

PEARL: Providing Education and Resources for Leadership

Cultivating Leadership: Responding to the Volunteer Dilemma

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Jewish Reconstructionist Federation

Transformative Judaism for the 21st Century

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Developing a Volunteer Base in Your Synagogue: Recruitment and Retention

Adapted, in part, from "Volunteer Survey Results: Cohort 3 Subgroup of The Synaplex Initiative of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal)", October 2006 / Tishrei 5767.

- **Build a culture of volunteerism at your synagogue.** Make sure your synagogue membership forms include questions about new members' skills and interests in participation in the synagogue and then follow-up on any interests expressed in a timely fashion! This can be done in the context of a "welcome to our community" phone call by a member of the Board of Directors or other synagogue leader. Many would-be volunteers are disillusioned when they indicate a willingness to take part in an aspect of synagogue life but that interest is not acknowledged. New members should receive a phone call even if there is no project fitting the description of their interests at the time they join. Some congregations do a formal skills and interest survey of their members every few years.
- **Consider offering a yearly class on "Congregation (*Your Name Goes Here*) 101" each year to help new members—and less involved members—connect to your community.** New members haven't yet developed shared memories from being part of your community, and they do not yet know the stories that make your community unique and special. Nor are they yet likely to have celebrated significant life cycle events at the synagogue, something which helps bind congregants to their spiritual homes. Learning about the synagogue's history and values as well as about the Reconstructionist movement (many new members may be first-timers in a Reconstructionist community) helps members become more connected with their community and leads to the development of a strong volunteer base.
- **Use a personal volunteer recruitment approach.** Volunteers particularly appreciate being invited to participate in a synagogue project by congregational leaders. Person-to-person recruitment is always the most effective method.

Consider inviting the potential volunteer for coffee or lunch to discuss the volunteer opportunity you have in mind. Phone recruitment works best only if you have an existing relationship with the potential volunteer. Generalized recruitment (volunteer recruitment from the *bima* or via e-mail or synagogue bulletin) is almost always the least effective method of recruitment.

- **Don't use excessive pressure to recruit volunteers.** Sometimes it's simply not the right time for a potential volunteer to commit to a project. Listen to his/her current time constraints and ask permission to contact the person again with another volunteer opportunity in the future. You are planting seeds to help your potential volunteer begin to envision him/herself as a volunteer in your community.
- **Engage new members or less-active members.** New members are often looking for ways to engage with their new community and to meet the people in it. They can make up a good potential volunteer recruitment base. You may want to consider pairing a seasoned volunteer with a new volunteer to help the new member get to know other congregants and to learn about your community. Everyone appreciates having a good mentor, and the mentor is also enriched through his/her mentorship role. Reaching out to members who have not yet been active volunteers is also an important way to expand your volunteer base.
- **Consider asking two people who are friends to volunteer together.** People who enjoy working together may more readily commit to your project and may feel more confident in their abilities to take on a new commitment if they know that the responsibility is to be shared. This is especially true today when congregants have so many things competing for their time.
- **Lone wolves.** Don't forget that some people work best on discrete projects alone; they are truly not collaborative sorts. Look for ways in which their personal style

can be honored so that they, too, can make a volunteer commitment to the synagogue.

- **Don't be afraid to ask busy people.** More often than not, the busiest people are the best volunteers, for they tend to be very goal-oriented and organized individuals. We sometimes shy away from asking them to volunteer and then are sorry when we see them taking on a significant leadership role in another community volunteer position.
- **Be sure to offer a variety of volunteer opportunities.** First time volunteers are more likely to commit to small projects which have a specific beginning, middle and end as well as well-defined goals, so you should have a variety of such opportunities to present. It's also important for *you* to learn whether or not a new volunteer will follow-through with his/her commitment before assigning such a person responsibility for a major task.
- **Clarify roles.** Clearly explain the scope of the project and time commitment necessary to potential volunteers in order to make certain that the volunteer will be able to comfortably fulfill the position s/he is undertaking. It helps to have a short written description of the entire project and the volunteer's part in it to hand to the individual when you are asking for participation in the project. You want to cultivate "buy-in"—to get the volunteer excited about the project and about his/her role in its success. You also want to make sure that the volunteer's expectations of his/her participation match the "job description" of your project.
- **Use volunteers' strengths.** Tailor volunteer jobs to match individuals' interests and abilities, but also consider asking your potential volunteers how they would like to spend their volunteer time—the answers may surprise you. Some people want to do something very different in their volunteer lives than they do during their professional lives.

