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A LIGHT TOUCH: MOTIVATING AND LEADING VOLUNTEERS

“There was something else Tom needed to tell them, something important but subtle, and he was searching for the right words. Monks could be arrogant, and might alienate the volunteers. Tom wanted today’s operation to be easygoing and cheerful. ‘I’ve worked with volunteers before,’ he began. ‘It’s important not to . . . not to treat them like servants. We may feel that they are laboring to obtain a heavenly reward, and should therefore work harder than they would for money, but they don’t necessarily take that attitude. They feel they’re working for nothing, and doing a great kindness to us thereby; and if we seem ungrateful they will work slowly and make mistakes. It will be best to rule them with a light touch.’”
(*The Pillars of the Earth*, Ken Follett)

According to the North American Bureau of Labor Statistics, during the last twelve months nearly 70 million people will have served as volunteers. Conservative speculation for unreported volunteers would suggest that figure would pass 100 million. It is likely that at least every third person you see daily could be a volunteer. Within the church, the rate of volunteerism is even higher, since the relentless demands of church life require as many hands as possible. This is particularly true in youth ministry, which most people acknowledge is necessary to help mold the next generation for Christ. In most churches—at least those with an overall aim to attract youth and young families to their congregations—a large number of programs and activities are aimed at youth. A large volunteer workforce is required to maintain these programs, from church morning classes to special children’s or youth services to weekend clubs and camping trips. These programs and activities require a huge amount of work for the volunteers—all of this on top of their responsibilities at their paid employment. Volunteering ultimately requires tremendous dedication, since those volunteer hours take away from family time, eat into leisure activities, and may often cause the volunteer to lose sleep at night.

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we do most of our “recruiting” through the nominating committee. After much fasting and prayer and hours spent pouring over a seemingly endless list of vacant positions, we finally start making calls . . . and disappointment sinks in. Many of the answers vary from sheepish—and possibly stunned—silence to resounding exclamations of “No way!” When the weary committee finally gets down to the youth ministry sections (always located near the bottom of the list), all it can hope for is that the current volunteer who has served the last forty years is still willing to continue. He is well-meaning but is no longer connecting

with the youth. The ministry is failing and kids are quitting church, but at least the program can continue if this person says “yes”! No one else is willing to even try.

Throughout my career as a youth ministry professional, working on summer camps, weekly church programs, and large annual events, I have discovered how difficult it can be to get people to commit to a volunteer position. So many people—often the best and most talented—are tired. They have had bad experiences in the past with volunteer work. They have felt undervalued, unappreciated, taken for granted. They have been treated as though they were expendable or have been given jobs that didn’t match their skills or talents. “I’m fed up,” they say, shaking their heads. So much of the success of any type of ministry depends on a motivated and happy volunteer workforce. Why do so many leaders fail to utilize volunteers properly, and what can we do to make the most of this important resource?

In *This Way to Youth Ministry*, author Duffy Robbins (2004) expands on a study carried out by Strommen, Jones, and Rahn, who examined 2,500 youth workers to establish the top “six perils that can sink a career.” They are as follows:

1. Feelings of personal inadequacy
2. Strained family relationships
3. A growing loss of confidence
4. Feeling unqualified for the job
5. Disorganization in one’s work habits
6. Burnout

To overcome these obstacles and find a youth volunteer who will serve past the standard 12- to 24-month stint and be your “die-hard” warrior is no easy task. Yet there are at least four areas that, if addressed, can help you recruit, retain, and refine them. All of these require a continual self-evaluation of your leadership and of the kind of volunteer you seek. I’ve arranged the principles in a particular order, but there is no particular sequence to be followed in addressing them.

MOTIVE

Motive: (noun) a reason for doing something, esp. one that is hidden or not obvious.

Moses spent forty years in the wilderness, tending sheep, in order to examine his motives and prepare himself for service. Most volunteers would be fortunate to have forty days to reflect on a youth position in the church, and they are often unsure of what they’re actually getting themselves into. As a leader, you need to be clear on what you’re looking for. Do you want a volunteer leader who will help shape the direction and vision of the ministry he or she is involved in, or are you looking for pairs of hands to assist with menial tasks like stacking the chairs, clearing out the warehouse, and scrubbing the fungus from the camping equipment? You may be looking for 52 weeks of excellent programming, while your volunteer may be aiming to recreate a sense of community and meaning among the young people of your church. There has to be a deep understanding between you and your volunteer about what both of you expect from the position. What motivates an individual to service is not the same for each person or position—nor should it be. Each position, if examined carefully, has its own unique set of challenges. If these are not articulated clearly, a volunteer’s motive can easily be squashed and as a result, the sustainability of the volunteer will drop drastically. In your process of selection, you must seek out ways to identify the motive for service. When appropriate and possible, you should ensure that you share

