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# The Art of Volunteer Coordination

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## A Series of Personal Experiences

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I answered a call from a small but developing arts organization for part-time help. The work consisted of phoning 30 volunteers once a month and assisting the production manager in running the monthly concerts. While a small honorarium for my time was offered, that was not what ultimately attracted me to the position.

I had come from a small town in Ontario. The act of volunteering is part of our community culture and the texture of our daily lives: Volunteers provide much-needed support at churches, at schools, the local hospitals and for many community functions. It is so intertwined with our daily social life that we don't really divide it into "this-is-my-life" and "this-is-volunteering". When I came to Toronto I found I was a bit isolated and I wanted to find a smaller community in this big city where I could meet people and make a difference...just like home! I embraced Volunteer Co-ordination because it was how I knew to contribute to society and it was my way to become a part of life in the bigger metropolis. It filled my need to participate, to contribute and to evolve within my newly chosen community.

I approached the Volunteer Coordinator position with the assumption that many people volunteer for the same reasons. They too want to participate, contribute and evolve as individuals. My mission as a Volunteer Co-coordinator is to help create that opportunity for my volunteers.

Little did I know that fifteen seasons would pass and my job as a volunteer co-coordinator would become my full time position and a passion! I now co-ordinate and run approximately sixty concerts annually and my telephone list includes the names of 140 to 150 volunteers. Some of these volunteers have been with me during my entire fifteen seasons with Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra.

Therefore, when I was asked to participate in this Orchestras Canada presentation the aspect that I wanted to emphasize was How to maintain and keep your Volunteer or as I think of them - Tafelmusik's Working Guests.

It is easy to get volunteers once: pretty well anyone will help if asked— once. It is keeping good volunteers over the long-term that requires work but also provides the greatest rewards. So how do you do that? It is often the way they are treated the first time that inspires them to come back...or not. Treat volunteers the proper way from the first moment you meet them. The mistake many organizations make is to treat volunteers as unpaid labor to be used and abused. They are not star-struck groupies or there for a free concert, most volunteers come to you with a genuine interest and desire to help. Fulfill that interest by sharing the needs, the hopes and vision of your organization. Give them a clear sense of purpose and the genuine feedback that they are giving a much-appreciated contribution to the organization. They are VIPs of your organization. Let them know it by treating them that way.

## **Here are some Suggestions**

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### **Think before you ask**

A clearly defined job description makes everyone comfortable. This will allow you to communicate with your volunteer clearly and honestly. A clear job description provides a volunteer with an opportunity to say “yes” or “no” before they come to your venue. This will save you unnecessary work, enable you to link your volunteers with the most appropriate job and save both of you embarrassment, which might deter a volunteer from coming back. You do not want to have a volunteer show up, and then, because of lack of communication, tell you that no, he/she cannot move chairs or stand for long periods of time. If information is exchanged in a comfortable, confidential manner, instead of exposed at the last moment, arrangements can be made that are satisfactory to both you and to the volunteer. If ushering at a concert also includes clean up afterward, be very clear about it. That way, when they arrive, there are no hidden surprises for you or for them.

### **Get to Know your Volunteers**

An awareness of your volunteers’ abilities will help you to arrange the division of labour and to utilize talents effectively. Youth volunteers are task-orientated and need direction and supervision. They really like to see things accomplished and get great joy out of seeing concrete results at the end of the day. Older volunteers may not have youth on their side, but they have other talents that come from wisdom and experience. They are a great source of information and have a unique set of skills. They are also among my most gracious volunteers. They often can be given a task, needing very little direction or supervision. Let’s face it: Some of my senior volunteers have run their own companies, been doctors, librarians, administrative assistants and so forth. They understand the big picture and can assess what direction things need to take to accomplish a task. And if they don’t know, they are old and wise enough to ask. For example, I was involved recently with an Out-of-the-Cold benefit. I chose the young volunteers from local high schools to set-up and clean up the silent auction tables and the kitchen. A more senior volunteer was asked to give direction to table placement and several other more senior volunteers were given the task of arranging the silent auction items, which were brought to them from storage by the younger volunteers.

