

Mentoring – Why People Volunteer

By Ann Rolfe

Last week, I was later than usual taking my walk on the beach and there they were! I don't know if they are unique to Australia but on any summer Sunday, on most popular beaches you'll find them – nippers! (For international readers, nippers are not a form of crustacean seafood, or yet another poisonous critter waiting to get you, but kids of all ages being trained in water skills by an army of volunteers, in Surf Life Saving Australia).

As I walked and observed their activities – some learning CPR, others racing into the surf on their boards, and a few marching in step – I thought about the nature of volunteerism.

In Australia we couldn't get by without our volunteers. This summer has been the hottest on record with ferocious bushfires raging and extreme weather events. Wild winds, torrential rain and floods have caused havoc to homes, businesses and lives. The volunteers are there, fighting fires, throwing tarps over roofs, rescuing people or keeping them safe. They step up to do important work in the community. Not for pay, not for recognition but for ... what? Satisfaction, certainly but I reckon there is more to it than that and, by thinking about what it is, maybe we can learn more about attracting, developing and keeping our volunteer mentors.

It seems to me that people intuitively know that volunteering adds to their own health and wellbeing and three aspects particularly attract people:

1. A desire to contribute;
2. Using or developing strengths; and
3. Emotional appeal.

A Desire To Contribute

People mostly volunteer for altruistic reasons. To give something back, to be of service, to assist younger or less experienced or less fortunate people and for that we should applaud them. Contributing time and effort to something worthwhile give people a sense of purpose and meaning. It brings out the best in us when we give to a cause bigger than ourselves, it feels good and contributes to our own happiness.

Interest/Attraction To Activities

There is growing evidence that developing and using natural our strengths adds to quality of life. People thrive when they are fully engaged with work and life and an opportunity to apply skills and abilities in a volunteer role can be very fulfilling. So it's not only people who love the surf, swimming and competition that join Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA). Volunteers who enjoy, are good at, or want to develop all kinds of administrative, organizing, teaching or management skills are attracted too.

Emotional Appeal

Connectedness has also been shown to be necessary for wellbeing and happiness.

Being a volunteer satisfies the human need to belong. Many organisations feel like an extended family or tribe, with friendships, alliances and the occasional difference of opinion! There's a network of support and someone who's "got your back" as you work together for your chosen cause.

Volunteering enhances self-image. Doing something worthwhile, making a valuable contribution and being part of a team all add to self-esteem. Life is better when we feel good about ourselves. Most volunteer groups realise that all work and no play makes for a dull life. They know how to have fun! Social activities (not just fundraisers) are regular events. Games and competitions liven things up and celebrations and recognition awards are part of the tradition. And of course, a beverage shared with your mates always goes down well.

How Can You Use This For Mentoring?

Based on these observations, here are some suggested actions to attract and keep your volunteer mentors:

- Amplify your "cause". What makes it worthy? How will it give a sense of purpose or meaning to those that contribute?
- Identify the strengths that mentoring will give people the opportunity to use or develop.
- Create a "tribe". Go out of your way to ensure people feel they belong to the mentoring family or club.
- Build in fun! Ensure there is a social side to your mentoring program and activities mentors will enjoy.
- Celebrate, recognize and reward contributors. Find ways to show appreciation to mentors.

You need a comprehensive promotional strategy to attract mentors. Then you must communicate and continue to reinforce all of the above elements because that's how mentoring works!



Mentoring Mindset, Skills and Tools
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