- **Ask for feedback.** Chairpersons of a project should check in with their volunteers about their needs during the project's duration. If someone feels that s/he "got stuck" with much more work than bargained for, you may have created a one-time volunteer. Be prepared to step in with support if it is needed or to adapt the volunteer situation to help the volunteer to feel successful. Listening to volunteers and valuing both their insights and feedback will lead to volunteer retention.
- **Recognition.** Successful completion of a volunteer project is generally very gratifying for volunteers. Nevertheless, one can't say thank you too many ways or in too many venues. Thank yous are the "paychecks" for volunteers, and the investment in framed certificates of appreciation can go a long way to help a volunteer feel valued.
- **Feedback and Record Keeping.** Be sure to solicit specific feedback on the volunteer's participation in the project, letting him/her know that the synagogue leadership is committed to creating the best volunteer experiences possible. There are many volunteer satisfaction forms available that can be adapted for your use. In addition, ask your volunteers to keep careful records of all of their volunteer work. For instance, if a volunteer was soliciting prizes for your synagogue's Purim carnival, the next volunteer will have a great starting place if s/he is handed the information from the previous year's efforts. Good record keeping makes future volunteer recruitment easier because people are more likely to agree to take on a project when they do not feel as if they must start from scratch.
- **Re-Recruitment.** After the successful completion of a project, sometimes it is appropriate to ask the volunteer to take on this task for one additional year, bringing on a friend as a co-chair who will learn the ropes from him/her. This kind of "each one, teach one" approach can help ensure a steady stream of volunteers. On the other hand, it is not advisable to allow any one volunteer to become totally associated with a particular project. Not only does this lead to burn-out of the

volunteer, but also the project can become stale without the infusion of new people and new ideas. Even successful synagogue programming has a limited shelf life and must be renewed and reinvigorated to keep members' interest

- **Moving up the ladder.** A volunteer who has been successful with one small project might be invited to take on a bigger or different kind of role in an upcoming project. It's best to "strike while the iron is hot" and ask that volunteer to commit to a new role in the community soon after the successful completion of his/her first project.
- **Volunteering is about relationship.** Volunteers often express how much they value being part of a team when working with a group of fellow members on a synagogue project. They often form close relationships with synagogue leaders and clergy during the duration of the project, and they make friends in the synagogue community. They also tend to form closer ties to the community, in general, and to begin to understand the "big picture" of the synagogue itself, including the synagogue's on-going budgetary and volunteer needs. Importantly, they are likely to disseminate this information to their friends in the community. Volunteers tend to become well-informed congregants who are more likely to devote some of their time to the community in the future.

See <http://www.jrf.org/listserve> for a variety of leadership list serves to support your work of volunteer development.

Creating a Culture of Volunteer Engagement

Jill Friedman Fixler and Sandie Eichberg

From SYNERGY: UJA-Federation of New York and Synagogues Together
Spring 2007 / Nisan 5767

Volunteering is nothing new in Jewish life. The first volunteers were the Israelites who built the *Mishkan*, desert sanctuary. God said to Moses, "Make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them," and Moses said to the Israelites, "Let all among you who are skilled come and make all that Adonai has commanded," and "everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him came" until "their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done" (Exodus 25:8; 35:10–22; 36:7). If only inspiring the right volunteers to step forward to build our sacred communities were so easy in synagogue life today!

Leaders of synagogues with whom we have worked express the pressing need to find able congregants eager to help. What are some common reasons people do not volunteer their time and talent? We hear the following: many congregants fear that if they volunteer at the synagogue they may be signing up for a life sentence. Or they will not be supported in the work they do. Or they will have to reinvent the wheel because their predecessor is not available and left no documentation. The invitation may have been an impersonal "cattle call" for volunteers or the job may have nothing to do with their interests. When there is more to do than any 10 people can handle, or when synagogues rely on volunteers in order to adopt transformational programming like Synaplex, the lack of congregants willing to embrace volunteerism is hard felt.

Following is a checklist of six foundational ideas that underlie our work with synagogue leaders in building toward a culture of volunteer engagement.

Make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Aligning volunteer roles with congregational priorities and designing purposeful volunteer opportunities can build a synagogue's capacity to fulfill its potential and increase energy and enthusiasm. *How do you design volunteer opportunities to align with your congregation's vision?*

Everyone who excelled in ability. Congregants are more likely to enlist as volunteers when they are sharing skills at which they are proficient or learning skills of interest to them. This means that synagogue leaders must make an effort to learn about each congregant and make use of that knowledge in matching congregants to opportunities. Whether you commit the resources to individual interviews or simply use an initial intake form with your membership application, it is counterproductive to ask for information and not use it, as it undermines a sense of trust in the synagogue's commitment to engaging its members. *How does your congregation assess skills and talents of members? How do you make the match? How do you track congregants' skills?*

Everyone whose spirit moved him came. Congregational volunteer engagement is about community building and creating a sense of belonging. Ideal vehicles for creating connections are meaningful, high-impact service opportunities, such as planning Havdalah services, recruiting participants for study groups, participating in projects that help the disadvantaged, and mentoring new *chavurot*. When synagogues attend to clarifying expectations and aligning volunteering with congregational priorities, more congregants will want to be part of creating a better community. *How do you design and convey expectations for key volunteer roles? How do you build a Judaic framework into synagogue volunteer engagement?*