These assignments were repeated in the kitchen: An older volunteer was placed with younger volunteers so that respective talents blended. Working together, both age groups were blown away when they raised over \$5,000 with both the silent auction and food sales. They also enjoyed sharing their strengths as a group.

## **Respect your volunteer's time**

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Have a clear start time and a clear end time. We often stereotype the volunteer as youth or senior, with loads of leisure time. Those two groups have less restricted schedules to be sure, but many volunteers don't fall into that category, they are working people with families and commitments. These individuals give a lot of themselves in energy and hustle even after a long week of work. They want to help. But you need to help them, so they can help you. Time is important to these volunteers: they schedule things around helping you. Not only must they schedule in the time they give to you, but also they have work, childcare and partner issues. A clear start time and clear end time will set their mind at ease and allow them to focus on the task at hand, freeing them to really enjoy assisting the event.

Trust between you and your volunteers is built by keeping your word. I suggest you get to know your volunteers needs and take these needs into consideration when you are doing your scheduling. I often schedule my volunteers in shifts so that no one who volunteers is in the same position for an entire evening. This allows everyone time to enjoy the evening as well as accomplishing the work I need them to do. I do that even if that means doubling the number of volunteers I need. Fresh, enthusiastic volunteers perform much better than overworked, tired ones. I also stay on top of any volunteer shift changes that could affect another volunteers shift and I will fill in personally so that no one is unduly inconvenienced.

### **Be open and approachable.**

One of the things that I do is circulate during every concert and talk one on one to several volunteers—different ones each concert night. This is when I get the best suggestions on better ways of doing things. I try to do this during quieter times over the course of the evening when they are alert and enthusiastic. I have found that at the end of the evening, everyone just wants to finish up and go home and they will have convinced themselves that their idea or concern isn't that important. These one-on-one conversations are where I get important on the spot information. I have solved many a patron's complaint or inquiry before it reached the box office in a letter of complaint, because a volunteer gave me the heads up first.

### **Provide good tools and the education to use them effectively.**

If your volunteers need aids to do a good job, make sure you provide them. A well-written manual will save time on training and will make new volunteers feel secure, having a source to aid them with problems that might arise. It also keeps consistency in procedure. Otherwise, information can be slightly distorted when passed from one volunteer to another.

## **Take the time to make a good manual, it will save you time in the long run**

An enlarged floor plan that all can read easily will help with difficult house seating. One important issue for Tafelmusik was flashlight etiquette. A misused flashlight in a concert hall setting can be annoying to patrons who are trying to enjoy a concert and can cause havoc in an evacuation scenario. Explain clearly the safe way to handle any tool they use, even the lowly flashlight... Take the time to educate your volunteer for emergencies. Anticipate possible situations and have procedures in place. Write them down to be read, speak them aloud and practice them at a convenient time. I had a seasoned volunteer who had given of her time at several organizations over the years who expressed her gratitude for the emergency procedures established and articulated at Tafelmusik. For the first time in all her years as a volunteer, she knew what was expected of her. Your volunteers need to know what to do and where to be if an emergency happens. Include them.

## **Don't be judgmental.**

If an error is made, remember no one came here to do anything but help you and anything can happen during a live performance. A door is left unlocked, a patron is seated at an inappropriate time or the wrong information is given out. If at all possible, never single out any one individual. Make the recommendation a group suggestion and repeat that suggestion any time it is appropriate until you are sure everyone has heard and understood the issue and need for the procedure to correct it. A well-informed volunteer can answer a patrons question or resolve a problem when they are well prepared to do so. It is up to you to make sure they are informed.

Remember many of your volunteers are coming from a full day's work and sometimes things happen. They are tired and perhaps a bit short with a patron or a fellow volunteer. I want to emphasize, correct the problem quietly and make arrangements so it won't happen again.

