



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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The Art of Managing Volunteers

by Chris Fievoli



I chose the title of this article deliberately. We've all seen books about the science of managing people. But let's face it—when you are paying someone a wage, that gives you a very effective “hammer” with which you can get things done. However, if the person working for you is doing so for free, how do you effectively motivate them? That's where the art comes in.

The Society of Actuaries relies very heavily on volunteers. A large number of members contribute their time and efforts to committees, councils and leadership positions. If you spend enough time in the volunteer system, you will find yourself in a position where you are managing other volunteers.

When you get to that point, there is one thing you will find very quickly—you're not necessarily their number one priority. In the vast majority of cases, volunteers have paying positions that have first claim on their time. Don't be surprised if the time they give you comes second. As a manager of volunteers, your best strategy is to simply accept that fact. Give your volunteers enough latitude to

meet their other priorities. That may mean managing their workloads differently—a task with a very short effort time may require a much longer elapsed time to complete.

One of the key things to understand as a manager of volunteers is what motivates them. As you have probably figured out, money is not a factor. (I have occasionally offered to double what I pay my volunteers if they agree to take on a new task. It doesn't work.) Depending on the situation, there may be very different motivators—even within the same committee.

If you are lucky, you will have some volunteers who are motivated by making a contribution to the profession. These can often be your most effective resources, so make sure they have roles that are sufficiently challenging. They will also want to know that their contributions are valued, so always make an effort to listen to their suggestions. There is one caution to keep in mind, though—this type of volunteer may inadvertently take on too much, and before realizing it, become swamped. As their manager, make sure you have a good understanding of their workload, and step in if you see it getting to be too heavy.

Next, you may have volunteers who are motivated by the recognition; that is, they want membership on a committee because it looks good on their résumé. If that's their only motivation, then you could have problems getting them to complete their assignments. In this case, ensure that they have manageable workloads, and are not on a critical path to getting a project completed. Roles and responsibilities will likely need to be well-defined up front. Keep a close eye on their work, and always have a Plan B ready to put in place if they aren't making progress.

Finally, you may have volunteers motivated by the privileges. Have you wondered why so many Canadians volunteer for the E&E system? Could it be that the grading meetings—often held in Florida in December—offer a welcome getaway from the Northern winter? It could well be—it's certainly

what got me started as a volunteer for the profession way back when.

That motivation is not necessarily a bad thing. As a manager, you need to be very clear on what the expectations are. Tell them, “You have to do ‘A’ before you get ‘B’”. Celebrate successes, but only after everything has been completed satisfactorily. And if they deliver only what they were committed to—no more and no less—just be happy with that.

There are certainly other motivations out there as well, so as a manager you will need to keep your eyes open. Get to know your volunteers well. An understanding of their personal situation will help you find the right assignments for them. And if you come to realize that the fit is no longer there, then have an honest conversation about it. In most cases, if you give them an out, they will take it. Emphasize that there is no shame in dropping a volunteer assignment because of other priorities.

One other thing you will need to be prepared for is the unexpected. Volunteers may suddenly quit. Or they may just disappear altogether without telling you. Don’t be surprised if this happens. Make an effort to find those “lost” volunteers, but don’t over-exert yourself in the process. An unwilling volunteer is not an effective volunteer, and your best strategy in that case is to just move on.

On the other hand, if you are fortunate enough to find a volunteer who thrives in the role, then let them

run with it. Don’t be afraid to offer added responsibilities if you think they can handle it. But at the same time, don’t be surprised to hear them say no. You may have grand plans for a good volunteer, but as I said earlier, you may not be their number one priority. Never assume that someone will automatically jump at a chance to take on a more important role. Once again, having a Plan B is essential.

Finally, keep in mind that your best successes will come if you can approach things diplomatically. The attachment between a volunteer and their assignment is tenuous, much more so than the attachment between an employee and their job. That’s not to say that you can’t push for results, but you have to figure out what it means to push too hard. Respect their time, use lots of polite reminders if need be, and keep the experience positive. Look at things from their point of view; ask yourself what it would take to keep them coming back. This is where the art comes in—and it may take some practice before you develop the right touch.

Managing volunteers can be a rewarding experience, so if the opportunity arises, give it a try. The skills you learn as a result will serve you well in other endeavors. And you will find that you don’t necessarily get what you pay for—you might get a whole lot more. ●



Chris Fievoli, BMath, FSA, FCIA, is the resident actuary at the Canadian Institute of Actuaries. He is a member of the Society of Actuaries Board of Directors, and serves as the Board partner for the Management and Personal Development Committee. He can be reached at Chris.Fievoli@actuaries.ca.