And these are the gifts you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns... Engaging volunteers beyond the traditional roles of office assistants and board leaders engenders fuller participation and buy-in from the full diversity of members. A variety of volunteer opportunities that are short term and flexible enables congregants to choose ways to participate that complement their life style. *How do you adapt volunteer opportunities to the demands of work and family facing your congregants?*

Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work, . . . brought it as a freewill offering to Adonai (Exodus 35:29). By building esprit de corps, by acknowledging each gift and those who give it, the volunteer experience becomes more compelling, fun, and rewarding for participants. Volunteer service can and will enrich the value of membership for congregants. *In what variety of ways does your congregation celebrate those who volunteer? What stories do you tell about successful volunteer engagements? With whom do you share these stories?*

Adonai has singled out Bezalel ...endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft. . . and to give directions (Exodus 35:30–33). A key role of clergy and staff is volunteer engagement. When rabbis, cantors, and staff view their role as empowering congregants as their colleagues, consultants, and team members, the result of the volunteer's work has maximum impact. Often, this is a new skill for clergy, staff, and even lay leadership and will require professional development in order to implement the new culture. Leaders of synagogues must create staff position descriptions that directly describe staff responsibilities with volunteers, hire staff who have volunteer engagement experience, and discuss their interaction with volunteers during performance reviews. Advocates of volunteer engagement must obtain buy-in from the Board through strategic conversations about volunteerism. They must point out that engaging congregants as volunteers is an essential community-building tool and an opportunity to build the capacity and strength of the synagogue. *What resources of time and funding are devoted to training staff and board leaders for volunteer engagement? What can you do to hold staff and board leaders accountable for effective volunteer engagement? How*

can you align the work of volunteers as a resource for implementing congregational strategic planning?

Volunteer engagement is much more than rounding up warm bodies, coercing reluctant congregants, and waiting for the inevitable burnout. Building the *Mishkan* required a sense of purpose and thoughtful assessment and planning. Similarly, renewing a culture of volunteer engagement requires both of these so that each goal of the congregation is met by volunteers uniquely suited for that responsibility. Lay and professional leaders can transform the volunteer culture within a congregation by clarifying expectations of volunteers, giving them appropriate access to decision making and authority, and supporting them in their work.

The new culture of volunteer engagement invites each and every congregant to shape and nurture the synagogue and the future of the community. This is accomplished by crafting a vibrant congregation in which all members are inspired by their passion to bring their skill to fulfill the mission of the synagogue. When this happens, wonderful synergy will occur. Torah, study; *avodah*, worship; and *g'milut chasadim*, acts of kindness will thrive.

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FURTHER JRF RESOURCES

A Sacred Trust: A Values-Based Approach to Jewish Communal Leadership and Congregational Governance

⇒ <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-sacred-trust-main.html>

***Sacred Trust* Seminar Workbook And Guide to Effective Boards and Committees**

A 950-page resource binder and 110 page manual on:

- Perspectives on congregational leadership and governance from classical Jewish texts and Reconstructionist literature and articles.
- Theoretical framework and practical resources for developing effective systems of congregational governance.
- Samples of by-laws, mission statements, strategic plans, Board and Committee structures, meeting agendas, Board manuals, and Board orientation materials.

⇒ The binder can be purchased for \$54 and the manual for \$18 plus shipping from the **Reconstructionist Press**. Please contact Hattie Dunbar, Reconstructionist Press Fulfillment, via e-mail to hdunbar@jrf.org or phone to 215-885-5601 x30.



Synagogue Governance as a Sacred Trust

Rabbi Shawn Zevit (from *Reconstructionism Today*, Summer 2001)

⇒ <http://63.115.67.94/rt/sacred-trust.html>

Resources On Congregational Leadership And Governance

Rabbi Shawn Zevit

An extensive list of books and articles about many aspects of effective institutional leadership and governance.

⇒ <http://jrf.org/showres&rid=167>

⇒ [http://jrf.org/resources-library&tid=2:8&show=#Synagogue Leadership Development](http://jrf.org/resources-library&tid=2:8&show=#Synagogue%20Leadership%20Development)

⇒ <http://jrf.org/resources-library&tid=2:13&show=#Membership>

Resources on Community Building

Rabbi Shawn Zevit

A list of books, periodicals, and articles about congregational growth, outreach, and inreach.

⇒ <http://www.jrf.org/showres&rid=186>

Congregational Systems and Leadership

⇒ <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-st-systems-leadership.html>

Stages of Membership Development

⇒ <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kb-stages.html>

FURTHER EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Resources for Volunteer Leaders of Community Organizations

Saul Carliner

⇒ <http://saulcarliner.home.att.net/leadership/>

Volunteer Motivation

Energize, Inc.

⇒ <http://www.energizeinc.com/art/subj/recruit.html>

Volunteer Management Resource Library

Energize, Inc.

⇒ <http://www.energizeinc.com/art.html#skill>