## **No task is too small if its purpose is understood.**

The lowly art of stuffing envelopes for a mailing...not everyone's favorite thing, but, as marketing and development will tell you, very important to every organization. A brief explanation of the purpose of the mailing. What is included, to whom the mailing is directed and what outcome you are expecting, will help motivate the volunteer to do a good job in a timely manner. Then, make it fun: Some of the most entertaining and informative conversations I have had have been around a table of volunteers stuffing envelopes. A strong cup of tea or coffee, a glass of water and a plate of cookies are a much-appreciated courtesy to those who give you their time...and remember to provide proper bathroom and exercise breaks. Some organizations even create a contest; who can stuff the most envelopes the fastest, etc. and provide tickets to a concert or a CD as a motivation.

## **Participate yourself.**

I make it a rule not to ask a volunteer to do any thing I would not do. If a chair needs to be returned and I have the time, I do it. If I need help, I ask and we do it together. My volunteers have seen me pick up programs, return chairs, wash cups, stuff programs and work the mop and pail during intermission. Even though I do supervise, I also make a point of participating in the work to be done. I try to promote an atmosphere of “lets all work together”. A volunteer co-coordinator is a leader who leads by example.

## **Don't forget to say Thank you!**

I make it a point of saying thank you to my volunteers at the beginning of the evening. I also try very hard to make sure the volunteers get to experience the event around the work they do for me. For instance, those who volunteer for evening concerts see that concert the night they volunteer. If they come...they should have a seat. Volunteers who work a fundraising event with me are encouraged to take breaks during the evening and to take part in the festivities. I rotate my volunteers during a fundraising event so they have an opportunity to see the event from many aspects and have an opportunity to eat and meet the invited guests. They are always terrific ambassadors. I never leave someone at the front door or at coat check for the entire evening, even if I am the one to provide the break. If I see a volunteer doing an exceptional job, I walk right up and tell him/her how much I appreciate it. If I hear or find out about a special effort by one of my volunteers, I make sure it is brought to the attention of the other volunteers. It is a great way to train volunteers in a positive way rather than by faultfinding. I believe in hand-written thank you cards. If there is a way I can acknowledge a volunteer or a group of volunteers by discounts on merchandize, tickets to another concert or an invitation to a reception, I try to do so. They are an organization's frontline ambassadors and often go out of their way for the cause.

Volunteers are often the unsung heroes of an organization, especially in the early days when a group is struggling to establish itself. For instance, I know a volunteer, who in the early days of Tafelmusik often drove the harpsichord around in her Volvo Station wagon. As Tafelmusik grew, the need for this type of volunteer labour was replaced with paid labour but other opportunities for volunteering were always provided. A permanent set of hired ushers or helpers is often easier to maintain, “He who pays the piper, calls the tune”. But for Tafelmusik we like the warm friendly way our volunteer ushers treat our patrons. We also appreciate that fifteen ushers at \$8.00 / hour (the minimum rate for an usher these days) translates into a cost of approximately \$3,000 per concert week. Over the full concert season this represents a savings of approximately \$30,000. Especially in these tricky economic times, when most of us are seeking ways to maintain our organizations financially, volunteers are a source of labour we should encourage. Of course many venues have an ushering staff in place that must be used, but there are still many activities, including greeters at concerts and fundraising events that volunteers could share in if we are willing to create a place for them.

It is up to the organization to focus on its community— not just the performers, staff and patrons but also the volunteers who care passionately. How do we bring that community into a sacred, enchanted circle so all can benefit. I think that when an organization neglects its volunteers, its greatest loss is not actually labour but public relations. Volunteers interact one-on-one with the audience and like a relay team, they get information to the top fast, and then back to the patron. Treat your volunteers well and you create ambassadors that speak highly of your organization in the community. How you treat your volunteers is a clear indication of the culture of an organization. Word of mouth is one of the most economical and effective ways to promote an organization ever developed and your volunteers are experts at this type of communication.