

- This will give you more time to focus on all the other things going on. Assign someone ahead of time to train volunteers on their tasks.
- Make your volunteer roles exclusive.
 - Union County has interested volunteers fill out an application and identify areas of interest. They are required to complete their training ahead of time. That is when they receive their volunteer t-shirt. Any interested students must have at least a 3.0 GPA and need credit for service hours. This helps to ensure that the most committed, reliable students are given the opportunity to volunteer.
 - Cabarrus County lets students know ahead of time that if they do not perform their role adequately they will be asked to leave. They explain expectations ahead of time and let students know that there are consequences to poor performance and/or inappropriate behavior.
- Communication is key.
 - Explain expectations ahead of time. Share details about where to go, how to check in, what to wear, what to bring, what not to bring, job details and more. The more volunteers know ahead of time, the more you can focus on getting your event started on time and running smoothly.
- Put the burden of group recruitment on the group.
 - The Guilford/High Point program sends a registration form to teachers so they can sign up students. Someone from the program trains the teachers, and the teachers train the students. The teachers even assign the students to jobs.
- Surround yourself with good people.
 - You may call it a games management team or an organizing committee or something else, but the idea is to have different people responsible for different roles so you don't end up having to do it all yourself. You may want to put someone in charge of overall venue management, competition, awards, volunteers, etc.
- Have groups provide their own shirts.
 - Johnston County encourages school groups, civic organizations and businesses to bring their own matching shirts. The groups are able to advertise their organization, and the event managers can easily identify who is part of a particular group. This is also a money-saver.
- Make sure your best volunteers know what else your program is doing.
 - Before you let your volunteers leave, be sure you tell them about upcoming events or any other needs you have (e.g. coaches, Unified Partners). Otherwise, you might not see them again.
- Have fun!
 - Events are hard work, but they are also a lot of fun. Hopefully, by following these tips, you will find your next event runs smoother, is less stressful and is a great time for everyone involved.