



## Supercharge Volunteer Engagement for Your Organization

Advice on volunteer management programs, recognition efforts and engaging on new levels

Last week the Higher Logic Learning Series hosted two innovative thought leaders: Peggy Hoffman, CAE from Mariner Management and Elizabeth Weaver Engel, M.A., CAE from Spark Consulting. They discussed all things volunteerism, and how you can supercharge member loyalty and improve community engagement. Webinar attendees raised some great questions we didn't have time to answer. Read on for more advice on volunteer engagement and programs for your organization.

**Question: Volunteers are \_\_\_\_\_ . Fill in the blank.**



**Elizabeth Weaver Engel, M.A., CAE:** Volunteers are AWESOME! No, seriously—they tend to be our most dedicated members renewing year after year, and they also tend to care deeply about the association, otherwise they wouldn't be working for it for free. Which is really important to remember when yet another volunteer comes to you with yet another great idea you lack the budget or staff resources to implement. Volunteers are also often underappreciated. Staff can get into this mindset: "What do you want from me now? Why are you creating more work for me? For the love of God, would you just leave me alone for 10 minutes?" Take a deep breath, take a walk, take a Xanax if you have to, and realize the association doesn't belong to the staff alone—it belongs to the staff, the volunteers, the members, the customers and the other stakeholder audiences all together, and try to find your inner Zen.

**Q: I'm looking to build engagement around volunteer positions. Any advice?**



**EWE:** As in, "Why did these people volunteer if they didn't intend to fulfill their commitments?" In the moment, intervene as soon as you notice a problem. And remember from CAE training: volunteer to volunteer. You need to talk to the volunteer in charge of your slacker, alert the next person up the chain to the problem and ask the supervisor to talk to the person who's not living up to her commitment. The conversation shouldn't be accusatory: start by asking what's going on. She might have a valid reason she hasn't delivered yet. Maybe she wasn't clear on what she was supposed to do, when it was due, if she's waiting for something she needs from someone else (paid staff or volunteer) to move forward or something has changed in her personal or professional situation. Discover the problem first, then focus on fixing that problem. If it's unresolvable, remember that it's okay for a volunteer to quit, and it's also okay to fire a volunteer.

### THE HIGHER LOGIC LEARNING SERIES

#### Interactive Webinars Hosted by Community Leaders

We started the Learning Series to cover new topics and create conversations that matter to people and organizations creating and building dynamic online communities. Attendees build their knowledge-base and share user stories in an exclusive environment designed to be collaborative, interactive and educational. This inventive series is a collection of social networking webinars hosted by industry experts, thought leaders and Higher Logic staff who are empowering their organizations through social technology—and big ideas.

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To prevent this from happening in the future, think about the whole issue of the volunteer continuum Peggy talked about in the webinar, where you can test people's level of commitment in small-scale jobs before you assign them large-scale jobs. Also consider auditing your orientation and training program to make sure you're giving people accurate and sufficient information, so they know what they're committing to do, and they have the skills and information they need to complete those tasks on time.



**Peggy Hoffman, CAE:** My advice is creating a strategy around getting connected or getting involved, which is essentially expanding from a "Volunteer Page" to a "How to Get Involved" portal. ASAE's Get Involved is a good example, in that it shows how to position the option, draws you in, lets you sign-up and opt-in for alerts. Combined with a membership onboarding process that matches members to opportunities, this will grow the culture of volunteering. Once you have them plugging in, create a regular communication with them. Use updates, badging and volunteer highlights to stay top-of-mind for them. And train your leaders to be talent scouts and talent mentors.

**Q: One of our biggest concerns with the levels of volunteer engagement is they put the burden on the staff to organize and direct—any thoughts on that?**



**EWE:** Yes, excellent volunteer management takes time, effort and attention. That is why many leading nonprofit organizations have one or more formal volunteer coordinators as full time staff positions. If you add it up, your volunteers are saving your organization a tremendous amount of time and money through their unpaid labor. You owe it to them to provide appropriately professional support.



**PMH:** Also consider the difference between start-up mode and management. Strive to allow the transition as a time for testing out procedures, technology, communications channels, etc., to find the ones that will balance staff/volunteer time and effort.

**Q: Do you have any suggestions for how to convert Millennials into volunteer leaders?**



**EWE:** Pair them with Boomers in a cross-mentoring relationship. The two generations are relatively inclined to like each other and get along (think about how many Millennials list their parents among their closest friends), and if you can help create an environment of mutual respect and information sharing, the Boomer mentors can help prepare the Millennial padawans with what they need to know and do in order to be successful. Simultaneously, the Millennials can share their unique perspectives and experiences to help keep the association leadership structure current and relevant.

And don't be afraid to give your Millennial volunteers a chance. You might not want to run out and elect a 22 year-old chair on your Board of Directors, but give her a shot to run a small project or a task force. The only way to get experience is to, you know, get experience. As she gains more skills and confidence, start scaling up the size or profile of the projects you ask her to run. And don't equate lack of experience with lack of aptitude or interest. It's like developing staff, only without paychecks.

