The Care and Feeding of Good Volunteers

BY RICHARD P. BURKE

"I volunteer!" Those two words are guaranteed to bring a smile to any candidate. Campaigns have historically been powered by volunteers and the spirit they bring to a campaign.

But the words "I volunteer" merely begin the process. After that first rush of enthusiasm dissipates, candidates and campaign workers notice that some volunteers become less reliable.

How can we change that? According to Dr. Peter M. Sandman (a professor at Rutgers University) the secret is to **focus on the needs of the volunteers as much or more than the needs of your campaign.**

In the late 1980s, Dr. Sandman was a volunteer coordinator for the Nuclear Freeze movement, and wrote an article entitled, "Holding Your Volunteers." His advice applies not just to the Freeze movement, but to any group that relies on volunteer support.

Sandman wrote: "I want to list for you the 12 most common reasons why volunteers quit their organizations — or, more often, simply disappear.

Most of the 12 can be dealt with **if** we are paying attention to organizational maintenance. None of the 12 reasons for quitting, by the way, is people changing their minds about the issues. Note also that none of the 12 reasons is 'not enough time,' which is what many former volunteers will tell you if you ask why they left. Their day didn't get shorter, after all; they just decided to reallocate the part of it that used to go to [you]."

Instead, noted Sandman, volunteers leave because the volunteer work "no longer satisfies their own needs. Holding volunteers, in other words, is more a matter of maintaining their joy than of maintaining their conviction." Here are Dr. Sandman's 12 reasons (slightly edited):

1 BURN OUT

People often quit organizations when they are asked to do too much too fast. We are all familiar with the phenomenon: A newcomer at the March meeting speaks up at the April meeting, is appointed committee chair at the May meeting, and doesn't show for the June meeting. To avoid burn out, we should try to offer volunteers a series of slowly increasing responsibilities.

2 COOL OUT

The opposite of asking people to do too much too fast is not asking them to do anything at all. In many groups this is the number one reason for leaving: No one invited me to the workshop, no one asked me to help with the [neighborhood] canvass, no one told me they needed me. The solution to "cool out" is straightforward. Don't be diffident about asking, and don't lose track of people. Be especially careful to touch base with volunteers who missed the last meeting, so the lack of a role doesn't become a reason to miss the next one as well.

3 KEEP OUT

People who know each other inevitably gravitate to each other at gatherings, especially when we've been through tough times together, or when we have work to transact and gossip to transmit. This leaves newcomers sitting painfully alone, watching the inner circle and pondering the invisible "Keep Out" signs we didn't mean to post. You can't stop the formation of cliques, and you can't stop wanting time with your friends. But you can consciously reach out to newcomers. In larger groups you can even institutionalize a buddy system. Pair each newcomer with another newcomer to compare notes with, and with an old-timer to go to for basic information.

4 PULL OUT

Newcomers may become pillars of a campaign organization, but they don't want to feel that they must. That is, people are more likely to participate when the extent of their participation is not disruptive to their lives. Organizational commitments are like personal commitments in this way: No one likes to feel trapped, and so the sense that a person or group is clutching desperately provokes a strong impulse to escape while there's still time. Part of the solution is to project desire but not desperation. The rest of it is to let the volunteer control the commitment; when a volunteer sets explicit limits ("I don't want to sell tickets to the lasagna dinner"), respect them.

5 CAN'T WIN

Nothing scares volunteers away faster than the sense of futility — either the feeling that the work is doomed to defeat or the feeling that the goals are unclear, that defeat and victory hardly apply. To forestall this "can't win" feeling, try to build instead a sense of efficacy, a sense that the goals are worth achieving, that the group can achieve them, and that the volunteer is contributing significantly to their achievement. This means defining explicit short-term objectives as well as the long-

term vision, and it means making a fuss each time an objective is achieved. Don't let people go out on an afternoon canvass without a standard of how many homes, signatures, and dollars represent a successful afternoon — and don't let them go home afterward without crowing over the success.

6 CAN'T LOSE

As many front-running political candidates have learned to their dismay, working for a sure thing strikes most people as just as pointless as working for a futile long shot. For purposes of volunteer morale, the ideal probability of success is about 40%: We're a little behind but with your help we're going to pull into the lead. Be especially alert for the anticlimax that follows a victory. You need to celebrate the success, of course, but be sure to connect it in advance to the next step and the step after that, so the pause to celebrate is always following by a reason to keep working.

7 NO GROWTH

Alienated labor is bad enough when you're paid for it; it's intolerable when you're not. Volunteer work should be interesting; it should offer variety, change, a chance for personal growth. There is boring work to be done, of course. But spread it around (officers too); make it fun where you can; and alternate it with more interesting work, volunteer training, and other plums. Note, however, that boredom is in the eye of the beholder. Some of your volunteers may prefer the conviviality of an envelope-stuffing party to the tension of a congressional lobbying visit. But most do not; though they may not complain (until they quit), they expect a chance to grow. Look around for volunteers who may be in a no-growth rut, and offer them a spicy new challenge.

8 NO APPRECIATION

Volunteers don't just enjoy being appreciated. They need it (without it they tend to lose faith in the value of what they're doing) and they deserve it. At a minimum, appreciating volunteers has three components. The most obvious is "thank you" - We are grateful for what you have done. But just as important — and far more often neglected — is "please": We are not taking for granted that you will do more. And perhaps the most crucial aspect of appreciation is meticulous attention to logistics: Returning phone calls, answering notes, passing along information, scheduling meetings at times the volunteer can make. Organizations that really know how to appreciate volunteers — the American Cancer Society comes to mind — use everything from newsletters to awards banquets to endless desktop pen sets to make the point.

9 EXTERNAL OPPOSITION

If family and friends are opposed to a volunteer's volunteering, odds are you'll eventually lose that volunteer. The obvious solution is to avoid external opposition in the first place. Family and friends are in a real sense "contributing" some of their time with the volunteer; find ways and occasions to thank them. Better still, lessen the contribution by involving them directly. Even family members who do not want to volunteer themselves may still want to meet the people and get a sense of what goes on during all those [volunteer] hours. And think about external opposition that rises out of skepticism about the cause rather than resentment of the competition. Involvement is the best way to cope with this, too, but second best is to make sure volunteers bring home a steady stream of "ammunition" demonstrating the wisdom and effectiveness of [your organization's] work.

10 EXTERNAL CONFLICT

Personality conflicts, tensions, and even quarrels may be acceptable at home or at a paying job, but not at a volunteer job — especially not a political one. Part of the problem is imagining that people who share political values are always going to like each other. Part of the solution is accepting that we may not like each other. Once the conflict is acknowledged, the rest of the solution depends on the style of your group. Some groups mediate the battle, some encourage the battlers to duke it out, some urge them to make up, and some reorganize the work so they won't have to deal with each other so much.

11 POLICY DISAGREEMENTS

Sometimes — though less often than we image — the conflict is genuinely over policies rather than personalities. A consensus decision-making process will help here. Though it takes forever, it leads to better decisions, and unlike voting it doesn't produce disgruntled minorities. Even if your group decides things by vote or by fiat, the crucial need is to listen to the losing side. Volunteers who quite over a policy disagreement almost always report that the majority (or the chair) didn't understand their position. If you can summarize the minority viewpoint accurately and respectfully, the minority will usually accept the decision. A corollary is that volunteers who weren't present when a decision was made are the ones most likely to see it as grounds for quitting, so try to make key decisions when the dissidents are there to express their dissent.

12 NOT ENOUGH FUN

Yes, of course [achieving your political goals] is serious work. But we mere humans need parties and picnics and softball teams. "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."