examples for each stage, demonstrating failure and showing what a new level of success might look like. Everybody fails, yet we rarely address failure in a healthy manner, showing how to learn from mistakes and move on. The leader needs to establish what the volunteer sees as success and what makes him or her feel validated. Does he or she live for affirmation? If so, from whom or what? Has he or she ever led out in any capacity before? How does he or she deal with difficult challenges?

Healthy leaders are not afraid of success and relish finding others to work around them with the same motive. Your leadership culture will alter the motives of all your volunteers. Your motives must be transparent, even if theirs are not. Your motives must have space for growth and expansion, even if theirs do not. Your motives must involve looking at your volunteers and knowing their hearts, just as Christ did in John 3 with Nicodemus. Your desire for success is simply the desire to share the story of Christ. The closer your motive is to that to which Christ calls you, the easier it will be to see the potential in other people—not simply their outward appearance. Malcolm Gladwell (2005), in his book *Blink*, suggests that often in the first few seconds when you meet someone you have an immediate reaction or judgment. Those initial judgments often reveal true motives. When establishing motives, leaders should use as much data as possible. Leaders should have the heart to seek and save the lost—that motive, ideally, should be foremost in all volunteers' minds. In youth ministry, that initial motive gives volunteers the patience to start, stay, and then remain in the journey.

CHALLENGE

Challenge: (noun) a task or situation that tests someone's abilities.

They had stopped attending church for quite a while and exhibit the now-typical postmodern trends of continuing to accept Christ, yet struggling with organized faith. They are in fact experiencing “the odyssey years,” a recently identified period of transition in between adolescence and adulthood. Physically these individuals look like adults, but internally they are reverting to their teenage years. The struggle to accept responsibility affects all aspects of life, including their spiritual walk with God and their involvement with the church. These are the people you are attempting to recruit as volunteers.

Members of this group typically detest pastoral visits and see them as feeble attempts to return them to a faith community that has lost its true purpose. They desire community, purpose, and meaning, but secretly mock those who allege to have discovered these things for themselves. The fact that some leaders allow this emptiness to exist just reinforces their belief in the pointlessness of it all. As leaders, it is imperative that we make sure human needs for community, purpose, and meaning are filled by God and not through our shallow attempts at creating these things. If we as leaders rely on our energy, creativity, acceptance, or position to provide our purpose, we lend ourselves to a rollercoaster journey that can be shaken to its core through simple disagreement with our volunteers. We must understand who we are before we expect it of others.

The secret to resuscitation during this “odyssey”—which is key to recruiting leaders—lies in creating a healthy challenge for this generation. In one particular case, our pastoral team was dealing with overwhelming apathy among the young adult population. We asked them to meet for a private discussion in a neutral location—easy to escape, nothing to lose except two hours of time. We promised that after this meeting, we would not disturb them any further. It almost sounds like

a time-share sales pitch, except that we approached this meeting with the assurance that God is the source for these young adults' needs. Those who are outspoken about their absence in church activities are this way for a reason—they want a challenge that will result in change.

The conversation that followed in that meeting was a painful rant filled with the anguish faced by so many potential youth volunteers. They talked about the lack of care shown by their leaders, about the dismissal of their ideas by leadership, and about the hypocritical approach of leaders currently in place. It basically boiled down to this: "No one values what I have to offer; therefore, I leave in order to re-build what little faith I have left." This is typical of the types of reactions we will hear from people who have been embittered by the "system." They will accuse people of lies, politics, nepotism, and fraud. They express deep disgust and seek to distance themselves from what they see as corruption. However, through this painful process we will also hear the cry from within the volunteers that they want to change everything for the better.

After hearing this group's dissatisfaction and desire for change and progress, we reminded them of the Gideon selection process. What we needed was quality and not quantity; every great movement starts with one passionate God-inspired heart. We reminded them that in that very room could be sitting the leaders who would change the present and future—that transformation is within grasp if good people would simply be willing to step up and lead. We pointed out that God calls us to change the world we live in. We reminded this group that if they were serious about making a difference, we had a challenge for them. This was most important, because all volunteers need a challenge. If we ask a volunteer to merely open the door, we'll be lucky if she does so. But if we ask a volunteer to design the door she needs to open, we have created a challenge.