## LIKE WHAT YOU SEE?

We've put together a resource page that is an aggregate of the webinar content. Consider it your hub for accessing resources like the recording, slide deck and additional content items. Enjoy!

[www.higherlogic.com/resources/learning-series/supercarge-member-loyalty](http://www.higherlogic.com/resources/learning-series/supercarge-member-loyalty)

### Additional Resource:



#### The Mission-Driven Volunteer White Paper

<http://getmespark.com/wp-content/uploads/MissionDrivenVol.pdf>



**PMH:** Two thoughts: (1) Implement an effective orientation and training program and they will convert; and (2) Tap your chapters and components as farm teams. In my chapter, we just booted out all but two Boomers, and brought in Generation Xers and Millennials in an overhaul. Sure, there was limited training, but the stakes aren't as high in one of your component groups—it's a safer environment.

**Q: Can you please share more micro-volunteerism resources?**



**EWE:** Opportunities for micro-volunteering are almost limitless. Ask people to suggest topics for your newsletter, magazine, blog, webinars or conference, or vote on topics others have suggested, a la SXSW. Allow people to rate an article or comment on a blog post. Request they vote in your elections. Encourage posting a question or an answer to your LinkedIn group, private community or listserv. You can ask people to make a personal call to a new member, welcoming her to your association. Others can serve as welcome ambassadors at your chapter events, or as meeting buddies for first-timers at your annual conference. Have attendees share their thoughts at a Town Hall meeting at your next event. Responding to polls or short surveys is always productive. You can ask people to share your content through Facebook or Twitter. And don't forget: ask them how they'd like to contribute to your association. Truly, you are only limited by your imagination.



**PMH:** Love this question and here are few links to explore:

- [Micro-Adhocracy: Macro-Engagement Blog](#)
- [Walking the Deep Walk of Volunteer Engagement Blog](#)

**Q: How do you find out what rewards the volunteers like/want?**



**EWE:** Ask them! And it's okay to be forward about it: "What would be a meaningful way for us to show our appreciation for your contributions?" But hopefully you—or someone else on your staff—are getting to know them at least a little during the course of their volunteer service, so you'll have some insight into their personalities, hobbies and key issues. Run with the fact that you know she's a dedicated cyclist or he's a Washington Nationals super fan. Also remember to scale the level of thank you to the level of contribution—in other words, someone who was a greeter at one of your chapter events probably shouldn't receive the same type of reward as the person who served as chair of your Board of Directors for two years.



**PMH:** And ask others who may know the individual. Build out your database to include age category (helps you understand which generation), interests and a robust tracking of volunteer roles.

**Q: Sharing is one thing—building an online audience is more relevant. How can influencers get recognized for contributing to audience building?**



**EWE:** Again, I would urge you to talk to them and ask what they would value. "Top Contributor" or "Most Valuable Contributor" badges or ribbons, leaderboards and feature contributor profiles are popular choices in many online communities, and they're relatively easy to implement. But if you have someone who contributes actively because she wants to help people or build community, she's probably not interested in "star status"—in fact, it may bein direct opposition to what she's trying to accomplish.

**Additional Resource:**



The Changing Face of Volunteerism White Paper

<http://resources.higherlogic.com/volunteerism-white-paper>

**Q: Is there any best practice information on how much recognition to give at a given level of service? For example, should a micro volunteer get more than an email thank you?**



**PMH:** Suffice to say there is no “best practice”. It is true you want to scale your recognition efforts, so think of it this way: appreciate equally and acknowledge in the context of the contribution. Follow this rule: Say thank you early and often to all volunteers. If the task was micro, such as reviewing an article, you can include a note acknowledging their contribution. If the volunteer was part of the host committee at your annual conference, a special badge is appropriate. As the task requires more time or effort, keep the thanks early and often, but scale up the recognition.

Studies on volunteer satisfaction suggest that for micro or episodic volunteers, recognition is most meaningful and beneficial when it coincides with the service—an immediate thank you (on-site and post-event or activity) is a best practice. Doing this trumps any “gift”. As you plot out your recognition plan, focus on early, heartfelt thanks that specifically references how they made a difference for all.

The 2013 [Volunteer Canada Volunteer Recognition Study](#) showed for 80% of volunteers, the most effective recognition was in hearing about how their work has made a difference, and 70% said they would like to be recognized by being thanked in person on an ongoing, informal basis.

(By the way, least preferred ways in this study: banquets, formal gatherings and public acknowledgment in newspapers, radio or television.)

**Q: Would you share your favorite quote about volunteers?**

**EWE:** “Those who can, do. Those who can do more, volunteer.”

**PMH:** “Don’t ever question the value of volunteers. Noah’s Ark was built by volunteers; the Titanic was built by professionals.”