This method offers a filter process that dedicated volunteer leaders find attractive. At that meeting, we gave this group a home and offered them the freedom to mold it into action. A challenge without empowerment is a blank paper with no writing utensils. It is key, of course, that your empowerment is authentic, not simply raising their hopes to crush them again. The mantra for this group eventually became "Every now and then, someone chooses to be different." That choice to be different was the choice to follow Christ.

CONNECT

Connect: (verb) bring together or into contact so that a real or notional link is established.

Many volunteers become frustrated and burned out because the challenge they are given does not connect with their talents or who they are as people. Challenged volunteers need to be connected with the right task—a task that utilizes their skills and the things they are uniquely passionate about. What is the point of a young adult accountant who works in the business district in London at a high annual salary being assigned to Sabbath School Lesson distribution? We as leaders need to harness the potential miracle waiting to be discovered among our volunteers. On a simple financial level, the church could not afford to pay that young adult's hourly scale. I am convinced that if we had to pay for support we would not always assign the same tasks. Does that mean that a highly educated volunteer should only do the more complex tasks in church? Certainly not—but we will get the best volunteer force if we make a conscious effort to consider what people might be best at doing, what they might take the most pride in, and how we can harness their abilities to create a better church community.

We often hold a totally egalitarian view of church office and service, with the view that there

is no task too small for each of us to do in service of the church. The attitude and motive of the volunteer should be toward service, not personal glory. I would agree with that philosophy to the extent of motive, but note that the Bible encourages us to be wise in giving out assignments, and that there are different levels of service even among the angels. We as leaders must try to find the best and most challenging positions for our volunteers. We should not allow their burning desire to serve to be squashed with only menial or boring tasks. We must be sure to match the task with the individual.

It is important for leaders to help potential volunteers identify possible areas where they might excel. Some enjoy spiritual gift surveys or personality tests, and find them helpful. Others prefer to dialogue with leaders in discovering the unique role they can take on as volunteers. The process a leader chooses needs to be clear to all involved. Ultimately, clarity of vision and purpose of the ministry will inspire volunteers to discover their service points. Two of the best greeters I have ever met were a Queen's Council Judge and a travel agent. They were simply gifted in welcoming people into the presence of God—and they enjoyed using their talents in this way.

PROTECT

Protect: (verb) to keep safe from harm or injury.

The fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke alludes to three main categories of people who disconnect with the faith walk. Some, like the sheep, wander away; some, like the coin, remain physically present but are disconnected; others, like the prodigal son, reject the faith community entirely and leave. I would suggest that our volunteers probably fall into the same three categories—sometimes because we as leaders have not protected, cared for, and loved them as we should have.

As leaders, we need to be able to invest part of ourselves into every volunteer we work with. That investment may be in the form of funds, energy, or vision; but more often, it simply comes down to time. Our most valuable asset is our time. Our most powerful childhood memories often revolve around time with individuals who invested in us—that one special teacher who took notice of us, or the parent who paused in the middle of a busy day to listen to our stories. If we simply make ourselves available, we have already done the most important thing in caring for our volunteers; it will pay off for the rest of their lives, not only while they serve working alongside us, but wherever their ministry path takes them.

Our role as leaders is to draw out the best characteristics from our volunteers. To instill loyalty means we have to be patient and sometimes cover up their mistakes, remove the blame, and protect them from overly hostile criticism. To instill creativity means we need to give freedom and remove any micro-managing tendencies we may have. To instill passion means we have to inspire them and challenge them with new thoughts.

There is a careful balance between mercy and justice, between toeing the policy line and allowing flexibility. To hover only on one edge is to remove that tension from ourselves as leaders. But that tension is what keeps us sharp and focused. It's the tension that leads us to opening ourselves up as leaders.

CONCLUSION

In the time of Christ, every young man wanted to be a Rabbi. They memorized the Torah and trained in its ways, hoping to be chosen and trained in the ways of a Rabbi. Should they fail that

selection process, they naturally became carpenters or fishermen. When Jesus chose his volunteers, he saw the potential within each one. Each had the choice to follow and succeed. Interestingly, Jesus invested in three men in particular and held them accountable. He showed mercy and at times declared justice—all the while developing them to be leaders for the current generation.

Volunteers serve Christ, and they need to see Him through us as leaders. At the end of the day, we need to be the leaders with whom we would be honored to serve.

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